

Interview with Bill Weinberg
By Andy Heintz
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Bill Weinberg has worked vigorously, through his [World War 4 Report](#) website (started after 9-11), to tell the stories of progressive forces in the Middle East—like the Rojava Kurds in northern Syria, the Local Coordination Committees that helped spark the Syrian revolution, the labor unions in the Iraqi oil-fields, and the Organization of Women’s Freedom in Iraq.

Reminiscent of George Orwell’s outraged and morally precise criticisms of leftist supporters of Joseph Stalin, Weinberg has no patience for so-called leftists who champion war criminals as anti-imperialist heroes because they happen to be enemies of the United States. On this subject, and the lack of leftist support for progressives struggling against dictatorships and jihadist groups in foreign countries, Weinberg’s anger scorches the page.

Bill Weinberg is the author of *Homage to the Chiapas: The New Indigenous Struggle in Mexico* and *War on the Land: Ecology and Politics in Central America*. His work has been featured in *The Nation*, *The Progressive*, *The Village Voice*, *In These Times*, *Newsday* and *Al Jazeera*. Weinberg was also a correspondent and contributing editor for *Native Americas*, Cornell University’s quarterly journal of hemispheric indigenous issues, where he won three awards from the Native American Journalists Association (NAJA). He is currently at work on a new book on indigenous struggles in the Andes.

What do you make of Noam Chomsky’s critique that much of the mainstream media’s reporting is influenced by their patriotic presuppositions? For example, we attacked Afghanistan because they were harboring terrorists, but it’s extremely rare to hear anyone say Cuba or the Sandinistas could have attacked America because we were training and harboring terrorists that were attacking those countries.

This is basic Chomsky 101. Anyone who has any progressive sensibility at all understands this. I hear progressives harping on this over and over and over again, and they are not reaching anyone who needs to hear it, they are just sort of, you know, congratulating each other on being so smart and getting it while the rest of society is so dumb and brainwashed and don't get it. What purpose does this serve other than to entrench our own sanctimony? What purpose does it serve to take this legitimate insight and say it over and over and over again and never go any further than that?

I have a problem with the word "we" to refer to the government. When I use the word *we*, I'm talking about progressives; I'm not talking about the government. Part of the reason there isn't any sense of distance or objectivity at all on these questions is because of the pronoun *we*. When we use the pronoun *we* to talk about the government we are internalizing the imperial perspective. For all the Fox News viewers out there *we* can do no wrong and *we* are on the side of the angels; for all the Chomsky-heads out there *we* can do no right and *we* are the fucking devil. I worry about the imperial narcissism that goes with using the pronoun *we* and the notion that it's all about "us." Either way, the word is burdened with a sense of pride or a sense of shame. I'm not in the government, so I avoid the word *we*; I use the word *they* to refer to the government.

What do you make of Chomsky's critique of humanitarian intervention?

In terms of US intervention and the notion that "our" hands are not clean because "we" committed all these terrible war crimes in Iraq and "we" backed the Turkish government when they were killing the Kurds and "we" backed the Indonesian government when they were committing genocide in East Timor... Well, yes, all that is true. The insight behind this critique is we have to understand there isn't any such thing as humanitarian intervention; I agree with Chomsky on that. The word humanitarian is referring to motives and I don't believe there is any such thing as pure motives in the realm of statecraft, and especially in the realm of geopolitics. Any intervention the US takes, whatever propaganda or even self-delusion is employed, ultimately is going to be about protecting US strategic interests. Which ultimately means the interests of the US ruling class. To me, that's axiomatic; it goes without saying.

It isn't merely incidental that the US backed genocide in East Timor and then it was shedding all these crocodile tears about genocide in Kosovo and Bosnia.

There is a legitimate point there about US interests and hypocrisy; and in the case of Samantha Power perhaps self-delusion behind the notion of humanitarian intervention. The “but” is that, for starters, you have these idiots who go to the next level and flip reality on its head and say in situations like Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, Darfur or Syria that there isn’t any genocide or ethnic cleansing and the perpetrators are actually the victims and the victims are the aggressors. This is just repugnant bullshit.

But there is still another problem here, and that’s making it all about US motives. This isn’t the only question we should be grappling with. When the Kosovar Albanians say “look, we’re under attack from the Serbs, our villages are being burnt down, we’re being forced to flee up to the mountains, somebody help us,” I don’t think they have to be immediately concerned about the motives of those who are coming to help them. They can be forgiven for having bigger concerns than that.

The left used to have this idea that we are in solidarity with the people on the ground. We are in solidarity with the people of Vietnam. We are in solidarity with the people of Nicaragua. The more serious people on the left would actually go to Nicaragua and pick coffee and deliver computers and build ties of solidarity. Today, the left isn’t interested in that at all for the most part... Today the people on the ground don’t exist except as victims of US imperialism. Their own actual struggles and perceptions don’t exist as far as the mainstream left is concerned.

The people on the ground in Syria for four years now have waged a heroic struggle against a brutal dictatorship. Peaceful protests were repeatedly massacred over a period of a year and the world stood by and did nothing until finally the situation escalated into a war. Then, nobody aided the Free Syrian Army—which was an amalgam of militias who started out as universalistic and secular and were calling for a multiethnic Syria. And the jihadists came along and filled the vacuum. You’ve got the rise of groups like the Nusra Front, ISIS and so on, who seized a lot of territory and told the Syrians, most of whom are Sunni, “look, you have been betrayed by the world, no one would help you against this dictatorship, we’ll help you.” And they gained some followers this way. And then the stupid left comes along and says all the opposition are jihadists so therefore we have to support the dictatorship. What hypocritical, arrogant, and ultimately, racist and privileged talk. Everything the left is supposed to be against is exactly what it is.

There were reports that the US was funding the jihadists through its allies in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

I don't believe the Saudis backed ISIS. I'm no fan of the Saudi regime. I hate the regime, but I don't think they backed ISIS. Because ISIS came from al-Qaeda, and al-Qaeda has been attacking Saudi Arabia for the last 10 to 15 years. People act like nothing has changed since the mujahideen war in Afghanistan in the '80s, when actually everything has changed since then.

I do think there is evidence that Turkey has connived with ISIS, primarily because ISIS is fighting the Kurds. But I think Turkey did this independently, not acting as a US proxy. Again: not everything is about "us."

Many were worried that arming the resistance would lead to the jihadists getting their hands on more guns.

That was the conventional view on the left. I'm not making policy prescriptions, but I'm saying you have to at least listen to the progressive forces on the ground and grapple with what they are saying. When the civil resistance and the progressive forces are saying—not uniformly in one voice but overwhelmingly—“we need a no-fly zone, please enforce a no-fly zone, we are getting bombed here, we're getting slaughtered here and it's been going on for years,” we should at least listen to what they have to say instead of just readily dismissing it, which has been the position of the left. I'm not on a soapbox for military intervention or any other policy. I'm not a laptop bombardier. But if the civil resistance and the progressive forces are overwhelmingly calling for a no-fly zone, I'm not going to oppose it. I can't be on two contradictory soapboxes simultaneously. I'm not in the government and I'm not making policy. My concern is trying to build solidarity with progressive forces on the ground in Syria.

I absolutely see the problems of the United States extending its military might any more than it has. And I understand the disaster that we're seeing in the Middle East right now is in many ways the fruit of US military adventures. But I also see the problems of *not* imposing a no-fly zone. There are problems with that position too.

You've written movingly about the Rojava Kurds in northern Syria. Do you think we should arm the Syrian Kurds and the Iraqi Kurds? My only worry is if ISIS defeats them, they have more weapons.

The obvious answer to that criticism is if they aren't armed, their defeat is going to be more likely, isn't it? Look at the analogy of the Spanish Civil War. No one on the left was saying that we can't arm the Spanish Republicans because if they lose the guns may fall into the hands of Fascists. No one was saying "hands off Spain"—except to the Fascist powers, not the Western democracies. Conservatives in the West were saying "hands off Spain, it's not our fight," and were assailed for this by the left! People on the left were protesting that the Spanish Republic had been betrayed by the world.

And despite all the conspiracy theories, the US is still doing nothing against [Syrian dictator Bashar] Assad. All their efforts are directed against ISIS and al-Nusra. They aren't going after Assad at all.

How would you handle this situation if you don't want to back Assad but you don't want to empower the jihadists either?

Look, there continues to be a legitimate resistance in Syria that is not in the jihadist camp. I see my position less and less about making policy recommendations and more and more about trying to build solidarity between the progressive forces on the ground in Syria and Iraq and the progressive voices in the US—a sphere in which I do have somewhat of a voice, not very much, but at least a little bit of voice. With the government, I have no voice at all. The soapbox of solidarity with the civil resistance is more important to me than the soapbox of non-intervention. I understand the problems of intervention and I understand the problems of no intervention. We're in a very, very grim, very, very difficult situation. There aren't any easy answers and I oppose the peddlers of easy answers, whether they are promoting the pro-intervention position or the anti-intervention position.

I will say that the problems with US intervention are becoming very clear at this moment, with Washington apparently giving Turkey a green light to bomb the revolutionary Kurds in Iraq and Syria despite the fact that these are the very forces that are most effectively fighting ISIS. But it is also true that these same forces support US air-strikes on ISIS, and the US has actually dropped them aid and coordinated with them. They are now being betrayed, and we urgently have to speak up for them and protest this.

What is the best way to support progressive elements like the Kurds in Syria?

Give them a voice, act like they exist! I've got friends who are organizing a book drive so they can send books to the university the Rojava Kurds have established in their territory, and that's great. But what's more important about it is not that they are sending the books there – that's secondary. What's important about it is the fact that by doing the book drive here, we are affirming that this social experiment in Syria actually exists and countering the stupid left bullshit that all of the Syrian rebels are jihadists and therefore we should be backing Assad.

What changes would you like to see in the progressive left today?

They should get over their Oedipus complex about big daddy US imperialism and start adhering to principle.

During the Kosovo intervention, there was the critique that the US was supporting Turkish atrocities against the Kurds at the same time they were bombing Serbia to supposedly protect the Kosovar Albanians.

As acknowledged. But if your village has been burned down and you have been forced into a refugee camp across the border, what difference does it make to you that there are Kurds in Turkey that are in a similar situation? How does that lessen your plight? The Kosovars overwhelmingly approved of the NATO intervention, while some notable anti-Milosevic Serbian opposition forces did not.

There was one anti-war protest that I attended during the Kosovo crisis that was organized by the War Resisters League in New York City. It was a small gathering, not great attendance, in Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village. I had been working with WRL to try to support the draft resisters and anti-militarist opposition and people who were in favor of ethnic coexistence in all the republics, primarily Croatia and Serbia, but in all the former Yugoslav Republics. These people who we were trying to support were somewhat divided on the question of intervention. The ones who were ideologically pacifist opposed the NATO intervention, but a lot of them in their desperation supported it. War Resisters are ideologically pacifist so they held this anti-war rally which was saying the right things. Opposing violence on both sides, opposing Milosevic, but saying the bombing wasn't going to help, which was my position at the time so I marched with them. It was small, poorly attended and not very inspiring.

Meanwhile, there were two big mobilizations in New York. One was the stupid Workers World Party with their front group the International Action Center, which today is the core of International ANSWER. They held a larger anti-war

rally. They got the Serbian immigrants on board and they were marching in the street chanting "Serbia, Serbia, Serbia!" at the same time the Serbs were slaughtering the Albanians.

Then, the Albanian community in New York City marched on the United Nations waving the American flag and waving banners that said "thank you NATO." It was the most frustrating moment of my career as an anti-war activist. Now I'm not exactly an anti-war activist anymore, but more of a solidarity activist. And that was a critical moment in this transition.

I supported the non-violent civil resistance in Kosovo led by Ibrahim Rugova. The world would not recognize their movement. People in United States displayed no interest in knowing this movement existed except for a few lonely voices like me and my friends in the War Resisters League (and Albanian-Americans, of course). This civil resistance came under unrelenting pressure, and that's when the hot heads prevailed and said "fuck this non-violence shit, we're going to form a guerrilla army." Ibrahim Rugova's movement was sidelined and the KLA [Kosovo Liberation Army] sort of stole the show and they become part of this big imperial game where the Germans were backing them and the Russians were backing the Serbs, and the whole thing got really, really ugly really fast, and it ended with NATO intervention. I see this as a lesson in the criticality of solidarity. If the left is going to oppose US military adventures, it has got to get serious about solidarity.

Similar points about double standards were raised after 9-11.

I remember after 9-11 talking to some jingos in my family and on a bulletin board I was on at the time who were saying things like, "look what they did to our city, we have to go in there and turn Afghanistan into a parking lot, blah, blah, blah." and I was like, "Well you know, what they did to our city is payback for what 'we' (quote-unquote) have been doing to Iraq for the last 10 years and for giving a blank check to Israel to do what they have been doing to the Palestinians for all these years. You can also point to Nicaragua and Chile and all these other terrible crimes the United States has committed all over the world. You don't like that the United States has been attacked? Well yeah, I'm sure you don't. I'm sure the Chileans weren't happy their government was overthrown on Sept. 11, 1973 and 3,000 of them were disappeared." When you're talking to some jingos, there is some utility in making this argument.

When the left is having its own internal discussions and keeps making this point over and over again, it serves no purpose. It only serves to entrench their sanctimony and their groupthink. It doesn't make them think. It doesn't make them challenge their assumptions. It doesn't make them grapple with the realities of ethically complicated situations that we find ourselves in.

If it was OK to bomb Afghanistan, would it have been OK for the East Timorese and the Sandinistas to bomb Washington?

I think this question has utility depending on who the audience is. As a US citizen I acknowledge my complicity and I recognize that that the government is doing this stuff in my name so I have a responsibility to protest. But I'm not actually *committing* these crimes. We have to reject the notion of collective guilt and the idea that attacks on civilians are justifiable. So, while of course the East Timorese and Nicaraguans harbored no such ambitions, that's a valid theoretical question for the jingos, to help them overcome their mentality that legitimizes such attacks. For much of the left, I'm afraid, this question is raised with an opposite intent... precisely to legitimize attacks on civilians... the notion that a suicide bomber is "the poor man's F-16." Which of course paradoxically legitimizes the violence carried out with F-16s...

Who do you admire on the left in America?

It's kind of a desert out there. I like the Marxist-humanists, Kevin Anderson, Peter Hudis. I like my buds in the Rojava Solidarity effort, and the followers of the late anarchist thinker Murray Bookchin. As for David Graeber, I have my criticisms of him, too, but he's supporting the Rojava Kurds and I appreciate that. Many of the voices that most inspire me are not on the American left, but left and secularist figures in what is called the "Muslim world." I'm talking about genuinely heroic figures such as Iraq's Houzan Mahmoud, Iran's Maryam Namazie and Algeria's Karima Bennoune and Marieme Helie Lucas. These women intransigently oppose Western imperialism and political Islam alike, and speak with the moral authority of those who have placed themselves at risk.

You identify as an anarchist. Can you speak about what anarchism means to you?

Some people call it "democracy taken seriously." About 25 years ago when I was more dogmatic I would have considered myself an anarchist and a pacifist. So

anarchism to me is not about violence, it was about non-violence. I wanted to see a non-violent revolution: People putting themselves in harm's way to stop the war machine and people dropping out of the system as a form of non-cooperation and eventually building a society based on decentralized cooperatives instead of centralized top-down structures. That's what anarchism meant to me. Now, a generation later, I still consider myself an anarchist, although I feel the need to add the caveat that I'm not a dogmatic one, I'm a pragmatic anarchist. Most of the forces I'm supporting in Iraq and Syria are not anarchist, although the Rojava Kurds sort of are. They don't call themselves anarchists, but they are influenced by Murray Bookchin and they're trying to put in place anarchistic experiments like direct democracy and so on, so they are anarchist-leaning and anarchist-influenced. The Local Coordination Committees that started the Syrian revolution in 2011 are a mix. Some are more consciously left-wing than others – there are anarchists amongst them. But for the most part they are basically pro-democratic, pro-secular — and I will take that, that's good enough for me. In a dystopian context like this, that's damn good, and to continue to advocate that in the face of everything from the regime and the jihadists is heroic. The people I've supported in Iraq for the past 10 years now — the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq and the labor unions — they are feminist and Marxist and they are coming out of the Marxist-Humanist tradition. They are followers of the Worker-Communist Party of Iraq, and the late theorist Hekmat Mansour, who founded its sibling organization, the Worker-Communist Party of Iran. And they are, by the way, very anti-imperialist in their politics. You don't have to pass my anarchist litmus test to get my support.

I no longer can call myself a pacifist. I grappled with it long and hard. 1994 was the turnaround for me. Two things happened that year that cured me of my pacifism: The Zapatista revolution in Chiapas [Mexico] that I went down and covered and experienced. And at the same time, the siege of Sarajevo was going on in Bosnia. And I thought, "You know it's kind of condescending for me to preach pacifist purity from my privileged position." No one was coming to burn down *my* village so I couldn't deny other people the right to self-defense. I believe in the power of non-violence, but I don't believe in turning it into an ossified dogma and I do believe there are situations where getting your hands dirty in armed resistance is forced upon you and your choice is to do that or get exterminated.

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