Historians are always influenced by the present when addressing the past; writing the history of an event necessarily reflects on present reality. The first prerequisite for writing history is a historical perspective, the passage of time providing the distance that allows for the discovery of sources, the gathering of documents, and the comparison of narratives.

It is commonly accepted that the recent Arab uprisings will prove to be a watershed in the history of the modern Middle East, and will reshape the geopolitical order in the Arab world. The uprisings surprised analysts, observers, and specialists across the board. The uprisings were a series of popular and non-violent revolutions (at least in the first phases) seeking wholesale change in which the Arab people vociferously rejected the idea of “Arab exceptionalism” and the inevitability of “Arab defeatism.” Perhaps the clearest sign of their authenticity lies in the fact that they were not instigated by political parties and ideologies but embodied the popular will for a new political contract based on citizenship and civil rights.

Gilbert Achcar’s *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* provides not only a definitive and comprehensive overview of the uprisings but also, and more importantly, identifies the socio-economic dynamics that led to their eruption. While the first two chapters, which examine the dimensions of the socio-economic predicament, constitute the book’s primary contribution, the importance of the following chapters—in which he presents an in-depth analysis of the uprisings, focusing on internal and regional factors, the sequence of the main events, and Western policy—should not be underestimated.

Right from the start, Achcar indicates that the book’s core argument is that the socioeconomic factors have been at the very heart of the Arab uprisings
Rather than being driven by leftist revolutionary or religious-oriented ideologies, the uprisings broke out in public squares among members of the middle and lower classes exhausted by poverty, unemployment, marginalization, and authoritarianism.

In the first chapter—entitled “Fettered Developments”—Achcar discusses the well-documented economic crisis into which the Arab Middle East currently finds itself, comparing this region with other parts of the world. The liberalization process the Arab public-sector-dominated economies underwent had catastrophic ramifications, the available data evincing that in the two decades between 1970 and 1990 the per capita GDP in the Arab world stagnated to an alarming degree (p. 11).

Achcar’s discussion of four aspects of economic development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region leaves no doubt in the reader’s mind that the region is facing a severe development crisis. Although on average poverty and inequality in MENA are lower than in other developing regimes in Africa and Asia, it has exceptionally high rates of informal labor, youth underemployment, female underemployment, and graduate unemployment. For example, the percentage of women employed or seeking employment in MENA (18.1% in the ME, 24% in NA) is particularly low in comparison to other developing African and Asian countries (pp. 29–30). The region’s rate of unemployed women and youth unemployment also sets it apart from the rest of the world.

The crisis of the educated young middle-class is twofold. Firstly, their share in the total number of unemployed is higher than their proportion of the labor force. Secondly, recent figures (2000–2011) evince that the rate of emigration of people with tertiary education from MENA to countries outside the region was sufficiently high as to warrant talking about a “brain drain.”

The second chapter provides an abundance of information and explanations relating to the problematic nature of the peculiar model of capitalism that has developed in the Arab world since the late 1970s. This model went hand in hand with the introduction of the Infitah (“openness”) policy, and also coincided with the Arab oil boom that expanded the political and economic influence of the Arab monarchies in the Persian Gulf. The social and economic policies inspired by the neo-liberal and privatization paradigm failed to achieve their declared goals of streamlining the economy and improving the standard of living for the Arab states that adopted them. The failure of these policies is demonstrated by the fact that, with the exception of the six oil monarchies, the annual growth rate of gross capital formation for the region showed a downward trend for the four decades between 1969–2007 (p. 41). Similarly, in contrast to other parts of the world in which neo-liberal