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The "Arab Spring": The Origins of a Misnomer

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The tumultuous events that have swept through the Middle East during the last year or so were widely referred to in the West as the "Arab Spring". The media was awash with expectations of a secular democratic upheaval that was about to remove the dictators that had ruled much of the region for generations. The term "Spring" had European origins, conjuring up associations with the "Spring of Nations" in 1848, the "Prague Spring" of 1968, or the Eastern European Spring of the late 1980s after the fall of Communism, when popular uprisings in the name of secular democracy sought the overthrow of despotic regimes that had ruled for decades. The "Arab Spring", according to this thinking, was analogous to the European experience. Indeed, Islamist movements, we were told, were on the margins of events and an overrated force in Arab politics. They were being pushed aside by the new, younger generation of secular democrats organized through the ultra-modern social networks of Facebook and Twitter, much alike their Western counterparts. None of this proved to be true.

These faulty assessments were all components of a "false universalism"[1] that was never translated into political reality. The Islamists, albeit of various strands, have won every election held since the advent of the "Arab Spring". In Egypt, the most important of Arab states, the Islamists crushed the secular democrats, who proved to be an almost irrelevant political force. Islamists

[1] This is a term I have borrowed from Nader Hashemi who used it in his book ***Islam, Secularism and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

have also won the elections held thus far in Tunisia, Morocco and Kuwait, and are playing a prominent role in post-Qaddafi Libya.

Amongst Western observers there was a deeply ingrained reticence to recognize the Otherness of the Middle Eastern Other, in particular the fact that Middle Eastern societies are far less secular and considerably more pious than their Western counterparts. The origins of this inherent reluctance to engage in the cultural Otherness of the Middle East are to be found in the more general post-modern assault on value-free science and objective truth, the rational underpinnings of the European enlightenment. In the aftermath of the Second World War, during which modern science had been employed to perpetrate the unprecedented immorality and inhumanity of the Holocaust, as well as to deliberately destroy masses of innocent civilians with nuclear weapons, considerable doubt was raised about the validity of the very notion of value-free science. If "the clay feet of science" were being questioned, this was all the more so in reference to the "objective truth" of the humanities and the social sciences, where the argument was now made with ever-increasing force that the "soft" sciences were no more than an array of political agendas, or narratives, all designed to serve the political ends of particular elites or interest groups. The humanities and the social sciences should, therefore, be recast to assist in the creation of a new, more just, political order.[2]

This debate did not bypass the field of Middle Eastern studies. In his most influential book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said, the renowned Professor of English Literature from Columbia University, assailed traditional Middle Eastern scholarship for its overemphasis on the cultural differences between Middle Eastern and Western peoples and for according far too much importance to Islam as a religion and civilization in determining the distinctive characteristics of Middle Eastern societies. Said rejected the "notion that there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically 'different' inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture, or racial essence proper to that geographical space..."[3] This form of scholarship, he argued, had racist undertones and was intended, in this case, to serve the interests of domineering Western powers by portraying the peoples of the Middle East as essentially static and underdeveloped.

In the study of the Middle East, as in other fields in the humanities and social sciences, scholarship, and reporting too, was expected to conform to a form of political correctness rather than the pursuit of an unattainable, ostensibly objective truth. In Middle Eastern studies this came to mean that the study of political culture or cultural distinctiveness became illegitimate. Said's critique was taken to an absurd extreme through the imposition of a Saidian-McCarthyist straightjacket, whereby anyone engaging in the study of political culture would invariably face intellectual excommunication and/or condemnation for being "essentialist," "orientalist" or even "racist".

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[2] Based on Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, ***Telling the Truth About History*** (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994).

[3] Edward Said, ***Orientalism***, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 322.

In the midst of the Orientalism debate in the United States, Michael Hudson, a prominent American political scientist empathetic towards the Arab world, urged his colleagues to "be careful not to throw out the political culture baby with the Orientalist bathwater."[4] But Hudson's was a voice in the wilderness. His advice has gone unheeded by most. It is now much more widely acceptable to "explain events as if these were generic phenomena inextricably linked to paradigms of a universal nature. . . . Such universal paradigms attempt to explain widely divergent historical developments as if differences in culture, time, and place had no vital bearing on historical outcomes."[5]

The use of the term "Spring", with its typically European connotations and inherent secular expectations, coupled with the exaggerated media focus on the almost mythological qualities and influence of Facebook and Twitter, fostered such a false universal paradigm of uniformity between the Middle East and the West. The inordinate emphasis on technology was the perfect representation of this universalist nature of the new globalized world. Thus the pundits created a universe in which virtual reality and political reality were entirely comingled, a world in which the discussion of the more profound social, political and cultural trends of modern Arab societies could be totally ignored or even pronounced as irrelevant.

Major media outlets focused on the youngsters in Cairo's Tahrir Square, who were for the large part secular liberals. They interviewed intellectuals with perfect "Oxbridge" accents, and asserted time and again that Egypt's Islamists were but a marginal force whose influence was greatly exaggerated by alarmists. It was as if the hundreds of thousands in Tahrir Square and their "Oxbridge" spokespersons represented all 85 million Egyptians.

Very much in line with the popular media representation, a widely held, and needless to say, politically correct academic view was also prevalent in the early days of the "Arab Spring". As opposed to the "alarmists" who predicted that a tidal wave of Islam was about to sweep Egypt and the region, the politically correct assessment argued that in a world of Twitter and Facebook, a new Middle Eastern democracy was about to take root. This assessment did not anticipate an Islamist takeover in Egypt. In the free democratic space that was filling the void left by the disintegration of Mubarak's National Democratic Party, the Muslim Brotherhood was deemed more likely to decline than to grow. Large segments of the Egyptian people would have political alternatives that weren't available to them before. In other words, new parties would emerge, which would siphon off some of the Muslim Brotherhood vote. The Muslim Brothers would remain an important part of the Egyptian polity,

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[4] Michael Hudson, "The Political Culture Approach to Arab Democratization: The Case for Bringing It Back In, Carefully," in *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World*, ed. Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany, and Paul Noble, vol. 1: *Theoretical Perspectives* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1995), p. 65.

[5] Jacob Lassner and Ilan Troen, ***Jews and Muslims in the Arab World: Haunted by Pasts Real and Imagined*** (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), p. xi.

but not the biggest or the most important part, according to this assessment. As for the regional ramifications, the unrest in Egypt was a model lesson in civil protest, which could spread across the entire Middle East with the same democratizing results.[6]

There is not even one correct sentence in the above analysis. It is a perfect example of the prevalent post-Saidian, post-modern "Spring-like" analytical paradigm which is flawed to the core. That is not to argue that traditional Orientalism is above criticism, but that taking the Orientalist critique to an absurd extreme and entirely ignoring the cultural input in Middle Eastern politics is to evade the underlying currents and processes in Middle Eastern societies and to obfuscate the fact that "culture matters" in the Middle East, just as it does everywhere else. The Middle East is not exceptional. It has its peculiarities and distinctive cultural characteristics, just like all regions, peoples and cultures of the world. These are too important to be relegated to the margins of scholarship, in the name of some post-modern quasi-religious creed.

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[6] ***The Jerusalem Report***, 28 February 2011.