The Impact of 'Globalisation' on the Arab Revolts

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The fall of the USSR in 1991 eradicated communism's ideological challenge to US hegemony. This prompted theorists to reconsider America's identity and role in the world. Since then, two opposing and highly influential accounts – Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis and Francis Fukuyama's assertion of the 'End of History' – have come together in a discursive constellation that reinforces an image of West Asia and North Africa (WANA) as a static and despotic region, lagging behind the 'West'. Within this discourse, the Arab revolts represent the globalisation of 'Western' values, a feat that has been achieved by 'modernising' the region.

I reject this position. After demonstrating how Fukuyama and Huntington's propositions have meshed together, I will reveal how economic globalisation has exacerbated pre-existing structural inequalities within WANA. I will then explain how their discourse reinforced this current by sanctioning measures that deepened the roots of the region's neo-patrimonial regimes. It will be shown that the Arab revolts arose from within a history of opposition to the grievances caused by these local and global forces. Finally, I will elaborate how technological advances have enabled a global counter-cultural politics of resistance to emerge, which has empowered social agents to liberate the discourse of human rights and democracy from the despots and doctrinarians who declare them to be uniquely 'Western' concepts.

'Global Village' Meets a World Divided

For some, the calls for democracy and social justice driving the Arab revolts represent the triumph of 'Western' values in a region characterised by despotism and dictatorships. The 'End of History' has, at last, arrived in the 'Middle East', they say (Herscovitch 2011). This thesis, propounded twenty years earlier by US State Department member, Francis Fukuyama, holds that in a post-Cold War global system, 'Western' liberal democracy is the ultimate and uncontested modality of governance (Fukuyama 1992). In the absence of a viable ideological alternative, citizens and states of the world will be unable to resist liberalism's gravitational pull and 'Western' democracy will be instituted across the globe (ibid).

What, then, explained the longevity of WANA's dictators and 'Arab Presidents for Life', two decades after 'Western' liberalism prevailed against the 'Red Menace' (Owen 2012)? Samuel Huntington puts this down not to the regimes' security apparatuses, the type of state or their integration within the global capitalist order, but to the type of people who inhabit these lands. He identifies Islam as the core reason why 'Western' democracy has not washed across the globe. We are told that

"Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, [and] the separation of church and state have little resonance in Islamic cultures" (Huntington 1993: 40).

Those persuaded by this argument have been quick to caution that the problems caused by the 'Islamic mindset' are not confined to WANA, in which Islam is the dominant religion. Searching for a new enemy to replace communism and reaffirm the universality of 'Western' values (Qureshi 2003), Huntington asserts that, at the most fundamental level, "a concept of nonviolence is absent from Muslim doctrine and practice" (1996: 263). This has been fuelling Islamic militancy directed against the 'West' for having dared question the sovereignty of Allah – a phenomenon

Bernard Lewis describes as "Muslim rage" (1990). Indeed, the "conflict along the fault line between Western and Islamic civilisations has been going on for 1,300 years" and, as adherents of this view assure us, if the transnational growth of neo-fundamental Islamism is anything to go by, this "centuries-old military interaction between the West and Islam is unlikely to decline" (Huntington 1993: 31).

What is the remedy to this thorn in the side of the 'West'? Daniel Pipes, founder of the neo-conservative US think-tank, Middle East Forum, proposes a solution: make Muslims modernise. If they do, he pontificates, "they will no longer need to train terrorists or target missiles against the West; to emigrate to Europe and America; or to resist integration within Western societies" (1990). Translated into policy, this has played out in the form of the 'war on terror' and the 2003 Iraq war, fought in order to tame and civilise the 'Green Menace' by exporting 'Western' values and democracy on a mass-scale (Adib-Moghaddam 2006). It has also reinforced the implementation of neoliberal structural readjustment programmes and policy prescriptions promoted under the heading of 'good governance', whose implications on the Arab revolts will be covered shortly.

Although they offer opposing images of the world, Fukuyama and Huntington's propositions work together to create a discourse in which globalisation is "unidirectional and driven solely by the twin forces of liberalism and economic integration" (Adib-Moghaddam 2002: 206). In this framework, democratisation is equivalent to 'Westernisation', which is equivalent to globalisation. The Arab revolts, therefore, are product of the 'West's' modernising efforts within WANA, which have nurtured an appetite for democracy and a disregard for despotism.

Bread, Economic Justice, and the Capitalist Mode of Production

This discourse is undermined once history is brought back into analyses of the Arab revolts. It must be recalled that the state formation process in WANA began by colonial conquest. As colonial powers and mandatory authorities, Britain and France imposed the administrative, judicial and institutional structure of modern states onto pre-existing forms of social organisation (Hollis 2013).

As an imported concept, the state was weak because it lacked the "ideological hegemony that would enable it to forge a 'historic' social bloc that accepts the legitimacy of the ruling stratum" (Ayubi 1995: 3). The exigencies of this "fragile form of sovereignty" meant that political elites were quick to put in place coercive and discursive structures that would place them at the centre of the newly-imagined nation (Owen 2012: 8). This often involved drawing people into the state via patronage networks that worked through "archaic social structures" such as tribalism, sectarianism and regionalism (Achcar 2013: 168). A state-bourgeoisie whose interests were tied to the state emerged through this process. The tide of oil and gas industry nationalisations that swept across WANA in the early 1970s increased the resources available for regimes to channel through these patronage networks, and the state-bourgeoisie swelled accordingly. Accompanying this tide and exacerbating the state-bourgeoisie's expropriation of wealth, Sadat and al-Assad's introduction of economic liberalisation measures (*infitah*) in Egypt and Syria in 1974 acted as a precursor to the widespread implementation of neoliberal formulas in the late 1980s and 1990s (ibid).

The poverty and precarity of employment for people in the region – issues at the heart of calls for economic justice in the Arab revolts – are attributable to this modality of the capitalist mode of production (Achcar 2013). The arbitrary nature of resource allocation and law enforcement of the neo-patrimonal regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria deterred long-term investment in the region, which has displayed a downward tendency since 1985 (ibid). The region's eye-wateringly low employment rates (42.7% in the 'Middle East'; 44.2% in North Africa) and the low annual GDP per capita growth rates (stagnating between 0-5% since 1990) are "natural corollaries of [this] steadily declining growth in fixed investment" (ibid: 51-63). Privatisation and economic liberalisation under neoliberal readjustment programmes have exacerbated these fiscal difficulties by providing political and economic elites with new sources of patronage (Bogaert 2013). As a result, the nepotistic networks that uphold these regimes have been extended (ibid) – a major factor contributing to low (0.1%) annual rates of productivity growth rate in the 'Middle East and North Africa' between 1993-2003 (Korany 2013).

Bringing the focus back to the role of globalisation in the Arab revolts, it is clear that these internationally prescribed neoliberal policies acted as catalysts in precipitating mass protest against the socio-political character of the regimes

in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria. They played into an already existing form of neo-patrimonialism that encouraged the development of crony, nepotistic capitalism, which directed state resources into the hands of a few at the expense of the majority (Bogaert 2013). It is simply inadequate, therefore, to fall back on hackneyed stereotypes about the 'Arab despotic exception' to explain the persistence of authoritarianism in WANA.

Dignity, Social Justice, and the Global Discourse of Democracy

It is equally wrongheaded to proclaim that the Arab revolts represent a sudden 'Arab awakening' to the injustices of illiberal rule. What might justify such a claim in the minds of those who disagree? By perpetuating the myth of the 'Arab despotic exception', Huntington's sensationalist theory provided fodder for the neoliberal ideologues at the IMF, the World Bank and USAID to promote their reforms as improving the governance of the region's neo-patrimonial regimes. This was supplemented by an intensification of the global discourse of democracy during the 1990s, which saw a proliferation of NGOs working on "democracy, rule of law and civil society projects" (Carapico 2002: 381). Many of these organisations have been heavily dependent on grants and contracts awarded by the US and EU, and have commonly adopted a "liberal-international-institutional philosophy" that promotes "pluralist democratic institutions…, legal reform [and] human rights" (ibid: 384). In this manner, it is claimed that an appetite for democracy can be stimulated, allowing for the institution of liberal norms and a transition from authoritarianism to democracy (ibid).

By painting a picture of a 'Middle East' naturally ruled by despotic forces and unable to change itself, inequality, underdevelopment and unemployment are depoliticised and transformed into issues requiring proper management and expert fixes (Mitchell 2002). Technical solutions such as privatization, economic liberalization, decentralisation and electoral reform are, henceforth, suggested on the basis that the rationality of 'the market' and 'good governance' can overcome the inefficiency of the 'despotic Arab mindset' (ibid). The uneven distribution of power and resources through networks of patronage and privilege is the root cause of inequality, underdevelopment and unemployment in the region (Achcar 2013). If these networks are ignored, however, solutions to these 'development' problems can be presented through a moral register that allows 'good governance' reforms to be imagined as a one-way transaction between "good people and bad dictators" (Bogaert 2013: 217). As a result, all reforms are portrayed as democratic, despite the evidence that these institutional 'techno-fixes' have often reinforced the power of ruling elites by opening up new channels for the distribution of patronage (Lust 2009; Mitchell 2002).

The contradictions within the globalised discourse of democracy have also manifested themselves through the apparent exclusion of Islamist and Arab nationalist institutions from the current of democratisation funds available from the 1990s onwards (Carapico 2002). Likewise, Western diplomats have paid lip service to the idea of democracy promotion, but during the 1990s "there was little real pressure on the region's governments to permit people an expanded voice in politics" (Norton 2013: 132). Resultantly, a blind eye was turned to the suppression of Islamists in parliamentary elections such as in Egypt and Tunisia (ibid).

The EU and US's variegated support for democracy in the region can be put down to a desire for stability. As Esposito observes: "for leaders in the west, democracy raises the prospect of old and reliable friends or client states being transformed into more independent and less predictable nations" (1999: 241). Thus, what appears is an interest in "democracy without dissent", meaning the 'West's' openness to "government-controlled and government-dominated change, but not a change of government" (ibid: 244).

It would appear, then, that certain elements within the political societies of WANA are deemed not to have the kind of civility that is compatible with 'Western' democracy and liberalisation (Volpi 2011). Having been pressured to democratise and liberalise – but only to a point – Arab governments "adopted some of the rhetorical and symbolic trappings of democracy" (Carapico 2002: 391). The authoritarianism, nepotism, corruption and patronage networks remained, however. The differential incorporation of socio-political classes into the global capitalist economy through this process did not only further inequality and poverty. It revealed that reality belies the ostensible goals of the globalised discourse of democracy. The resounding calls for dignity and social justice in the Arab revolts are, in part, a response to this disillusionment (Khalidi 2013). They are an assertion that, just as different forms of democracy have emerged in the 'West' through its adaptation to local conditions (Esposito 1999), the liberal-normative basis of

the international system must change to grant the region's inhabitants the dignity and freedom to define politics in their own terms (Adib-Moghaddam 2013). Claiming that the Arab revolts represent the late arrival of the 'end of history' in WANA is, thus, devoid of analytical rigour. It presents a transhistorical notion of democracy that, when imposed from above, restricts openings for alternative political formations to emerge through the same processes that created culturally authentic and indigenous political systems in the 'West'.

Freedom, Self-Determination, and the Politics of Resistance

How might we make space for an alternative politics of truth to change the liberal-normative basis of the international system? The answer lies in giving a platform to the forms of meaningful political expression that have emerged through resistance. The Arab revolts provided just this platform. They revealed the inadequacy of generalisations about the 'Arab street' or 'Islamic mindset' for analysing the politics of the region, and have emphasised the importance of a more substantive engagement with domestic policies in WANA (Fawcett 2013).

The Arab revolts may have taken commentators by surprise, but they did not take place in a vacuum. For instance, Tunisian and Egyptian labour activists had, since the 1970s, played a vanguard role in "shaping the development of broad mass struggles" and resisting the effects of neoliberal economic integration (Achcar 2013: 157). The authoritarianism of the ruling regimes in Tunisia and Egypt had also been challenged by women's movements, which played a defining role in spreading democratic values (ibid). Through this process, populations in WANA have debated the nature of the political communities they live in and have mobilised to change the structural conditions and subjectivities imposed upon them by ruling elites (Levine 2013).

These individual and institutional struggles were antecedents to the Arab revolts and foundational to the discourse that tied a common thread between them (Achcar 2013). The spreading of this discourse was facilitated by the "unfettered revolution in communications, trade and technology" associated with globalisation (Fawcett 2013: 196). These technologies have increased opportunities for alternative political views to be heard, thereby decreasing the efficacy of censorship (Achcar 2013). The visibility of inequality within and between states, and between WANA and the rest of the world has also increased (Halliday 2002). Tech-savvy youth networks were another social agency that played a vanguard role in "coordinating contentious actions and bridging the claims and identities of a wider range of actors" (Achcar 2013: 160). Transnational, transversal solidarities have sprung up as a result, uniting those oppressed and marginalised by the ever-increasing hierarchisation within global capitalism's international divisions of labour, and all those opposed to "the common experience of injustice all over the world" (Adib-Moghaddam 2013: 85).

The globalisation of the political imagination through this process has facilitated the emergence of a counter-cultural politics of resistance that is both local and global (Adib-Moghaddam 2013). Using these new communications technologies, bloggers, filmmakers, musicians, and artists from diverse ideological backgrounds have drawn upon the terms of the Enlightenment to frame their repertoires of resistance. They have staked their claims for dignity, freedom and social justice through the lenses of democracy, representation and human rights (Hudson 2013). Contrary to those who insist on harking back to some 'golden era' of cultural purity, and to those determined to lock these referents in an eighteenth-century epistemological prison, this is neither 'cultural imperialism' nor the homogenising steamroller of 'Westernisation'. Rather, the "universality of norms such as social justice, independence, freedom and democracy" has been reclaimed (Adib-Moghaddam 2013: 15) as "the diaspora of these terms across the world has loosened the internal coherence that held them together in a Euro-American master narrative" (Appadurai 1996: 35).

This emphasises the agency of local actors. Agency reveals itself through the emergence of new subjectivities that come forward when power and resistance meet each other (Adib-Moghaddam 2013). The subjectivities taken up by those who engage in radical protests are, hence, the products of an interaction between the individual subject and the discursive, disciplinary and institutional forces of the regime they are contesting (Levine 2013). Crucially, this acknowledges the multiplicity of subject positions that are inevitably produced in this dialectic, but which are nonetheless united by the ethic of a global counter-cultural politics of resistance. This plurality within the universal "makes it impossible for the postcolonial deconstructionist to suggest that the subaltern cannot speak" (Dabashi

2012: 233). This is evidenced by the merging of the styles and idioms of this counter-culture with local motifs to challenge domestic truth conditions (Levine 2013). For example, we can witness the emergence of a "hybrid, post-modernist 'Islamocratic politics' [that is] directed towards democracy and social equality" (Adib-Moghaddam 2013: 54). We may also observe the reinvigoration of the Arab 'imagined community' (Khalidi 2013), which no longer has a charismatic leader at its centre, but has evolved into a de-centred, leaderless and non-identitarian movement geared towards these same universals (Adib-Moghaddam 2013).

In this manner, a chorus of political subjectivities has permeated the political field once monopolised and emaciated by the narrow range of identities made available by ruling regimes. In coming together in a plural but unified movement, social agents have, hence, overcome the compartmentalising effect of modalities of governance that manipulated archaic social structures to bring subjects closer to the state (Levine 2013). As a result, a profound crack has appeared in the discursive and disciplinary foundations of these regimes, severely undermining their legitimacy and strength.

In this way, it is clear that the Arab revolts are specific to regional conditions. At the same time, the networked nature of the Arab revolts has located them within a broader cosmopolitan exchange and struggle for justice. It is this dialectic between the local and global that has enabled the Arab revolts to retain their specificity, whilst engaging with and contesting the liberal-normative basis of the international system (Dabashi 2012). This local/global interaction counteracts Huntington's claim that the world is bifurcated along various unbreachable civilisational faultlines. The hybrid political formations that emerge through this interaction also allow analyses to move beyond the dogma of theorists, such as Fukuyama, who lay claim to democracy and liberalism as uniquely 'Western' constructs to be exported around the globe.

Conclusion

This paper has argued against a unidirectional understanding of globalisation. Those who believe economic integration and liberalism are the fundamental drivers of globalisation owe an intellectual debt to Fukuyama, whose hubristic proclamation of the 'end of history' placed 'Western' liberalism at the zenith of a teleological narrative of development. Huntington's 'clash' thesis meshed with this narrative by emphasising the despotic and 'backward' nature of the 'Islamic mindset'. Prompted to remedy this by the activism of neo-fundamental Islamists, a wave of US and EU-funded democratising projects were implemented in WANA to bring the region 'level with us'. However, these projects ignored the structure of state-society relations in WANA and essentialised regional actors. As a result, they exacerbated already unequal power relations and inequality.

The institutionalisation of this regime of truth and its widespread acceptance robbed regional actors of a voice, denied their resistance and prevented political alternatives from being aired. In fact, the Arab revolts emerged out of a history of opposition to authoritarianism and the malefic effects of neoliberal economic integration on neo-patrimonial societies. Advances in communications technology widened the political field in WANA and allowed oppositional networks to grow. This facilitated the formation of a global counter-cultural politics of resistance that contributed to the hybridisation of the terms and concepts often deemed exclusively 'Western'. The ethic of this politics of resistance reaffirmed the agency of individual actors, providing space for new subjectivities to emerge that challenge assumptions about how politics should be conducted domestically and internationally.

In sum, the socio-political character of the regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria was what had made the effects of privatisation and liberalisation so bad. The Arab revolts sought to change this but also rejected the patronising and paternalistic rhetoric that accompanied this augmentation in inequality. They represent the dialectical interaction of global forces with local conditions, located within the context of technological and cultural changes occurring on a global scale. Globalisation, therefore, not only exacerbated the structural conditions that elicited the Arab revolts but also facilitated and provided space for local and global actors to shape the form of this resistance.

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