

Lessons from the South

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Abstract:

Iain Chambers' essay challenges explanations of the Arab Spring emerging from the Occidental media, arguing that the terms of engagement set by the Arab revolts can no longer be unilaterally defined by the West. Chambers stresses the centrality of the Mediterranean as an increasingly evident site of confluence between East and West and between North and South. He goes on to argue that the events of the Arab Spring reopen the Western cultural and political lexicon, and put into question the historical alliance between Christianity and the universalising discourses of modernity. Ideas regarding the individual, the public sphere, political agency, religion, secularism and the state are necessarily being renegotiated in the context of the uprisings. The lived experiences of the Arab Spring slip beyond Western constructions of the events to expose the political and cultural burden of a modernity that may no longer be determined or managed single-handedly by the West. The Arab uprisings have occurred in the same time frame as protests in several European capitals, particularly since the fiscal collapse of 2008, and while there are distinct differences in these social unrests there is also, Chambers observes, a common factor: the rejection of the hypocrisies of the modern state. The new perspectives emerging from this confluence of experience around the shores of the Mediterranean may yield a more radical humanism within social, cultural, and political formations that are not automatically circumscribed by the global dictates of neoliberalism.

Keywords: The South, Mediterranean, Occident, space, secularism, translation.

When mass protests and regime changes swept across North Africa in the Spring of 2011, and subsequently triggered turbulence in Bahrain and a bloody civil war presently being waged in Syria, Occidental journalism and political commentary was initially taken by surprise. The status quo—and not only for Arab dictators—had

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seemingly crumbled overnight. The situation was eventually brought into perspective and under Western eyes through a series of explanatory frames – educated unemployed youth, the new social media, state oppression, and the lack of democracy – that responded to Occidental criteria of analysis. Of course, in the contemporary conditions of planetary modernity all is somehow connected, nothing takes place in a vacuum, and the languages, technologies, and ideologies of the West clearly played a significant role. However, rather than measure such events – their perceived achievements and failures – against a presumed Occidental template, it is perhaps politically and historically more significant to register the emergence of a series of interrogations that invest both the protagonists and those of us observing from afar. It is also important at this point to register that the processes and procedures under discussion are still very much in progress: the question of rights and liberties – social, political, human – remains open, the subject of discussion, debate, and continuing struggle. A previous political landscape, which had been thoroughly endorsed by Western powers and diplomacy, is clearly in ruins. The assumption that only the Occidental ‘we’ has the right to define ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ has clearly been rendered vulnerable to unsuspected historical operations and cultural forces.

What emerge from this picture are critical prospects that criss-cross the Mediterranean, rendering proximate its northern and southern shores, shredding the confines between Occident and Orient. When the terms of political, historical and cultural freedom are exposed – for whom, where, when, and how? – a whole critical lexicon comes under review. The assumed temporality of political and historical progress, the accumulative power of its linear development, are skewed into another space in which modernity is neither mono-dimensional nor homogeneous. The downfall of Mubarak, the daily protests in Tahrir Square, were not simply Egyptian matters. Their resonance was not restricted merely to the Arab world. A political lexicon that many consider to be complete and fully achieved in the governing bodies and institutional authorities of the West has been reopened and newly researched, traversed and translated. Understandings of the individual, the public sphere, political agency, religion, secularism and the state suddenly become vulnerable to renegotiation in events that rudely punctuate flawless abstractions.

As we, too, are learning, nothing is guaranteed. Rights and freedoms can be rolled back. In the name of security, driven by the imperatives of governance, there can always occur a turn in the screw. In a world that increasingly does not recognise human beings, only citizens and subjects, the categories that supposedly secure the polis are always open to unsuspected interpretation, redefinition, contestation and ideological spin. Our conceptual securities become the agonistic sites of historical processes and cultural struggle that do not necessarily mirror the critical and political imperatives of the West. This introduces us to a profound countertext of Occidental modernity. On the other side of the page, or else retrieved from the seeming blankness of the margins, both the ethics and aesthetics of ‘reading’ the world come undone. Picking up the pieces, re-assembling the elements of a previous hegemonic order now

mixed with other incentives and stories to tell, is to push our understandings out into unsuspected and unprotected spaces. Here, negotiating a world that consistently exceeds my ken, distinctions and divisions, and their accompanying academic and disciplinary authorisation, becomes altogether more vulnerable. A body of knowledge, a corpus of understanding and the authority of its literature, is wounded. There is now a cut that perhaps can never be healed.

What is presently occurring in North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean – in Egypt, Israel or Syria – throws an interrogating light across the West. Not only does a colonial past, etched in the actual frontiers of these states and, in particular, in the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948, continue to haunt the dramatic conflictuality of the area, but understandings are overwhelmingly directed and disciplined by Western constructions of Islam and the Arab world. In an unfortunately under-read book by Edward Said – *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (1997 [1981]) – the precise political and cultural prison house of such constructions is caught in its brutal historical weight. Precisely by slipping beyond these constructions and reworking and translating the political and cultural lexicons of modernity, the West is now confronted by a modernity that is not merely ‘ours’ to administer and define. In the transit of translation, which as Walter Benjamin has taught us is always a two-way process in which the original is subsequently impossible to reconstruct, unexpected versions emerge. As Salman Rushdie put it some time ago, this is how newness enters the world (1992: 394).

After all, explanations that run along the grooves of precarious livelihoods, youth unemployment, and the frequent unaccountability of government are an increasingly global condition and not simply restricted to the south of the planet. Revolts in Tunis and rioting in south London are not the same thing. They are differentiated in all manner of complexities, but they are also bound together in the overarching procedures of a neoliberal global order. Here, in the resonance and dissonance of different localities, we also touch the paradoxes of the present conjuncture: registering in the Arab world demands for freedom, change, and accountable government, while in the West these perspectives are often publicly in retreat. To register the proximity of the dramatic visual presence of events unfolding on the African and Asian shores of the Mediterranean draws the West, however reluctantly, out of its self. Massacres, dictatorships, police brutality, people on the street voicing the sacred lexicon of Western liberalism – ‘freedom’, ‘democracy’ – cannot be ignored. There was no burning of US or European or Israeli flags; simply the disquieting spectacle of people apparently taking the political rhetoric of the West seriously; often far more seriously than the West itself. The languages of the West have exceeded any single point of ‘origin’; they are clearly no longer its property, to be defined and managed solely according to its will.

What is exposed, perhaps unwinding in what until yesterday were the autocratic states of North Africa, is a profound challenge to neoliberalism, to its individualist and fundamentally anti-social and anti-democratic logic. Beyond the slogans of democracy

and constitutional reform there is emerging in the Arab world the fundamental contestation of the hypocrisy of the modern state, particularly after the fiscal crash of 2008, which considers only the welfare of its elites throughout the world, rather than that of the majority of its population. There are significant planetary communalities here. The public financing of stability and not of change, the rescue of banks and the bailing out of corruption rather than people, is part of a planetary drive towards privatising profits and socialising losses. Ultimately, the on-going struggles for change in the Arab world, the unexpected outcomes of a social networking that stretches from the blogosphere to the street, are also profoundly about processes of democratisation and their absence, not only in the rest of the world, but also in the West itself. The necessary re-reading of modernity proposed in the present moment invites us to consider in particular its composition in the complex meshing of liberalism and capitalism. This is a political economy – the very term and practice itself a product of this formation – in which Occidental economical, political, and cultural power presents itself as a hegemonic force on a planetary scale. It is where state, nation, market, and ‘civilisation’ are increasingly wedged or striated within each other’s making, and their separation increasingly rendered untenable. It is about a ‘way of life’. This is why we are talking about a political economy and not simply about economics.

Abu Atris, the pseudonym of a writer working in Egypt, suggested on the Al Jazeera English website on 24 February 2011 that what was under way in the revolts in North Africa was also a revolt against neo-liberalism and the policing of its logic by subordinate client states in the Arab world (the page now appears under Armbrust 2013). The systematic conflation of business and politics under the impact of privatisation, forcibly bringing society under the rule of the market, is not only typical of the situation in ‘advanced Western democracies’. Egypt and Tunisia have been neoliberal states for decades. The proximity of Arab leadership to the Bush administrations, or, over a longer period of time, the direct involvement of the Italian government in the Tunisian state, is mirrored in public figures (which in Egypt includes the upper ranks of the military) having a foot in both politics and business. Government is there to defend free market fundamentalism, to divert financing from the public to the private sector, or rather to privatise and plunder public resources, and to ideologically block considerations of poverty and questions of social and economic justice. In this scenario, the proximity of Cairo to Washington, or of Tripoli to Rome, reaches its obscene extremes when warfare comes to be organised through neoliberal principles and increasingly privatised: contractors in Iraq, mercenaries in Libya.

Beyond the West

For the problem, rarely acknowledged, is that there does not exist a unique or homogenous West, or East; there exists no such *thing* as Islam or Christianity. The world cannot be othered in such simplicities, and civilisation or truth cannot be immediately identified with one or other of the antagonistic poles. To insist on the

idea of Islam as a thing, condensed in the figure of the armed terrorist or the veiled woman, that is, in a clear image to be confronted, contested, and eventually converted to our way of life, reveals, as Edward W. Said and Gil Anidjar have explained, the centrality of religious discourse to the making of the modern West. As a category of interpretation – like ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ – the concept of ‘religion’ is an invention of Occidental modernity and its planetary pedagogy.

El Jadida. It is the hour that milk is delivered. The hour that I love the most in my city, peopled still only for an instance by those who have to rise early: street cleaners, fishermen, donut vendors, the devout, vegetable sellers, the custodians of the public ovens. One after another they wish me a “luminous day” while I wander the streets and alleys. Come with me into the old Portuguese town where the past has been restored in the smallest detail. In this space, the size of a public square, there, flanking each other are a mosque, a church and a synagogue. What is this Islamism? This word does not appear in our dictionaries. I learnt of its existence in the Western media. (Chraïbi 1997; my translation)

The disquieting historical conclusion, that we rarely confront, is that European Christianity is perhaps the proper name of Occidental modernity and its globalisation. Secular, lay thought is sustained by a disposition of faith: the belief in the teleological redemption of time as ‘progress’; in the call to save the world and render it subservient to a unique image; in the humanist mastery of the cosmos; in the mission to create an exceptional state, or the ‘city on the hill’, sought by the Puritans in the colonies of north America (and the Jesuits thousands of miles further south on the same continent). As Antonio Gramsci reminds us, the relationship between religion, the state, and the political formation of the West is inseparable. Elsewhere, I have argued that the secular West is sustained by this ‘invisible order’ (Chambers 2012). In strictly historical terms no one would contest this affirmation, particularly in the context of the violent affirmation of the constellation of European colonialism. But to insist today on this dimension frequently promotes critical embarrassment and silence. Today, the question of religion is associated with other places, and other epochs, with another culture: somebody else’s property and problem, certainly not belonging to *our* modern world. Some years ago, the Egyptian scholar Leila Ahmed noted that in the struggle of Western women for their rights and freedom no one ever suggested that they should abandon Christianity in order to obtain them. Today, it is precisely this option – the abandonment of what, after all, is a variant of a shared monotheism – which the West demands of Muslim women (see Ahmed 1993). Such a request obviously presumes that Islam and modernity are separate entities, rather than profoundly entangled in a complex European and extra-European formation. That one can be modern, a Muslim, and a woman clearly undoes any singular definition of modernity, its politics, practices, and possibilities (see Mahmood 2005).

From this awareness it becomes possible to grasp the sense of an eventual humanism that is disentangled from the hypocrisy of a ‘Europe which never stops talking of

man yet massacres him at every one of its street corners, at every corner of the world' (Fanon 2004: 235) The humanism that Fanon sought, to replace a 'jumble of dead words' (2004: 11), has the vital responsibility to host requests and desires that exceed the will of the West. To cross this threshold is to sound the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of a Europe that achieved its apex in the colonial instance that, in turn, was stabilised and perpetuated by racism as a founding structure of Occidental modernity. Here there would be much to say on the vicinity of Fanon and Foucault around the central idea of race and racism as the central disposition of modern bio-power.

Apart from secularism, the other key concept invariably deployed in the registration of apparent difference between Europe and the rest of the world is that of the 'public sphere'. Together with secularism, the public sphere is considered central to the formation and exercise of modern democracy. Here, in the public exposition of individualism and rationalised interests, the modern bourgeois order was apparently formed (see Habermas 1992). It tends to be assumed that the rest of the world lives the concept of the public sphere as an absence, rather than being the site of other modalities of public encounter, confrontation, and expression (see Salvatore 2011). The opacity proposed by embedded practices and lives elsewhere confound Occidental rationality seeking to render the world transparent to the universalising desire of its will. If modern anthropology has begun to understand this, much of the rest of the social and human sciences still remain very much in the dark. The so-called 'Arab Spring', unauthorised by Western politics, culture and its sciences, has operated a cut of this type. What emerges is that the Occidental blueprint cannot be simply copied or imposed. Its languages and technologies may well open up local counter-spaces and narratives—from rap music, heavy metal Islam, and social networks to pressuring political institutions to change—but they are always in transit, without guarantees; their apparent roots in the West provide somebody else's routes. The West, in becoming the world, loses its 'origins'.

The question of secularism and the public sphere should therefore not be understood simply in terms of their sociological specificity: the historical products of local forces, political desires, and cultural constraints. As cultural practices and historical forces they contribute to an altogether more extensive debate, and the eventual elaboration of a convivial critical space that is neither limited to Islam, the Arab world, nor to the West. The translation by the West of its other, and that of the West by the other, however asymmetrical the relationship, is by no means a one-way traffic. This is why the planetary transit of the West—its political languages, technologies and modalities of knowledge—poses a far more significant perspective than that of mimicry, mistranslation, and presumed 'betrayals'. In this sense the daily practices of realising political processes able to negotiate and configure the historical and cultural conditions of life in North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean pose a series of interrogations that arrive at the heart of the global pretensions of democratic thought. The assumption that democracy is forever Occidental in

provenance, practice, and participation necessarily comes undone. If the West has become the world, it can no longer claim a unique centre or single authority.

As the infinite passage of music teaches us, the discourse and structures of democracy, faith, and the public sphere can be duplicated, dubbed, and remixed in multiple and unauthorised versions. The encounter with other historical traditions, cultural patrimonies, and modalities of reasoning instigates *mutual translation* (however uneven the forces in play). It inaugurates processes that can no longer be understood in a unilateral fashion. ‘Freedom’ and ‘democracy’ are not exportable items, ‘religion’ is not merely a timeless dogma: all are historical practices that emerge from complex human fashioning. Learning from a multifarious world that has not simply been proximate in its thought and culture to the West, but also deeply imbricated in its formation and language (from science and medicine to language, literature and the culinary arts) is not merely a matter of adjusting a repressed historical archive. Listening and responding to the southern and eastern shores of the present-day Mediterranean is, despite its obvious economic and political subordination to Euro-American interests, to take an apprenticeship in the justice of a democracy yet to come: both there and here.

This, finally, is the ‘disjunctive’ time—to use Homi Bhabha’s term (1994: *passim*)—of the postcolonial present. It is a time that is neither linear nor monolithic, and exposes modernity to other dynamics in the planetary present (see also Mezzadra and Rahola 2006). It is right now being explored in events, cultural practices, and political struggles from Tunis to Tehran. This is a time that is divided from a unique temporality and is always out of joint with respect to a singular will. As a temporality that is folded into the uneven specificities of place, and their particular powers of transformation, it promotes the emerging critique of the assumed ‘neutrality’ of the Occidental view: its political framing, its historical verdicts, and the knowledge apparatuses of its social sciences. Political, sociological, and historical knowledge—their ‘objectivity’—is now rendered accountable in another, unsuspected critical space: all to be renegotiated in a displaced positionality.

In underscoring how we are diversely placed, and yet ultimately connected, these comments have simply sought to propose a modality of criticism that is ultimately willing to expose itself to a Mediterranean whose histories, cultures, and possibilities are irreducible to the presumed authority of its northern shore. Is this what we might mean by a postcolonial Mediterranean? Perhaps. It is certainly a proposal for a new, more open, multilateral critical space.

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Lessons from the South

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