



The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism

Hamid Dabashi

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This pioneering explanation of the Arab Spring will define a new era of thinking about the Middle East.

In this landmark book, Hamid Dabashi argues that the revolutionary uprisings that have engulfed multiple countries and political climes from Morocco to Iran and from Syria to Yemen, were driven by a 'Delayed Defiance' - a point of rebellion against domestic tyranny and globalized disempowerment alike - that signifies no less than the end of Postcolonialism. Sketching a new geography of liberation, Dabashi shows how the Arab Spring has altered the geopolitics of the region so radically that we must begin re-imagining the 'the Middle East'.

Ultimately, the 'permanent revolutionary mood' Dabashi brilliantly explains has the potential to liberate not only those societies already ignited, but many others through a universal geopolitics of hope.

The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism Details

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Faiz Alas says

It is now time to give a more detailed account of my central proposition that in the rise of the Arab Spring we are witness to the end of postcoloniality as a condition and mode of ideology formation.

Madelaine says

Published only a year after the uprisings began, the book serves as a refreshing framework to interpreting the revolutions and the future of the Middle East in general. Author Hamid Dabashi is noticeably excited at the prospects of a new Middle East following these revolutions. After all that has transpired, he is likely disappointed at the actual results of the uprisings, but regardless his framework was very enlightening. His primary argument is one that I find to be uncommon and highly undervalued within academia and discourse about the Middle East in general: that we need to evolve beyond perceiving the world as a simple East-West dichotomy. Though this dichotomy served us well within the emergence of Edward Said's *Orientalism* and the subsequent discussions, the Middle East has responded with supposed decolonial/anti-imperialist regimes that turned out to be authoritarian, repressive, and did nothing to advance the region (namely Assad's Syria, Ben Ali's Tunisia, Gaddafi's Libya, etc.) These regimes were able to survive for so long using anti-imperialist rhetoric and polarizing the people on the basis of anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiments. Dabashi argues the need to move past this reductive, simple allying with all things anti-imperialist since it has done little but bring more suffering and oppression towards Arab peoples. Additionally, I appreciated Dabashi's methodology, especially in deconstructing various articles in a simplistic and witty manner. Overall, this was a great read and I'd recommend this to anyone who is looking for an alternative reading to the topic of the Arab Spring, which since 2012 has obviously been a huge hot topic for writers. Reading this opened me up to Dabashi and I'll definitely be reading more of his work in the future.

Sara Salem says

Expected much more from this. He claims the end of postcolonialism but provides very little evidence for why this is the case.

Thai Divone says

I don't know how to review this book, I must confess, and perhaps I shouldn't. I'm clearly not the right person for the job. But this book left me so breathless, so amazed, and also so disappointed, at times, that I have to write it down. Dabashi succeeds in writing a manifesto for a series of revolutions, much alike Marx and the Spring of Nations. Like Marx, he is not very polite, not very cautious. At times he is also extremely brilliant like a shining star. This is a book that one must read. It is also a book that one must not take by its word. This is a book to keep for life, even though some of the dreams it presents sometimes feel like they were shattered into dust.

Ioana Fotache says

The only flaw with this book is the fact that its optimism got dated really fast. Every time Dabashi was expressing his positive outlook for peace in the Middle East I would cringe, but he couldn't have known in hindsight.

Andrea says

I enjoyed this, even though being written in the moment it might be a little repetitive and a little early in some of its pronouncements perhaps. Yet it captures a feeling -- both of the exuberance and hopefulness of the protests that spread around the world at the time (and continue to some degree), and a frustration with old ways of thinking about things. We differ in some of the details of this, but it's the delicious and productive kind of difference in opinion, not the same old frustrations with small groups stuck in their ways.

But first, to deal with that provocative, and prevocational tagline, the end of postcolonialism. As Dabashi writes:

[T]he major argument of this book is that events in the Arab and Muslim world generically referred to as the 'Arab Spring [p 75]' represent the end of postcolonial ideological formations as we have known them for the past two hundred years. By the end of postcoloniality, I mean the cessation of ideological production in colonial contexts and terms -- the terms determined by the European colonial domination of the region, and the tyrannical 'postcolonial' states left behind when the Europeans collected their flags and left. Anticolonial nationalism, socialism, and Islamism are the ideological formations that historically have confronted European colonialism and shaped the modern nation-states ... [p. 139]

The end of postcolonial ideological formations does not mean that colonialism itself has ended or that imperialism does not generate resistance but that the world is no longer trapped in old ways of thinking, trapped in opposition, but free to struggle with itself, move forward into new pathways. [p 140]

Said spoke for an earlier period, but to build on his work we must transcend it, 'We need to overcome the anxiety of Orientalism and shift our theorizing lens to our evolving history and stop trying to explain things to that fictive white man who sat in Edward Said's mind for a lifetime'. Ha. He also answers the 'outlandish' question of whether the subaltern can speak with a resounding of course. He questions Hardt and Negri for their Eurocentrism (and the Christianity of their ideals!), draws on Badiou and Hannah Arendt and Agamben and Bishara and poets and writers of arabic that I do know -- in something of a mishmash perhaps, but I think taking what is useful from different places to understand the now is no bad thing. That is not to say he asks that we forget the past, just that we do not allow those old patterns of thought and action to control us moving into the future. There is so much here, so just to focus on what I loved most.

I appreciate his efforts to see the academic/writer as making a conscious choice to join the uprisings, and then what their role can be. He writes:

The task of becoming attentive students of the uprisings and seeing to it that they generate their own knowledge are tasks no less urgent than the revolutions themselves. To be sure, we are fortunately no longer in the age of grand-narrative-based universalist philosophies and sweeping theorizations. Whereas the Left Kantians' longing for 'total revolution' following the French Revolution ended up producing 'prophets of extremity' in Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida, I have opted for the idea of open-ended revolutions, work-in-progress, an opera aperta, as a working idea to keep the tenacity of these revolutions alive theoretically.

In terms of the search for a new mode of compatible knowledge, the left is part of the problem, not the solution. The Arab and non-Arab left must shape up and join the revolutions, and cease being an obstacle to them. [241]

I don't know about the 'prophets of extremity' bit, (though I very much look forward to rolling my eyes at the next mention of Foucault over cocktails and muttering 'prophet of extremity'), but I do agree that the establishment left needs to get its act together and act not as a brake, but as a springboard, isn't that what we've been working and organising and theorising for? Still, the major lack in this book is a thoughtful look at the coproduction of knowledge, participatory research, praxis...just what kind of intellectual work needs to happen in the movement that is building, and how? That is a huge question that people have been working on in other places, people like Freire or Myles Horton, but which I don't see being picked up or theorised elsewhere which saddens me.

But that said, this book made me happy. It does not take us beyond, but calls for us to go there together with the people in revolt:

In order to reach for the current world, the world we live in, the world in which people revolt, the world in which Meydan Azadi and Tahrir Square have become emblematic of something else, something beyond 'Western liberal democracy,' something yet to be named, needs to be imagined. In this world, I suggest, demography, labour migration, gender apartheid, and environmental catastrophe are the key operative factors. In this world, Islam will not disappear, it will be sublimated into a new cosmopolitan worldliness. [p. 118]

I read that list of key operative factors and wanted to do a fist pump, yes I said, yes! That's it, and that isn't really what most people are talking about. He continues

...the commencement of the Arab Spring is the inaugural moment of not just a new historical but, more importantly, a new emancipatory geographical imagination... [55]

Again this is a thought that is started, but not really developed – how much exciting work is to be done? But I am fascinated with this idea

A geography of liberation begins with people's struggles for bread and dignity and builds from there the moral map of their worldly whereabouts to wrap around a fragile planet. On this map there is no East or West, South or North, invested with ideological racialization, one against the other.[57]

I love his acknowledgement of the radical aspects of the civil rights movement, and his effort to recapture that understanding as we watch the renewed struggle. I don't think anyone who hasn't been poor or oppressed can really understand just how important the struggle for bread and dignity are, the meaning and necessity of a basic level of security and respect in society. I know that I will never understand it fully having been born poor and treated so and still angry, yet white and with all the privileges of an American and European passport. Fundamental changes are needed to win these fundamental demands if we demand them for all.

Like the geographies of liberation, he raises what are for me equally exciting about the connection between democracy – a new, revitalised vision of democracy – and public space.

What the naked military apparatus of these illegitimate states faced was the expanded public space that was now fully conscious of itself...That amounts to the people, hitherto the subjects of a ('postcolonial') tyranny, becoming, ipso facto, the citizens of the republic they wish to populate and thus expand into the public space they must thus define and designate. [204]

And

The *regime du savoir* associated with that politics is being altered, by way of altering the worlds we inhabit, and not merely by way of resistance to power. The transversalism of these revolutionary uprisings, as a result, generates its own synergy by systematically and consistently expanding the public space they implicate for the exercise of civil liberties.

These are all revolts that are fundamentally about the (re)taking of public space, both physical and virtual, the (re)taking of a new kind of citizenship, and I'm following this idea along here, but it is a citizenship not of blood or passports, but of geography and struggle. I love thinking through this, and I love that he did not focus on this as a virtual revolution as it so clearly was not, that was simply one aspect of the millions of people actually physically coming together and demanding regime change, demanding social justice, demanding a new world. A view of this as simply being about twitter and youtube and blogging takes away much of its power and potential as a force for revolutionary change

Thus the middle class and blogging are offered as the explanations for a transnational uprising that was catalysed by a fruit peddler who set himself on fire out of economic desperation. [222-223]

We cannot forget that.
