Digital Arabism

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Does the expression "Arab Spring" have any meaning beyond being a journalistic catchphrase? Put differently, is there in fact a common "Arab" characteristic among the events that, in multiple and varied forms, have recently played out in countries as different as Tunisia, in the Maghreb; Egypt, unquestionably the great regional power; impoverished Yemen, at the southern tip of the peninsula; its rich neighbor, the Kingdom of Bahrain; and Syria, in the heart of the Fertile Crescent? Revolutions to some, conspiracies to others, a veritable seismic split in the history of the region or mere "shocks" generating cosmetic changes in the organization of power – do the social protests now linked under this name have anything more in common than the fact of having taken place in various locations conventionally called "the Arab world"? Is it not the case that one of the (undoubtedly provisional) lessons of the "Spring" has been to bring back into fashion a name that had tended to be set aside in favor of designations such as the "Islamic world" or "Greater Middle East," understood as the area stretching from the Maghreb in the west to Afghanistan and Pakistan in the east? In any case, it is striking to note that the first readings of these phenomena – whether they emphasize the intolerable "social fatigue" produced by largely authoritarian regimes, the inevitable erosion of an Islamist protest wearied by its messianic appeals, or the indomitable demographic momentum of the Arab baby-boom generations – are all characterized by their adoption of the same, exclusively Arab lens.

How might one explain this agreement – which is nearly always implicit among commentators and analysts – to emphasize the *Arab* aspect of this *Spring*? Why is this adjective, after years of being not only forgotten but disgraced, making a comeback on both the academic and media stage? What elements of current events are strong enough to reverse language trends and give new heuristic value to a geopolitical concept that many considered to have fallen into obsolescence? One possible way to answer these questions is to go back to the genesis of this expression and therefore to the late-nineteenth-century "invention" of what has since been called "the Arab world." If the conjuring of this new political fantasy world was indeed the product of a techno-historical context common to the rise of various nationalisms in the era of "print capitalism," can we hypothesize that the renewal of the

"imagined community"[1] of Arabs results from a new set of conditions in which today's technologies have replaced those of the past? Following in the footsteps of the initial information and communications revolution that accompanied this cultural area's arrival in the modern world, are digital networks currently reshaping an Arab world that is prepared to assert itself once again as a political entity?

The "Birth" of the Arab World

In the Romantic era, Europeans hardly knew anything of the East except from voyages to the Holy Land, a region almost entirely disconnected from the North African territories in which France was nevertheless establishing its colonies. As for the inhabitants of the vast territories ruled in principle by a caliph, they were almost entirely unaware of any hypothetical "Ottoman identity"; they defined themselves according to all sorts of religious, geographical, clan, and professional categories, and the rather unflattering designation "Arab" was hardly used except as a name for nomadic populations. Prior to the modern age, one would search in vain for the expression "Arab world" in the region's traditions (or elsewhere, for that matter). In order for the term to have come into use, there must have been, among local populations, the birth of a feeling of belonging to a community, with its related political implications. The term was endowed with a centrality that did not necessarily eclipse other identity markers, starting with the Muslim religion.

With its own unique chronology, and in the specific context of European colonial expansionism and "early globalization,"[2] the Arabic-speaking world of the Ottoman Empire and especially the countries of the Fertile Crescent were thus gradually won over by a novel flow of ideas calling for Arab political unity. Based, like much nationalism, on a mythical foundation narrative, in this case the memory of the past grandeur of the Arab empire in the Umayyad or Abbasid eras, the new narrative of a supranational people came into circulation in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. It has continued to play a central role in the contemporary history of the region, despite the failure of the great Arab Revolt of 1916-1918 and the construction of numerous nation-states over the last century.

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[1] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

[2] Suzanne Berger, *Notre première mondialisation: Leçons d'un échec oublié*, La république des idées (Paris: Seuil, 2003).

These nation-states, most of which were born of decolonization struggles, certainly developed their own national mythologies, but with explicit references to a supranational whole embodied, for example, by the organization of the Arab League, founded in 1945 (with seven member states at the time and twenty-two today). More than the Islamic reference – at least until the start of the 1970s, which was the symbolic date of the death of Gamal Abdel Nasser – Arab nationalism remained the foundational paradigm of political representations of the region. Nearly or entirely devoid of any mention of this part of the world, Benedict Anderson's book on the origin and rise of national ideas nevertheless finds a striking illustration of them in the Arab world. At the heart of this movement of cultural and political rebirth (*Nahda*), which brought the Arab world (not yet known by that name) from the classical to the modern age, one unquestionably finds motifs analyzed by the historian in other contexts, namely the adoption of print which became a form of merchandise via the distribution of the press and mass publishing.

Admittedly, print was slow to make its way into societies to the east and the south of the Mediterranean. However, rather than a resistance too easily attributed to the Muslim religion alone, the fact that the Arab world held this technology at a distance for so long despite its being so close and so easily accessible can in reality be explained by the fear that its use would lead to the disappearance of an entire system of production and transmission of knowledge inherited from the past.

Adopting print – at the time of the threat of European colonial expansionism, no less – obviously represented a break with the known world and a leap into the adventure of modernization. It required no less than the full will of public powers – in the event, that of Mehmet Ali, the first modern sovereign of Egypt and viceroy of the country for nearly all of the first half of the nineteenth century – to impose the beginnings of a technological revolution in the early 1820s, the consequences of which would not be felt for a long time. Nevertheless, beginning in the 1850s, together with the publication of the first modern literary works (particularly in the fields of prose and theater) and the first private newspapers, we can see the undeniable harbingers of the cultural integration of print,[3] which, as historians of Arabic literature have shown, accelerated considerably in the final quarter of the century.

One must, of course, consider the impact of such a development in the context of these societies, which still had low literacy rates and a preindustrial economy. Nevertheless, print had an audience, one that, despite being small and limited to paltry numbers of élites

[3] Roger Chartier, *Les usages de l'imprim*é *(XVᵉ-XIXᵉ siècle)* (Paris: Fayard, 1987).

concentrated mainly in a few urban centers, still had sufficient scope to spark a flow of ideas, particularly through translations, that brought modernization to the Arab world. It is in this context that a new figure appeared in society: the man of letters, journalist, and political agitator, of which the Lebanese Jurji Zaydan was a sort of archetype throughout his professional life in Cairo.[4] In a departure from existing training programs, fields of specialization, and especially the written forms inherited from the classical age, this "birth of the [modern Arab] writer"[5] marks a complete break with the previous symbolic system based on oral transmission relayed, in a way, by the manuscript culture. In this sense, print really did *produce*, almost literally speaking, the modern Arab intellectual, by creating the economic conditions in which the figure of the modern scribe[6] could materialize in the social sphere, but also by imposing a radical change on the intercessory role entrusted to specialists of symbolic production. Poetic language, hitherto oriented in essence toward the time of the revelation, fundamentally based in memory, and deliberately reserved for an élite, thus became more prosaic, communicating to everyone the vision of a collective future built upon the notion of the common good.[7]

From One Media Age to Another: The Quiet Revolution of Digital Technologies

Though in its very first formulations it originated in the (often Christian) milieus of the Levant, the new age of the Arab "mediasphere"[8] quickly found its center of gravity in Cairo, a location that neither the political vicissitudes of the region nor the development of new media would change: films from Studio Misr in the mid-1930s, then radio in the middle of the century (with the famous Voice of the Arabs, which played a significant role, for example, in the Algerian Revolution). This entrenchment was strong enough to resist the

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[4] Anne-Laure Dupont, *Ǧurǧî Zaydân, 1861-1914: Écrivain réformiste et témoin de la Renaissance arabe* (Beirut: IFPO, 2006).

[5] Alain Viala, *Naissance de l'écrivain: Sociologie de la littérature à l'âge classique* (Paris: Minuit, 1985).

[6] Régis Debray, *Le scribe: Genèse du politique* (Paris: Grasset, 1980).

[7] Yves Gonzalez-Quijano, "La Renaissance arabe au XIXᵉ siècle: Médiums, médiations et médiateurs," in *Histoire de la littérature arabe moderne (1800-1945),* ed. Boutros Hallaq and Heidi Toëlle (Paris: Sindbad/Actes Sud, 2007).

[8] Régis Debray, *Cours de médiologie générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).

paradoxical imperatives of different formulations of national identity, even as technological and political developments should have favored a minimal definition of that identity rather than its broadest extension. Even at the high point of the construction of the new Arab political entities, the fragmentation of the region's media market never completely eclipsed the domain of symbolic circulations, so recently established at the time of the *Nahda* (renaissance) of the late nineteenth century. Neither the legal nor (especially) the political constraints on the free circulation of literature and ideas, nor even the launch of numerous Hertz televisions, which were by definition subject to the dividing lines of new national borders, could to break the linguistic and cultural connection that, come what may, united the various groups that constituted the greater Arab region.

Disjunctive logic did not entirely carry the day because there was too much overlap (in both the geographical and symbolic senses) between various broadcast zones, and too many unifying flows of ideas in the political and symbolic spheres as well. One might cite, for example, the Palestinian question as formulated in numerous novels, poems, films, paintings and songs. . .

Nevertheless, a century after its emergence, it seemed that Arab print nationalism would not survive obvious political failure. Its death, marked in popular imagination by the 1975 death of the singer Umm Kulthum, the Arab diva *par excellence*, seemed all the more inevitable as a new federative political myth was being established – that of political Islam, embodied by the "religious revolution"[9] in Iran in 1979. But another "revolution" was beginning, as quiet as it was invisible: the revolution of the development of digital information and communications technology. Though some observers at the time noted how much the overthrow of the Shah owed to the broadcasting of Imam Khomeini's speech through the new (still analog!) medium of audio cassettes, no one yet imagined the consequences of the worldwide (digital) information revolution for the Arabic-speaking world.

While the fragmentation of the region's virtual space into independent states appeared inevitable with the decline of the mobilizing potential of pan-Arab ideology, the development of computerized publishing, along with digital broadcasting, gave the press renewed enjoyment of the circumstances that had witnessed the diffusion of nationalistic ideas a century earlier. Just as in the days when the first print periodicals reached an Arab-speaking audience throughout the Ottoman Empire and beyond, beginning in the 1980s various major

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[9]Daryus Shayegan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une révolution religieuse?* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991).

dailies such as *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, *Al-Hayat,* and *Al-Quds al-'arabi* could reach international audiences, this time through unmediated electronic distribution. So long as local authorities did not oppose their publication, identical versions of the same newspapers, with the same news, editorials, and commentaries, reached the political and economic élites scattered throughout the major urban centers of countries throughout the region. In the Internet era, such a technological advancement seems quite modest; at the time, however, it amounted to laying the foundation of a new public space for exchange and communication.

The same technological and financial context and the forced march toward the modernization of the region's major press companies as they came under the control of the Gulf powers allowed for a new escalation of the flow of communication within just a few years. Indeed, the 1990s saw the arrival of the first satellite channels. Some, such as Al-Jazeera, have made their mark on the world media stage. Nevertheless, just as the significance of the famous Qatari network is far from limited to its news channel – with programs ranging from sports broadcasts and children's programs to documentaries and religious programs, among hundreds of other channels available on Arab satellite – the importance of the Arab television revolution must also not be reduced to its news aspect alone. Along with the revival of national themes in the stringent domain of political competition, the new satellite channels, with their games, advertisements, soap operas, and sports programs, have also made an impact (one that might be considered even more decisive, at least in the medium term) by creating a sort of transnational public space in which Arab viewers more or less share the same images and references. Fed by the productions of the sound and image culture industries with their digital by-products, a new imagery has thus been broadcast, particularly to young people, whose demographic significance is well-known (the median age of the Arab population being approximately 21 years, as opposed to 37.7 in Europe).

Thanks to this same generation of youth, the Internet has experienced a period of growth that is all the more striking for the fact that it long remained unseen or underestimated.[10] After a relatively late start, more for technical and political reasons than because of the religious reservations sometimes assumed, the Arab world converted to digital technologies, "caught up" a bit, and even became a leading worldwide player for certain applications. This is particularly true of the social networks, starting with Facebook, whose

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10 Yves Gonzalez-Quijano, "La révolution de l'information aura-t-elle lieu? Les Enjeux des nouvelles technologies de l'information et de la communication dans le monde arabe," *Politique étrangère* 67 (2002): 135-148.

users were more numerous than readers of daily newspapers in May 2010! That figure is certainly indicative of the progress of digital culture among young people. But even more than that, on a symbolic level it represents a sort of transition from the first "information revolution" in the Arab world – the development of the printed press in the late nineteenth century – and the second, on the threshold of the third millennium, thanks to Web 2.0 applications: The first opened the way for "vertical mobilization," in which nationalistic ideas could spread through the efforts of the new élites of the publishing professions; the second seems to embody the idea of an Arab nation that could be achieved by the idea of revolution through capillary action and thanks to reticular Internet circulation.

Players as well-informed as Wael Ghonim (Head of Marketing for Google Middle East and North Africa, but also the administrator of the Facebook group that rallied protesters to the events of January 25 in Egypt) circulate slogans like "Twitter Revolution" or "Revolution 2.0," but they probably create more obstacles to understanding the "Arab Spring" than they help to clarify the succession of events in a region that appears to be plagued by notable political inaction. Besides the dangerous new allure of the technology, these slogans tell us nothing about how the Arab world is being recast by the deliberately anonymous and egalitarian legions of activists from this new generation, militants who have come to politics from the Web and its networks. And yet these expressions remain pertinent, for they have the merit of clearly drawing attention to the changes caused by information and communications technology. This is all another way of saying that the print nationalism of the pioneers of modern Arab identity is being succeeded, a century later, by the digital Arabism of those born in the digital age.

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