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# Neo-Orientalism and the e-Revolutionary: Self-Representation and the Post-Arab Spring

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## Abstract

The uprisings of 2011 in the Middle East and North Africa opened the way for a potential reimagining of the role of the Arab socio-political militant and the work of the public intellectual. Much change was achieved and the action of postmodern social activists played a central role in this historical undertaking. Deeper examination of the discourse and subsequent positioning of a large segment among these newer actors reveal, in the post-Arab Spring period, neo-Orientalist traits whereby Western metropolis concerns and phraseology overtake the domestic requirements of political transition. Self-representing themselves and their theatres by way of borrowed perspectives proceeding from external, paternalistic logics has led this new generation of actors to a series of contradictions as to the very democratizing rupture and rebirth of the region they have been advocating for. Borrowed prisms and subservient agency are the consequential drivers of this mode, which proceeds paradoxically on claims of independence and ownership.

## Keywords

Arab Spring – social media – Orientalism – youth – uprisings – revolution – transition – representation – elite

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And the first rude sketch that the world had seen was joy to his mighty heart,  
Till the Devil whispered behind the leaves: 'It's pretty, but is it art?'

RUDYARD KIPLING, *The Conundrum of the Workshops*, 1890

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The social uprisings of the winter 2011 that took place across North Africa and the Middle East marked a long-awaited rise against the authoritarianism that had plagued the political systems of this region since the decolonization era in the 1960s. Subsequently referred to as 'the Arab Spring', the revolts, which began in earnest in Tunisia in late December 2010 and spread through the rest of the Arab world, leading within months to the fall of the Zein al Abidin Ben Ali regime in Tunisia, the Hosni Mubarak regime in Egypt, the Muammar Gaddafi regime in Libya, and the Ali Abdallah Saleh regime in Yemen, were the culmination of decades-long civil and political opposition to these rulers by a wide spectrum of actors. In vivid scenes of coming togetherness, activists of all hues joined spontaneously with each other and with average citizens to stand in resolute opposition to the arbitrariness of dictatorships that abruptly lost their grip on a societal body now able to effect change.

One segment of the Arab populations, in particular, emerged early on as a visibly new actor to which the success of the revolutions was rapidly attributed by external observers: the youth.<sup>1</sup> More specifically identified as groups of young men and women massively using social media platforms with dexterity, these leaderless and decentralized militants mobilized staunchly and efficiently for months until the regimes capitulated. Though the stories inevitably played out differently from one country to another – Ben Ali fled the country seeking asylum in Saudi Arabia, Mubarak was forced to resign and was assigned to house arrest, Gaddafi was lynched by a mob following an eight-month armed conflict and an international intervention led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and Saleh stepped down following an assassination attempt and per an agreement brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – the place occupied by these youth and their creative use of social media stood undeniably at the center of these momentous changes.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Juan Cole, *The New Arabs : How the Millennial Generation is Changing the Middle East* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).

In spite of such centrality, the role of what can be termed ‘e-revolutionaries’ in the post-Arab Spring has not yet been examined critically. This shortcoming is important for two reasons. On the one hand, the amplitude of the youth’s action in generating, among other actors, significant political transformation in the region calls for in-depth research and analysis to unpack the full spectrum of the political consequences of these actions and their evolving ideology, and not merely their sociological or generational aspects. On the other, the fall of the autocratic regimes in 2011 represented an important phase in the history of the Middle East and North Africa wherein, above and beyond political rhetoric and militancy, matters of representation and self-representation were eminently at play.

Yet, overwhelmingly, social sciences analyses devoted to the web-savvy youth of the Arab Spring have (i) taken their cue from media or policy accounts, (ii) focused statically on the actions undertaken during the revolutionary moment, with minimal or derivative discussion of subsequent strategies and positioning, and (iii) portrayed them in reductionist, one-dimensional light. The latter such simplistic outlook, best described as a type of either *enamora-miento* or demonizing of one’s object of study, has notably stood in the way of a value-neutral, scientific understanding of the role of these actors in the current phase of Middle Eastern and North African politics. Neither effusively romanticizing the “generation changing the world”<sup>2</sup> nor indulging conspiracy theories and accusing it of being manipulated by United States’ think-tanks<sup>3</sup> helps advance our knowledge of what is undeniably a key actor at a key moment in the Arab world’s history. Instead, what we need to clinically dig deeper into are the larger questions of how the success of the 2011 uprisings was managed by these actors, and what this tells us about the evolving landscape of post-uprising dynamics among early twenty-first century actors in the Middle East and North Africa – and specifically as it relates to the production, or lack thereof, of a new discourse.

This essay argues that, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, a segment of the rebellious Arab youth using social media has paradoxically displayed features of what can be identified as a neo-Orientalist discourse. In reflecting about their milieu, their region and their own actions in conformity with the tenets

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2 As *Time Magazine* dubbed it in its February 29, 2011 cover story.

3 Even if links existed between several young Egyptian and Tunisian activists and American parties – see, for instance, Ron Nixon, “U.S. groups helped nurture Arab uprisings,” *New York Times*, April 14, 2011 – it is erroneous to represent such connections (often limited to participation in trainings or sponsored visits) to a ‘master plan’ concocted in Washington or London against the Arab world and inculcated to these youth.

of that accepted yet discredited paradigm, these globally-connected actors have performatively communicated by way of language, references, and viewpoints often more reminiscent of that of the Orientalists rather than a critique of or departure from them. The analysis offers, secondarily, that the materialization of such ambivalent exoticizing dynamics has weakened the *revolutionary* nature of the uprisings and limited the ability of those youth to reimagine Arab politics in novel ways beyond both Orientalist-dominated frameworks and the earlier local authoritarian matrix which the revolutionists fought successfully.

### The Challenge of 'The Day After'

The challenges faced by the 2011 Arab youth revolutionaries are nothing new. A large part of the flaws and fissures of clenched-fist improvisation they and others in those revolts engaged into after the victory are arguably almost inevitable. The passage from an uprising to a political transition is a most difficult step. Seldom does the sequence play out easily and fluidly. Indeed, the norm in such matters is one of a trouble-ridden period at the inception of transition. In his *Histories* (110), roman historian Cornelius Tacitus famously captured that non-linear experience coining the axiom that "after an evil reign, the fairest dawn is the first." The issue of how the cantankerous revolutionary public becomes a self-governing entity constitutes undeniably one of the most formidable tasks, for how can in effect political agency be displayed astutely and with aplomb in the absence of formative experience, which fundamentally results from trial, missteps, and failures? What is more, uncertainty is the order of the day. As George Pettee remarked, "revolutionists enter the limelight, not like men on horseback, as victorious conspirators appearing in the forum, but like fearful children exploring an empty house, not sure that it is empty."<sup>4</sup>

Both the challenge of inexperience and the specter of power remnants are, as it were, particularly vertiginous for the revolutionary youth hungering for sustenance. As indeed one particular Orientalist, T.E. Lawrence, remarked insightfully in his beautiful *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, reflecting on how the Great Arab Revolt of 1916 was betrayed by the British-French Sykes-Picot treaty and subsequent related arrangements between the European powers and their regional Arab allies:

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4 George Pettee, *The Process of Revolution* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938), 100–101.

The morning freshness of the world-to-be intoxicated us. We were wrought up with ideas inexpressible and vaporous, but to be fought for. We lived many lives in those whirling campaigns, never sparing ourselves: yet when we achieved and the new world dawned, the old men came out again and took our victory to remake in the likeness of the former world they knew. Youth could win, but had not learned to keep, and was pitifully weak against age, and they thanked us kindly and made their peace.<sup>5</sup>

The question is indeed arresting: “Why have oppositions in the Arab world... failed so absolutely, and why have they repeated in power, or in pursuit of it, so many of the faults and crimes of the old regimes?”<sup>6</sup> And the response is quite explicit: “The Arab uprisings represented a real opportunity for change. The conditions were ripe for genuinely transformative revolutions that could sweep away the old rotting order and take confident steps towards democracy and freedom. That freedom never materialized largely due to failures in leadership and political organization. Neither the political elites nor the emerging forces were able to take control of the revolutionary wave, to give it meaning and use it to drive through change.”<sup>7</sup>

This diagnosis is correct but it calls for further unpacking. If, as noted, the undoing of revolutionary dreams is nothing new,<sup>8</sup> something else it would appear was at play here. Above and beyond leadership and organizational issues,<sup>9</sup> misguidedly, the youth ‘fell’ for the iconography and the sensationalist narrative distilled about their own action to unseat corrupt regimes, which had long been supported by Western states. Instead of controlling that narrative as they had their revolts conjuring up witty arrogance to expose naked princes, some of the actors of the revolution started seeing themselves through the eyes of the external narrator admiring that dismantling insolence. Those very things which they had displayed so powerfully during the revolution days – impulse and agency – were then willingly placed into the hands of others.

5 T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (New York: First Anchor Books, 1991 [1926]), 24.

6 Patrick Cockburn, “Hazards of Revolution,” *The London Review of Books* 36, no. 1, January 9, 2014, 25.

7 Karl Sharro, “The Arab Uprisings and Self-Determination: The Missed Opportunity,” *Karl reMarks*, December 16, 2013, <http://www.karlremarks.com/2013/12/essay-arab-uprisings-and-self.html>.

8 Also see, for instance, Bedross Der Matossian, *Shattered Dreams of Revolution: From Liberty to Violence in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2014).

9 On these, see for instance, Nadine Abdalla, “Egypt’s Revolutionary Youth: From Street Politics to Party Politics,” *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, SWP Comments 11, Berlin, March 2013.

Accordingly, and to the extent that it can be characterized as such, the neo-Orientalism of the e-revolutionaries was manifested in three main ways: first, through the presentation of the Arab situation as exceptional, thus indulging logics about the Arab 'ways'; secondly, by way of, nevertheless, orienting political messages principally towards the Western metropolis condescendingly relegating the local scene to a secondary level; and finally, through the demonstration of at times intolerant politics, in the name of tolerance, a choice which set the stage for the return of some of the fallen regimes.

### Exceptionalism

Whereas revolutionary and transition processes constitute a universal experience, which many societies have gone through before the Arab world, the dominant discourse among e-revolutionaries, who admittedly come in a variety of hues,<sup>10</sup> was one stressing the importance of being familiar with the specific history of the region to be able to understand the revolts and their aftermath. If assorted reasons do explain the events, historical contextualization is, to be certain, unavoidable if one is to properly portray, much less decipher, the *intifadas*, *qawmas* and *hiraks* that shook the Middle East and North Africa in 2011. And indeed the sequence plays out over at least the past century with one dystrophy generating the next one: an end to the Ottoman Empire 'to end all peace',<sup>11</sup> a mandate system architecture that threw off any prospect of endogenous state-building, post-colonial regimes that opted for reproducing the colonial dispossession dynamics instead of nurturing democratizing ones, debased bi-polarized political systems dominated by the military and the Islamists, and half a century of authoritarianism in all its nepotistic, violent, and corrupt features bringing the sequence to the cusp of revolution.

Such knowledge is, however, only *part* of the story about the pursuit of democracy. It is the historical context. No more, no less. To it cannot be confined the fullness of our analysis of the dynamic events of the Arab Spring. Eschewing detachment and telling the story as native sons and daughters is therefore both dicey proposition and uncomfortable proximity. Privileging such familiarity with the Arab world, as many have done, to the detriment of a comparative outlook about the workings of political transformation in effect

10 For an insightful discussion of the creativity of these actors, see Reda Benkirane, "The Alchemy of Revolution: The Role of Social Networks and New Media in the Arab Spring," *Geneva Centre for Security Policy*, Policy Paper 7, Geneva, June 2012.

11 See David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1989).

mirrors the Orientalist mantra which precisely argues that a special 'knowledge' of the 'Orient' is needed to understand 'it'. In his inaugural 1978 work and its 1993 follow-up,<sup>12</sup> Edward Said articulates a vision in which Orientalism is inherently a system of thought that essentializes the heterogeneity of the region around four aspects: a hierarchical relationship to the West, a paralyzed ensemble that fails to respond to the requirements of modernity, a necessary (direct or indirect, colonial or peaceful) control, and an external representation. In adopting a stance whereby closeness to the ways Arab politics work was argued to be a necessary frame of understanding, many an Arab were apophatically displaying the latter aspect of Orientalism. Whereas for all its necessary contextualization, democratization is a forward-looking process whose components are as much, if not more, mechanistic and universal than eternally conditioned by fixed cultural traits. Yet such culturalist determinism is precisely what was beamed to the world and to themselves by an important segment of the new generation of Arab democrats.

It is, for instance, arresting that the rich, complex, and lengthy transitions to democracy experiences of Southwestern Europe in the 1960s, Latin America in the 1970s, and Eastern Europe in the 1980s – indeed the failed ones in Sub-Saharan Africa during the 1990s – were seldom brought up, much less seriously looked at, for lessons learned. Upon inviting such fertile comparativism, one was often, in 2011–2015, told that “things work differently in the Arab world.” Accordingly, the uprisings, revolts, and revolutions that emanate from the Middle East and North Africa region seem now in some ways unrelated to the initial efforts aimed at bringing to an end an authoritarian system of rule and re-negotiating a new, democratic social contract.<sup>13</sup> Strangely enough, the revolutionaries followed a path whereby the revolutions were conveyed in gradually internationally depoliticized dynamics in favor of über-domestic outlooks. Yet experience can also be contextualized by linking it to wider dimensions, particularly in a region that had long suffered ornamental external representation. Alterity can be managed, indeed accommodated within differences,<sup>14</sup> without necessarily positing it as so particularly special that it escapes universal political norms.

12 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions and the Orient* (New York: Routledge, 1978); and *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

13 Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou and Timothy D. Sisk, *Bringing Back Transitoology: Democratization in the 21st Century* (Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2013), 11.

14 See Kabir Tambar, *The Reckoning of Pluralism: Political Belonging and the Demands of History in Turkey* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2014).

## Facing West

E-revolutionaries are not merely a demographic reality. They also constitute a cultural one that, in the post-Arab Spring phase, gradually adopted defining, virtual world traits. During the revolutionary moment, a political entity of collective aggrandizement transcending many social barriers had been born. Much of that was owed to the 'physicality' of that first phase, and the promises it carried. As captured by Athena Athanasiou:

[T]he gatherings implicate fundamentally the very condition of corporeal standing in public – in the urban street. It is the ordinary and rather undramatic practice of standing, rather than a miraculously extraordinary disruption, that actualizes here the living register of the event. The very practice of *statis* creates both a space of reflection and a space for revolt, but also an affective comportment of standing and standpoint. It is such a corporeal and affective disposition of stasis that derails, if only temporarily, normative presuppositions about what may come into being as publicly intelligible and sensible in existing polities.<sup>15</sup>

While the exceptionalism claimed by the youth of the Arab spring worked against the homogenization of the democratizing experience they were pursuing, the adoption of virtual world rhetorical devices – beyond such 'affective comportment of standing and standpoint' – more attuned to the cultural references of the Western metropolises than their local milieu ended up equally weakening the lasting transforming potential of the youth's work on their societies. 'Tahrir' was revealed instead as that most ambiguous of spaces: a genuine coming together that still harbored dormant mutual distrust. More than the other dimensions of the post-Arab Spring experience of the e-revolutionaries, this aspect indicates that, following the fall of the regimes, many amongst these actors became noticeably less concerned with the needed transition work – revolutions are about energy, transitions are about skills – than establishing externally their paternity over the previous sequence. Plucking *bon mots* and hip references attuned to the latest fads in the metropolis (how does the *fellah* make sense of Starbucks jokes?), they often mirrored an image of the 'Middle East' imagined in Western capitals – all while claiming that one needed to be from the region to understand it. This most undeniably adorned their political action with a certain *trahison des clercs* orientation which then

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15 Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (London: Polity, 2013), 150–151.

released increasingly aloof dispositions and, in ways, self-centered ones as many also received politicized awards to essentially produce political knowledge,<sup>16</sup> another distinguishing feature of Orientalism.

In so doing, the e-revolutionaries displayed performative dynamics implicitly or explicitly, unwittingly or wittingly in pursuit primarily of the imprimatur not of their fellow citizens, or indeed political competitors, but of Western and other international centers. In opting for such dynamics, the youth consequentially came to gradually be regarded with suspicion by segments in their societies that had initially applauded them and which now began looking at them as merely embodying a new, replacement elite. Though, it must be stressed, e-revolutionaries come in different guises, the dominant group came to be regarded as one corresponding to what Kwame Anthony Appiah had called “a comprador intelligentsia, [namely] a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery,”<sup>17</sup> and, later on, Hamid Dabashi expanded to ‘intellectual comprador,’ one that is “involved in a dialectical traffic between the center and the periphery (thus collapsing both into one world).”<sup>18</sup> This was in many ways tantamount to revolutionary hubris. For indeed lurking behind many such grandstanding was merely vanity. Wit was broadcast towards the metropolis. And to what end? In the aftermath of the *Naksa*, there emerged, according to Joseph Massad,<sup>19</sup> one such type of subservience. Yet, whereas the post-1967 stance was the product of pragmatism, lamentation, or defeatism, the youth of the Arab Spring had admittedly started on a victorious, sure-footed path.

Such dissociation played out in particular around the issue of the Islamists, in Egypt most visibly but elsewhere as well. A significant shortcoming of the e-revolutionaries was thus their inability to deal constructively with political Islam. Political Islam was in that commentariat too often caricatured and its place in the modern societies of the region reduced to the actions of extremists whose ethos was turned into a pathos. It is no small irony that those same voices that had called for nuanced understanding of the region and its history were borrowing so heavily from the most basic Orientalist tradition with

16 As'ad Abukhalil, “Western Awards for the Natives,” *Al Akhbar English*, October 13, 2014.

17 Kwame Anthony Appiah, “The Postcolonial and the Postmodern,” in *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 149.

18 Hamid Dabashi, *Brown Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto, 2011), 41. Appiah and Dabashi both build on the works and stances of Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, and Malcolm X.

19 Joseph Massad, “Political Realists or Comprador Intelligentsia: Palestinian Intellectuals and the National Struggle,” *Critique* 6, no. 11 (1997): 21–35.

oversweeping judgments and inflammation about the danger of an alternative political project (radical Islamism aside). Missing in those discursive practices was the complexity of the relationship of Islam with modernity and indeed democracy.<sup>20</sup>

Therein lies yet another logjamed Orientalist paradox of the e-revolutionary who did not seize on the possibility of moving away from the *ancien régime*'s constant broadcast of messages towards Washington, London, or Paris (ever to justify or rationalize its actions). What is more, such behavior flew in the face of a historical moment that had in the post-9/11 phase been characterized by global expressions of emancipation. As Edward Said put it then: "more than ever before, it is true to say that the new generation of humanist scholars is more attuned than any before it to the non-European, genderized, decolonized, and decentered energies and currents of our time."<sup>21</sup> In that regard, the revolutions were also admittedly eminently postmodern (yet postmodernism itself is arguably a by-product of the Western experience).<sup>22</sup> Little were they able to build on the fact that the Arab Spring – and 9/11, for other reasons – were two sociopolitical and geopolitical events not predicted and poorly dealt with by analysts. To put it in other words, there was in those electronic acts of political will insufficient or barely sketched "imagination of the communities needed in order to become cohesive and coherent."<sup>23</sup>

### Neo-Orientalism to Neo-Authoritarianism

Such absent coherence and lax engagement with the deeper transition issues ultimately set the stage for ill-advised political positioning by the e-revolutionaries which, in countries such as Egypt for instance, enabled the reconstitution of the very system the militants had fought. Logically, neo-Orientalism could beget neo-authoritarianism. More than the trench warfare with the Islamists – in itself at least arguably constitutive of civic processes in the long run – the liberals'

20 For a rich discussion of the misrepresentations of Islam and their underpinnings, see Joseph A. Massad, *Islam in Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

21 Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 47.

22 As Drucilla Corner notes, "postmodernity easily falls in with a particular perspective on historical and philosophical development" (Drucilla Corner, *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 2. For an argument on how postmodernism marginalizes the non-Western experience and its aspirations, see Ziauddin Sardar, *Postmodernism and the Other New Imperialism of Western Culture* (London: Pluto, 1997).

23 Pankaj Mishra, "The Case against the Global Novel," *The Financial Times*, September 27, 2013.

demonization of religious actors led the youth towards Faustian bargains with a 'deep state' that was only too willing to bounce back. Scenes of Tahrir Squarers cheering military helicopters flying in an orchestrated choreography over the place shortly after the deposition of President Mohammad Morsi in July 2013 revealed both the limits of democratizing pronouncements and political acumen suddenly amnesic of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces' virginity tests.

Particularly absent from the discourse of the e-revolutionaries were the larger issues of sovereignty, autonomy in the international sphere, and political independence.<sup>24</sup> Eminently problematic interventions in Libya, Ivory Coast, Mali, and the Central African Republic were observed with analyses that seldom strayed from their regional anchor and from the canons ('necessity') of what was aired by policy wonks in Washington or Paris. The momentum gathered in the spring of 2011 had landed these actors in a place from which they could have questioned the very tenets of their countries' dependence on external partners. Rapidly, too rapidly, however, pragmatism overtook the ephemeral political projects. Displaying entrepreneurship instead of sagacity and grounding authority in a borrowed space possibly fatally wounded this movement. One can indeed argue that, much like the Young Turks of the 1900s who displayed little interest for events beyond Istanbul (ignoring, for instance, the calls of the Arab reformers of nearby Damascus seeking alliances), the e-revolutionaries of the 2010s basked in media glory instead of investing that precious and hard-earned political capital in the lasting project of political transition and state-building.

In the final analysis, the role of the Arab Spring youth known for its use of social media has not yet been properly historicized. Scholarship beyond the snapshot, emotional moment of the uprisings is needed to understand the complexity of the dynamics that played out notably in the aftermath of the fall of the regimes, and before the recodification of some of these orders. Reversing the angle on the incomplete narratives, critical inroads would necessarily place this latest wave of rebellion in the context of a *longue durée* history of social mobilization in the region<sup>25</sup> but also examine the ways in which it manifested paradoxical dynamics of voluntary alignment on metropolis representation of the Middle East and North Africa when it was, more than its predecessors, equipped to deconstruct and indeed replace those representations with native ones.

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24 The type of reframing questions raised, for instance, by the likes of Anne Orford or Branwen Gruffydd-Jones in their respectively edited works *International Law and Its Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and *Decolonizing International Relations* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

25 On this history, see, for instance, Stephanie Cronin (ed.), *Subalterns and Social Protest: History from Below in the Middle East and North Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

Manifested with acuity, this “inability to realize the democratic intentions they so vociferously and rhetorically expounded”<sup>26</sup> calls for not merely an analysis of the political conditions that obtained but also of the self-representation mechanisms opted for by the actors themselves. Ultimately, the shortcomings of the e-revolutionaries can be attributed to both the individualistic times they live in, which privilege posture – spanning a modern-day arc from Max Stirner’s 1844 *The Ego and its Own* to Jean M. Twenge’s recent *Narcissism Epidemic*, revolutions can fall not solely to high intrigue but merely to low entitlement – and most certainly to the continuing dystrophies of Arab sociopolitics. One of the final scenes of David Lean’s 1962 film, *Lawrence of Arabia*, dramatizes the episode when the Arab tribes that had taken Damascus ahead of General George Allenby’s troops vainly and tragically bicker in the parliament building before leaving towards the desert, as night falls on the Syrian city and the British come to reap the fruits of that revolt. Here too, dispute and vanity were no compass for the *dizzying* effects of post-revolutionary days. Reflecting on how the aftermath of the 1917 Russian revolution was dealt with by him and his fellow Bolsheviks, Lenin commented: “You know Trotsky? From persecution and a life underground to come so suddenly into power... *Es schwindelt!*”<sup>27</sup>

The Arab Spring held the palpable promise of the (re)construction of not merely a new identity but a novel political project. Instead of viscerally working towards the latter in contributing legitimate building blocks of a critical universalism,<sup>28</sup> the e-revolutionaries eschewed such possibility in favor of recognizable and marketable personal stories. The grammar of an authentic intellectual resistance to not merely local despots but to a skewed understanding of a region might have been squandered then and there. Beyond the specific 2010s episode of the globally-connected, self-dispossessing revolutionary youth of the Arab Spring, this contradiction ultimately also stands at the heart of the existing unresolved equation between the West and the Orient. As the post-Arab Spring came to be colored by a political sociology of hybridity and a geo-strategy of uncertainty, what part of the role played by these actors, we ought to ask, is a set of contingent historical actions, and what is merely symptomatic of conscious identity choices? How can alternative, more authentic courses of action anchored in less derivative or borrowed representation be charted in the face of such permanent narratives?

26 Ali Anouzla, “Self-Criticism and Genuine Dialogue Required,” *Qantara*, August 25, 2014.

27 Vladimir Lenin quoted in Leon Trotsky, *My Life* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1930), 265.

28 See Mondher Kilani, *Pour Un Universalisme Critique: Essai d’Anthropologie du Contemporain* (Paris: La Découverte, 2014). Kilani notes that, as a work in progress, such a project “moves forward” in spite of its “incompleteness.”