CLASSICAL BOOK REVIEW

Hamid Dabashi: The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism

Zed Books, 2012

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> The world is not divided between East and West. You are American, I am Iranian, we don't know each other, but we talk and we understand each other perfectly. The difference between you and your government is much bigger than the difference between you and me. And the difference between me and my government is much bigger than the difference between me and you. And our governments are very much the same. Marjane Satrapi (Goldberg & Satrapi, 2005).

In 2012 I began my PhD research in earnest, which originally had the broad and optimistic aim of studying dynamics of nonviolent resistance across the entire West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region during the so-called Arab Spring. Entire books on the events had already been released by 2012, seeming to mark a rush to provide expansive analyses of the processes and implications of the so-called Arab Spring. Two of the earliest texts I read for my research offered entirely disparate assessments: Bradley's (2012) After the Arab Spring: How Islamists Hijacked the Middle East Revolts, appearing remarkably reductionist and assumptive for an analysis produced while events were still very much in flux; Dabashi's The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism offered the counterweight to this text.

Introducing the Book

In contrast with the swift pessimism of Bradley, and Castell's (2012) more sympathetic yet tenuous retrofitting of his established theories, the tone of Dabashi's texts struck me as markedly different. This is perhaps summed up by his note in the acknowledgements that, 'The writing of this book is much indebted to that global sense of awe, admiration, and solidarity with the Arab Spring' (p.xiii). It is Dabashi's sense that the WANA revolutions marked a recovery as well as departure point for the region and the world,

and the prescience that regardless of counter-revolution and contestation—something perhaps borne out by events in Syria and Iraq— this authentic narrative of the Arab Spring as a recovery and departure point would have to be fought for.

Broad Overview

The Arab Spring is perhaps not the most accessible text for students new to the issues.[1] However, Dabashi's structuring of the text possibly helps open up the analysis to a reader. At the beginning of each chapter he tends to depart from a particular individual, event or theory, weaving this in with a restatement of the central themes and arguments, therefore accreting the new concepts or focuses into the overall narrative. This is particularly evident onwards from Chapter Two: Towards a Liberation Geography, where Dabashi considers President Obama's lack of identity or affinity with Palestinian children, across the (manufactured) 'West'/'East' divide generally, which he ties to historical elements of Orientalism. Chapter Three: A New Language of Revolt, builds on this, while introducing Hannah Arendt's conception of public space. Drawing on literary and aesthetic theorists from across the WANA region, Dabashi supports his crucial position of the Arab Spring both as a departure point for an open-ended revolution, but also as evidence of the presence of alternative political, economic and social organisation that have long been present in the region.

In Chapter Four: Discovering a New World, Dabashi considers the significance of Tahrir Square as a crucible for a new public space, drawing on literature as well as linguistic and semiotic analysis. The subsequent chapter links the emergence of Iran's 2009 Green Movement with the Tunisian revolution, which suggests an important expansion of the 'revolutionary period' in the broader WANA region as beginning in 2009—even if concrete dates are somewhat contrived in relation to episodes of resistance. Moreover, Dabashi significantly questions the presence of a severe Shiite-Sunni divide in the region; while there have been various examples of horrendous violence justified on sectarian grounds, it is notable that Iraq and Lebanon's protests in the past year have been considered non-sectarian, as were Syria's 2011 protests to a certain extent. Chapter Six is concerned broadly with Israel and Iran's politics and influence in the region.

1 I am grateful to Majken Jul Sørensen for sharing student feedback on Dabashi's text as part of her course teaching at Karlstad University.

Chapter Seven elaborates on the 'Arab Spring' as The End of Postcolonialism, as well as more broadly the end of ideology as the basis of revolution. This will be returned to below, although relatedly Chapter Eight: Race, Gender and Class in Transnational Revolutions, should be noted as one of the profoundest aspects of Dabashi's analysis in the book. Dabashi points to the legacy of resistance in the region along the strands of race, gender and class, as well as their intersection, while noting the importance of these aspects to justice and the enduring success of the 'Arab Spring' processes. Particularly at the time of publication in 2012, Dabashi's calling out and condemnation of racism in the region, his emphasis that women are not simply meek but empowered (p.193), as well as connection of economic migration to colonialism, historical subjugation and the structural problems that resulted in the revolutions (p.194), were overlooked certainly in mainstream analyses of events. In Chapter Nine, Libya: The Crucible and the Politics of Space, the historical support and connections of the West to the Gaddafi regime are elaborated, with the subsequent NATO-led intervention in the country pointed to as part of the counter-revolution against the new public space. The final chapter and conclusion provide a summary or restatement of the Arab Spring as a sign and signifier of an open-ended revolt.

Dabashi's book is not one that provides detailed country-specific narratives—this is not to say it is not well-grounded in events—although this would not necessarily have aged well given the lack of in-depth analysis that existed at the time of writing. In fact, there are certain notable details that have fallen out of focus nearly a decade on: the connections Dabashi makes to the 2009 Green movement in Iran; the support for the region's 'ghastly dictators or theocratic tyrannies' by Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales, despite being 'champion[s] of the poor' at home (p.130); some on the traditional left showing 'support—passive or active—of murderous tyrants like Bashar al-Assad' (p.241) and his Iranian government and Hezbollah supporters (pp.110-111).

While these may not seem like the most pertinent details to the events, the classical book review is intended to be a more personal account, and for me Dabashi's prescience regarding the stance of some on the left is important to my own interrogation of resistance practices, in this regard solidarity with the oppressed. During my local activism in West Yorkshire in support of the Syrian people's resistance to the Assad regime, I was deeply troubled by some peace activists' alignment with the regime, as well as Russian and Iranian support of it. In Bahrain, as the UK trained and armed the country's

security forces and the US 'turned a blind eye to the murderous regime'; rather than being an Iran-backed uprising, Dabashi argues that 'The only influence the Islamic Republic has had on Bahrain is to teach the ruling regime, by example, how to quell a democratic revolt—the same role it had for the even more bloody crackdown of Bashar al-Assad' (p.151). When first reading *The Arab Spring* in 2012 his comments on the left had not really registered with me, but it is poignant to read his summation: 'Those among the "left" who oppose the Green Movement and the Arab Spring—in a bizarre combination of a politics of despair, political Orientalism, and nihilistic anti-imperialism—are trapped inside their sclerotic, retrogressive imagination' (p.164). In the following sections I will show why I consider Dabashi's book to provide an authentic corrective to this.

The End of Postcolonialism

Dabashi's explanation of the 2010/11 WANA revolutions as the end of postcolonialism is essentially that they mark an end to various 'false binaries' (p.9) broadly separating 'the west' from 'the rest'. They are an end to both a 'politics of replicating "the West"' (p.xviii) or challenging it from an ideological basis, 'from Third World Socialism to anticolonial nationalism to militant Islamism (vintage postcolonial ideologies)' (p.10). Fundamentally reflecting an established post-ideology paradigm including in relation to resistance, as well as sub-analyses such as post-Islamism (see Bayat, 2013), Dabashi extends the revolutions to marking the end of postcolonialism in 'having overcome once and for all the thick (material and moral) [manufactured] colonial divide' (p.xix). Dabashi explains the evolutions as overcoming the 'Islam and the West' binary (pxix), the 'forced categories of "Religious" versus "Secular", "Traditional" versus "Modern", "Eastern" versus "Western"' (p.9), because 'these revolutions are collective acts of *overcoming*. They are crafting new identities, forging new solidarities, both within and without the "Islam and the West" binary [original emphasis]' (p.xix). As well as an 'overcoming', the revolutions are a 'shift towards the *restoration* of a repressed and denied cosmopolitan culture rather than a blind revolution with a limited and cliché-ridden political agenda [emphasis added]' (p.9). In asserting '*Huriyyah, Adalah Ijtima'iyah, Karmah*, "Freedom, Social Justice, Dignity"' (p.10), there has been a restoration of revolutionary potential and a definite rejection of westernism (which Dabashi identifies with exploitative capitalist relations):

> Recovering precisely the cosmopolitan worldliness in which alternative notions and practices of civil liberties and economic justice can and ought to be produced. Thus this cosmopolitanism is precisely the opposite of 'Westernism'; it is in fact the end of 'Westernism' as an exhausted and depleted mode of bipolar knowledge production (p.10)

Reflecting a decolonisation and sharing of 'the centre', Dabashi posits that the WANA revolution herald a global shift—having helped to inspire movements internationally in 2011—'we are on the cusp of discovering emerging new worlds, a liberation geography, that will require and produce a new organicity for the intellectual—this time involving the citizenry and civil liberties' (p.12), plus an 'emerging world I identify as being characterised by *cosmopolitan worldliness*—which […] has always been innate to these societies and is now being retrieved with a purposeful intent toward the future. This purposeful retrieval I call *liberation geography*' (p.14).

In the wake of events in the past decade it may be tempting to dismiss Dabashi as too utopian, idealistic and romantic about this change. One counter would be that the Western-backed restoration of dictators, plus the emergence of ISIS' so-called caliphate, could be labelled as counter-revolutionary forces—but there remains those who see these as somehow inevitable outcomes of the so-called Arab Spring; they are of the Arab Spring rather than external to it. On this point we may reiterate Dabashi's suggestion of the cosmopolitan worldliness of the 'Middle East and North Africa' or the 'Arab and the Muslim World' being retrieved, as the ontologically prior process—although for Dabashi this cosmopolitan worldliness is 'existential (Heidegger's designation): historical, lived, experienced, remembered, acted' (p.114). Thus, we can move past a 'revolution', 'counter-revolution' binary too (see also Abdelhamid's (2020) article in this issue for why this binary is problematic) by extending the temporal and spatial basis of the revolts in time. They are premised on a far larger and more expansive recovery of subjugated history and experience.

Presistance

However, the so-called Arab Spring is being contested at the level of meaning, significance and culture, indeed bringing into question and (mis)representing the nature and reality of individuals, groups and culture (p.p82,154) this raises a deeper question about what or who is in a position of resistance and what is being resisted. When entire alternative ways of life,

living and lifestyles, cultures (in all their human complexity) that exist as part of the world are identified for 'othering', subjugation or elimination, posited in a manufactured opposition to something, this may serve to not just posit them as being in resistance to or for something. Rather it also requires an acknowledgement of their prior existence or presence simply as being, a prior position of not being in resistance, thus positioning them as being in 'presistance' (presence and resistance).

I would emphasise that neither Dabashi nor myself reject that people and groups in West Asia and North Africa are engaged in resistance. Moreover, being in resistance can become a significant aspect of identity, for example in the Zapatista declaration of '500 years of struggle' (Carrigan, 2001, p.419) and that position of being compelled or forced into resistance to and for something must be acknowledged. As Dabashi states generally but also specifically in relation to women's resistance that was evident during the so-called Arab Spring, it 'did not emerge from nowhere. They are the voices and visages cultivated in the public domain for decades and centuries […] It is a North American and Western European calamity that these women are thought of only in Oriental harems' (p.189,191). Furthermore, with the revolutions being less ideological-driven, Dabashi identifies more of a cultural context:

> We will witness a shift towards the restoration of a repressed and denied cosmopolitan culture rather than a blind revolution with a limited and cliché-ridden political agenda. There has always been a cosmopolitan worldliness about these cultures, which are otherwise hidden beneath the forced categories of 'Religious' versus 'Secular', 'Traditional' versus 'Modern', 'Eastern' versus 'Western' (pp.9, 80-81)

Alternatively, Dabashi talks of this as an aim to 'retrieve the multiple worlds that have existed prior to and coterminous with "Islam and the West"' (p.115). Therefore, at least at the level of culture—and acknowledging that of course these may involve alternative political and economic systems—when it is clearly in a subjugated and marginalised position and needing to be in resistance for its continued existence—yet existing nevertheless—is there a way of situating and acknowledging an alternative way of life that facilitates its 'retrieval' or 'restoration'? Does this existence or 'presence' while in 'resistance' necessitate a new term such as 'presistance'—hardly a significant advancement in understanding, although a form of alternative-

affirming terminology nonetheless? This may be a minor contribution in the vein of Dabashi suggesting that 'The only way that this debilitating, self-raising, other-lowering world (called 'the West') can be overcome is by the recognition of other worlds (p.87).

(Nonviolent) Revolution

Dabashi's critique of violence as 'the cornerstone' of the state, of 'violent despair' as underpinning the 'theoretical terms of politics' from Hobbes and Rousseau to Marx and Weber (p.170), is central to his text, and his call for a redefinition of humanity as a more universal form of solidarity. It is notable that Dabashi considers 'nonviolent civil disobedience' as crucial to the revolutionary processes symbolised by Tahrir Square, 'the categorical denunciation of violence' (p.87). He also considered that the 'most important challenge that Egyptian and other revolutionaries face […will be] to posit the will of the people and yet systematically to translate that raw power into political forms' (p.96). This is reflected in the common question over how uprisings, particularly in the wake of the 2010/11 revolutions, which seem to have a more disparate leadership and reflect the unity and coming together of many different groups in society, hold together when confronted by counter-revolutionary forces. Dabashi suggested that the splintering unity among resisters is something that could in fact be a strength:

> These fractures will expand the public space, not diminish it. That societal expansion of the bedrock of politics will not be along ideological lines. The ideals remain open and grand, as they must, but demanding and exacting their realization require painstaking and detailed work by particular voluntary associations beyond the reach of the state—labour unions, women's right (sic.) organisations, student assemblies—all by way of forming a web of affiliation around the atomised individual, thus protecting her, thus enabling him, to resist the ever increasing power of the emergent state (Dabashi, 2012, p.xx, p.95)

I think it is notable, and I remain convinced by, Dabashi's position that fundamentally, forms of constructive resistance are required to perpetuate the revolutionary aims, which he puts in stark terms:

> Nonviolent civil disobedience will never be successful unless and until the movements begin to interface with the grassroots social formations of labour, women, and student movements. The mobilising of these formations is precisely the factor that can guarantee the success of the revolutionary uprisings […] what is needed are enduring, grassroots, voluntary associations that will demand and achieve civil liberties and democratic rights in particular and detailed terms (p.216).

This is fundamentally an optimistic position on the likely progress of events, although one could easily remark that the creation and strengthening of these voluntary associations in the WANA region and indeed elsewhere has not seen a concerted effort. Nevertheless, this year the prospects and potential of mutual aid in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic has shown the possibilities in the face of an often callous state (See Brown, 2020a).

Dabashi's main argument about the progression of the so-called Arab Spring is that the revolutions are 'inconclusive and open-ended, wherein national politics will have consequences transnationally, and vice-versa' (p.12). The sense of an 'open-ended unfolding of these revolts is related to the process of the individual being reinserted into the expanding public space (p.xx). The open-ended revolution in Dabashi's conception is based heavily on Arendt's analysis of revolution, with him devoting Chapter Three to this. Dabashi suggests Arendt 'posited the public domain as the *nexus classicus* of the political—a space in which freedom from fear and the liberty to exercise democratic rights is realised', and presented an 'articulation of politics as a domain that protects the citizen against state violence' (p.246). The Arab spring exemplified this conception of open-ended revolution as opposed to an ideologically driven 'total revolution': 'Protection and expansion of the public space (Tahrir Square write large) is only possible through the means of an open-ended revolution' (p.246). As with the state needing to consistently re-secure and reassert itself in the face of an elusive final act of divine violence leading to ultimate security (see Dillon 2008), this concept of open-ended revolution is a 'move away from the idea of a total, sudden, and final revolution/resolution, a metanarrative of emancipation that further implicated the knowing subject as its agent in a self-defeating project' (Dabashi, 2012, p.246). It is an acknowledgement of the need of the citizen to continuously re-secure and reassert themselves and the context of freedom, liberty and dignity.

One could argue that a focus on political organisation, as well as the conceptualisation of the revolutionary processes as a reduction to the achievement of dignity, gives insufficient attention to the crucial economic marginalisation and discontent of people. However, Dabashi's emphasis on the slogans around *karamah* or 'dignity' during the revolutions I do not think is misplaced (p.127), and it is useful precisely because it can be an all-encapsulating concept, with dignity meaning many different things to many different people, having political, economic and social implications.

Moreover, Dabashi situates the need for new forms of political organisation clearly in relation to the end of the economic exploitation, marginalisation and injustice that was sought through the revolution, stating: 'the masses involved in the Arab revolts are right to demand that their economic plight be addressed, being as they are on they receiving end of the ravages of a militantly globalising neoliberalism' (p.61). Given that he suggests 'the ravages of neoliberal economics, unfettered greed, and an irresponsible orgy of deregulation have suddenly made Keynesian economics a plausible strategy for survival, *albeit only in the short term* [emphasis added]' (p.61), Dabashi is again sceptical of the state. It is through civil liberties and freedom enshrined in voluntary associations that 'protect the otherwise atomised individual from totalitarianism, as well as the most vulnerably, namely the working class, against the wanton disregard practised by neoliberal predatory capitalism' (p.62). Likewise, the civil liberties and freedom typically associated with democracy are worthless without economic justice (p.64).

Dabashi clearly aligns his anarchist position and suspicion 'of all state formations' (pp.247-248) with Arendt's analysis of revolution, as exemplified in her 'dismissal of the revolutionary process in both French and American cases' (pp.247). This is of significance because a severely overlooked element of Gene Sharp's (1980, pp.150-156) analysis is his sympathetic assessment of Arendt's work, which highly aligns his anarchist position and his position on the need for voluntary associations, parallel institutions and decentralisation of power with Arendt's (1969) favourability towards decentralised council systems being the 'authentic extension' of revolutionary processes (p.124; see Brown, 2020b). However, it must be restated that, especially given the misplaced emphasis on the influence of 'Sharpian pragmatic/strategic' nonviolence during the WANA uprising (Brown, 2019, pp.42-48), this connection between Dabashi and Sharp's views on nonviolent change via Arendt is a rather exciting constellation. If we broadly consider this work

towards decentralised power under 'constructive resistance', there is much to be explored empirically in the WANA region in relation to this concept and Dabashi's still highly pertinent analysis of the so-called Arab Spring.

Ten years on, my personal impression is that Dabashi's *The Arab Spring* offers one of the profoundest analyses of the 2010/11 WANA revolutions and their intricacies. At the time of its writing it brought together multiple strands, both of an established and major nature—the implications of orientalism—as well as those still largely overlooked, for example abuses of migrant workers and their resistance to. The latter cases, as well as other issues Dabashi raised early on in the processes such as some left-wing activists and groups' support for Assad over a grassroots, popular revolution, remain largely understated as phenomena. Furthermore, his analysis recognises that in many instances tthere are years, decades and generations of resistance struggles in many countries that cannot be discounted or reduced to a revolutionary 'outburst'. Meanwhile, the manner in which Dabashi situates the practical political and economic alternatives is in accordance with ideas around constructive resistance. Much assessment of the success or failure of the so-called Arab Spring has looked at the institutionalisation of revolutionary goals, democratisation or autocratisation at the state level. Yet such bottom-up changes are crucial, particularly if Dabashi's assessment is to endure in practice of an open-ended revolution as explained above, as a constant striving, defence and reassertion of individual dignity in solidarity with others.

Particularly in the wake of open resistance in numerous states internationally, roughly from the end of 2018 to early 2020—but with many latent or ongoing uprisings despite coronavirus—with neoliberalism and corruption being significant factors, Dabashi's analysis of the malaise in the WANA and wider region has been borne out. Personally, I find Dabashi's message imperative; despite pessimism, counter-revolution and maybe even a sense of insurmountable repressive systems, the values the WANA revolutions signified in 2010/11 must and will be perpetuated. In this manner, Dabashi advocated 'for the idea of open-ended revolutions, work-in-progress […] to keep the tenacity of these revolutions alive theoretically' (p.241), and for 'listening carefully' (pp.68-69). For those of us engaged in academic work and indeed actions of solidarity with resisters in the region, Dabashi's call is necessary to help realise those values; the quote from Marjane Satrapi's at the outset evocatively captures the potential of such engagement.

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