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**THE  
ARAB  
SPRING**

THE END OF POSTCOLONIALISM

**HAMID DABASHI**

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# The Arab Spring

## **About the Author**

HAMID DABASHI is the Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. Born in Iran, he received a dual Ph.D. in Sociology of Culture and Islamic Studies from the University of Pennsylvania, followed by a postdoctoral fellowship at Harvard University. Dabashi has written twenty books, edited four, and written over a hundred chapters, essays, articles and book reviews. He is an internationally renowned cultural critic, and his writings have been translated into numerous languages.

Dabashi has been a columnist for the Egyptian *Al-Ahram Weekly* for over a decade, and is a regular contributor to Al Jazeera and CNN. He has been a committed teacher for nearly three decades and is also a public speaker, a current affairs essayist, a staunch anti-war activist, and the founder of Dreams of a Nation: A Palestinian Film Project. He has four children and lives in New York with his wife, the Iranian-Swedish feminist Golbarg Bashi.

*In memory of*  
*Edward Said and Magda al-Nowaihi*  
*who are not here to see it*  
*– and for*  
*Joseph Massad and Noha Radwan*  
*who will see it through*



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The writing of this book is my way of joining my brothers and sisters in Tahrir Square chanting their slogan *al-Sha'b Yurid Isqat al-Nizam*, 'People Demand the Overthrow of the Regime'. I have taken that slogan and run with it, as it were, from one end of the Arab world to the other – articulating ideas, sharing hopes and fears, categorically investing in the aspirations of the heroic uprisings of Arabs from Africa to Asia. That sense of solidarity would not have been possible were I not blessed with friends who have made me feel at home in the Arab world.

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The Arab Spring took the world by surprise and generated much good will and solidarity around the globe during its dramatic unfolding. The writing of this book is much indebted to that global sense of awe, admiration, and solidarity with the Arab Spring. It is a blessing to have been at the center of so much goodwill.

## Preface

'I am delighted that you are resolved and turn your thoughts from backward glances at the past toward a new understanding.' The young Karl Marx (1818-1883) was 26 years old when he thus began his short encomium 'For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing' (1844), in the form of a short letter to Arnold Ruge, his co-editor of the newly established journal *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*. As he wrote this letter, he was fully aware of a new historic understanding that was in the offing, which was necessary to make sense of a world unfolding in front of the young revolutionary. The declaratory letter was in many ways premonitory of the European Revolutions of 1848, also known as 'the Spring of Nations, or 'Springtime of the Peoples,' the euphoric uprisings that would later lead Marx with Engels to write the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), some three years before he thought the revolutions were betrayed and wrote *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1851-52). But at this point Marx is ecstatic, prophetic, fiercely determined, and full of fire. He was witness to a European Spring very much as we are today to an Arab Spring. He wrote of Paris as 'the new capital of the new world,' as we do today about Cairo. The word 'world' or 'new world' is the most repeated trope in this letter. Marx knew he was at the threshold of a new world. With visionary determinism he declared: 'What is necessary will

arrange itself.... I do not doubt, therefore, that all obstacles ... will be removed.’ He saw not just the upcoming revolutions but also the counter-revolutionary forces that will try to derail them – as we do today, from Saudi Arabi and the Islamic Republic to the US, the EU, and Israel.

One must abandon all ludicrous postures of Monday morning quarterbacking and share with the young Marx his enthusiasm and feel the tenacious tonality of his voice and vision – for which he had no predetermined dogma or ideology. ‘I am therefore not in favor of setting up any dogmatic flag,’ he told his co-editor. ‘On the contrary, we must try to help the *dogmatics* to clarify to themselves the meaning of their own positions.’ He knew something was soaring in the air and thus he assured his colleague that ‘we shall confront the world not as doctrinaires with a new principle: “Here is the truth, bow down before it!”’ No: that would not do. Something else was necessary: ‘We develop new principles to the world out of its own principles. We do not say to the world: “Stop fighting; your struggle is of no account. We want to shout the true slogan of the struggle at you.”’ None of that would do. He had his ears to the ground, and he was listening – to the Tahrir Square of his time. Something far more crucial was on hand: ‘We only show the world,’ he assured himself and his comrade, ‘what it is fighting for, and *consciousness* is something that the world must acquire, like it or not.’ On that note, he concluded with a bravura: ‘Our motto must therefore be: *Reform of consciousness* not through dogmas, but through *analyzing the mystical consciousness*, the consciousness which is unclear to itself, whether it appears in religious or political forms.’ Regarding that project, Marx promised, ‘It will transpire that *the world has long been dreaming of something* that it can acquire if only it became conscious of it.’ And then in a rare moment of high European Christianity: ‘To have its sins forgiven mankind has only to declare them to be what they really are.’<sup>1</sup>

History may indeed, as Marx once frivolously put it, repeat itself (once as tragedy, once as farce) – but the world will not.

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1. Karl Marx, ‘For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing,’ in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd edn (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978): 12–15; emphasis added.

The world keeps discovering, keeps inventing, keeps overcoming itself. In the Arab Spring, the world is once again pregnant with better and more hopeful versions of itself. The crescendo of transnational uprisings from Morocco to Iran, and from Syria to Yemen, are turning the world upside down. The task facing us today is precisely to see in what particular way our consciousness of the world is in the midst of transforming itself – by force of history. The world we have hitherto known as ‘the Middle East’ or ‘North Africa,’ or ‘the Arab and Muslim world,’ all part and parcel of a colonial geography we had inherited, is changing, and is changing fast. We have now entered the phase of documenting in what particular terms that world is transcending itself, overcoming the mystified consciousness into which it was colonially cast and postcolonially fixated.

In understanding what is happening in North Africa and the Middle East, we are running out of metaphors. We need new metaphors. Even the word ‘revolution’ – understood anywhere from Karl Marx to Hannah Arendt – needs rethinking. Such a new language of the revolution will cast the impact of ‘the Arab Spring’ on national and international politics for generations to come. These uprisings have already moved beyond race and religion, sects and ideologies, pro- or anti-Western. The term ‘West’ is more meaningless today than ever before – it has lost its potency, and with it the notion, and the condition, we had code-named *postcoloniality*. The East, the West, the Oriental, the colonial, the postcolonial – they are no more. What we are witnessing unfold in what used to be called ‘the Middle East’ (and beyond) marks the end of postcolonial ideological formations – and that is precisely the principal argument informing the way this book discusses and celebrates the Arab Spring. The postcolonial did not overcome the colonial; it exacerbated it by negation. The Arab Spring has overcome them both. The drama of this *delayed defiance* Arabs have now called their spring; and I will use the occasion to make a case for our having entered the phase of the end of postcoloniality, delivered from exacerbating a historic trauma.

Of the three terms circulating for what we have witnessed unfold from early 2011 – ‘Arab revolutions,’ ‘Arab Awakening’

and ‘Arab Spring’ – I have opted for ‘Arab Spring’ because it both marks the time of year it commenced and metaphorically announces a season of hope, trust, fecundity, and rebirth. Later on, when the Eurozone crisis and the American Occupy Wall Street movements had been termed the ‘European Summer’ and ‘American Fall,’ the world at large knew we had hit upon a winter of discontent. This is not to indulge in runaway metaphors that may be ahead of world-historic events, but to leave for posterity a sign of the sudden upsurge of hope in a better world that we were all reading in our midst.

*The transformation of consciousness*, and precisely not through dogma or violence, is the inaugural moment of discovering new worlds – not by willing what does not exist but by seeing what is unfolding. As I write, the Arab revolutions, each with a different momentum, are creating a new geography of liberation, which is no longer mapped on colonial or cast upon postcolonial structures of domination; this restructuring points to a far more radical emancipation, not only in these but, by extension, in adjacent societies and in an open-ended dynamic. This permanent revolutionary mood has already connected the national to the transnational in unexpected and unfolding ways, leading to a reconfigured geopolitics of hope. That the Arab revolutions are changing our imaginative geography is already evident in the interaction between the southern and northern coasts of the Mediterranean in terms of modes of protest, with the spread of Tahrir Square-style youth uprisings evident from Greece to Spain, and indeed to the United States and the Occupy Wall Street movement – with even Aung San Suu Kyi comparing her campaign for democracy in Burma to the Arab Spring. These revolutions are not driven by the politics of replicating ‘the West’ – rather, they are transcending it, and thus are as conceptually disturbing to the existing political order as to the *régime du savoir* around the globe. The ground is shifting under the feet of what self-proclaimed superpowers thought was their globe. These variations on the theme of delayed defiance hinge on the idea that the revolutions are simultaneously a rejection not just of the colonial oppression they have inherited but, *a fortiori*, of the postcolonial ideologies that had presented and

exhausted themselves as its antithesis in Islamist, nationalist or socialist grand narratives.

The mystical consciousness our world has inherited hangs around the binary of ‘The West and the Rest,’ the most damning delusion that the European colonial map of the world manufactured and left behind, with ‘Islam and the West’ as its most potent borderlines. It is precisely that grand illusion that is dissolving right before our eyes. But that is not all: the challenge posed by these revolutions to divisions within Islam and among Muslims – racial (Arabs, Turks, Iranians, etc.), ethnic (Kurds, Baluchs, etc.), or sectarian (Sunni and Shi’i in particular) – has at once agitated and (*ipso facto*) discredited them. 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 – overcoming once and for all the thick (material and moral) colonial divide. The dynamics now unfolding between the national and the transnational will, as they do, override all others. The synergy that has ensued is crafting a new framework for the humanity they have thus embraced and empowered. Those dynamics are checked, to be sure, by counter-revolutionary forces that are now fully at work – and that have much to lose from these revolutions.

The world, and not just ‘the Muslim world,’ has long been dreaming of these uprisings. Since at least the French Revolution of 1789, the European revolutions of 1848, the Russian Revolution of 1917, since the British packed their belongings and left India in 1948, since the French left Algeria, the Italians Libya, the world has been dreaming of the Arab Spring. From the time the colonial world began lowering European flags, and as the postcolonial world was raising new ones, the world has been dreaming of the emblematic slogan, now chanted by people from one end of the Arab world to another: *Huriyyah, Adalah Ijtima’iyah, Karamah*, ‘Freedom, Social Justice, Dignity.’

To pave the way for an open-ended unfolding of these revolts, the public space has been expanding for a very long time, and the political act is now being charged and redefined to accommodate it. But the public facade of unity across social classes and between



different political tendencies, which has characterized the uprising from the very outset, has been and will continue to be fractured. But these fractures will expand the public space, not diminish it. That societal expansion of the bedrock of politics will not be along ideological lines. In the world beyond Christian dogma, people are not born in a state of sin, for this to be forgiven by way of communal declaration. As there is no original sin, there is no final forgiveness – and thus no grand illusion, no master-narratives of emancipation. 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 – labor unions, women’s right organizations, student assemblies – all by way of forming a web of affiliation around the atomized individual, thus protecting her, thus enabling him, to resist the ever increasing power of the emergent state.

The specter of that emerging state will keep the democratic muscles of these revolutionary uprisings flexing – for a very long time, and for a very simple reason. The world we have inherited is mystified (Marx’s term) by the force fields of power that have at once held it together and distorted it. Fighting the military and economic might of counter-revolutionaries goes hand in hand with deciphering the transformed consciousness that must promise and deliver the emerging world. The colonial subject (now revolting beyond the mirage of the postcolonial state) was formed, forced, and framed as the object of European imperial domination, with multivariate modes of governmentality that extended from the heart of ‘the West’ to the edges of ‘the Rest.’ Europe colonized the Arab and Muslim world from one end to the other precisely according to the model of power by which it was itself being colonized by the self-fetishizing logic of capital. It was, by way of partaking in the making of the fetishized commodity, being alienated from itself as it was forcing that massive alienation on the colonial world. Postcolonialism was instrumental in conceptually fetishizing colonialism as something other than the abuse of labor by capital writ large. It is not, and never has been.

The postcolonial subject, which was none other than the colonial subject multiplied by the illusion of emancipation, was thus released