

## Report

# Arab Revolutions: Orientalism Reconsidered!



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While following news stories of all the Arab revolutions whether in Arab or Western media, one can find Edward Said in the center of all of them. One just needs to have in mind Edward Said's wholehearted arguments around the themes related to these events like the question of democracy, freedom, modernity, development, identity, Islam, Arabs, media so and so forth. The first time I remembered Edward Said in this situation was when I saw Jon Alterman speaking on CNN's Back Story few hours after the flee of the Tunisian ousted president Ben Ali about his view of the situation in Tunisia. Alterman as presented in the program is a Middle East expert, a pseudonym given by New England universities to modern day Orientalists. He is director and senior fellow of Middle East Program in the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), an American think tank providing US officials with consultation and strategic policies to deal with the Middle East and its people. He was asked by Michael Holmes a typical question about everything happening in this part of the world, the question of predictability. Of course a major characteristic given to this region in Orientalism's narrative is unpredictability of attitudes and behavior of people living in this region because predictability is a symptom of rational thinking and reasoning and of course this is exclusively a Western trait that cannot be handled by Oriental mind. Alterman was asked by the program host Michael Holmes if he expected such a thing to take place there in that peaceful & civilized manner. The answer was typical as was the question. The Middle East expert did not let down the expectations of his host nor his interlocutors. He said what can be paraphrased in this way; frankly speaking, I did not expect it to happen in this way. The answer he gave was not surprising at all to me or people who are aware of the rigidly fabricated picture about this region and its people in Western mind. Because of thousands of Oriental narratives on the Orient as a geographical, political, & cultural entity Western mind cannot handle the idea that this place can stand for anything meaningful or positive save the conventional grotesque picture of exoticism or terrorism. This place is historically engraved in Western mind as "a place of romance, exotic beings, hunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said, 1978, p. 01) .

The second occasion I remembered Late Edward Said in this context was after I saw short video report in the New York Times website. Speaking in the video was the right wing journalist and New York Times columnist, Thomas Friedman. Friedman is known for being a Zionist Jew and a diehard supporter of Israel, "the only democratic state in the Middle East" one should remember. He is famous for his fierce defense of Israel and US foreign policy that consider it as its first geostrategic ally in the region because it is part of the "free world". With regard to Edward Said, Friedman is a historical opponent if not enemy. For people who do not know Mr. Friedman, he is famous of his denigrating and racist comments about Arabs. Edward Herman the co-author of Manufacturing Consent with Noam Chomsky says in this regard: "[Thomas Friedman is]...regularly denigrating Arabs for their qualities of emotionalism, unreason, and hostility to democracy and modernization." In this attitude, Friedman is the "idiot-savant" and a good disciple of "tired and old Orientalists like Bernard Lewis" as Said described him in his famous article "Living in Arabic". The Orientalist tenor in Friedman's works is blatant to people following his polemic writings in various issues. Noam Chomsky described him as a war drum banger for all American wars in the region after praising the murderous Israeli bombing of Gaza civilians saying it "educates" Gazans.

Having all this in mind, it becomes very interesting to search for such voices during this critical moment in the region's history and this was a major concern in my mind when I was following these uprisings and their coverage in Western media. I really wanted to see Mr. Friedman and the bunch of neo-conservatives who are the most authentic producers & consumers of all Orientalist ideas political & cultural alike. I sincerely wished to meet Bernard Lewis, Samuel Huntington, Francis Fukuyama, Fouad Ajami, Richard Perle, Daniel Pipes, Charles Krauthammer and a myriad of right winged theorists, journalists & politicians just to say hi. I realized that these guys became muted & silence by the loud voices of Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, 25th of January movement in Egypt, 17th of February in Libya and the rest of grass root movements in the Arab world. But coming back to our fiend Thomas Friedman, it is interesting to see his position toward these events in the region. He can be classified with the right wingers and the clash of civilization theorists. He shares with Bernard Lewis and his fellows a great deal of their racist & upper-handed opinions about the Middle East and its people.

In this school's rhetoric, violence, terrorism, backwardness, and resentful attitudes towards modernity and democracy as Western values, are the very characteristics of this place of the world. In the video, Friedman was covering the Jordanian version of the popular uprisings on the 4th of February in a rainy day down town Amman. The video was very short, about 90 seconds but the description he made for the protest was very enthusiastic and celebratory. It used words like democracy, change, reform, freedom and dignity. In fact, I found that very odd and very telling in the same time. I said to myself "the guy is learning new things from our region". He is learning and we are teaching, a position shift for the first time. Yes, he is learning that people of this part of the planet have dreams and aspirations for themselves and their children, something they were denied for decades if not ages. I said to myself that the guy is correcting part of the distorted picture he and his colleagues were instigating about us. He is learning that we have many priorities to care about except thinking about the West with hatred & rage.

When I saw Mr. Friedman in that short clip, I remembered all these guys, the living and the old. I remembered Frederick Schlegel, Ernest Renan, Gustave Flaubert, Gerard de Nerval and Chateaubriand. I imagined them silent and muted by the voices of Tunisians, Egyptians, Libyans, Jordanians, Syrians, Moroccans & Mauritians. I imagined them asking astonishingly an existential questions like "what happened to the Orient, our Orient?" "What happened to its romance & exoticism?" "What happened to its submission and withdrawal from history?" I imagined them mourning and whining the lost of the essence of the Orient and the Oriental mind that betrayed their fictive stories, romantic novels, and grotesque paintings. I imagined Kuchuk Hanem slapping Gustave Flaubert and ordering him to stop his ridiculous narrative about the lustful & docile Oriental woman. I imagined "Women of Algiers" imprisoning Eugene Delacroix in a Harem place and forcing him to draw another picture for the Algerian women before freeing him.. To end with our friend Friedman, in describing the wonderful & unusual (for him) scene in Tahrir Square, three days after the report he made from Amman, Jordan and for days before the forced resignation of his Excellency, Hosni Mubarak, Friedman said: "...this is the most remarkable thing that I have ever seen. This is the single most authentic expression of Arab aspiration, hope, frustration, culture, identity that I have ever seen anytime, anywhere... The real Egypt in all its energy, passion and hope is just gushing over there... Any realistic policy should take into account this reality. Any policy we follow in the Middle East should better be based on this reality in Tahrir Square" What a change?

This moment of Arab history is unique in so many perspectives; political, ontological, cultural, historical and so on. It brings so many questions as it answers so many. It raises questions of democracy, freedom, political reform, identity claim...etc. No one can deny -including the ones whose job is to do so- the importance and significance of these revolutions in the Arab world. As defined in Chamber's Encyclopedic English Dictionary revolution is "a complete, drastic and usually far reaching change in ideas and ways of doing things." People in the Arab world revolted against corrupt and stagnant regimes because they seek that complete, drastic and far-reaching change described in that definition. They revolted because they felt betrayal and treachery by primitive political systems ranging from fake representative monarchies to forged authoritarian republics or repub-chies or "Jumilikiyate", a term coined by the Egyptian liberal activist Saaddine Ibrahim to portray the genius invention of Arab rulers that mixes of republic mode of rule with monarchic. People in the Arab world revolted because they found themselves left behind in the human race in history. They revolted to tell others that they are not the exception in human aspiration for freedom and human dignity.

My argument in this respect is that Edward Said's thought about the Middle East, the ancient Orient, seem highly true and prophetic. Said's argument that all mankind shares the same aspiration and hope of liberty, freedom & human dignity are proven valid by these grassroots revolutions breaking the imperial borders from Mauritania to the Sultanate of Oman. The breadth and spreading of these revolutions is the long waited for historical moment for Edward Said one can say. These revolutions are the best thing to dedicate to Edward Said after seven years of his departure. This historical moment is the exact moment to remember Said's passionate defense of this region and its

inhabitants. Without any doubt, these great events are the most spontaneous and eloquent responses to demonization, vilification, distortion, and misrepresentation practiced historically and contemporarily against Arabs and Muslims by old and new Orientalist discourses. I go so far and say that this moment in Arab history will force the last surviving Orientalists to fade away because their magic and frozen in history Orient is no longer valid. Orientalism as a purely Western epistemological phenomenon had created unhealthy, reductionist, and distorted picture about the Orient and its people. It is a rooted cumulative cultural, academic and for most institutional doctrine in Western mind about the Orient & Orientals. In Orientalist discourse there is a deep rooted image that "a fundamental ontological difference exists between the essential nature of the Orient and the Occident, to the decisive advantage of the latter. Western societies, cultures, languages and mentalities are supposed to be essentially and inherently superior to the Eastern ones" In Edward Said's words: "the essence of Orientalism is the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority..." In Rudyard Kipling's *The Ballad of East and West*, the "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" In all these three dogmatic descriptions, the poor East is the eternal, unchanging, frozen in history antagonist of the West that have multiple deployable functions; cultural, identical, and political. Because of these fundamental and essentialist distinction between the two blocks, there should also be an epistemological difference that holds that "the sort of conceptual instruments, scientific categories, sociological concepts, political descriptions and ideological distinctions employed to understand and deal with the Western societies remain, in principle, irrelevant and inapplicable to Eastern ones" This exclusive & congested categorization is the most fertile ground for polemicist & partisans like the ones I cited earlier; Bernard Lewis, Samuel Huntington, Daniel Pipes, Richard Perl...etc.

In the same token two other modern ontological Orientalist voices assert similar exclusionist & segregationist statements about the two entities, Western & non-Western, the West & the rest. Bernard Lewis in one of his favorite polemic informs us that "recourse to the language of left-wing and right-wing, progressive and conservative, and the rest of Western terminology... in explaining Muslim political phenomenon is about as accurate and as enlightening as an account of a cricket match by a baseball correspondent." In another ridiculous simile, a colleague of the tired Orientalist, H. A. R. Gibb believes that applying "the psychology and mechanisms of Western political institutions to Asian or Arab situations is pure Walt Disney." The statement speaks for itself.

The last case I met during my following of these events is the next account. On 29th of March, CNN's Piers Morgan Tonight was discussing President Obama's speech on the Libyan crisis with his guests, Bill Richardson ex US ambassador to the UN, David Trump, the famous billionaire & potential Republican presidential candidate and Fouad Ajemi, an outspoken supporter of the Iraq War, the nobility of which he believes there "can be no doubt." Obama defended the US intervention in Libya by claiming that it would be a betrayal of who they are if not helping a fellow human being in need. The interesting thing was not that humanistic and libertarian tone in President Obama's speech but rather David Trump's rejection of that argument. He said with the bluntest terms that killing civilians in "Libya is none of our business, we are fighting the wrong war". He added that "we will certainly win but we should ask ourselves whom we are winning for. We have no economic interests in Libya; China does so we should not interfere there". The words speak themselves too. When America destroyed a whole country for the sake of forged & mysterious WMD, it was ok but when it sent its Cruise missiles to halt Kaddafi's mercenaries from killing innocent unarmed civilians, it was not right since American oil companies were not benefiting from the first oil reserve in Africa. What a revengeful and anti-human logic?

Against this confrontationist and reactionary language of both policy makers and their Orientalist advisors comes the reconciliatory and humanistic philosophy led by Edward Said and many other critics of the ontological Orientalism & its clashing and imperial thesis. As a matter of fact, Edward Said's refusal of the idea that human values like freedom, liberty and democracy are exclusively Western givens is rightly proved by the popular revolutions spreading like fire in bush in the Arab world. Said comes with an



opposite thesis that totally refuses and fights the previous idea that claims that history celebrates success with one given race, culture or state of being –Western in this case– and let behind another. This moment of Arab history came to prove another argument by Said when he says that no culture or civilization is free of internal reform mechanisms that can provide people with alternative options beyond the official, orthodox or mainstream forms whether political, social or cultural. He says in his lecture “The Myth of the Clash of Civilization”: “Anyone who has the slightest understanding of how cultures really work, knows that defining the culture, saying what is for members of that culture, is always a major and even in undemocratic societies, an ongoing contest [.....] In addition to the mainstream or official culture, there are dissenting or alternative, unorthodox, heterodox, strands that contain many anti-authoritarian themes in them that are in completion with the official culture [.....] Like any other major world culture [Islamic world] contains within itself an astonishing variety of currents and counter currents. I would say that it is this extremely widespread attitude of questioning and skepticism towards age-old authority that characterizes the post war world in both east and west” Politically, it is this considered off stream, and silent majority that brought this unpredictable change. It is these internal mechanisms that achieved what the last civilizing mission of George Bush and his hawkish Orientalist advisors could not achieve with their Phantoms, B52, F15 or F16.

But this counter civilizing mission is still under threat if not carefully monitored and nurtured by the wisdom and visionary thinking of great minds like Edward Said. In this crucial moment of Arab history, Said has a lot to teach us about the current and future circumstances that we are and will be facing in the future. The first point is to lift the challenge, to succeed and fulfill our commitment to real change. If one can bring us a word of wisdom today from Said’s graveyard in Brummana, Jabal Lubnan where his ash is buried he/she will bring to us something like the following:

“Dear citizens, today I am swollen with pride of you all, from Mauritania to Oman. I heard your voices. I saw your tighten fists and I smelled your sacred blood. You deceived your enemies who argued that you are inert and silent objects of the past. You pleased your friends who believed in the wisdom, vision, magic and fancy of the Orient. You achieved so many things but the way to freedom is so long and so hard. There are so many forces who do not wish you to thrive. Be it veteran Lewis, the polemicist Huntington or the unnamed rest, they were silent from the day you started. Let them silent, deaf and mute, so they were and so they should be. Believe me dear citizens, if you succeeded to lift the challenge, if you succeed to destroy the infrastructures of despotism and corruption, if you continued the blessed way you baptized by your sanctified blood, you can make historians write about the last Orinetalist as James Fennimore Cooper wrote about Uncas as The last of the Mohicans before three centuries.

Before I left your world, I declared for the last time that I have high regard for the powers & gifts you have to struggle on for your vision of what you are and what you want to be. Today, I can see for myself that I was not wrong about it and that delighted me to no end. It was not a prophetic prediction as some of you would say but I saw signs of this moment in many details that are easier said than done for shallow minded and simplistic polemicists who resorted to clashing civilizations and ending history instead of careful analysis that helps people to get closer to each other and discover the collective as well as plural destiny of mankind. I could predict this moment of dignified human history because of my deeper conviction that men make their own history and history can be made, unmade, written, unwritten by men and women alike. I said so because of my genuine belief that no nation, no culture or no race is excluded from making history. Here I return to some African words of wisdom that I never tire to cite. The verses are for a person I personally admire, the Martiniqueian poet, Aimé Césaire when he says: “The work of man is only just beginning and it remains to conquer all the violence entrenched in the recesses of our passion and no race possesses the monopoly of beauty, of intelligence, of force, and there is a place for everyone at the rendezvous of victory”.

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