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Democratic Transitions and Democracy Promotion

Coloniality and Democracy Promotion: the Paradoxes of the Arab Uprisings

Abstract

The Arab Uprisings are symbiotic of a the potentiality of a new epoch for the Muslim world, as the revolting populations have done away with the previously all-permeating aura of fear and rose up against despotic Authoritarian regimes however the necessary intellectual climate needed for transformative change has been debilitated by an unbridled call for 'Democracy Promotion' based on a reactive importation of knowledge produced by the Colonial centers. This paper will look an example of such, an article by Azzam Tamimi, and examine the underlying inconsistencies of unbridled "Democracy Promotion"

'Democratic Transition' or more importantly a need for 'Democracy Promotion' makes critical yet implicit normative and descriptivist claims about the veracity and sustainability of 'Democracy' as theoretical construct and as an optimal mode-of-governance for the Arab-Muslim world. However, these normative and politico-descriptivist assumptions cannot go unquestioned for it seems to me that 'Democracy' has become some sort of inevitable 'ends', the end of history as our neo-liberals would

have it, an age of maturity to which we must progress. Ironically, the very same process of *critical thinking* needed to undergo this process is foregone which we accept 'Democracy' in an unbridled fashion. What I am trying to say here was put aptly by the young Immanuel Kant who described the fundamental obstacle towards 'Enlightenment' as "*is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance. Dare to know! (Sapere aude.) "Have the courage to use your own understanding," is therefore the motto of the enlightenment*". It goes without saying that this might offend many writers, thinkers and activist who have devoted their intellectual and physical energies towards the realization of Democracy. What I am calling into question in this paper is not whether or not Democracy is theoretically sound and sustainable – this would require a lengthier essay – but rather an attitude i.e. a state of mind (according to Husserl and others; a state-of-being). This attitude is expressed in the thematic design of this conference. We, as youth, are not asked to critically question the hegemonic status of 'Democracy' as a universal seemingly omnipotent and natural 'ends' – but rather we must accept this, be it subconsciously (as I'm sure many participants already have) or consciously (which I respectfully refuse to do).

On Thinking

Our ability to 'think' involves a comprehension of our external environment vis-à-vis our sensory perceptions and the meanings and representations which we attribute to the beings and/or ideas in our external environment. This thinking-process occurs on two levels; an empirical level and a normative-level. For example, if a water bottle was put in front of me i.e. under my vision, I would link the plastic bottle, the liquid and the bottle cap and produce a 'thought' and express this thought through language; "this is a water bottle!" Suppose however that this water-bottle was offered to me during Ramadan, meaning that I was fasting and had to abstain from drinking, subsequently I would produce a thought on the normative-dimension of acting upon the water-bottle and say; "It is impermissible for me to drink this liquid". The former 'thought' is an empirical-thought whereas the latter is a normative-thought. These two forms of thought are not mutually exclusive, in fact, they are mutually constitutive. To make a normative-claim about a subject-matter requires an empirical knowledge of that subject-matter. Proactive action is the product of empirical and normative 'thought' – meaning that – to act upon a subject-matter one must have both a comprehension of the subject-matter and just as importantly, a normative-stance from that subject-matter. As a matter of fact, this is what makes human acts human – the fact that our acts are mediated by thought. Reactionary actions are those actions that do not originate in empirical-normative thought. These processes do not apply only to material objects but extend to 'ideas' like Democracy because 'ideas' are in themselves conceptual constructs based.

Accordingly, an 'ideas' veracity ought-to-be based on the extent to which that 'idea' is sustainable on its own grounds and secondly, the conformity of that 'idea' to one's normative framework. Having explained the foundations of positive and pro-active thought, we can put forth the question; (1) why hasn't the sustainability of Democracy been put to question and (2) does Democracy conform to our Islamic normative framework? Both questions must be dealt with at lengths prior to engaging in a discussion on the merits of Democracy promotion. In what follows, we will examine a concrete example of "Democracy Promotion" vis-à-vis a critical exposition of a piece written by Azzam Tamimi entitled '*The Quest for Democracy in the Arab World is an Islamic Cause*' published on Al-Jazeera Opinion which is symbiotic of the intellectual subversion to the knowledge-producing 'Western' hegemon.

Azzam Tamimi and the Mirage of Democracy: A Quest towards Subversion

If there is one thing we can learn from Azzam Tamimi's article '*The Quest for Democracy in the Arab World is an Islamic Cause*¹' it is that the continuity of colonization in the Muslim world is primarily a self-perpetuating process sustained and legitimized by what Bertrand Badie aptly called "the importers". Western systems, theories, and laws need not be imposed – in fact their imposition usually produces regressive results – however a far more insidious yet perceivably benign process of colonization occurs

¹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/02/quest-democracy-arab-world-an-i-201426144630841574.html>

when the 'native elites' who claim to represent the "colonized" imitates the colonized. This process of imitation/importation however puts the mimic in a difficult situation, on one hand he must retain the 'authenticity' he represents (culture, religion, etc.) i.e. that of his 'natives' and on the other hand he incessantly and obsessively imports the unauthentic from the West. To deal with this paradox, the mimic must create a synthesis between the 'Authentic' and the 'Imported'. The mimic is the polisher of chains, a grand illusionist and the greatest enemy to liberation. That explains why we have haphazardly superficial "Islamic Democratic" discourses or ambivalent notions of a "Civil State with an Islamic Reference" (only Allah, the All-Knower, seems to know what that contradiction-in-terms might mean). What is all-the-more problematic is that Tamimi is not only reifying the Eurocentric 'Democratic' State but he is also speaking about the quest of the Arab Spring, its trajectory and for our respected brother Tamimi it is a fixated path towards Democracy. A vision eerily similar, if not derivative of, the Western doctrine of "progress" towards "maturity" (i.e. Westernization). Essentially, even our future is determined by a Eurocentric mirage and clay idol named "Democracy".

The situation was articulated brilliantly by Paulo Freire² *"The central problem is this: How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation? Only as they discover themselves to be "hosts" of the oppressor can they contribute to*

² *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire

the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy. As long as they live in the duality in which to be is to be like, and to be like is to be like the oppressor, this contribution is impossible". In other words, there is a two-step transformative process which involves the authentication of identity through (1) producing non-Eurocentric narratives on the pre- and post-Arab Spring (because we are in no way in a post-Arab Spring in any existential sense) instead of recycling and loathing over Western narratives i.e. a "quest towards Democracy" and (2) excluding, from our map road towards liberation the neo-imperial West and their despots who until now have acted as midwives for this process or what Tamimi referred to in albeit more benign terms "power-sharing".

Asides for the intellectual and normative inconsistencies of universalizing and essentializing 'Democracy', an issue we have touched upon elsewhere, from a purely pragmatic perspective, what makes this obsessive pursuit of 'Democracy' all the more dumb-founding is its shallowness. Their reformist-accommodationalist methodology means that he paradoxically ends up both preserving the very power-structures which render the actualization of 'Democracy' impossible and continues to pursue it (Democracy) at the same time. In an age of free-market capitalist globalization and the anarchic state of the international order, the 'Nation' and its 'People' are neither sovereign nor free to determine their own trajectory and destiny as hegemonic forces external to the 'Nation' and its 'People' do so. And thus even on a pragmatic level, the ideals and material-goals of the mimic remain a mirage.

Secondly, how does 'Democracy' – in itself – alleviate the economic, social and political structural contradictions in the Muslim world? What is it intrinsic to 'Democracy' that makes it an all-encompassing and comprehensive political programme which can seemingly do away with the deep-rooted problems? History testifies to the fact that there is indeed no causal link between economic development, technological advancement and 'Democracy'. Unless 'Democracy' is a masquerade for a far-reaching neo-liberal political programme, it falls nothing short of a mirage. Both ways however, 'Democracy' is part of the problem and not a solution of any sorts.

In the end, both 'Democracy' and 'Power-sharing' are mirages and illusions of the Modern State system. There is nothing liberating about the hegemonic Democratic theory which is now defunct in its countries of origins and (I can safely say) it goes without saying that the power-elites who dominate the Muslim world are in no way interested in "power-sharing". Power must be taken, it is not shared nor given with power-elites who fetishize power with the Qur'an warning ""...*do not obey the order of the transgressors...*". Does the Qur'anic repetition of Musa's climatic clash with Pharaoh not teach our dear Tamimi any lessons on liberation? Or was the rejection of a dozen "power-sharing" offers by tribes to the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him) not an indication that power can only belong to an idea – *authentic* Islam - and not a disfigured distilled compromise-based reconfigured "Democratic Islam"?

