



What Is Enlightenment?: Continuity or Rupture in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings

By Mohammed D. Cherkaoui

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Political sociology has struggled with predicting the next turn of transformation in the MENA countries after the 2011 Uprisings. Arab activists did not articulate explicitly any modalities of their desired system, although their slogans ushered to a fully-democratic society. These unguided Uprisings showcase an open-ended *freedom-to question* after Arabs underwent their *freedom-from struggle* from authoritarianism. The new conflicts in Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and Libya have fragmented *shar'iyah* (legitimacy) into distinct conceptualizations: “revolutionary legitimacy,” “electoral legitimacy,” “legitimacy of the street,” and “consensual legitimacy.” This volume examines whether the Uprisings would introduce a replica of the European Enlightenment or rather stimulate an Arab/Islamic awakening with its own cultural specificity and political philosophy. By placing Immanuel Kant in Tahrir Square, this book adopts a comparative analysis of two enlightenment projects: one Arab, still under construction, with possible progression toward modernity or regression toward neo-authoritarianism, and one European, shaped by the past two centuries.

Mohammed D. Cherkaoui and the contributing authors use a hybrid theoretical framework drawing on three *tanwiri* (enlightenment) philosophers from different eras: Ibn Rushd, known in the west as Averroes (the twelfth century), Immanuel Kant (the eighteenth century), and Mohamed Abed Al-Jabri (the twentieth century). The authors propose a few projections about the outcome of the competition between an *Islamocracy vision* and what Cherkaoui terms as a *Demoslamic vision*, since it implies the Islamist movements’ flexibility to reconcile their religious absolutism with the prerequisites of liberal democracy. This book also traces the patterns of change which point to a possible Arab Axial Age. It ends with the trials of modernity and tradition in Tunisia and an imaginary speech Kant would deliver at the Tunisian Parliament after those vibrant debates of the new constitution in 2014.

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- Rank: #3155038 in eBooks
- Published on: 2016-04-11
- Released on: 2016-04-11
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

Review

The book does a good job in providing answers to the two main questions it raises: Why and in which ways the Arab Spring was a middle class phenomenon, and why and in which ways the pre-2011 traditions (authoritarianism and Islamism) reasserted themselves so forcefully, not to say violently, in the MENA countries after the uprisings of 2011. . . . The authors of this collective volume are to be congratulated for having elevated themselves above present day social sciences enslaved to the scientist myth of instrumental reason. (*VoegelinView*)

A uniquely informative read for anyone interested in the philosophical background of the Arab uprisings, paying equal weight to Arab and Western contributions, and displaying a careful attention to the relation between daily activism and the intellectual *zeitgeist* associated with revolutionary action. (Mohammed Bamyeh, University of Pittsburgh)

About the Author

Mohammed D. Cherkaoui is professor of conflict resolution and peacebuilding at George Mason University's School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution and member of the Center for Narrative and Conflict Resolution.

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