

## *The Western Spring*

I'm going to speak this evening about recent events in the MENA region, and the intense significance that they have for Europe – as indeed for the rest of the world. The significance that I want to examine is not a political significance (though it has of course had enormous political outcomes, still being played out in the fall of dictatorships and the remaking of nations). What I want to look at is a cultural significance: a shifting of the tectonic plates of culture, involving abrasive realignments of language, of values, of potent symbols and of reference points. In the smoke and din of political change we could easily miss it. But looking back in a decade's time I think – and I hope – that it will be harder to overlook. If so, it will be because it has altered a landscape of thought much broader than that of North Africa.

I have called this lecture 'The Western Spring,' because I want to suggest that what has happened since late January in the region has had an enormous impact on Europe. The phrase 'Arab Spring' is a glib cliché assigned by a Western press obsessed with easy references, and I shall try to avoid it. A 'Western Spring' is just as glib, but I use it because I want to stress the symmetry, and the way the tide has turned; the way that the people of the region, Arab and Amazigh, have upset long-held assumptions about their own cultures, and about the 'natural' direction of flow in cultural affairs between Europe and North Africa.

I first heard recently a splendid expression in French, 'Je l'ai fait pour des prunes,' (I did it for plums). It is dismissive, meaning that something was not worth the trouble, and it originates, it seems, in Louis IX's 1270 crusade, a military disaster that ended with the King of France defeated and dead, his body brought back for burial in Palermo cathedral. Of all that pomp and arrogance, the political and religious aggression that took a French army into Mamluk Egypt, nothing remains today but the damsons, the Damascus plums that Louis's retreating army carried with it, perhaps (I like to think) as tiny saplings in flowerpots bouncing at their saddle-bows. Three quarters of a millennium later the French monarchy is long gone, but in the Bordelais the plums are still dried into what we English call prunes, and the French call *pruneaux*; and in 2002, more than 800 years after St Louis's crusade, Agen prunes received legal protection from the EC as an essential element of France's culinary heritage. The beginning of the story can't *quite* be true

(the Romans grew damsons in England more than a thousand years before St Louis, for one thing), but it certainly sums up a truth more important than the migration of damsons: the long-term superiority of culture to power, of the plum-tree to the sword.

And that is my theme tonight. The events of the last year in North Africa and the Middle East have been dramatic and important, and have certainly triggered huge changes. Some of these changes will stick, others will not. Not every new government that emerges from these upheavals will be better than its predecessor, nor every people happier. What's more – as we know here in Morocco – there are some governments that are trying conscientiously, and often successfully, to manage change in less abrupt and less dangerous ways. But beyond all this, where are the plums? What will we see when we look back on 2011, as the great underlying changes of thought, assumption and culture that have taken place behind the comings and goings of tin-pot dictators?

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A few weeks ago I was in London, and I took the underground up to St Paul's Cathedral, to see the protest camp that has grown up around the cathedral's western entrance. It is a muddle of tents and awnings, banners and washing-lines. There are cook-shops and tattoo-parlours, a library, a press-tent and a tent that describes itself as a university. Books are lent, lectures delivered and art is made. On Temple Bar, the ancient archway which has been made into the entrance to Paternoster Square, there is a smartly produced black, white and red London street sign that reads TAHRIR SQUARE EC4 and in smaller letters underneath (misleadingly), CITY OF WESTMINSTER.

That sign signifies something really rather extraordinary. A year ago, very few people in Europe had heard of Midan al-Tahrir, the busy, jostling, nondescript, honking space in the centre of Cairo where all roads cross. Today, the world *has* heard a great deal of it, and its name is heavy with resonances, well on the way to becoming a cliché. This is symptomatic of things happening across the world in 2011. What we are seeing is a sudden discharge of ideas and symbols from the Middle East to the rest of the world – to Europe and the USA above all. Tahrir Square has become the touchstone of protest – the events there in January and February 2011 (and now again at the end of the year) have become the epitome of youth-led, idealistic revolution. One estimate is that 900 occupations of urban public space have taken place in the West since the spring, most visibly perhaps

that of Puerta del Sol by Spain's young *indignados*, from May 15<sup>th</sup> onwards. After the October 15<sup>th</sup> 'anniversary,' they grew in number. Some have been huge – Berlin, Lisbon, Zagreb, Brussels and others – some much smaller; some long-lasting, some almost ephemeral. Puerta del Sol, St Paul's in London, Tel Aviv and Zuccotti Park in New York's financial district have been particularly visible in the European press; but no doubt from elsewhere the emphasis is different. There have been Occupy protests in Dataran, Bath, Ulaanbataar, Auckland, Santiago de Chile – in other words, right across the world.

They all have political demands of some kind, and I'll return to those. Arguably more importantly, all of them embody one fundamental, mechanical and moral idea: that of a group of young people sitting down in a public space and refusing to go away until their demands are met. It isn't just a formal image, either. The cookshops, internet access points and libraries are deliberate echoes of Egypt's revolution: in Cairo in January and February the Square quickly became famous for the civil society that it spawned, the phone-charging stations, crèches, face-painting tents and art exhibitions. Indeed, it seems that the creation of this civil society was a deliberate act of policy – a well-designed statement about the intentions and assumptions of the protesters: they were not anarchists, these collective activities and institutions clearly said, because they were creating an orderly, if raucous, alternative society. This is replicated wherever Occupy occupies.

Tahrir Square created an idiom with a very clear message. Young people have, that message says, lost patience with their elders and with the politics of the older generation. They want a fresh start, without hypocrisy and with popular consent. They are clean (morally, if, after weeks in a public square, not always literally) and innocently single-minded, and their politics is about values and culture and change. Certainly they want the basic necessities of life – decent education, jobs and the wherewithal to marry and raise families. But the core demands are for respect – and for hope. Every demonstration and camp round the world now picks up these features and is a conscious reiteration of them. It has taken time for coherent demands to emerge from the movements around the world, but they reflect the same demands: first of all, education, employment, respect and hope.

It is very striking that the demands, while articulated and prioritized differently in different places are essentially the same, the demands of a generation which feels marginalized, impotent, and which wants, in the title of an early book about the so-called Arab Spring (by a British Journalist called Johnny West): *Karama*. And *karama* is just as important – and almost as lacking – in Athens and Rome as in

Tunis or Tripoli. And it is very striking indeed that the success of young Egypt, young Tunisia and young Libya in triggering a process of dramatic change has helped shape the thinking of young Spaniards, young Greeks, young Croats, young Americans, young Britons and young Chileans.

The way the messages have moved is not accidental. The role of social networking tools has been much discussed, but what is most important is that demonstrators have learned to manage their image and their message. In Cairo recently I picked up two picture books of the placards and signs in the Square last spring – funny, poignant, clever pieces of artwork which caught every photographer’s eye. But who were these signs aimed at? Not primarily at the Egyptian police, or even the Egyptian public: relatively few of them were in Arabic. No, these colourful, witty placards were mostly in European languages and were aimed at the world press, and the world’s bloggers, gathered round the square like hungry vultures, gobbling up the imagery, the graffiti and the comments, filtering them for home audiences. So the placards on the BBC were in English, but those on France 24 seemed mysteriously to be in French, and on Spanish television they were in Spanish. The media management was remarkable and sophisticated: young image-merchants in the square were able to assemble the backdrop for any language. No doubt Arab journalists saw Arabic signs. In all cases the audience was the world, and the whole demonstration was a media event designed to win support across the heads of the Egyptian police, in the sympathies of a global audience. We have seen analogous attention to press management in Syria, where the importance of image-communication has become very clear. Outside St Paul’s cathedral there is a very well-equipped press tent, just as there is in Zuccotti Park and in every other Occupy protest camp around the world.

Signs, words, behaviours – but above all the single powerfully symbolic fact of Tahrir Square – are what Richard Dawkins called *memes*. Memes are units of cultural practice and imagination, which act and spread, in Dawkins’s analogy, like genes. And this torrent of escaping memes, rushing from North Africa to Europe is amazing. For a couple of centuries the memes have largely spilled from West to East and North to South: ideas, books, systems, sciences, thoughts, metaphors and thinkers have to a great extent been travelling eastwards and finding their second homes in the Arab World. The events, ideas and creativity of the Middle East have mostly, though perhaps not quite as much as the West has thought, been sifted, valued and labelled in the terms set by the West. It is, broadly speaking, what Edward Said meant by orientalism.

For the time being at least, a strong counter-current has been established, and political actors in the West are searching for validation through the vocabulary of the events of the last year along the North African coast. Sometimes this is crude and pre-emptive. An example of this is the extraordinary hyper-linking that went on in early February between Tahrir Square and Madison, Wisconsin, where American trade unionists were resisting the removal of their collective bargaining rights. Outside the Madison State Capitol demonstrators chanted “Fight like Egyptians!” while in Tahrir Square one demonstrator at least was photographed carrying a banner which read “Egypt supports Wisconsin – One World, One Pain.” In Tel Aviv young demonstrators camping out in protest against the price of food and housing and the structure of Israeli society carried banners saying “We are all Egyptians.” Meanwhile in an odder piece of mimetic leakage, the *Economist* tells us that the Chinese government has, since the Tunisian Revolution (given the rather silly ‘jasmine’ label by profoundly unimaginative political commentators), banned the use of the word jasmine in the public media, and outlawed the sale of jasmine itself in the flower-markets of China.

At first perhaps this process was random, a flurry of associations and analogies which coalesced into an idiom. Tunis, and to a greater extent Egypt, gave vocabulary to the tide of protest that was rising amongst young people across the world in the first half of 2011. It became more self-conscious: in October, American demonstrators in New York, from the camp off Wall Street, were filmed marching arm-in-arm through the streets of Manhattan chanting in Arabic, *Assha3b yureed Isqat an-Nidam* and *Assha3b yureed Isqat Wallstreet – the people want the fall of the régime and the people want the fall of Wall Street*.

Now, as I write, Tahrir Square is filled again by tens of thousands of Egyptians, and activists are organizing a global day of protest against the SCAF, Egypt’s military government, co-ordinated across the whole global network of ‘Occupy’ protest camps. This is in many ways the complete inversion of anything that has happened in the past: today clever and imaginative young Egyptians are orchestrating protest across the world from iPads and telephones in the Square and across the world – addressing (like that other great cultural communicator, the Pope) *urbi et orbi*, to the city and the world. But from a scruffy African traffic island rather than a baroque balcony in Rome.

Tahrir Square is becoming a brand. World leaders, in turn, increasingly puzzled as to how to deal with similar phenomena in their own countries, recognize the potency of the symbolism, and have become more effusive about the revolutions

in the Middle East. I noticed this passing through Cairo Airport recently, where huge advertisements for the telephone company Mobinil offer three gigantic quotations. WE MUST EDUCATE OUR CHILDREN, one says, TO BECOME LIKE YOUNG EGYPTIAN PEOPLE. This is apparently a quotation from President Obama. Next to it is another quotation from the President of Austria, Heinz Fischer: THE PEOPLE OF EGYPT ARE THE GREATEST PEOPLE ON EARTH, AND THEY DESERVE THE NOBEL PRIZE FOR PEACE. There's even a typically opaque quotation from Silvio Berlusconi: THERE IS NOTHING NEW IN EGYPT – EGYPTIANS ARE MAKING HISTORY AS USUAL. Apart from the slightly undignified sight of a company so closely associated with the Egyptian *Ancien Régime* trying discreetly to change horses in 1500-point type, these quotations raise an interesting question: since they appear to be genuine, what is behind this sudden rash of philo-Egyptianism amongst senior Western politicians? It is of course simply more evidence that the Tahrir meme is on the loose, rampaging through Western consciousness, hybridizing energetically.

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This Tahrir meme – the symbolic DNA of the Square – has of course been used in very different ways. Demonstrations around the world did not all begin by echoing Egyptian aims or demands: they are not on the whole trying to dislodge military dictators. They took up anti-capitalist themes from a generation of urban protesters at G8 and G20 meetings, assembling a miscellany of dissatisfaction with the organization and ethics of capitalist society, before morphing into a politically-driven campaign focusing on equality and socio-economic injustice. What they all have in common is youth-driven outrage, a sense of moral irresistibility, and a lot of tent-canvas in a public place.

If we are looking for the Highest Common Factor, we don't have to look very far: the outrage is about impotence. Unemployment, inadequate higher education, the consequences of recession in spending cuts and what is charmingly called 'austerity,' all evoke a response from the young who feel that they are suffering the consequences of their elders' sins; and that the political systems of their own countries are unresponsive and incapable of delivering the radical change that many (and not just the young) see as necessary. In North Africa this focused upon military dictatorships and the hopelessness of huge numbers of excluded young people. In the EC and elsewhere in 'the West,' it focused on the consequences of the financial crisis for young people – unemployment, huge education debts, inability to enter the housing market. In all cases, those appropriating the public

spaces of the world's cities railed against arbitrary power exercised beyond their reach, by Mubarak or Ben Ali, by the City of London, the European Commission, the (oddly personified) bond markets, the IMF or the ECB. Events in North Africa provide a template for re-appropriating public space – the Public Square, the Arab Street – in an assertion of people-power against unresponsive, elitist, self-serving political institutions and practices. However we regard it on the spectrum of Righteous-to-Misguided, what we see is a model for popular political action that was largely generated in North Africa and the Middle East, and which has been taken up by young people across the globe.

I'd like, though, to argue that there is something else in common. It's something that interests me a good deal, because in a strange and indirect way, the *indignados* of Puerta del Sol and the press-managers in Tahrir Square are in the same business that I'm in, that's to say cultural relations. This is all about people speaking over the heads of governments, directly to people. In institutions like the British Council we use what is perhaps a simplistic typology of international communication: *diplomacy* is what we call communication from government to government; *public diplomacy* is direct communication by a government to another people; and *cultural relations* is direct communication from people to people. It's precisely this last that the young people of Zuccotti Park, St Paul's, Tahrir, the Pearl Roundabout and countless other open spaces in the A-Zs of the world's cities, have been up to. They want to talk across the heads of government to people round the world, and thanks to the amazing, hand-held, communication technology available to them, they can. Placards waved in Tunis are seen in Rio and Sydney and Delhi, just as the fuzzy cell-phone film clip of Mohammed Bouazzizi setting fire to himself flashed round the Arab World on al-Jazeera. It is not that official media are being by-passed (though they are): they are being *ignored*. The on-going struggles between governments in the MENA region and uncontrollable image-vectors like al-Jazeera, or silent, retail uploads to the net, or blogs, or twitter-feeds, are all panicky recognitions of the power of the image that cannot easily be constrained – and perhaps cannot be constrained at all.

Young people pick up the images, and the moral content. There's a famous story from the memoirs of Sir Anthony Parsons, the last British Ambassador to the court of the Shah of Iran: he comments that if he had only listened more carefully to his children who came home on holiday to Tehran from their English universities, he'd have known that there was a revolution close to boiling-point in Persia in 1979. If that hyperlink from the region into British university quads and

campuses existed then, it exists now too. But there has been a change. In 1979 British universities were open to such messages because their own politics were radical and globally aware: by 2011 the opposite was true. My own daughter, at Oxford until earlier this year, spoke often to me of the grey introversion and self-interestedness of British student politics. To her generation, starved of idealism by a contracting labour-market, growing debt and a public debate dominated by financial crisis, bankers' bonuses and a sense of impotence, the warm wind blowing in from North Africa was a breath of the idealism that they knew was missing.

I remember sitting during the first week of the Egyptian crisis in late January, in the offices of professors in Oxford and Edinburgh, watching them take anxious calls from the parents of British students studying Arabic in Cairo. The parents wanted their children safely home: for the most part the children were having none of it. They wanted only to be in Tahrir Square. And as one of the professors said to me, "I can't blame them. That's where I want to be." Another British professor who I telephoned a couple of weeks later at her northern English university, answered inaudibly against a background of raucous shouting: "What's all that noise?" I asked, "Where are you?" - "In Tahrir Square," she replied, "of course."

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What I would like to argue this evening is simply this. Events in North Africa and other parts of the MENA region in 2011 have opened a window. For this purpose we can leave aside the details, and observe that this moment is something very new – something that we have not seen in several generations. I don't just mean that European students are looking south for symbols (after all, they've worn the Palestinian *keffiyeh* pugnaciously for years in a tediously routinized radical chic). No, I mean that at all levels and across much of the world, a different kind of attention is being paid to the peoples of North Africa. This is sometimes quite an irritating sort of attention: the politics, the history and the society of the states of Maghreb and Mashriq are much more complex than Europe's instant experts understand, or even, in many cases, wish to be bothered with. There is a risk of course too, that the symbols taken from (I'm sorry) 'the Arab Spring,' will become routine, hackneyed and detached from their meanings. All this is so, but I focus on something slightly different, the change of direction.

In the Atlantic between Canada and Iceland there is an enormous natural phenomenon called the North Atlantic Elevator. It is a global pump which,

powered by changes in salinity and water temperature, brings vast quantities of water up from the deep ocean to the surface, powering the Gulf Stream, itself a major mechanism in the maintenance of the world's climate. Scientists fear that changes in the temperature differentials between the two layers of oceanic water may slow and then reverse the pump's direction of action – with catastrophic consequences for the world in general, and the European climate in particular. My sense is that we are looking in 2011 at a North African Elevator, pumping moral authority rather than hot water.

What do I mean by this? For several centuries the cultural pump has followed political muscle and directed the flow of influence from Europe to North Africa. It wasn't always so. Edward Gibbon put it nicely: "The Age of Arabian learning continued about 500 years and was coæval with the darkest and most slothful period of European annals." Muslim scientists and philosophers were the intellectual engines of the Middle Ages, crumbs from whose table fed the thinkers of Christian Europe. Claudio Lange described it like this: "In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Islamic civilization, together with the Byzantine, Chinese and Indian civilizations, established the First World of the time, while Western Europe embodied the Third." There was an apogee during what European historians call the High Middle Ages, when Muslims ruled in Sicily and Spain, and culture certainly flowed northward at least as much as it flowed southward, in what was a real and profoundly fruitful exchange, which historians are only now effectively moving from their desks and seminar rooms into wider public awareness.

Since then, the monotonous attrition of the European powers in the Maghreb has stemmed the northward flow in favour of the southward, first by slowly driving the Muslim states from southern Europe, and then by driving out the vast majority of their Muslim and Jewish peoples, and assimilating the rest. To be sure, the traces of Islamic culture and the Arabic language are everywhere, and great monuments of cultural syncretism stand in places like King Pedro I's 14<sup>th</sup> century palace at the Alcazar Réal at Seville, where the Arabic name of Allah is invoked alongside the Latin name of God in the carved plasterwork of ceilings made by *mudejar* craftsmen; or the Emperor Charles V's even more astonishing Capilla Réal at Cholula in Mexico, which is no more and no less than a faithful facsimile of the Great Mosque at Cordoba. But in the centuries that followed Charles, cultural, political and religious attitudes hardened, and European aggression in North Africa, followed by European imperialism, has governed the direction of flow, keeping it pointing firmly south.

One of the unexpected consequences of 9/11 and the wars of the last decade in the Muslim world, along with new depths of prejudice and some pretty vile pathologies, has been a growing interest in shared history, and shared culture. Paradoxically, just as an anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim literature flowers darkly in the West, so does a new literature of creative encounter. I have a shelf of recent books in my study looking at the creative encounter of East and West and the inextricability of their histories and cultures, and much is being published about the influence of Islamic thought and society on the Christian West. It seems to me that this golden river of scholarship has blossomed in recent years in the academies of Europe and America, and will continue to do so, though it is important not to assume that it is a novelty: Marina Warner, in a recent TLS, writes of books exploring “underexplored dimensions of exchange and cross-fertilization, much of them far more appreciative and therefore more fruitful than the current perspective common ignorance perpetuates, and certainly far surpassing the assumptions of most of our political leaders.” She is of course quite right.

But this approach in the West has managed (as she also writes) only a narrow popularity, and for all the unprecedentedly fine and stimulating research of the last couple of decades, the rise of an anti-immigration, anti-Islamic, deeply illiberal right wing in Europe and America has frequently overshadowed it. Like the Tahriri memes I noted a moment ago, these are internet-driven memes, a simplistic mythology of threats to European or American cultures and values, of racial marginalization by “Islamic” immigration and demographics – salted with a spattering of other traditionally right-wing obsessions. The rise of this extremist, often quasi-fascist and not infrequently violent series of cultural tropes is one of the greatest disfigurements of European culture and society today. It is driven to a large extent by insecurity, by rising unemployment, anomie, debt, and the (real or imagined) collapse of traditional structures of morality. It is expressed with venomous malice.

What we see therefore – and I am being very simplistic here, though I believe the model is true enough – is a Euro-North-African world in which two notable models of youth political activism compete. On the one hand are the far right politics and the bullying street-activism of explicitly racist parties in most European countries, and the sordid outpourings of the racist internet. This is the Europe of a recent report by the British think-tank Demos, which found “a continent-wide spread of hardline nationalist sentiment among the young, mainly men. Deeply cynical about their own governments and the EU, their generalised

fear about the future is focused on cultural identity, with immigration – particularly a perceived spread of Islamic influence – a concern.” Demos quotes one authority as saying that “as antisemitism was a unifying factor for far-right parties in the 1910s, 20s and 30s, Islamophobia has become the unifying factor in the early decades of the 21st century.” It is a fast-growing movement, in which men (at 75%) are heavily represented, and many of these men are unemployed. It is also, just like the activism of Occupy and the activity that preceded and fuelled events in North Africa, internet-driven, and young – with two-thirds of its supporters under 30.

On the other hand is the often unfocused but generally inclusive and progressive activism of Europe’s occupied squares. This too shares many of the characteristics I have just noted – above all, young, internet-driven and unemployed. That one of these political drivers – and certainly the one with an ethical core – comes (at least in part) to Europe from North Africa is fascinating and very striking; and I suspect very important.

Obviously, as I write, the future of the whole MENA region is unclear. One or two countries, like Morocco, seem to have managed the intense destabilization of youth discontent with judicious reforms. Others have seen full-blown revolutions, whether stifled, still in progress, unfinished or scarcely begun. Not all the results will be benign, of course, but there is an extraordinary explosion of energy, a sense across the region that the future is not beyond the power of this generation of Arabs and Amazigh to change; that passivity is no longer an honourable option.

And this takes us right back to the North African Elevator and the cascade of memes pumping northwards across the Mediterranean. This moment is pivotal. For the first time in many decades, perhaps centuries, Europe and America are looking at North Africa and the MENA region as a source of moral power. It’s a moment that may prove fleeting – but whether it does or not depends very much on events and processes whose outcomes we cannot yet see, on elections, constitutions and reforms that are still incomplete and in many cases unimagined.

But there’s no point in waiting for the future and reacting to it when it arrives. In the business of cultural relations, we have other fish that we should be frying right now. This change of direction, this reversal of the Elevator, creates a once in a lifetime, indeed once in many centuries, opportunity. For much too long, many (but not all) European cultural institutions have treated the relationship between Europe and North Africa as one of instruction, of demonstrating how things are –

how they can be – done best. There has been a strong sense of cultural hierarchy, which in many quarters still exists. At a meeting recently of North African arts managers, I heard the message clearly iterated: don't tell us what we want, or what we need. Ask us, and listen to the answer: we know more than you do about our needs, our continent, our world.

And this, I think, is the nature of the opportunity. If (as a Moroccan courtier recently said to me) we are witnessing the last act of the post-colonial era, we can look forward to, and help to engineer, a future of much greater cultural equality in the post-post-colonial era – what I might call (in view of the terms I described a moment ago) as *real* cultural relations. Actually, I'm not even sure that this future needs much engineering: we are living in it. The changes that have swept over the public face of a generation of young Arabs and Amazigh in the last year have also washed their European and North American contemporaries. Popular protest is not, of course, an original product of North Africa; but the idiom of popular protest, and above all of youth protest, in the world today, draws more strongly on the social, ethical and political thinking of the MENA region than anything else I can remember.

This is what I want us to hold on to. The strong conviction that we are seeing something new, something that can shift the cultural and ethical balance in important ways. An understanding that contributions to the future of our world don't come only from Europe. That there are new and virile memes on the loose. 'Ex Africa,' as Pliny put it, 'semper aliquid novi.' Or as I might rephrase the old Roman – 'there are more plums coming our way.'

Martin Rose  
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