Democracy and authoritarianism in the Arab world. The evolution of a long debate

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Abstract

The representation of the Arab world as "exceptional" (because of an absence of democracy) when compared with other regions of the world has permeated political science debates. Falling in line with Orientalist and culturalist theses, such interpretations read the region's political evolution as the result of chaos, randomness and external events and view Arab societies as backward and tribal. Over the decades, these readings have become tightly intertwined with studies emphasizing an inevitable clash of civilizations. In this binary contraposition, the Arab world represents an underdeveloped and violent region, largely because of Islam. The interweaving of development and democracy, which started in modernization theory in the 1950s and 1960s, has become even tighter in the era of globalization: Development, especially through the actions and the buzzwords of international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, increasingly became synonymous with democracy. This paper will unpack the debate by focusing on its key elements. The intent is to show how, even as paradigms and the lexicon change, this debate is still anchored in a stereotypical and primordialist view of the entire region.

Keywords: Democracy – Authoritarianism – Arab World – Exceptionalism – Sectarianism

SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. 2. Development "is" democracy. 3. Democratization and the Arab world. 4. "Arab exceptionalism" in retrospect. 5. Upgrading the debate on democratization. 6. Conclusion. A return to primordialism? The 2011 uprisings and the sectarian option.

1. *Introduction*

A map of the world's democracies reveals the Middle East to be an outlier. While many of the countries across the globe that have experienced authoritarianism (for example, in Latin America and Eastern Europe) have undertaken democratization processes, albeit frequently with uncertain outcomes, this has not been the case in the Middle East. Despite the protest movements that have shaken this part of the world since 2011 (the so-called "Arab Spring"), the presence of democracy in the region, at least according to Freedom House or the Bertelsmann Transformation Index[1], has remained problematic. Except for Tunisia, where protests led if not to a situation of full democracy then at least to an effective transition process, and Lebanon, with its controversial consociative system, the area overall remains dominated by authoritarianism[2].

Throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, cultural explanations, such the presence of Islam as an inhibitor of democracy, were adopted to explain the authoritarian resilience[3]. The impossibility of analysing the Middle East within the frame of democratization theory, which gained particular momentum after the the publication of Samuel Huntington's book on the third wave of democratization[4], has caused the region to be labelled as "exceptional" or, more generally, unsuitable for democracy. The narrative of "Arab exceptionalism" has spread largely in academia and politics to foster a certain representation of the Arab world by creating a negative and indelible label that is still in force today.

In the following pages, I argue that this is the result of a combination of two elements: on the one hand, the spread and pervasiveness of a normative and procedural approach to democratization that, grounded in modernization theories, was conceived and described as an irreversible process – a set of mechanism that sooner or later would bring democracy, development and well-being to any latitude; on the other hand, a consequence of the previous argument, the need for democratization processes to be incentivized through appropriate tools. One of the results of this debate is the idea that democracy could be exported. As Nicolas Guilhot argues, the social and political movements promoting democracy and human rights have gradually become weapons in the arsenal of power[5]. He highlights how, especially after the Washington Consensus, these movements

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[1] See the maps and rankings by Freedom House www.freedomhouse.org and the Bertelsmann Transformation Index www.bti-project.org/en/home, among others (last accessed 27.05.2019).

[2] We are well aware of the difficulty of giving a single name to the area and will refer interchangeably to the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa) and the Arab world. Another crucial issue is how to define democracy, an issue that it is not possible to deal with in this paper.

[3] E. Keddourie, *Democracy and Arab political culture*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington D.C., 1992; B. Lewis, *A historical overview*, in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1996, pp. 52-63; B. Lewis, *Islam and liberal democracy*, in *The Atlantic Monthly*, February, 1993.

[4] S. Huntington, *The third wave: Democratization in the late twentieth century*, University of Oklahoma Press, Oklahoma, 1993.

[5] N. Guilhot, *The democracy makers: Human rights and international order*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2005.

have become instruments for international actors and institutions to promote not only democracy and human rights but also, through them, their vision of the world.

As a result, the promotion of democracy and, more generally, of democratization has become a sort of watchword to be "exported" rather than a set of values to be shared and safeguarded. This "crusade" for democracy has received the support of intellectuals, as well as think tanks, research centres and politicians. The construction of the narrative has been crucial to its success and its dissemination around the world. Encouraged by economic globalization, the promotion of democracy (along with good governance and participation) has become one of the main goals of international organizations. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, as well as institutions such as the European Union, in accordance with the principle of conditionality, provide funds to developing countries in exchange for promoting democracy[6]. This had important consequences for the Middle East in terms of both representation and the political strategies that have been adopted to counter the "Arab exceptionalism".

In this paper, the academic debate surrounding "Arab exceptionalism" within the framework of democratization theory will be reviewed. However, this is not simply a theoretical exercise: It can tell us something relevant not only about the democratization processes per se but also, more generally, about the political mechanisms that have governed contemporary representations of the world. It is a historical and methodological excursus that proposes a consideration of the history of intellectual ideas and the impact of these ideas on the analysis (and representation) of a region and its population.

2. *Development "is" democracy*

The debate over the democratization – or, rather, the "non-democratization" – of the Middle East started in the aftermath of World War II within the frame of modernization theory. At the time, the social sciences were swept up by a wind of change whose goal was to build up universal knowledge capable of explaining certain areas and the social and political phenomena associated with them. The emergence of area studies played a significant role in giving credit to and strengthening the normative dimension of modernization theories. Modernity and the process it led to (i.e. modernization) took the form of a predefined trajectory that would transform traditional societies into modern societies. In this regard, structural theories, including the theories of modernization, have been useful in clearly identifying this process. In fact, they have focused on the institutional, economic, political, social and cultural structures that would permit the shift from tradition to modernity, from underdevelopment to development and from authoritarianism (identified with poverty and backwardness) to democracy

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[6] S. Carapico, *Foreign aid for promoting democracy in the Arab world*, in *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 3, 2002, pp. 379-395.

(identified with high levels of development and modernity). The more such structures were present within a given context, the greater the possibility was for that context to reach modernity. According to this paradigm, in the study of modernization in the so-called "Third World" countries[7], which embraces theories ranging from sociological and economic to anthropological and psychological approaches, evolutionary and functionalist aspects prevail. In a 1956 article entitled The Take-Off into Self-Sustained Growth, W.W. Rostow lays out a manifesto for the theory of modernization[8]. He compared the development and modernization process in developing countries to an aeroplane taking off: in a way that is gradual and unstoppable. Other theorists of modernization share the same theoretical assumptions: Modernization is the phase of a homogeneous process that, in short, is represented by Americanization or Europeanization. From the beginning, the close connection between social sciences and politics was evident. In fact, Rostow was asked to work as a consultant for the Lyndon B. Johnson administration immediately after the publication of his works.

Post–World War II transformations and the spread of the ideal of liberal democracy worldwide, as well as the paths of decolonization and the processes of people's self-determination, led to a semantic transformation that nonetheless did not change the approach to the study of "other" contexts. Gradually, modernity was associated not only with high levels of economic development but also with increasing rates of democracy. This step is crucial and, as we will see, would have an impact on the development of the theory of democratic transition that, in the vast majority of the cases, consider the prerequisites crucial in leading a country towards democracy.

Among the scholars who started to reflect on this correlation and married a functionalist approach to modernization, Lipset should be mentioned. Lipset dwells on the close correlation between economic development and modernity, the latter understood in the sense of the establishment of a democratic regime: The better a nation works, the greater the chances are of guaranteeing a stable democracy[9]. Lipset demonstrated the association between high economic performance and high levels of democracy by treating democracy, for the first time, as a dependent variable. Despite receiving multiple critiques[10], Lipset's

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[7] The general crisis of the model of modernization in the 1980s led to the collapse of the term Third World, along with the concept of third worldism, and the advent of the notion of developing countries.

[8] W.W. Rostow, *The Take-Off Into Self-Sustained Growth*, in *The Economic Journal*, Vol. 66, No. 261, 1956, pp. 25-48.

[9] S.M. Lipset, *Some social requisites of democracy: economic development and political legitimacy,* in *American Political Science Review,* Vol. 53, No. 1, 1959, pp. 60-105.

[10] For example, Larry Diamond (*Economic Development and Democracy Reconsidered*, in G. Marks, L. Diamond (Eds.), *Re-examining Democracy. Essays in Honour of Seymour Martin Lipset*, Newbury Park, Sage Publications, 1992, pp. 93-139) demonstrates that the correlation between economic development and democracy was weaker in cases where the Human Development Index (HDI), at the same economic level, was used as an indicator of development. A. Przeworski et al. (A. Przeworski, M. Alvarez, J.A. Cheibub, F. Limongi, *What makes*

reflection and, above all, the fact that he substantiates his research with quantitative data, strongly contributed to the development of a normative approach to the study of modernization processes, which turned out to be crucial for studies on democratization.

Other scholars who may also be cited for their structuralist approach have emphasized the importance of social structures to a country's democratic development: Barrington Moore, whose works examine the role of the middle class in the construction of the modern era[11]; Almond and Verba, who focused on the role political culture and social capital play as agents of democratization[12]; and Putnam, who linked the performance of a country's institutions to the population's civic culture[13]. The limits of applying structural theories to modernization lie in their often deterministic approach, which happens when they deny the role that the actors – whether groups or individuals – may play in influencing a country's development. The strongly deterministic approach and the attention on some predefined characteristics cannot by themselves explain the trajectory of a country's development. A state can have a very high level of education but still be utterly repressive or even have a considerable economic capacity that concentrates wealth in the hands of a few individuals. For example, this is the case of Saudi Arabia ad some GCC countries. Moreover, structuralist theories do not explain phenomena in a dynamic manner but offer static explanations applicable to a particular period of time.

Strong opposition to the modernization theories came in the form of the *dependencia* theory, the intellectual product of non-mainstream Latin American economists who analysed the causes of poverty and underdevelopment in their part of the world. The goal was to find a solution in order to alleviate the region's dependence on the outside world. The key point of these scholars' argument was a refusal of the assumption that foreign investments and free trade would enable countries to maximize their comparative advantage, which, in turn, would ensure development. In a context in which the theories of modernization became pervasive, the *dependencia* theory, which suggested adopting strategies of substituting imports that would have stimulated national industries, giving the state a primary role in the economy and decreasing the importance of external dependence, strongly contrasted with this approach, providing an alternative vision.

The publication and dissemination of some works that had widespread reverberations even outside the academic world contributed to spreading

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democracies endure?, in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 7, No. 1, January 1996, pp. 40-41) argue that poverty is a trap and that "poor democracies" (i.e. those with an average monthly income of less than $1,000 per capita) have low chances of survival. In addition, there was much discussion about the minimum threshold for a country to be on the path towards modernity.

[11] B. Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1966.

[12] G.A. Almond, S. Verba, *The civic culture*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1963.

[13] R.D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993.

modernization theories to the study of the Middle East. A landmark was the works of Gibb and Bowen, who in 1950 published the first volume of Islamic Society and the West, commissioned by the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London (the second volume would be published in 1957)[14]. The work was an interdisciplinary survey of the impact of the West on the Arab world and on Turkey since the 1800s. The aim was to offer an organic study of the life of Muslim societies. The overall project fell within the scope of the modernization school and was conceived as a regional history written from a Western perspective. The work was divided into three periods: 1) an analysis of the institutions of Islamic society in the 18th century before Western influence; 2) an examination of the impact of the West since 1800; and 3) an analysis of the current situation and the forces involved. The Arab world was not presented as a subject of historical, political or cultural activity but as an appendix to the West.

Another excellent example is Lerner's 1958 book, The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East, which offers an all-encompassing explanation based on quantitative data and was, therefore, considered much more reliable and objective than other studies on the Middle East at the time[15]. In particular, Lerner denounced the Nasserist policies that, according to him, would have rejected progress by promoting a climate of violence and inciting a return to power for Islam and terrorism. Lerner's vision promoted a narrative of opposition between discrete worlds and fuelled the contrast between "us" and "them" by claiming that only by promoting "their" modernization could they become like "us".

This study, as well as the aforementioned analysis by Gibb and Bowen, influenced subsequent works in this area and contributed to the development of the American Orientalist school. Even if some European scholars, in particular sociologists and ethnographers (also thanks to collaborations with the universities of Cairo and Beirut), produced a series of studies on the social evolution of the contemporary Middle East in contrast with the aforementioned perspectives[16], these studies were not so widely circulated and had little impact at the time[17].

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[14] H. Gibb, H. Bowen, *Islamic society and the West: a study of the impact of Western civilization on Moslem culture in the Near East*, Oxford University Press, London, 1950.

[15] D. Lerner, *The passing of traditional society: Modernizing the Middle East*, The Free Press, Glencoe, 1958.

[16] Among others, see E. Douttè, *Magie et religion dans l'Afrique du nord*, Jourdan, Algiers, 1908 and R. Montagne, *La vie sociale et la vie politique du Berbères*, Editions du comité de l'Afrique française, Paris, 1931.

[17] During the same period, economic and historical-political studies by local scholars such as Albert Hourani (Lebanon), Charles Issawi (Egypt) and George Antonius (Lebanon/Egypt) were published and became important reference points for scholars in later years. See G. Antonius, *The Arab awakening. The Story of the Arab National Movement*, Putman, New York, 1946; A. Hourani, *Syria and Lebanon. A political essay*, Oxford University Press, London, New York, Toronto, 1946; C. Issawi, *Egypt: an economic and social analysis*, Oxford University Press, London, 1947.

3. *Democratization and the Arab world*

In the mid-1970s, a number of countries, including some developing countries, started to undertake processes that gradually put them on the path towards democracy. Samuel Huntington refers to these processes as "waves" of democratization[18]. At the time, democracy was imagined, conceived and "practised" as an immanent and irreversible process; it became a global discourse that, sooner or later, would spread to every latitude[19]. Democratization and the study of the processes behind it were so pervasive that a "transitology" school emerged during the 1990s[20]. The new paradigm foresaw fixed stages, very similar to those the theory of modernization had proposed. A first phase of opening (political liberalization) would be followed by a phase of regime change and, finally, a phase of democratic consolidation. The more facilitating conditions or prerequisites a country had, such as the presence of political and economic liberalization and a strong civil society, the greater its chances of democratizing were. However, the paradigm appeared to be too static and deterministic, and it was soon evident how the opening processes could lead to different outcomes. Some countries fully achieved democracy; other countries followed a path leading them to a sort of grey area between democracy and authoritarianism. This led some authors to talk about the end of the 1990s as a period characterized by the growth of "illiberal democracies"[21] or "hybrid regimes"[22]. Furthermore, for states that had not achieved full democracy or for those where the process had ended, the process did not appear to be linear. In many of these, in fact, democracy was ineffective, and phenomena such as electoral manipulation, fraud, military presence and a lack of political institutions emerged[23]. Gills and Rocamora, for example, argue that the democracies formed in the 1980s could be defined as "low intensity democracies": democracies with institutional and economic instability, subject to strong international pressure and, ultimately, with little chance of continuing as such[24].

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[18] S.P. Huntington, *The third wave: Democratization in the late twentieth century*. Vol. 4. University of Oklahoma Press, Oklahoma, 1993.

[19] J. Johansson, *Globalisation and democracy: an overlooked dimension*, in O. Elgstrom and G. Hyden (Eds.), *Development and democracy: What we learned and how?,* Routledge, London, 2012.

[20] T. L. Karl, P. Schmitter, *What democracy is...and is not,* in *Journal of Democracy,* Vol. 2, No. 3, 1991, pp. 3-16; B. Geddes, *What do we know about democratization after twenty years?,* in *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 2, 1999, pp. 115–144.

[21] F. Zakaria, *The Rise of Illiberal Democracy*, in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 6, 1997, pp. 22-43.

[22] L. Diamond, *Thinking About Hybrid Regimes*, in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2002, pp. 21-35.

[23] L. Diamond, M.F. Plattner, A. Schedler, *Introduction*, in A. Schedler, L. Diamond, M.F. Plattner (Eds.), *The Self-Restraining State. Power and Accountability in New Democracies*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, 1999, pp. 1-12.

[24] B. Gills, J. Rocamora, *Low intensity democracy,* in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1992, pp. 501-523.

While the global character of the democratization processes, the so-called attitude of "democracy-spotting"[25] and the pervasiveness of the transitological school in academic debate pushed scholars to define it as a "paradogm"[26] and of the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium as a "demo-crazy era", although the Middle East seemed to be an exception to the rule. In this region, in fact, the spread of this debate coincided with a period of limited political reform. In 1989, the first parliamentary elections since the 1950s were organized in Jordan; in Yemen, this happened in 1993. In 1990, the Syrian parliament was expanded to include 60 seats for "independent" candidates, and Saudi Arabia established an appointed consultative council. In Algeria, the one-time single-party regime lifted restrictions on political parties and permitted competitive local elections in 1990. In 1991 there were free and fair legislative elections but the second round of the latter was then suspended as the military took over in January 1992. In 1992 Lebanon saw its first parliamentary elections since the civil war and in 1996, Kuwait held its first elections in a decade[27]. In 1997, there was a change in government in Morocco. These openings, however, involved only some of the Arab countries, and a more comprehensive examination shows how the processes that were started were often only façade procedures that did not undermine the status quo of the ruling elites. Moreover, even where attempts to open up seemed real, as in Tunisia, the authoritarian tracks never ceased to be trodden[28].

These openings and the consequent closures were the pretext for a significant revival of primordialist approaches, which had a major impact not only on the representation of the Middle East and on the development of a certain narrative but also on the West's political and economic strategies towards the region. As for the narratives, there was the birth of a second generation of Orientalists who, led by anthropologist Ernest Gellner, placed the weakness of the Arab state at the core of their analysis. For Gellner, the Arab-Muslim world had no hope of attaining democracy if it failed to detach itself from its traditions. In his argument, the scholar started from the assumption that civil society (as conceived in Western systems) does not exist in Muslim countries and that society in these countries

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[25] S. Levitsky, L.A. Way, *The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism*, in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2002, pp. 51-65.

[26] F. Cavatorta, *The convergence of governance. Upgrading authoritarianism in the Arab world and downgrading democracy elsewhere?*, in *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2010, pp. 217-232; M. Valbjørn, *Upgrading Post-democratization Studies: Examining a Re-politicized Arab World in a Transition to Somewhere*, in *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2012, pp. 25–35.

[27] T. Niblock, E. Murphy (eds.), *Economic and Political Liberalization in the Middle East*, British Academy, London, 1990; I. Harik, D. Sullivan (eds.), *Privatization and Liberalization in the Middle East*, University Indiana Press, Bloomington, IN, 1992; A. Richards, J. Waterbury, *A Political Economy of the Middle East*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1996.

[28] S.A. Cook, *The right way to promote Arab reform*, in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 2, 2005, pp. 91-102.

was destined to chaos and disorder – in short, to backwardness and the perpetual absence of democracy – because of its cronyism[29].

Gellner's studies, along with those of Huntington about the clash of civilizations[30] and of Pryce-Jones, conveyed the idea that in Islamic countries, especially those in the Middle East, the prospects for democratic development are limited. In his 1989 book, *The Closed Circle*, Pryce-Jones states that Arabs' immobility forces them to remain in a closed circle of cultural, religious and tribal traditions[31]. At the time, studies on the Middle East focused more on geopolitics or regional conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the Lebanese civil war that, according this neo-Orientalist view, were the natural outcome of a region predisposed to violence.

More broadly, these studies contributed to spreading the idea of Arab exceptionalism. According to them, it served no purpose to understand state and regional dynamics because such knowledge would not help to understand a region destined for backwardness and authoritarianism. This is certainly due to the fact that, for decades, the study of the area continued to provide interpretations related to Western paradigms (in particular regarding modernization, as discussed above) and Orientalist theories. Orientalists regarded the Islamic world as a cultural unity that they alone could decipher. As a consequence, specific aspects of the Middle East were studied. Often, they were abstracted from the regional context (relations within the villages, commerce, religion, the army, etc.), and the analysis was done without taking the State or the economic sphere into account and without analytically problematizing the theoretical aspects.

4. *"Arab exceptionalism" in retrospect*

"Arab exceptionalism" is inextricably linked to the development of area studies. The fact that the Orientalist vision became the lens used most often to study and read the dynamics of the area, especially after the end of World War II, played a decisive role. This attitude is linked to another element, namely the increasing weight of the United States and American academia in the study of the Middle East. US involvement in World War I helped in co-opting area specialists in various disciplines; the aim was to create ad hoc programmes in various American universities that included courses on the Middle East and its languages. Despite the joint efforts of the academic world and the government, however, Robert Hall wrote shortly after World War II that «the Near East is completely forgotten and there are only a few scholars who know this area thoroughly, except in the field of linguistic studies. Princeton University has plans and resources to

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[29] E. Gellner, *Conditions of liberty: civil society and its rivals*, Penguin Books, London, 1996, p. 26.

[30] S.P. Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996.

[31] D. Pryce-Jones, *The closed circle: an interpretations of the Arabs*, Harper and Row, New York, 1989, p. 406.

fill this gap»[32]. A few months later, the first programme in Near Eastern Studies was created at Princeton University. Around the same time, two other important events contributed to the evolution of Middle Eastern Studies in the United States: the founding of the Middle East Institute in 1946 and the publication of the first issue of its research dissemination medium, the Middle East Journal, in 1947[33].

In the 1950s and 1960s, the number of centres that directly or indirectly dealt with the Middle East in a systematic way gradually increased. But not even the birth of the state of Israel or the subsequent Arab–Israeli conflicts led to the creation of associations and institutes until about 20 years after the Middle East Institute was founded.

An important moment for Middle Eastern Studies came in 1967, when the Middle Eastern Studies Association (MESA) was founded in the United States with the support of the Ford Foundation and in close collaboration with the Jewish lobby and American intelligence services[34]. With the birth of MESA, some American scholars with specific training in the Arab world began to reflect on the fact that the major Middle East scholars in the United States did not come from the region and did not "speak for the region". First in the shadows and then more explicitly through the establishment of the Association of Arab-American University Graduates, these scholars sharply contrasted with the ideological power of MESA. Among others, it is worth remembering that Edward Said, along with Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, co-founded the Institute of Arab Studies and that he subsequently edited the Arab Studies Quarterly. In 1971, in response to the Orientalist paradigm[35], a group of young scholars and activists created the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), which would periodically publish MERIP reports. However, while Middle Eastern Studies were becoming more and more politicized, the United States had a remarkable appeal for foreign students – in particular, those from the Middle East. One reason was certainly the many opportunities to obtain grants and scholarships, but another reason was the American programmes' less rigorous approach. Unlike many of their European counterparts, the US programmes were not rooted in an Orientalist approach; in addition, they did not require that ancient languages be studied and offered greater freedom for individual research.

It should also be emphasized that, in general, Middle Eastern Studies in the United States have benefitted greatly from funding by the most prominent American oil companies, which needed experts to better understand regional

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[32] R. Hall, *Area Studies: with special reference to their implication for research in the Social Science*, Social Science Research Council Pamphlet 3, May 1949, p. 17. Hall's words are from May 1947 but were only printed in 1949.

[33] See the MESA website www.mei.edu/about (last accessed 2.05.2019).

[34] R.B. Winder, *Four Decades of Middle Eastern Study*, in *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 1, Winter 1987, pp. 40-63.

[35] Among others, besides the aforementioned Orientalism of Said, we note the important work of the Moroccan intellectual I.A. Laroui, *La crise des intellectuels arabes: traditionalisme ou historicisme?* (Maspero, Paris, 1974), who wrote about Paris as a destination for exiled Arabs in the post-colonial era.

dynamics. In this respect, the most demanding was the former Arabian-American Oil Company (ARAMCO). It was also the most generous in providing loans and even required travel to the Middle East to learn the languages spoken in the region.

Towards the end of the 1980s, studies on the Middle East became an area heavily contaminated by politics – to a much greater extent than ever before. Having questioned the Orientalist paradigm, above all thanks to the publication of Edward Said's Orientalism in 1978[36], other primordial approaches emerged, such as the culturalist paradigm, which has its roots in the theories of modernization. It is interesting to note that the Orientalist discourse has changed its lexicon over time by abandoning the description of "other" contexts in racist terms and citing "cultural" reasons to justify the West's supremacy over the East. In an essay that is based on an analysis of political culture applied to the Arab world and criticizes the approach, Lisa Anderson states that the spread of the concept of democracy and its alleged superiority has created a vicious circle, according to which if a state and its citizens do not strive to pursue democratic ends they are considered obtuse or perverse. From this point of view, the impossibility (or inability) of populations, anywhere in the world, to establish and maintain a democratic system of government is explained by forms of disability or immaturity in the population itself[37].

It was precisely on the basis of culturalist arguments that the politicization of Middle Eastern Studies produced an alliance between science and political decision making: The arguments of Huntington, Lewis and Halpern[38], among others, fuelled the thesis of "exporting democracy" that took root in the 1980s, a period in which the Reagan administration started its "crusade for democracy"[39]. This campaign culminated in the country's direct intervention in Iraq in 1991 with Operation Desert Storm[40]. American foreign policy has become intertwined with economic neoliberalism, which, especially since the 2003 invasion of Afghanistan, makes use of weapons and economic dependence to "export"

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[36] E. Said, *Orientalism*, Phanteon Books, New York, 1978.

[37] L. Anderson, *Democracy in the Arab world: a critique of the Political Cultural approach"*, in R. Brynen, B. Korany, P. Noble (Eds.), *Political liberalisation and democratisation in the Arab world,* Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder and London, 1995, p. 77.

[38] As Halpern points out, there were «scarcely a handful of books in any language that analyse the relationship between social, economic, and intellectual forces and contemporary political trends in the countries of the Arab world…». Yet, he continues, «even without these materials to draw on, an essay such as the present one must be attempted. The policy-maker and the concerned public need an analytical foundation for judgment before all the returns are in». Tellingly, however, Halpern also writes that his book «is addressed equally to those whose main concern is the increase of knowledge». See M. Halpern, *The politics of social change in Middle East and North Africa*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1963, x–xi.

[39] B. Gills, J. Rocamora, *Low intensity democracy*, op.cit.

[40] *Ibidem*, p. 505. While the United States had previously supported authoritarian regimes simply because they served to further its own anti-communist goals (especially in Latin America), from this moment on it began to look with great interest at those processes that facilitated the development of new democracies, even if they were weak and unconsolidated.

democracy to the world[41]. However, as Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points speech demonstrates, it is an instrument that is far from new to the American repertoire. According to this view, if democratization in developing countries does not appear to have a positive outcome, it must nevertheless be supported by all possible means, including through the use of weapons and by interfering in a country's economic and financial sectors. The result has been the creation of a dynamics of (above all economic) submission that legitimizes the market's influence in its most invasive capitalist forms, according to a process in which capitalism is equivalent to democracy and democracy is equivalent to capitalism. Ultimately, the new world order creates a sort of new colonialism supported by economic, social and institutional practices[42]: unilateral coercion by governments, promises of an economic nature (from the threat of boycott to the promise of favours) in exchange for the protection of human rights and political performances increasingly oriented towards democratic principles. "Multilateral systems of political conditionality", in the words of Schmitter and Brouwer, that can include or exclude states from a series of international and regional privileges and from being part of regional or international organizations have been instruments of coercion and control used on many occasions over the past 30 years[43].

It is clear that the theories of democratization and of modernization have contributed to (re-)reading and (re-)ordering the relations between "West" and "East". As we have seen, not only have they nourished the academic debate and, therefore, oriented the evolution of studies on the Middle East region, but they also have a significant impact on the development of political strategies targeting this region. As Hinnebusch states, it is undeniable that the post-1960s processes of nationalizing the economy produced a class of state-dependent crony capitalists for contracts, monopolies and other favours completely incapable of fostering development processes by promoting pro-democracy coalitions. At the same time, the dynamics we discussed above reinforced a representation of the region in terms of exceptionalism. In many respects, this representation is attributable to exogenous factors and the development of an asymmetrical and unequal relationship between the West and the Middle East[44].

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[41] Guilhot, *The democracy makers,* op.cit.

[42] B. Gills, J. Rocamora, *Low intensity democracy*, op.cit. p. 503.

[43] P.H. Schmitter, I. Brouwer, *Conceptualising, researching and evaluating democracy promotion and protection*, EUI working paper, SPS n° 99/9, 1999. The European Union also used economic incentives or negative and positive conditionality to "export" democracy. See also S. Qadir, C. Clapham, B. Gills, *Sustainable democracy: formalism vs. substance*, in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 1993, p. 420.

[44] R. Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian persistence, democratization theory and the Middle East: An overview and critique*, in *Democratization*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2006, pp. 373-395.

5. *Upgrading the debate on democratization*

The debate on democratization has contributed to making the Middle East region "exceptional". Between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, the stability of the region's regimes and their resilience amid internal and external pressures produced a methodological and theoretical shift that had major implications for scholars and analysts. One of the most accurate reflections leading to this change within the paradigm of democratic transition, which had already been criticized in a well-known 2002 Carothers article[45], came from Lisa Anderson. In her 2006 article, she questioned why democratization scholars had spent rivers of ink trying to include the Middle East (which did not democratize) in the paradigm of democratization[46]. According to Anderson, this theoretical and methodological frenzy had made scholars lose sight of the real forces that could have led to regime change, thus leading them to neglect the dynamics of society and of governments, as well as the ongoing transformations. In fact, work on institutions and parliaments and in civil societies showed its limitations. The institutions were weak and controlled by strong and top-down apparatuses; the elections were manipulated and served only to enhance the credibility of the leader and to legitimize him; the parliaments were a façade; and the apparent reforms were mirrors for the larks of international donors. «Arab incumbents quickly learned the lesson of what was expected internationally and adopted the 'democracy language'; talking the 'donor talk' became a prerequisite for political rent-seeking»[47]. A segment of the Middle Eastern population viewed democracy as a new and inevitable Western imposition.

This awareness led democratization scholars – and, in particular, political scientists – to reflect on the fact that the regimes resistant to democracy are political and their actions are exquisitely political, and studying such dynamics is much more crucial than studying the lack of a democratization process[48]. If one of the characteristics of the previous interpretations (especially of the Orientalist paradigm) had been to read and represent Arab societies as immovable because authoritarian regimes were themselves immovable, the observation of the institutional mechanisms that develop within an authoritarian regime combined with a structural observation shows how flexible, adaptable and mutable these regimes are. This new awareness led to a methodological earthquake: «Eventually some of the erstwhile students of democratization in the Middle East […] decided it better to ask a different question: not 'Why is there no democracy?' But what

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[45] T. Carothers, *The end of transition paradigm*, in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2002, pp. 5-21.

[46] L. Anderson, *Searching where the light shines: Studying democratization in the Middle East*, in *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 9, 2006, pp. 189-214.

[47] H. Albrecht, O. Schlumberger, *'Waiting for Godot': regime change without democratization in the Middle East,* in *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2004, p. 376.

[48] See Q. Wiktorowicz, *Civil society as social control: state power in Jordan*, in *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 32, 2000, p. 43 and Q. Wiktorowicz, *The Management of Islamic Activism: Salafis, the Muslim Brotherhood and State Power in Jordan*, Albany: State University, New York, 2001.

accounts for the persistence of authoritarianism?»[49]. This question stems from the reflections of democratization scholars who, in the aftermath of the third wave, did not ask why democracy had failed in certain contexts but rather how democracy had managed to survive in others. The attention, as Bellin highlights, should therefore not be so much on the search for the absence of prerequisites – essential elements of the theory of democratization – as on the search for those elements that "foster robust authoritarianism"[50]. The change of approach has unexpected consequences for the academic debate, opening up new paths and reflections. In this "post-democratization" line of enquiry[51], attention has shifted to electoral processes[52], development policies[53], the impact of privatization processes[54] and the manipulation of civil society[55]. This approach examines those political tools that underpin authoritarian Arab regimes. As Hinnebusch points out, (both the political and the economic) liberalization processes promoted in some Arab countries since the 1990s were, in hindsight, a way of replacing the democratization process rather than a step towards reaching it[56]. To this end, political elites have chiefly used economic liberalization, known in Arabic as the *infitah*, to build domestic legitimacy. Such a strategy has enabled them to compromise with (or incorporate) various sections of the population to build and maintain a network of political and economic privileges[57]. The most important theoretical framework to frame discussions around the survival of authoritarian rule in the Arab world is offered in Heydemann's "upgrading Arab authoritarianism", whose core argument is that the ruling elites are able, through selective liberalization, to renew their role and legitimacy in order to stay in power without offering meaningful political change[58]. Heydemann argues that all

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[49] L. Anderson, *Searching where the light shines*, op.cit., p. 200.

[50] E. Bellin, *The robustness of authoritarianism in the Middle East: exceptionalism in comparative perspective,* in *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 36, 2004, pp. 139-57.

[51] M. Valbjørn, A. Bank, *Examining the 'Post' in Post-Democratization: The Future of Middle Eastern Political Rule through Lenses of the Past*, in *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2010, pp. 183-200; A. Teti, *Beyond Lies the Wub: The Challenges of (Post)Democratization*, in *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2012, pp. 5-24.

[52] E. Lust-Okar, *Elections under Authoritarianism: Preliminary Lessons from Jordan*, in *Democratization*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2006, pp. 456-471.

[53] S. Heydemann (Ed.), *Network of privileges in the Middle East. The politics of economic reform revisited*, Palgrave McMillian, New York, 2004.

[54] S.I. Bergh, *Introduction: Researching the effects of neoliberal reforms on local governance in the Southern Mediterranean*, in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2012, pp. 303-321.

[55] F. Cavatorta, V. Durac, *Civil Society and Democratisation in the Arab world: the Dynamics of Activism*, Routledge, London, 2010; R. Di Peri, P. Rivetti (Eds.), *Effetto società civile. Pratiche e retoriche in Iran, Libano, Egitto e Marocco*, Bonanno, Catania, 2010.

[56] R. Hinnebusch, *Liberalization without Democratization in 'Post-populist' Authoritarian States*, in N. Butenschon, U. Davis, M. Hassassian (Eds.), *Citizenship and State in the Middle East*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, New York, 2000, pp. 123-45.

[57] S. Heydemann, *Network of privileges in the Middle East*, op.cit.

[58] S. Heydemann, *Social Pacts and the Persistence of Authoritarianism in the Middle East*, in O. Schlumberger (Ed.), *Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Non-Democratic Regimes,* Stanford University Press, Stanford, pp. 21-38.

the liberal reforms undertaken serve the purpose of strengthening the regime and do not generate the dynamics one would expect: Economic liberalization fails to produce a democracy-demanding bourgeoisie; civil society activism strengthens authoritarian dynamics; and political liberalization does not produce a snowballing effect.

6. *Conclusion. A return to primordialism? The 2011 uprisings and the sectarian option*

As we have seen, the attempt to explain the Middle East has produced, over the course of the 20th century, results that are not very useful to identifying both the real socio-political and the international dynamics that were developing in the various countries of the region. As Bill writes, «American analysts continue to explore their political empty quarter in search of the oases of knowledge necessary to explain political development in the Middle East. Eventually, these analysts all seem to end up at the same old watering holes, believing they have discovered new oases and giving them different names each time. In the 1950s and 1960s, the signs at the oases read 'liberal democracy and Westernization'; in the 1960s and 1970s, the search focused on 'political development and political participation'; in the 1970s and 1980s, the jargon was 'legitimacy' and 'the state and society' dichotomy; today, the words on the weather-beaten old signs are 'civil society' and 'democratization.' We have come full circle»[59].

The 2011 uprisings triggered a methodological earthquake that showed, once again, that scholars had been looking "in the wrong place". Years of study on authoritarian resilience had almost completely ignored the dynamics of subaltern actors who had gradually acquired weight within the societies. Most purely economic policy analyses that were too focused on rentierism or neo-patrimonialism had also been neglected. An intra-paradigmatic debate developed immediately after the events of 2011[60]. While scholars of the democratic transition school have talked about failed transitions[61], advocates of authoritarian resilience have rather sought to explain 2011 as a return to authoritarianism[62]. In any case, the revolts have exposed the weakness and inadequacy of both paradigms, which have proved too rigid to grasp those changes and the complexity of the facts leading to the revolts. As Paola Rivetti states, «This is the case not only because a different set of marginal actors—others than the 'usual

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[59] J.A. Bill. *The study of Middle East politics, 1946–1996: a stocktaking,* in *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 50, No. 4, 1996, p. 501.

[60] In particular, see: M. Pace, F. Cavatorta, *The Arab uprisings in theoretical perspective–an introduction,* in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2012, pp. 125-138 and F. Volpi, *Explaining (and re-explaining) political change in the Middle East during the Arab Spring: trajectories of democratization and of authoritarianism in the Maghreb,* in *Democratization*, Vol. 20, No. 6, 2013, pp. 969-990.

[61] N. Brown, *Egypt's Failed Transition*, in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 24, No. 4, 2013, pp. 45-58.

[62] S. Heydemann, R. Leenders, *Authoritarian Learning and Authoritarian Resilience: Regime Responses to the Arab Awakening*, in *Globalizations*, Vol. 8, No. 5, 2011, pp. 647-653.

middle-class suspects' of mainstream democratisation theories—have been empowered as the protagonists of the protests, but also because contentious state–society relations have been developing differently from the template provided by orthodox theories of transitions to democracy»[63].

By contrast, the outcomes of the revolts have shown the non-linearity of the processes in progress: The war in Syria and Yemen, the authoritarian return to Egypt, the Jordanian immobility and the "normalization" of protests in Morocco have shown how dynamics and processes do not have a foregone conclusion. This non-linear trend of the revolts and their uncertain outcome, the rise to power of Islamist parties and the appearance of the "Islamic State" have promoted the emergence of analyses that emphasize the most negative and dramatic aspects of how regional policy and geopolitics evolve and are often superficial writings serving a certain political vision. In addition, this approach ignored a number of important transformations that have been direct consequences of the revolts: among others, the renewed politicization of the Arab world, "street politics", the "non-movements" and other subjects (such as trade unions) that previous analyses, which had focused too much on studying the institutional mechanisms guaranteeing the longevity of regional regimes, largely overlooked[64].

So, how to weave the threads of a fabric that has already been woven for about a century? Did the 2011 uprisings produce new watchwords, like those that Bill mentions? Today, the mantra seems to be one of sectarianism. The lens of sectarianism, beyond the enthusiasm for the revolutionary wave, seems to have assumed a crucial role in analyses of the intra-state and regional dynamics[65]. This is demonstrated by the flourishing of studies and analyses that place the sectarian version at the centre as an explanatory lens for Middle Eastern relations[66].

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[63] P. Rivetti, *Continuity and change before and after the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco: Regime reconfiguration and policymaking in North Africa*, in *The British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2015, p. 3.

[64] A. Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2010 as well as E. Lust, *Why Now? Micro Transitions and the Arab Uprisings*, in *The Monkeycage*, 24 October 2011, available at http://goo.gl/qi7R4v (last accessed 2.05.2019). See also J. Chalcraft, *Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2016; M. El-Ghobashy, *Politics by Other Means: In Egypt, Street Protests Set the Agenda*, in *Boston Review*, November/December 2011, pp. 39-44; A. M. Agathangelou, N. Soguk, *Rocking the Kasbah: Insurrectional Politics, the 'Arab Streets' and Global Revolution in the 21st Century*, in *Globalizations*, Vol. 8, No. 5, 2011, pp. 551-558 and M. Valbjørn, *Upgrading post-democratization studies*, op.cit.

[65] R. Di Peri, *Il Medio Oriente oggi. Narrative, contro-narrative, rappresentazioni,* in *Passato e Presente*, Vol. 98, No. 2, 2016, pp. 74-89.

[66] K. Dalacoura, *The Arab Uprisings Two Years On: Ideology, Sectarianism and the Changing Balance of Power in the Middle East*, in *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2013, pp. 75-89; R. Visser, *The Western Imposition of Sectarianism on Iraqi Politics*, in *The Arab Studies Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 2/1, 2008, pp. 83-99; M. Darwich, T. Fakhoury, *Casting the Other as an existential threat: The securitisation of sectarianism in the international relations of the Syria crisis*, in *Global Discourse*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 2017, pp. 712-732; S. Heydemann, E. Chace-Donahue, *Sovereignty Versus Sectarianism: Contested Norms and the Logic of Regional Conflict in the Greater Levant*, in *The Levant*, Vol. 15, No. 60, 2018, pp. 16-47; F. Haddad, *'Sectarianism' and Its Discontents in*

Reading the Middle East in sectarian terms favours the religious dimension (clash between Shiites and Sunnis) and the "tribal" aspects of relations between states. This has had and continues to have important repercussions. First of all, because the attention on the sectarian dimension obscures other interpretative lenses for the study and representation of the Middle East, which has the effect of feeding a line of studies seeking to explain all the (political and social) phenomena present in the region in an all-encompassing way. Secondly, because the emphasis on sectarian groups essentializes social and political relations and gives us back a region (and states) in which the political dimension appears to be irrelevant. Finally, because it shifted attention to much more appealing dynamics from the academic and international research institutes' point of view and obscured the interesting state dynamics that have developed – especially since 2011.

Are we facing a new theoretical shift that explains little or nothing of the real dynamics in play in the countries in the region? Paradigms help to interpret and study reality; however, as we have seen, they become problematic when they take on a normative dimension and are tied to politics. The sectarianization of the Middle East risks once again tarnishing the most profitable lines of study (such as subaltern studies) by proposing a primordialist and essentialist reading that fuels a sterile debate at an academic and political level.

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the Study of the Middle East, in *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 71, No. 3, 2017, pp. 363-382; N. Hashemi, D. Postel, *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017; M. Valbjørn, R. Hinnebusch, *Exploring the Nexus between Sectarianism and Regime Formation in a New Middle East: Theoretical Points of Departure*, in *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism,* Vol. 19, No. 1, 2019, pp. 2-22.

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