Arab Spring, American Autumn

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The "Autumn" of America designates a way to understand the period which follows the so-called “American century,” namely that which comes after the particular form of U.S. hegemony that was operative between WWII and the late cold war within which the economic and geopolitical predominance of the U.S. was confused with the global popularity of its cultural products. The logics of the American century were powerful; indeed they circumscribed the ways in which American studies understood the relationship of American culture to geopolitics and material history. The Autumn of America (a phrase I adapt from Giovanni Arrighi) is an expression of the sense that the massive financialization of the American economy is a sign of its waning, and that a shift in the meanings of “America” and “American culture” globally is at hand, one which forces us to give a new account for the meanings of “America” (as fragment, as circulating agent of capitalist modernity, etc.) in the 21st century. However, American culture and American cultural forms (from Hollywood formulas to the dynamic spaces of social networking media) are still massively popular, including in the Middle East and North Africa. The so-called “Arab spring” was productive in changing many mainstream American attitudes toward the Arab world, forcing many to revise the previous sense of the Arab world as stuck in centuries of history (Orientalism) and offering an opening to a sense of the Arab world as young, vibrant, and multivalent. Still, many of those who championed the Tahrir uprisings, and those in Tunisia and elsewhere, gave too much centrality to the role of American forms (especially social networking media) in their accounts of the “Arab spring.” Against these accounts, and against prevailing notions in both literary studies and cultural diplomacy, I argue that as American cultural products and cultural forms are taken up by disparate publics, the new meanings that accrue to them are not to be understood as evidence of U.S. cultural hegemony, nor do they prove the persistence of the American century. Rather the innovative ways in which Egyptians and Moroccans use U.S. cultural forms for local projects demonstrates what the end of the American century looks like and offers an energized means by which to interpret North African and Middle Eastern literature and cultural production in the digital age. The paper draws on my research during 2011 in Cairo and Casablanca, two very different situations, to be sure, though linked in multiple ways.