“A New MENA?”: Re-inventing the American “Democratization” project in the Arab world’s monumental squares

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My paper will develop ideas that I started to explore in the context of my forthcoming monograph Monumental Space in the Post-Imperial Novel: An Interdisciplinary Study and in my new research on the ways in which post-imperial Europe and neo-imperial America are not only shaping the “Arab Spring” but also becoming deeply impacted by the ongoing re-inventions of the nation and reconfigurations of “democratization” in the Middle-East and North Africa. My work views imperial geographies as contested spaces, particularly disrupted by the dynamics of political performance in monumental squares, from tactical everyday life practices to organized protests. This calls for not only comparison but also the need for questioning disciplinary and political borders as the implications of popular uprisings against hegemonic national and international policies are reconsidered at the intersection of political geography, performativity, identity politics, and monumental iconography/iconoclasm, from social movements in the last four decades in America (anti-war, black-freedom struggle, and women’s rights) to the rise of pro-democracy movements across the Arab world in the last two decades (for instance, Mohamed Bouazizi’s (2011) and Norman Morrison’s (1965) immolations; the throwing of shoes at emblems of hegemonic power by Egyptian protesters in Tahrir Square and Muntadhar al-Zaidi in Baghdad’s Green Zone; Free Riders in the US in the 1960s and Arab protesters in 2011, etc). The aim is to show how the “Arab Spring” is both a radical revisioning of the “democratization” discourse associated with the US foreign policy approach to the “New Middle East” and an indirect engagement with the successive democratic reforms brought about by people power in a corporate and conservative America. From this perspective, I will also briefly look at the intersecting roles of literature and the media in anticipating and representing popular uprisings in the Arab world’s squares while enabling the transcultural negotiation of democracy as process and performance across and beyond geopolitical borders.