“Measuring the “great distance from our shores”: New Western Geographic Imaginaries of the Middle East/North Africa”

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In the wake of the Arab revolutions, Western media, politicians, and academics have employed interpretive trajectories that are steeped in specific U.S. and European historical memories and spatial and temporal concepts. In his May 19, 2011 address, for example, President Obama invoked the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights struggle, while German media drew parallels to the European revolutions of 1848 and 1989. Furthermore, attempting to spatially and politically reassess the new global realities and relations, German media defined North Africa as Europe’s “new south,” in need of a “new deal” and a commitment to a “reconstruction South” (a reference to the post-1989 German “reconstruction East”). While the Arab revolutions have prompted “new geographic imaginaries” in the West, these new orientations find their expression in the language and the visuals of distinct national projects and familiar geographical markers and historical models. As a consequence, each new national and regional imaginary recalibrates its own social identities and historical self-definitions.

Using selected U.S. and European media representations, this paper argues that the interpretation of social transformations in the Middle East/North Africa - of “shifting borders” - comes with divergent, ideologically packed redrawings of the global map and revisions of national histories.

How can transnational American Studies investigate the resulting narratives in their global dimensions without falling back on the nation, or the region, as default category? How can a related field - maritime studies - challenge geopolitical claims to the Mediterranean as “mare nostrum”? What kind of work does a particular binary framing of these narratives perform, and with what consequences? Yet also: how can a comparative study of historical contexts that span MENA, the U.S., and Europe create unexpected spaces of possibility; of human connections and of solidarity between social actors who experienced injustice and reclaim their dignity?