After the American Century: The Ends of U.S. Culture in the Middle East

Brian T. Edwards
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Brian T. Edwards' book boasts of an insightful interdisciplinary approach that draws upon his expertise in anthropology, literary and cultural studies, American studies, and Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) studies. His approach and overall argument can benefit both the specialists in these disciplines and the non-academic audience interested in the MENA region's contemporary cultural history and connection to the United States' international cultural politics. Edwards introduces two principal concepts to formulate his arguments: the "ends of circulation" and "jumping publics." In his view, the former describes "new contexts for American texts" and the latter explicates "the way culture moves through the world in the digital age" (p. 27).

He offers four reasons why the circulation of cultural products "across borders and publics" is important to the contemporary American audience.

First, "The U.S. Department of State has invested time and funding in propagating the circulation of American culture." Second, "American media venues have a continuing interest in this topic, whether in the coverage of the Egyptian revolution or in the popular fascination with books such as *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) that depict Americans or American culture displaced in the Middle East." Third, many "popular and influential writers," including "the developmentalist Daniel Lerner in the 1950s to Thomas Friedman in the 1990s and 2000s to media studies journalist Clay Shirky, assume a technocentric or cyberutopian determinism," and thus consider "access to new technologies and media" and "modernization and freedom" inevitably intertwined. And fourth, "In the fields of American literary studies and comparative literature, the ways in which the American culture and literature are taken up around the world puts pressure on the ways of doing things in those disciplines" (p. 16).

Additionally, the author argues that American cultural forms "jump publics" internationally by developing "new sets of meanings that adhere to and build on their authors' use of them," while serving as a model for "a range of local meanings and new forms." This occurs in such a way that although there "seems to be familiar elements in the new uses of these forms," the American audience can no longer understand them (p. 35).

Chapter 1, "After the American Century," lays out the theoretical and methodological grounds for his research. Based on his fieldwork in Tehran, Cairo, and Casablanca, Edwards examines the circulation of American cultural forms these cities and how Iran, Egypt, and Morocco's indigenous cultural energies transform these imports. Taking the concept from Henry Luce's (1898-1967) 1941 article "The American Century," he contends that the "American Century" has ended in the twenty-first century. In the early 1940s, Luce argued that the United States must shoulder an "international responsibility" that matches her economic power (p. 20). Edwards maintains that for decades American cultural forms have been promoted around the world in connection with the "cherished American cultural values of freedom, choice, and independence." He suggests that in recent years, "some in the Middle East and North Africa have levied critiques of the forms' culture of origin even while making use of or adapting the forms themselves," thereby challenging this international hegemonic dominance (p. 20).

In chapter 2, "Jumping Publics," he argues that the works of such contemporary Egyptian writers as Omar Taher, Magdy El Shafee, and Ahmed Alaidy have not only informed "the Egyptian public in the wake of the 'shock' of multimedia and the digital revolution," but have also influenced the devel-

opment of an indigenous dissident discourse, one that had a greater impact on the Egyptian revolution of 2011 than Facebook, Twitter, or American democracy (p. 83). In Edwards' analysis, Taher imagines a reading public that is simultaneously local and international (p. 53) by referencing social media, the FIFA World Cup, and other realities in his fictional works. Also, by examining the local and American influences on El Shafee's *Metro*, Egypt's first graphic novel, Edwards details how it "jumps publics, leaving behind the register familiar to Western readers" (p. 56). And finally, he scrutinizes Alaidy's novel *An Takun ʿAbbās al-ʿAbd* (2003) (*Being Abbas el Abd* [2006]), inspired by Chuck Palahniuk's punk novel *Fight Club* (1996), and locates it within the epistemic paradigms of globalization.

In chapter 3, "Argo Fuck Yourself," a reference to the catchphrase of the movie's American characters, he examines the reception of Ben Affleck's "Argo," which won the 2013 Oscar for Best Picture, and Asghar Farhadi's Iranian film "A Separation," which won the 2012 Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. He argues that their reception and interpretation in Iran and the United States were immensely influenced by the American-Iranian political tension (p. 85). "Argo" recounts the rescue mission of six American diplomats during the Iranian hostage crisis (1979-81). Although its opening provides a historical background to the Iranians' angst against the United States, the majority of the movie represents Iranians as anonymous and voiceless enemies. Therefore, in Edwards' view, the movie underwrites "the continued sanctions against the Iranian state, which have had the gravest consequences on middle- and lower-class Iranians" (p. 92). American reviewers have praised it as a daring portrayal of a critical chapter in Iran-U.S. relations, whereas film critics in Iran have denounced it as anti-Tehran propaganda.

"A Separation" (2011) narrates the travails of an Iranian couple as the wife plans to migrate to the United States while the husband insists on staying in Iran to take care of his elderly father. American critics have interpreted the film as indicative of contemporary Iran's repressive sociopolitical conditions and of young Iranians' desire to emigrate to the United States. However, conservative reviewers in Iran have rejected the film as an unrealistic portrayal of contemporary Iranian society and attribute its international success to its negative representation of Iran. Edwards further looks at the Iranians' reception of "Shrek" (2001) and how its different Persian dubbings and presence in such public places as malls and kindergarten walls points to its end of circulation and acquisition of new meanings (p. 124).

In chapter 4, "Coming Out in Casablanca," Edwards looks at the creative dubbing and montage of "Shrek" in Arabic by an anonymous artist named

"Hamada." The Moroccan "Shrek" uses Arabic songs and local sociocultural references, thus remaking the original movie into a product that would be completely unfamiliar to the original audience. He then concentrates on "Marock" (2005) and its controversial reception in Morocco and positive appraisal in the West. In his view this film, which depicts the life of affluent upper class youth in Casablanca, uses a Hollywood-style romance story, offers a critical picture of Islam, and excludes middle- and lower-class Moroccans. Local film reviewers have criticized it as an insult to Islam and an unrealistic portrayal of life in Casablanca, while Western critics have applauded its courage for representing the realities of modern Moroccan life (p. 157).

Edwards also discusses the works and literary influence of the first openly gay Moroccan short story and novel writer, Abdellah Taia, in both Morocco and the United States to demonstrate that not only his works but also the conception of his sexuality jumps publics. Taia engages western models of sexuality, but detaches himself from the pre-assigned models promoted by his western and Moroccan champions (p. 182).

In the epilgue," the author concentrates on Edward Said's definitions of "Orientalism" in *Orientalism* (1978) and points to its lingering presence in the contemporary world. Edwards argues that first, as an academic field of inquiry and in conjunction with "the military invasion and occupation," not to mention the "massive new resources and interest by government funding agencies and private donors alike available to develop programs and academic departments," Orientalism is now more focused on the MENA region (p. 206). Second, it remains functional as "a style of thought" that distinguishes between "the Orient" and "the Occident" via a binary logic. Contemporary Orientalist distinctions between "the West" and "the Muslim world," or "the Arab world," or "the Middle East," in Edwards' view, "collapse internal differences and diversity in place of an imagined totality" (p. 206). And third, Orientalism as "a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient" is still prevalent (p. 207). Despite the collapse of boundaries and binaries in the digital age, Orientalism continues to exert its influence on the world. However, its "circulation and the anxiety it provokes" distinguishes contemporary American Orientalists from their European predecessors (p. 208). Edwards concludes that critical discussions of cultural circulation can dismantle contemporary American Orientalism and "the debilitating logics of the American century" (p. 218).

After the American Century is a valuable contribution to cultural studies, MENA studies, comparative literary studies, and anthropology. Cultural critics will benefit from Edwards' account of the circulation and jumping publics of cultural forms around the globe. Scholars of MENA studies can read this book

as a model of cultural and historical analysis that addresses both the western and the MENA region's academic and non-academic audiences. Comparatists will find its comprehensive scope yet meticulous attention to the countries and cultures examined, as well as the connections he establishes among them through his concepts of "ends of circulation" and "jumping public," insightful. And anthropologists will find Edwards' fusion of fieldwork and analyses of broader historical and cultural perspectives compelling.

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