**Contact Information:** Dmitry Chernobrov, School of International Relations, University of St Andrews, Arts Building, The Scores, St Andrews KY16 9AX, United Kingdom. Email: dc54@st-andrews.ac.uk

**Title:** The Spring of Western Narcissism: Apsychoanalytic approach to Western reactions to the ‘Arab Spring’

**Abstract**

This paper analyses the evolution of Western perceptions of the Arab Spring through the prism of self/other identities and psychoanalysis. Reconstructing the process, the argument suggests that the West engages in a self-pleasing phantasy of first recognising itself in protesters, then, when faced with irreconcilable difference, developing a no less narcissistic suspicion. The argument is situated in the broader dynamics of self-definition against the unknown, and the illusions and traumas of a meaningful discovery of an Other.

**Keywords:** Arab Spring; granted self; phantasy; identity; narcissism; abjection.

The Spring of Western Narcissism: Apsychoanalytic approach to

Western reactions to the ‘Arab Spring’

Dmitry Chernobrov

**Introduction**

The pure, upon seeing it pure, call it pure (Chinese proverb)

What do you see? What do you make of it? Do you like what you see? What should you do about it? The questions which arise when faced with the unknown call not only for an acknowledgment of presence of the previously unseen (‘something exists’), but call for a quick reaction and assessment. Recent domestic political crises in a number of Arab states, followed by violent or near-violent changes of government, presented such an ‘unknown’ to a Western outsider. These events were described by overgeneralised notions of ‘Arab Spring’, ‘Arab Awakening’ and greeted as an unprecedented rise of people’s civil consciousness.

Faced with the necessity to make quick policy choices, the US and some European states seemed to have interpreted the unknown as something obvious and always known: oppression leads to revolution, and ‘we’ as democracies have inspired ‘them’. Not aiming to explain the unrest itself, the paper suggests an interpretation of this response by presenting the socio-political Western reactions to the Arab Spring from the position of collective identity and psychoanalysis. Equally, this paper does not aim to challenge the validity of claims about the Other (the events of the Arab Spring), and stays away from the area of the political to situate events and reactions in a broader psychoanalytic perspective rather than regard them as rational policy choices. Instead, this is an attempt to unravel the desires and narratives which led the West and Western public to interpret the Arab Spring in this way, overlooking the diversity and complexity of both itself and the revolutions. Starting from wide public acceptance of the broad ‘Arab Spring’ label, as seen in the media, generalisations are a necessary part of the argument as I attempt to reconstruct how the US and Western Europe made sense of the unknown. When I speak about the ‘West’ or ‘Arab Spring’, I refer to the American-European illusion of a democratic West being in flat agreement about the uniform and homogeneous Other, as seen from calls for collective action over Libya to generally coinciding media and public appraisals of the Arab Spring.

The argument will center on the psychoanalytic frame of *phantasy*,which has the purpose of giving *pleasure* to self by reinforcing the self’s positive exclusivity. Phantasy as the ‘particular content of the urges or feelings dominating the mind’ rely on projection: ‘attributing to the other person some of one’s own qualities’ (Klein, 1960, pp. 6-7). I will argue that initially the West engages in a self-pleasing phantasy about the emergence of new democratic states, which are seen as an analogue self. Recognition of similarity is significantly motivated by the idealised self-concept held by the West and by the familiar signifiers and ‘good’/‘bad’ object splits it sees in the Arab Spring. When Islamist movements gained in popularity, the West turned to suspicion of traumatic betrayal, and the other became suspect and different. I will draw on Kristeva’s theory of abjection in self-formation to explain how the West dealt with the Arab Spring phenomena and adjusted its phantasy of self in a way that enabled those in the West to continue to experience pleasure and feel protected from owing any dystonic negative traits. I will suggest that the Western narrative of the Arab Spring largely demonstrated what the West was ready and eager to see due to its *narcissism* (in the Freudian sense of a libidinal connection to self), making it a narrative not so much about ‘them’ (what happens inside the Arab other), but about ‘us’ and how ‘we’ create illusions of recognition or alienation based on self-love.

Ideally, a process of self-realisation and meaningful engagement with the new regimes as other in their own right would signal a *discovery* of complexity beyond ‘good’ or ‘bad’ images held by either phantasy. The actual other is in fact dynamic and diverse: this is evident from Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya’s evolution from suppressed protests to new regimes with complex political environments. In a meaningful discovery of the other a collective self not only answers the question ‘what do you see’, but through a combination of knowledge and self-transformation finds an answer to the questions that follow. The failure of the US and Europe to recognize complexity from the start is provoked by feelings of insecurity in the face of the unknown, fears that force the Western self to engage in phantasy and to defend against anxiety by projecting similarity or difference. Complexity can only be discovered if the Western self works through its anxieties and avoids the various forms that simplifying phantasies can take. Only then will the Western self finally be able to see the actual other behind the one that it has been imagining.

**Idealised Self, Memory and Recognition**

To understand the reactions of the Western self to various others, it is necessary to suggest what constitutes its boundary. The West is a generalised notion, a social and political identity uniting many smaller collective groups that feel a sense of belonging to the larger in-group. This identity is activated against a suitable other: in our case the Arab, Muslim and Rest-generalised other. There are certain elements which allow smaller groups within the Western self to recognize each other as part of the larger unity, as well as agreement in attributing otherness to the Rest. As a marker of distinction and in-group membership, the US and Europe in recent decades have been promoting a narrative centered on democratic discourse, living standards, notions of freedom and human rights. Though a feeling of common belonging is also due to similarities in history, culture, and religious heritage, and indeed other factors and layers can be suggested as well, it is largely the rhetoric of freedom, opportunity, and value of life that since Cold War times became widespread as the membership narrative marking the boundary against the Rest; support of these elements is crucial to demonstrate in-group belonging. Despite not always being put into action, and bordering on self-deception in many cases of realpolitik, the West praises and embraces its record of shared democratic achievements, which the other is claimed to lack.

Being key to this narrative, democracy seems to have no history but ‘just is’: the Western self assumes it has always been democratic or aspiring towards democracy and ignores non-democratic elements of its history. Memory is key in this: we select our history, and the mechanisms of remembering and forgetting help maintain the positivity of one’s collective self which is crucial to its existence: ‘groups organize informal forgetting, reconstruction, and positive distortion of the past in order to defend group values and their own image’ (Paez, *et al*, 1997, p. 161).We are looking at a self-concept that rids itself of its complexity and bad objects (e.g., a history of violence or genocide) and suppresses truths too difficult to bear. Idealisation acts as a protective mechanism against one’s disturbing past and fulfills the desire to lift oneself above others by providing a sense of identity, significance, and feelings of superiority while compensating for inner divisions and self-alienation (Horney, 1950, pp. 21-22). The West needs to view *itself* as ‘good people who generally engage in positively valued behaviors’ (Hafer, *et al*, 2008, p. 29). Such an idealised narrative reflects not so much what self *is*, but what it *wants to be:* distinctly positive,and purified of bad objects.

Because past truths are disturbing, the current Western narrative emphasizes idea over common history or territory. It is not a closed-membership group; instead it claims to offer common, universal values, and a model of governance promoted through cultural and economic interdependence. This is a narrative of possible global unity rather than difference, in contrast to earlier colonial narratives of racial or economic superiority and justified dominance. Combined with a widespread public belief in the advantages of its democratic governance, a global narrative of common values and aspirations draws identities together. ‘They want to be us’ or ‘they need to be us’ in relation to the West-Rest debate is followed by ‘they can become us’ (everyone can be a democracy) and ‘they will eventually become like us’ (i.e. all countries are gradually evolving toward democracy), which is a common perceptual manifestation of *linear* modernisation theory[[1]](#endnote-1).

Given this expectation that the Rest eventually will imitate the West, news of public uprisings against authoritarian regimes in Arab states was easily taken to be a starting point in the ‘upgrade’ which would surely follow. Starting with Tunisia, Hillary Clinton spoke of the protests as the chance for democracy (the rhetoric of ‘chance’ becomes typical in her statements), while European media present protesters as the (true) people of Libya and Syria and stress responsibility to help. In his speech to the UN General Assembly, UK Prime Minister David Cameron characterized the revolution in Libya as ‘people standing up and giving voice to hopes for more open and democratic societies’ (BBC, Sept 22, 2011). The live coverage and discussion pages on Libya created by the BBC (e.g. Libya Fighting, BBC) and other big European and American media were full of sympathy for the protesters/rebels, urgency to help, and hostility or even hate speech towards Gaddafi’s regime.

The Western self, with the boundary of shared values, expects and sees the Arab Other as split in two: the Kleinian ‘bad object’ in the form of the already known old other which continues to unite all traits contrary to Western self (oppressive governance, instability, disrespect for human life, improper treatment of women: these traits did not prevent political dealings with the regimes in the past, but offered a pleasing distinction for the West), and a new collectivity which is to become a ‘good object’. Sharing a common purpose of regime change, and attempting over time to organize a central command, rebels in Libya or Syria may not necessarily feel or recognize themselves as the existing or lasting unity the West anticipates them to be: the West imagines collective identity in them by mixing together Arab ‘springs’, assuming common cause, overlooking fractions fighting for power within the opposition, and choosing to see unity when recognizing full representative power in the Libyan National Council and Syrian National Coalition. The individual is lost and flattened in the collective: actual motivations of each participant in the protests and the degree of their true belief in democratic aspirations imagined by the West to be behind the protests are way below the knowledge level that the West has of this new group. In a way, the West sees what it expects and wants to see (a ‘wave of democratisation’), firm in its belief that it should be so. In the absence of knowledge about a new group, an established identity group easily falls into the trap of assigning qualities to the unknown based on what has been ‘foreseen’ or expected (Todorov, 1999) – and this was the reaction experienced by the Western self. Insecurity in the face of violence stimulates the West to interpret or rather *imagine* the new group by situating the unknown into known frames. As a result, it is ready to see signs of democratic change. The protesters are no longer the unknown, unremembered and therefore troubling, but now become all too familiar.

This is the point where memory replaces knowledge. How many ‘bad’, ‘negative’ Western revolutions do we know? Very few that are worth remembering. By remembering and forgetting, the West has given meaning to revolutions as it imagines it experienced them: a largely heroic epic, promoted in contemporary literature, film, and art, which includes fighting oppression, challenging the illegitimately powerful, and voicing the truth, as well as not being overly religious in the process. This continues the tendency for self-idealisation which entails self-glorification through chosen experiences (Horney, 1950, p. 22): the West selects praiseworthy elements of revolution and glorifies them as a step toward free society and responsible governance, stressing a successful outcome over a traumatic or violent past. Similarly to how it constructed its own democratic narrative, self remembers not what has been (nor does it aim to do so), but rather *how it must have been*. To acknowledge a history of unjustified or disproportionate violence would disturb the positive self: an anti-violence democratic narrative cannot be violent. Projection of the West’s own revolutionary memory and idealised self leads to the glorification of Arab Spring movements: various as they are, they form a similar heroic epic about the generalised protester/rebel, which culminates in media attention focusing exclusively on opposition movements, celebrating ‘The Protester’ as ‘Person of the Year’ (2011), demonizing the repressive old other (Mubarak, Gaddafi, Assad, and their regimes), and adopting such positive labels as ‘Arab *Spring*’ or ‘Arab *Awakening*’.

Consequently, selective memory and the idealised self-concept play a significant role in assessing further revolutionary events. From a Kleinian standpoint, new perceptions are related to previous loving and hating experiences: a friendly or abusive person from one’s past becomes a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ object, which, starting with the ‘good mother’ and ‘rival father’, contributes to the formation of the ego. Resemblance of strangers to either of these objects in their phantasised rather than actual form creates subconscious expectations of similar experience in future interactions (Klein, 1960, p. 6-9). Protesters are reported to be involved in activities close and dear to the West: though through violence, they are expressing *opposition*; they are using *media* and Youtube for an international outreach (especially in Syria and Libya); they *blog*, *tweet* and organize *Facebook* events to unite and *discuss* (Egypt); and they are using signifiers shared by the West: *freedom*, *human* *rights*, and *democracy*. Western collective memory is seduced by these familiar signifiers – labels implying a number of generally agreed upon characteristics, which are recalled when the signifier is used (Žižek, 2008, p. 108). An image of the Arab Spring which operates with labels of ‘opposition’ and ‘freedom’ hits the positive notes of the current Western identity narrative, which is centered around the idea of democracy as a unifying value and regards the existence and activity of opposition as a value in itself (therefore merely being a protester is a necessary and positive element to democratic discourse). This constant comparison confirms the West’s vision of itself by giving it the illusion that the Rest is finally ‘catching up’. The Western self interprets Arab protests and revolutions through the prism of its own selective memory and ‘good’/‘bad’ objects, and such a projection is only strengthened by the assumption of linear development and the desire to see one’s self reproduced.

**Phantasy of ‘Granted Self’**

As the discussion of memory shows, we do not know ourselves: what defines us and our relations to others is only how we imagine ourselves and how we match others to ‘good’ and ‘bad’ objects from our past experiences and phantasies. Comparing the generalised Arab protester with itself, the West seems to construct a *phantasy* *of recognition*. For Klein and Kristeva, who believe that phantasy leads our perception of the external, the process the West goes through when faced with the unknown will involve a degree of projection. Phantasy protects from anxiety, while desire and subconscious drives determine what form the phantasy will take (Sanchez-Pardo, 2003; Millar, 2006).

The form of the mainstream American and Western European phantasy about the Arab Spring, however, is atypical. Imagining the stranger as inferior or wrong is a spontaneous reaction (Todorov, 1999, p. 76). The self’s sense of distinction from *any* other is generally maintained through mechanisms of reaffirmation: the self either dismisses difference as ‘wrong’ and confirms its positive view of itself, or adjusts its narrative to still appear positive. However, the spontaneous reaction of the Western self to a new Arab other is to imagine them ‘like us’. When a new group starts to be associated with a self, this is usually a result of intimate knowledge of each other, a long shared memory (Paez, *et al*, 1997; Gaskell and Wright, 1997), or processes of adaptive mourning, if reconciliation follows trauma (Murer, 2009). Not truly fitting any of these cases, Arab protesters still cross into the inside of the existing boundary of Western values, while profound differences in language, culture, religion, and history, as well as lack of knowledge and absence of shared memories, though potential lines of division are not articulated as such and do not form a new boundary. Both the West and the new group define their own self against a common other (Mubarak, Gaddafi, Assad), and this draws them close: ‘us’ is anything that is not ‘not-us’. As suggested by Freud, the viability of affectionate bonds seems to depend on the availability of other people toward whom it is possible to express aggression (Freud, 1921).

Based on its understanding of the events drawn from selective memory, narrative, and knowledge of the previous hostile other, Western Europe and the US seem to ‘adopt’ the protesters/rebels through a formula: ‘they are defending us’ (with ‘*us*’ being the shared values of Western self-membership) and therefore ‘*they are like us*’. In the constant anxiety surrounding the fluid border of self and other, and especially in cases of facing the unknown, we seek ourselves in others, and an idealised self rid of its own bad objects can only see itself in an idealised other. Availability of signifiers and memories that lead us to treat the unknown as familiar through ‘good’/’bad’ object splits simplifies this process.

Protesters of the Arab Spring are seen to belong to ‘our’ in-group and command immense protective sympathy in a psychological ‘acceptance’ process which I introduce here as the act of ‘*granting self-identity*’ by the Western imagined unity. They appear as an extension of self, an ‘*analogue*’ to self. Being an analogue, a ‘granted self’ does not cause transformation of self-proper (as in cases when two collective groups merge to form a new self): on the contrary, the self-proper confidently reiterates its own feeling of belonging through the pleasure of projecting its self onto others. The *granter* of self-identity (Western self-proper) is aware of its pleasing distinction of being able to ‘grant self’ to others. Despite superiority being a taboo narrative in the West (‘we cannot say it’ - ‘we should not think it’), this difference in agency allows us to identify the position of the ‘granted self’ as dependent, within ‘us’: it is similar enough to provide narcissistic pleasure (phantasy of an analogue to self), but different enough to prevent ‘catastrophic indifferentiation’ (Figlio, 2012, p. 18) as the other lacks the power and authority of self-proper to grant or withdraw the property of sameness.

The phenomenon of granting self-identity to Arab protesters leads to perceptual implications which then transform into policies. Consumed by the illusion of an analogue, the West starts defending the positive qualities of the familiar ‘granted self’: in instances when uncomfortable differences are noted, they are attributed to a different environment rather than to the nature of the group itself: for instance, Syrian rebels are violent in response to governmental massacres. Occasional evidence of unjust violence incompatible with human rights committed by Libyan or Syrian rebels can still be coped with in a process of shared regret (e.g. ‘we’ did injustice in Guantanamo which is not ‘forgotten’), or criminalized and attributed to outliers from the ‘normal’, mainstream group (initial flattened phantasy of homogeneously democratic rebels). Such violence is not unknown, and therefore is not alarming enough to interfere with the phantasy of sameness: there appears to be something similar in the memory of the Western self which only supports the understanding of the linearity of democratic development, appealing to the self-ego in the process (‘we are a step further’), and in a sense, predicting the evolution of the ‘granted self’ from uncontrolled violence to a certain ‘standard’ of behaviour (‘they will still become like us’). Thus, instances of potential difference (them as violent and weak) lead to even closer proximity between Western self and ‘granted self’. Violence is seen as an earlier stage of similar development, rather than serving to emphasize irreconcilable difference. Policy-wise, this process led to a certain credit of trust that Western governments initially expressed toward Arab Spring movements: making allowances (mainly overlooking violence) which they would not have normally made toward an other.

Even initial evidence in Libya and Syria of the ‘granted self’ being weak and unable to win on its own, although ‘self’ should appear strong, is seen as temporary: it is so not because the rebels’ unity, as imagined by the West, is fake (e.g. they may consist of various fractions), but rather because the bad other is strong and treacherous (bombs civilians, makes massive arrests, and explores military advantage), and ‘we’ are not defending ‘them’. ‘Granted self-identity’ seems to have taken Arab protesters into the protective circle of the Western self. Seeing ‘us’ in ‘them’ and their present through our past, and associating ‘us’ with a narrative based on shared values, ‘we’ feel that part of ‘us’ is under attack by an oppressive hostile other, and we experience urgency to intervene: ‘To fail to act is to fail those who need our help’ (Cameron’s speech, BBC, Sept 22, 2011).

The phantasy of Arab Spring protesters as an analogue self may not fully explain the political decisions of the West, but it helps account for dominant public attitudes to it. Western political involvement could be approached through other frameworks, not least through realist assessment of benefits from regime change. However, the phantasy of recognition of an analogue to self is politically convenient and psychologically pleasing to the West. Not only does it provide self the narcissistic pleasure of seeing self in others and imagining its model reproduced, but it also purifies the West from the guilt of dealing with oppressive regimes in the past (e.g. the US having been Mubarak’s ally) by imagining that ‘we’ have always truly been against ‘them’.

**Phantasy of Betrayal and Abjection**

The positive image of Arab Spring protests seemed to encounter few serious challenges while the ‘granted self’ retained the main element determining its positivity – opposition to a negative old other. Potentially crucial differences overlooked or justified by a hostile environment became more alarming with the elimination of the old other, against whom the granted self’s positivity was clear. Rebuilding society after civil war (Libya) or restructuring the system of governance (Egypt, Tunisia) allowed the Western self further to explore the new group and discover cases in which the familiar started to look foreign or even fearfully familiar.

The growing popularity of Islamic parties and leaders in Arab Spring countries caught the Western public unprepared. The Muslim Brotherhood became equivalent to Mohammed Morsi’s identity in European and US media, while the popularity of appeals to Islamic values in election campaigns in Egypt and Libya were often criticized by the US as potentially undemocratic (e.g., in their treatment of women). Revolutions which were already regarded as positive developments on the way to being ‘just like us’ and inclusion in the self, were suddenly overshadowed with signs of un-Western behaviour (violence, inequality, human rights violations) . This is the point when Hillary Clinton warned of ‘backsliding in the democratic transformations’ and called on the duty ‘to protect democracy’ which had just been founded (The Guardian, Feb 25, 2012). Fears of what a violent and ‘Islamist’ element could do to the outcome of the revolutions were particularly sparked around Egyptian elections in 2012, reports of improper behaviour by rebels or of radical Islamist groups increasing their role in Syria throughout 2012-2013, and the murder of the US Ambassador in Libya in September 2012. Regarding the latter, Obama’s recognition of ‘bumps in the road’ due to Islamic heritage and ‘strains of extremism’ (CBS ’60 minutes’, Sept 23, 2012) comes as one of the most moderate statements in the US media.

This is not only a refusal of the West to accept variation or dynamics within the other: difference also becomes irreconcilable due to a paternal desire of the granter of self-identity to control the analogue. The newly recognized ‘self’ must not shame ‘us’ or challenge ‘our’ positivity: to follow the Western linear model of development, the new group needs to keep doing the right things. However, in claiming universality, the West offers a very particular model: a global democratic world is thought possible and desirable only the way the US and Western Europe imagine it, suggesting a self-monopoly on positivity. Hence a certain degree of infantilisation of the new Arab regimes: just as in the case where American advisors were sent to help countries that experienced the fall of communism, the West here, too, expects the ‘granted self’ to return affection by following advice on new constitutions, elections, treatment of former regime members, etc. This does not always happen, as demonstrated by the controversy around the new Egyptian constitution in late 2012 or by the insistence of new regimes (Libya) on prosecuting former elites in their home countries which suggested responsive repression. The collision between the expected and the real, and the lack of full control over the ‘granted self’ that retains political independence, suggest that certain kinds of agency within the ‘granted self’ are unwelcome by the self-proper, and present a breaking point[[2]](#endnote-2).

Such a dissimilarity between the expected (and imagined as real) and the actual in a situation when the collective has already created a unifying narrative granting self-membership to those ‘just like us’ or ‘wanting to be us’, is highly traumatic: a positive self cannot appear unjust or violent. The ‘granted self’ is seen as treacherous: it has become ‘like us’ and then betrayed ‘us’. The Western phantasy of a very good other is shattered: seeing what it wanted to see, the self suddenly discovers something not only unremembered, but expressly un-Western. Based on a lie in which bad objects and memories are cleansed, self-membership does not accept alternative beliefs or partial commitments that would undermine its idealised view of itself, and a suspected denial of its values, even if in a minor element, activates self-defense. As a result, ‘when contentious or threatening events challenge the personal or collective sense of self, individuals and collectivities are forced to shape or alter their notion of identity in order to cope’ (Murer, 2009, p. 113). The Western self has either to admit it was mistaken in its original perception and revise the ‘granted self’ as other, or accommodate its views of what a positive/negative revolutionary experience is and alter its own selective memory and identity narrative. The latter would challenge self-love and is avoided: self-positivity is not questioned, and serves as a starting point for comparison. Neither can the West fully expel the ‘granted self’ as other: the trauma is ever more painful since it touches the core of the Western democratic narrative. It risks collapsing: if ‘they’ did not try to become ‘us’, then how could we mistake them for ‘us’? And if they did try to become ‘us’, then maybe ‘they have not or *cannot* become us’? Thus linear development toward democracy and its global applicability, key elements of the Western narrative and the source of narcissistic pleasure, are at risk of being disproved. Consequently, the Arab Spring starts to deviate from the ‘good object’ of a secular and non-violent revolution, and by no longer being identical, it again becomes the unknown, unremembered, different and therefore potentially wrong and not entirely positive.

In these circumstances the Western self continues to explain the unknown through the known, and copes with difference by projecting its previous negative experiences. Projection of unwanted traits into a representation or phantasy of an outsider helps realize and maintain one’s difference. This is not meant to suggest that the European and American self has fully refused the previous phantasy of ‘granted self’; there is still a lot of ongoing public admiration and encouragement of the rebels both in the media and at the official level. However, the path to recognizing the complexity of Arab Spring(s) involves discovering difference and coping with it. Alarmed by familiar difference (Islamism, violence), the West is still phantasising, though the phantasy of pleasing similarity (an analogue self) gives way to no less imagined suspicion of what these revolutions could lead to (analogue other).

It is interesting to situate the change of phantasy within the psychoanalytic framework of abjection. Introduced by Kristeva, this is a defensive mechanism which reassures the proper Self of its positivity by projecting the feared and repelled negative traits into a former part of self, which becomes abject: ‘The abject appears in order to uphold “I” within the Other.’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 15). Part of the previous experience, the abject helps define self as its pure, positive opposite: the self uses projection ‘to attribute unacceptable thoughts or impulses in an effort to be rid of them’ (Volkan, 1988, p. 19). Though expelled, the availability of the abject is also desirable: it always overshadows self to assure it of distinction and reconcile the trauma of recognising the abject as self in the past. The self constantly needs reminders of its difference and purity, and violently maintains the border; otherwise it risks slipping into the abject and becoming negative. For this purpose, an abject provides a self with a reservoir of projected negativity, but is always kept at hand and realised not simply as an outsider (other), but as a ‘familiar foreigner’ – a repressed memory of one’s former self. Abject ‘is that which, though intimately part of an earlier experience, must be rejected so that the self can establish the borders of its unified subjectivity’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.9).

In our case of ‘granted identity’ of the protester/rebel evolving into an abject to the Western self, abjection does not start in its traditional way, and the concept has to be expanded. Abjection, as described by Kristeva, usually happens within a commonly shared past/group, where self and abject know each other in detail. It is largely this intimate knowledge and the trauma of sharing a common memory that makes the abject so familiar. However, in the case of ‘granting identity’ to Arab Spring protesters, self and abject are united not by common history, but only by the assumption that they are on the same ‘line’ of development – a democratic narrative with a claim to global outreach regardless of distance and ethnicity. The abject does not even need to make a claim to be self: it is the self (West) that has previously phantasised, embraced, and idealised the abject, and now suffers trauma. Moreover, their relation is not based on actual knowledge: instead, intimate knowledge and common values are *imagined* as the West is eager to see them (‘they are ‘us’, and we know ‘us’’). Discovery of difference changes this simplified formula to the traumatic ‘they are not/cannot be us?’ Projecting unwanted traits into an abject serves to restore narcissistic comfort by assuring the Western self that difference is a fault ‘with them, and not with us’.

In the case we are considering, abjection as a protective mechanism seems to be activated when the old (repressive) other is gone, but negative traits (violence) stay, and the self defends against falling into the void by projecting them into the abject, into the familiar that becomes foreign and is both repelled and desirable. As it earlier projected its positive selective memory into the ‘granted self’, taking revolution as a sign of ‘awakening’ and hope, the West now repeats the same process, but in the manner of defilement, as Kristeva’s theory describes it. The repressed negative history of the self – the memory of its own violence and authoritarian rule that it chose to suppress in the remembering and forgetting process – is disturbed by the betrayal of the ‘granted self’ and is now projected on the abject: ‘that which is perceived as strange and alien within the newly constructed other is simultaneously uncomfortably familiar because it is the *self*-repressed’ (Murer, 2009, p. 117). The NYTimes, for example, actively talks about crimes of Syrian rebels which go beyond justified violence (e.g. NYTimes, Nov. 2, 2012). ‘Their’ violence becomes *vengeance* as ‘we’ understand vengeance from ‘our’ past. Alternative social values and views on justice (which in some form have been in the revolutions from the start and, in Egypt, culminate in Morsi’s victory) are explained as familiar and wrong-headed religious radicalism. Even the position of protesters as proof of a democratic social structure is no longer entirely positive: in fact, groups of protesters may be dangerous radicals. Just as similarities were expected to bring about further similarities in the ‘granted self’ process, the self now expects and imagines more differences after suspecting their first sign and falls into a cognitive trap of exaggerating differences so that they appear more different than they actually are (Dalal, 2009, p. 78).

Coping with difference, and explaining the unknown through the known, the self projects its own past experience with different others into the abject’s past. As in the Freudian process of Nachträglichkeit: we are ‘‘rewriting history’, retroactively giving the elements their symbolic weight by including them in new textures – it is this elaboration which decides retroactively what they ‘will have been’’ (Zizek, 2008, p. 59). The self-proper now re-interprets previous signs to confirm that it had always known the abject to be different (violent, Islamist) in a negative way[[3]](#endnote-3). On the other hand, there still ‘should be some unconscious perception of a likeness, a reverse correspondence that binds us together while alienating us’ (Volkan, 1988, p. 99). A possible reason for this is that the self ‘must, in some way, be aware *that what we have projected is our own in order to feel the relief of being rid of it* (Sandler, 1989, p. 26). Filling the abject with negative memories makes sense in the chaos of the unknown and once again cleanses self from bad objects.

The self goes on to compare the abject with boundaries and prejudices that exist against different others, trying to fit the still unknown group into rigid and probably irrelevant self-other frames. Phantasising the abject as between two extremes (if not with ‘us’, then with one of ‘them’), the Western self projects its boundary with a different, radical Muslim other, into the abject. The facelessness of the Protester of the Year, which in a ‘granted self’ symbolizes collectivity, unity, variety, and the faceless strength of large numbers (possibly summarised in a formula ‘They can be anyone if they have become like us’), becomes frightening in an abject. Alarmed by a pro-Islamic ‘betrayal’, the self suddenly sees the hijab covering the face of The Protester not as a sign of reconciliation (‘our model applies to everyone’), but as a sign of difference. A faceless protester is discovered to be dangerously close to a faceless terrorist, hiding the same collective and anonymous power and capability to inflict violence. Thus, can we understand the fear that followed the killing of the US Ambassador in Libya in September 2012. Fear, projected from the relations with a different other, constructs the self-abject boundary and redefines self as subject to endangerment. Violence is no longer attributed to individual outliers but becomes intrinsic to the abject in a stereotypical way: the popular image of the radical Muslim other as treacherous, unpredictable, and incapable of stability is fitted onto the radicalizing protester (e.g., when Obama explains ‘bumps in the road’ by problematic Islamic heritage).

In narcissism, defilement of the abject serves a protective purpose: it reassures the Western self of its purity. However, to be pure in its positivity rather than to be merely different requires that the self does not (and cannot) fully part with the abject. If the abject is lost, the self loses its positive distinctness. Since the West still has a broad Rest-other, against which it establishes its boundary, the role of the abject is not so much to define *what* self is (different), but *how* *positive* self is. In its representations of the outcomes of the Arab Spring the West constantly reminds itself of its positive distinction: similar to the power to judge the ‘granted self’, it can now call comparisons of Arab Spring outcomes to Western democracy ‘naïve’ (e.g. The Telegraph, May 31, 2012). The narrative of the Arab Spring becomes the spring of Western narcissism, enabling the West to confirm its feeling of goodness by constantly implying that ‘we’ are ‘better’: learning about the abject, the self remembers that ‘we’ are not violent; non-radical, fair, ‘we’ are further on the way to democracy, ‘our’ revolutions were ‘cleaner’, and ‘we’ are stable and not in a crisis. Thus the phantasy of the Arab Spring is indeed not so much about ‘them’, but about ‘us’ and for ‘us’: the phantasy is *wishful* in the Freudian sense that the self wishes ‘to repeat the experience of satisfaction’ (Sanchez-Pardo, 2003, p. 181), which leads the West first to see itself in the other, and then to reiterate its positivity against the imagined violence of the abject.

**From Phantasy to Discovery**

The processes of granting the newly recognized group a collective identity and adopting it into the protective circle of the Western self, followed by an imagined betrayal, suspicion and abjection, reflect the dynamics of the West–Arab Spring phantasy: the narrative is threatened, collapses and is restructured. However, what each group imagines is not only directed at the other; the narratives need to be put in a broader perspective that explains how each self defines its collectivity and against whom the self is defined.

The imagined collectivity of Arab Spring protesters positions itself in direct contrast to the oppressive and powerful old other, and it thus shares a common enemy-other with the West. This creates a condition that allows the Western self to create a ‘granted self’ phantasy. The unknown new Arab other, seen through the eyes of the West as just another self (‘like us’), is born in a violent detachment from the old other and is allowed a dream of a new, untainted start. As a result, violence is not only attributed to the hostile other, but limited to it: negative stereotypical qualities which the West used to assign to the old other before the Arab Spring (e.g. instability, unpredictability, cruelty, etc.) are no longer seen as cultural/ethnic qualities of the people, but are largely personified only by the ruling elite or particular dictators.

However, once such a largely personified hostile other is eliminated through protests or civil war (e.g. in Libya), the blame for the remaining or suspected violence and difference is unassigned. The new Arab other can still define itself as positive based on the traumatic memory of the old (repressive) other: the old other becomes *memory* of the other. However, this is no longer a memory/narrative shared by the West. The period when the West defines its border and positivity against the hostile other ends once that other is eliminated: while alive, Gaddafi helped the West define itself by understanding what the West was not, but his constructive meaning for the Western narrative dies with him. When imagining the post-revolutionary Arab Spring, the West sees no Other. An absence of such an other, against which self would maintain its boundary, and the presence of only an analogous ‘granted self’ in a suddenly deserted identity space poses a risk that the Western self might lose its boundary and slip into the void. This situation endangers the pure positivity of the Western self-image: if there is no other, and no border, the elements that the West would previously have regarded as negative and attributed to the other (ongoing violence, unfairness, etc.) would become self. This is where abjection becomes logical: to avoid slipping into the negative and to maintain a positive representation of self, the West, looking for purity, emphasizes its positive difference, however small and narcissistic this difference is.

However, if the abjection that follows the suspicion of betrayal continues, the Western understanding of the ‘granted self’ revised as abject is likely to be caught in a position of confusion: if it was the old other that was hostile and ‘bad’, how can the new collectivity, which violently detached from that other and defined itself as contrary to it, also be negative? This is the point that the Western self currently seems to be approaching. Potentially this is also the point of realizing that the new group is in fact a new other, which cannot be understood within the limited frames of existing self-other comparisons. It is both similar and different.

This is the moment when the Western self would hopefully discover and recognise complexity in the new other (e.g. the current perception of Syrian rebels is much more complex than it had been in the Libyan case). Through ‘granted identity’ and subsequent abjection, the West follows the process of transformation from the ‘paranoid-schizoid position’ of all-good or the risk of all-bad images to a more ‘depressive’ position when the self can hold both good and bad images of the same object simultaneously (Klein, 1946). Such recognition of difference in the absence of hostility is potentially similar to Todorov’s idea of ‘healthy’ self-other relations as well: ‘*equality* without its compelling us to accept identity; but also *difference* without its degenerating into superiority/inferiority’ (Todorov, 1999, p. 249). This new *understanding* of the other can overcome the trauma of suspected betrayal by acknowledging that the new Arab other is neither ‘us’ nor in deliberate opposition to ‘us’. Politically, this opens a more constructive dialogue, when events following the revolutions are not attributed to a positive phantasy or stereotypical suspicion, but are seen as a more neutral instance of difference.

**Conclusion**

The discovery of the unknown is a long process, complicated by projections of previous experience and selective memory. People do not react rationally, especially when faced with a possibility of trauma (Murer, 2009, p. 113): the unknown is always a threat and source of anxiety, since there is no boundary or confirmed sameness or difference against it. Unlike the normal process in which an other informs self (‘we understand who we are by understanding who we are not’), an encounter with the unknown puts the self in a contrary position, in which it not only has to imagine itself as whole and pure (‘who we are’), but to *make* the other into what self wants it to be: such a position welcomes projective phantasy.

At all stages Western phantasy of the Arab Spring is not so much about the ‘good’ or ‘bad’ actual other, but about the narcissistic desire to affirm the idealised view of the West’s own self – the same desire which dictates abjection of its own violent beginnings in the forgetting of uncomfortable elements of its own history. The phantasy of the other reflects what the West hopes to see and hopes to be. The stranger initially feels familiar as its coming has been predicted and desired. In viewing them as ‘like us’ the West is involved in a Kleinian monologue of projective and introjective identification: filling the other with good qualities of self, it enjoys, in return, ‘secondary narcissism, in which admiration, love, and esteem for the object are transferred to one’s own self’ (Sandler, 1989, p. 10). Until noticing the first signs of difference, which still does not lead to the understanding and discovery of the other, the self is looking into a mirror and sympathising with its own positivity. However, abjection appears to be the first step toward true discovery: the self now knows there is a difference, even though that difference is still interpreted through projections and phantasy. Thus abjection of the newly ‘granted self’ is also more about the protection of self-pleasure and Western idealised conceptions of self than it is a discovery of the other. Only when an exit from the trap of needing all-good or all-bad images of the self-become-abject-other is found can the West meaningfully engage the new other and really discover it for the first time.

**About the author**

Dmitry Chernobrov is a PhD student and Tutor in International Relations at the School of International Relations, University of St Andrews, United Kingdom. He is also the Associate Researcher at St Leonard’s School in Scotland. His current research explores the dependence of metaphorical stereotyping on psychoanalytic dynamics in international conflict. He is the author of a number of articles on the evolution of the Other in historical conflict.

**Notes**

**References**

*BBC News* (2011) Seize opportunity of Arab Spring, Cameron urges UN. 22 September, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-15025599, accessed 14 January 2013.

*BBC Live Report* (2011) Libya Fighting. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14610722, accessed 14 January 2013.

*BBC Live Report* (2011) Libya Fighting: As It Happened. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14674119, accessed 14 January 2013.

*CBS ’60 minutes’*. 23 September 2012.

Cumming-Bruce, N., Gladstone, R. (2012) UN Says Execution Video From Syria Shows Apparent War Crime. *The New York Times*, online publication 2 November, doi: www.nytimes.com/2012/11/03/world/middleeast/un-says-syria-execution-video-shows-apparent-war-crime.html?\_r=0

Dalal, F. (2009) The Paradox of Belonging. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 14(1): 74-81.

Figlio, K. (2012) The Dread of Sameness. In: L. Auestad (ed.) *Psychoanalysis and Politics: Exclusion and the Politics of Representation*. London: Karnac, pp. 7-24.

Freud, S. (1921, 1955) Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego. *Standard edition* 18. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 67-143.

Gaskell, G., and Wright, D. (1997) Group Differences in Memory for a Political Event. In: Pennebaker, J., Paez, D., and Rime, B (eds.) *Collective Memory of Political Events*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997, pp. 175-191.

Hafer, C., Olson, J., and Peterson, A. (2008) Extreme Harmdoing: a View form the Social Psychology of Justice. In: Esses, V. and Vernon, R. *Explaining the Breakdown of Ethnic Relations*. *Why Neighbors Kill.* Oxford:Blackwell Publishing, pp. 17-40.

Horney, K. (1950) *Neurosis and Human Growth*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Klein, M. (1946) Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 27: 99-110.

Klein, M. (1948) *Contributions to Psychoanalysis 1921-1945*. London: Hogarth Press.

Klein, M. (1960) *Our Adult World and its Roots in Infancy*. London: Tavinstock Publications.

Kristeva, J. (1982) *Powers of horror: an essay on abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Millar, A. (2006) *Socio-ideological phantasy and the Northern Ireland conflict*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Murer, J. (2009) Constructing the enemy-other: Anxiety, trauma and mourning in the narratives of political conflict. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, 14 (2): 109-130.

Paez, D., Basabe, N., and Gonzalez, J. (1997) Social Processes and Collective Memory: a Cross-Cultural Approach to Remembering Political Events. In: Pennebaker, J., Paez, D., and Rime, B (eds.) *Collective Memory of Political Events*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997, pp. 147-175.

Sanchez-Pardo, E. (2003) *Cultures of the Death Drive: Melanie Klein and Modernist Melancholia*. Duke University Press.

Sandler, J. (ed.) (1989) *Projection, Identification, and Projective Identification*. London: Karnac Books.

*The Guardian* (2012) Clinton warns of Arab Spring backsliding, online publication 25 February, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/feedarticle/10112504.

The Telegraph (2012) The Arab Spring was no prelude to democracy, online publication 31 May, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9302719/The-Arab-Spring-was-no-prelude-to-democracy.html

Todorov, T. (1999) *The Conquest of America: the Question of the Other*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

Volkan, V. (1988) *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Anderson.

Zizek, S. (2008) *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso.

1. An assumption of linearity is typical of a number of modernisation theories thought and taught in the West, which assign a certain ‘finality’ to liberal economics and capitalism, secularism, human rights, and the democratic socio-political discourse. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The so-called ‘colour’ revolutions in a number of post-Soviet countries demonstrated similar processes of imagining ‘them’ like ‘us’ in an illusion of linear development and inevitable democratisation. Local projects to eliminate corruption and voice discontent, Rose, Orange, and Central Asian revolutions were also welcomed and embraced by the Western media as ‘granted selves’, followed by very similar expressions denouncing deviation from the ‘right’ way and betrayal. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Such a re-evaluative mechanism is clearly visible in Morsi’s case: when difference is noted (e.g. the crisis over developing a new Egyptian Constitution and expanding the presidential powers), his Islamist background provides an escape from the trauma of having phantasised the other as an analogue self: Western media inquire ‘how could anyone expect him to be truly democratic?’ [↑](#endnote-ref-3)