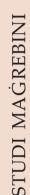STUDI MAĠREBINI

Volume I

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EMERGING ACTORS IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY NORTH AFRICA
Gender Mobility and Social Activism

Preface by
Gilbert ACHCAR

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In memory of our dear friend and colleague Agostino Cilardo (1947-2017)

If you would indeed behold the spirit of death, open your heart wide unto the body of life.
For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one.

Kahlil Gibran

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Domenico COPERTINO

Abstract

The major historical dimension of change, introduced in the Middle Eastern scholarship by the so-called Arabs springs, should inform the anthropological study of the region. I discuss three main anthropological paradigms (interpretive, praxiological, reflexive) against this need-for-change background. The interpretive paradigm is discussed through balancing the experience-distant concepts of political-anthropological analysis with the experience-near concepts of Tunisian social actors involved in the revolutionary process: I tried to locate the analytical concept of democracy against the background of the ideological and practical tools of the protagonists of the revolutionary process. The sub-categories covered under the broader concept of democracy are closer to social actors' own experience: I refer to such concepts as freedom, dignity, social justice, governmentality, that are analysed with reference to both their explicit formulation and implicit understandings by the individuals and groups involved in the revolutionary process. The reflexive approach in the anthropological study of cultures disseminated the idea that the deeper the involvement of the researcher in the reality s/he is studying, the more comprehensive is the understanding of that culture and society. The ease of immersion in the post-revolutionary Tunisian context, due to the compelling wave of freedom of expression in Tunisia after the revolution, makes that context attractive for anthropologists and researchers in Middle Eastern issues. The sense of freedom researchers experience doing fieldwork in post-revolutionary Tunisia, studying the political movements that fostered freedom of expression during the revolutionary process, is related to the historical change and conquered freedom of expression. Praxiology might be discussed through the ethnographic experience in revolutionary Tunisia, in order to understand how such ideas as homosociality, secularism, pluralism, hegemony become part of people's daily practices.

Introduction

Since the eruption of the Arab revolutions, in December 2011 - January 2012, there has been an increase in the number of statements related to change in the methods, topics and frameworks of Middle

Eastern scholarship. The common idea is that, since the societies involved in the so-called 'Arab Springs' have changed to some extent, the social sciences studying them should transform themselves too. Tunisian intellectual Hakim Ben Hammouda effectively summarized this mood:

> For some months, theoretical reflection has developed and there has been an increase in the number of works analyzing such sudden emergence of history and its ripples through a world that many considered convicted to immobility.[1]

It is as if scholars drawing on Edward Said's seminal book *Orientalism* suddenly felt the perspectives they themselves have long taken for granted had been finally accepted by a wider audience, now persuaded that an Orientalist knowledge of the Middle East, based on a powerful discourse entailing its radical otherness, its exceptionality as regards the modernization of the World and its failure to represent itself, has been proved wrong at last. According to Jean-Pierre Filiu,

> The real Arab exception is the spread with which the democratic protests sweep the regimes away. Arabs are back in the headlines worldwide, this time not through war and/or terror, but because of popular dedication and celebration of liberty: this is also quite a revolution.[2]

According to several scholars, the Arab springs spread to a wider audience the idea of the Middle East as constituting part of the modern world:

> The world has been finally taking cognizance of the fact that the core itself of what has been long dubbed the 'Arab and Islamic', or even 'Arab-Islamic world' (a construction that al-Jazeera itself has obsessively reiterated during the 15 years of its existence) does share in a modern

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[1] H. Ben Hammouda, « Le printemps arabe et l'effet kaleidoscope », in *Réalités* 1448 (August 2013), http://www.realites.com.tn/2013/09/un-autre-regard-le-printemps-arabe-et-leffet-kaleidoscope/.

[2] J. P. Filiu, *The Arab Revolution. Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising*, Hurst & Company, London, 2011, p. 16.

type of collective political subjectivity, and produces a socio-cultural experience in which it injects new interrogations and opens new gaps.[3]

How may this widened awareness inform the anthropological study of the Middle East and the Arab world? Since the publishing of Lila Abu-Lughod's 'Zones of Theory in the Anthropology of the Arab world' (1989), on the one hand anthropologists have reconsidered their interest for such topics as Islam, segregation, segmentation, despotism (the 'zones of theory'); on the other hand, new fields of anthropological interest have been developed by anthropologists working in the Middle East, such as media, cultural heritage, gender and piety as means of subjectivity production. The risk with developing new fields of interest is that they may lose their novelty and become in turn zones of theory, comfortable intellectual cradles in which scholars lull themselves with their favourite topics, gatekeeping concepts, anchors and languages. In other terms, certain styles of thought, approaches and methods developed starting from a critical stance towards stereotypes, risk to become stereotypical themselves.

Despite the fact that anthropologists working in the Middle East have been urging for the taking into account of the dimension of historical change and cultural transformation, the paradigms, methods and subjects of Middle Eastern anthropology have not been affected by the radical change introduced by the Arab revolutions so far. Furthermore, the anthropological stress on contemporaneity and cultural convergences has influenced other disciplines and anthropologists are not any longer unique among scholars of Middle Eastern societies in coping with such dimensions.

I discuss three main anthropological paradigms (interpretive, praxiological, reflexive) against this need-for-change background; I have chosen such paradigms since they constituted the theoretical framework I moved in, dealing with the issues raised by my fieldwork in Syria and Tunisia; furthermore, they have been developed or implemented by scholars with fieldwork and experience in the Middle East: Clifford Geertz, Pierre Bourdieu and Lila Abu-Lughod. Geertz's fieldwork in Morocco was fundamental for his *Interpretation of cultures*; though Bourdieu was not an anthropologist, his interests and

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[3] A. Salvatore, 'Only a Question of Time? From Connectedness to Mobilization in the Public Sphere', in *Culture and Society*, 11/3/2011, http://theoryculturesociety. blogspot.it/2011/03/armando-salvatore-on-egypt-facebook-and.html?m=1 (last access 22/5/2015).

methods in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* are evidently influenced by anthropology, and his concept of *habitus*, explained in this book, thoroughly influenced the later debates about such basic concepts in anthropology as culture and society; American-Palestinian anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod did not define her approach as 'reflexive', although *Veiled Sentiments* is constructed around the observation of the ways the Bedouin culture and subcultures 'reflect' on the anthropologist: she shows that this reflexive process is basic for the understanding of the 'other' culture, whose 'otherness' is toned down as it becomes part of the anthropologist's identity.

Interpretivism

In Geertz's approach, culture is understood as a web of meaning whose knots are unwound by the socio-cultural analyst; like language, social action is intended as a complex of symbols that anthropologists get to know and interpret through the ethnographic experience. Since people interpret these symbols in their daily interactions, the observation of social action is aimed at grasping their interpretation. The first step of fieldwork is the description of such symbolic interactions, what Geertz terms 'thin description'; the following step is the ethnographer's interpretation of these interactions. Since the latter includes people's interpretations, the ethnographer's work is meant as an interpretation of interpretations; this is achieved through 'thick description', which includes the observation of interactions, the account of people's interpretations and the ethnographer's interpretation of interpretations. Ethnography is not intended as 'grasping the natives' point of view', but as narrowing the gap between the anthropologist's and his/her interlocutors' points of view.

In the interpretive perspective, participant observation is experienced as meeting halfway between two subjects' worldview. This is pursued by balancing between experience-near and experience-distant concepts, namely the ideas people draw from to interpret their daily interactions (near to their experience) and the anthropologist's intellectual background (distant from people's experience). Ethnography is not meant as a collection of bizarre ideas and practices, but rather as the construction of a common ground between different cultures. This leads the anthropologist to counter the perception of otherness when describing cultures. This is particularly fruitful for the anthropological study of Middle Eastern cultures, since the latter concentrated for decades on those traits and worldviews liable to

reproduce their exoticism and otherness. Lila Abu-Lughod criticized this clustering of ethnographic researches about what she terms the 'zones of theory': *harem* theory (dealing with gender segregation), segmentarian theory (dealing with tribalism and conveying the image of Arabs as *homines segmentarii*), Islam (intended as a theoretical metonym for a world where everything is influenced by religion). These zones cover the anthropological study of the Arab cultures, whereas other 'gatekeeping concepts'[4] concern Turkish (despotism) and Persian (*bazaar* economy) contexts.

Directing my research mainly within the interpretive paradigm, I put much of my effort into balancing the experience-distant concepts of political-anthropological analysis with the experience-near concepts of Tunisian social actors involved in the revolutionary process. In particular, I followed the meetings of one youth Islamic association, Ash-Shabab ar-Rissali ('The young messengers') which formed part of the Tunisian civil society[5] that gained visibility after the '14th January revolution' and was close to the Muslim Brotherhood network. I also had several conversations with some representatives of Ennahdha, the Tunisian party that constitutes the political branch of the Brotherhood. The league (*rābiṭa*) Ash-Shabab ar-Rissali was founded right after the revolution, since such associations were prohibited or strictly controlled by the police during the Ben Ali's regime. The 'young messengers' promote both *da'wa* in the narrow sense of the term (inviting non-practicing Muslims to pray) and the knowledge of Islam from the historical and educational perspective.

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[4] A. Appadurai, 'Theory in Anthropology: Center and Periphery', in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 28/2 (April 1986), pp. 356-361.

[5] 'Civil society' itself could be analysed as an experience-distant concept, on the background of ethnographic research among such Islamic association. Indeed the concept has been thoroughly debated in anthropology, and studies from North African and Middle Eastern contexts have contributed to the deepening of its complex definition. Although several studies about North African civil societies focus mainly on the activities and discourses of secularist organizations, and Tunisian public debate is currently caught into a sharp polarization opposing the political parties, in crisis of legitimacy and consensus, to the most influent association of what is commonly referred to as the Tunisian civil society (Ugtt, Utica, the National Bar Association, the Human Rights League), I rather focus on the activities of democratic participation of Islamic associations engaged in spreading pious practices among the population, what is commonly known as *da'wa*.

I tried to locate the analytical concept of democracy against the background of the ideological and practical tools of these protagonists of the revolutionary process. This was meant as a contribution to the debate within the anthropology of democracy, a field of interest whose borders and subjects are currently being defined, following a seminal article by Julia Paley.[6] The main aim of this debate is comprehending current understandings of democracy, through both cross-cultural comparison and reference to global discourses that inform the conceptualization and shaping of practices of democratic participation in different contexts across the world.

Indeed, different forms of democratic participation shape the public debate in contemporary Tunisia. The post-revolution Tunisian public space is open to extremely different political activities and discussions, showing the complexity of the historical change for which the revolutionary phase of December 2010/January 2011 was but the tinder. Scholars are tracing a frame of the complex landscape of the contemporary Tunisian public sphere through reference to different forms of democratic participation, such as the youth activism in social media debates, street demonstrations, the struggle for political freedom conducted by traditional secularist and Islamic political parties, the middle-classes' involvement in the movements for change, the popular struggles for labour rights, social justice and equity, and the role of the army in the revolutionary process. Furthermore, the anthropological perspective analyses concepts and practices which, starting from a narrow definition of democracy, could appear as antithetical, such as the participation of the army in the democratic process, and the post-revolutionary hegemony of the Islamic movement and party Ennahdha.

Through comparison and categorization of these practices under the broader category of democracy, the latter is being deepened in its complexity. 'Democracy' in the anthropological perspective is used as an analytic category quite distant from the explicit formulation of social actors, that in some cases refuse this concept or discard it as a Western neo-colonial ideology. According to Tunisian intellectual Hakim Ben Hammouda, the idea of the Arab revolutions as a major project of democratization, modernization and emancipation from dictatorship, carried on in the name of the 'post-national power of

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[6] J. Paley, 'Toward an Anthropology of Democracy', in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002), pp. 469-496.

freedom', is affected by a euro-centric perspective, that identifies the movement toward modernity with societies' common evolution into a 'shared universe of freedoms and human rights'.[7] Anyway, the sub-categories covered under the broader concept of democracy are closer to social actors' own experience: I refer to such concepts as *ḥurriya* (freedom), *karāma* (dignity), *'adāla ijtimā'iyya* (social justice), that are analysed with reference to both their explicit formulation and implicit understandings by the individuals and groups involved in the revolutionary process.

Probably the most outstanding achievements of the Tunisian revolution were those related to the major ideal of political freedom (entailing freedom of expression and association), gained within the space of just a few weeks: the tyrant's hasty escape; the creation of the Higher Authority for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform and Democratic Transition; the suspension of the 1959 Constitution; the first democratic elections in the history of the country. The opening preamble of the new Constitution, passed on 27th January 2014, lists among its objectives the end of tyranny, injustice and corruption and the pursuit of freedom and dignity. Indeed, the official political map of Tunisia soon after January opened up to all those parties that were excluded from it; the regime's opponents were freed from prison or returned from exile.

Besides freedom, the Tunisian revolution has been celebrated for fostering the value of *karāma* (often translated as 'dignity'), a concept the Islamic movement conceived of mainly as social justice. According to Ennahdha MP Osama al-Saghir, with whom I had several conversations from 2013 to 2015, *karāma* means first of all equality, resulting in a project aimed at reducing the socioeconomic gaps among Tunisians, improving the material conditions and fostering the social advancement of unemployed or underemployed people. This aim is strictly related both to that of freedom and to another meaning of *karāma*, namely the idea of a national stance against international political and economic interference. Though the Islamic movement since its beginning has fought against Western economic and political domination, after the revolution it has been facing the prospect of a flight of European capital; as a ruling party, it has been concerned with how to keep multinational corporations in the country, whilst at the same time trying to keep their power of people

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[7] Ben Hammouda, « Le printemps arabe et l'effet kaleidoscope ».

and capital management from ignoring or breaching the laws of the State. As al-Saghir told me,

> In the past, when Eni or Benetton did business in Tunisia, they spoke with some regime's official and the deal was made; their investment cost was minimal; the local manpower was underpaid; the previous regime found it all good clean fun. Nowadays deals are made abiding by laws, openly. Tunisian workers earn treble what they did before. That's how the concept of *karāma* is translated into practice.[8]

The third experience-distant concept I drew on is Foucauldian governmentality,[9] tested against the background of the experience-near concept of Islamic rule. The latter was controversial over the three years of Ennahdha majority in the National Constituent Assembly (NCA), when the Islamic party ruled the country through several cabinets. The debate was first of all about the reference to *sharī'a* in the new Constitution and was enlivened by Tunisian secularist circles, accusing the Islamists to aim at the foundation of an Islamic state.[10]

In fact, the debate in Tunisia did not lead to a total opposition between the secularists and the Islamists about the latter's alleged project to bind the new Constitution to *sharī'a.* For instance, the acknowledgement of Islamic conduct as a basic unifying value of Tunisian society was the subject of some discourses of the President of the Republic Beji Caid Essebsi, whose election was celebrated by some observers as the victory of the secularist world terminating the 'Islamic autumn' that followed the 'Arab spring'. Furthermore, the Islamic movement was not unanimous in arguing that *sharī'a* should inform the Constitution. As Osama al-Saghir told me,

> What's the point of referring to *sharī'a* in the Constitution? *Sharī'a* doesn't exist in itself, it's not a book: have you ever seen a book titled

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[8] Interview with the author, Tunis, September 2013.

[9] M. Foucault, 'La governamentalità', in *Aut-aut* 167/168 (1978), pp. 12-29.

[10] S. Labat, *Les islamistes tunisiens entre l'état et la mosquée*, Demopolis, Paris, 2013; A. Meddeb, « La défaite des islamistes et l'alliance occidentale », *Leaders* 10/2013, p 6; H. Hkima, « De quelle démocratie parle-t-on? », in *La Presse*, 14/4/2015; N. Benazouz, « De quelle union nationale parles-tu, 'ayouhal-ablah' ? », *La Presse* 8/4/2015; L. Blaise, « Le projet de la nouvelle Constitution tunisienne en 10 questions », 15/5/2013, http://nawaat.org/portail/2013/05/15/tunisiela-constitution-en-10-questions/ (access 16/12/2016).

The Sharī'a ? We were planning to put it into one of our Constitution drafts, as an opening-up factor: it would have been a positive value to refer.[11]

This draft, presented in March 2012, mentioned *sharī'a* as one source of the law and provided for a specific board (*majlis 'alā lil-iftā'*) to check the compliance of laws with Islamic norms.[12] The following debate led the Islamic movement to reconsider this plan, since the reference to *sharī'a* would come to constitute a rift factor in the society, producing an effect opposite to what was intended. Osama told me:

We realized that the Constitution didn't need to be checked against the background of *sharī'a*. If misinterpreted it could create division, as if in our society there were people for or against Islam. The Tunisian society had joined together for the revolution and we didn't want to fragment it. Therefore, in our second draft we took off the reference to *sharī'a*.[13]

This was Rached Ghannouchi's (2012) idea as well:

Nous ne voulons pas que la société tunisienne soit divisée en deux camps opposés idéologiquement, l'un pro-charia et l'autre anti-charia. Cela ne nous réjouit pas et c'est très grave. Nous voulons plutôt une Constitution qui soit pour tous les Tunisiens quelles que soient leurs convictions. (…) L'essentiel, c'est que les Tunisiens sont aujourd'hui unis autour de l'islam et de la démocratie. (…) L'islam n'autorise pas de traiter autrui de mécréants.[14]

Indeed, the following constitutional draft presented by the Islamists did not mention the *sharī'a*. They found it was enough not to amend the first article of the 1959 Constitution, that recognized Islam as the official religion of the country. Such broad reference to Islam was accepted by the NCA and written in the preamble of the current

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[11] Interview with the author, Tunis March 2015.

[12] Y. Ben Achour, 'Religion, Revolution, and Constitution: the Case of Tunisia', Yadh Ben Achour Blog, 26/10/2012, in http://yadhba.blogspot.it/2012/10/religion-revolution-and-constitution_6573.html (last access 6/12/2016).

[13] Interview with the author, Tunis, March 2015.

[14] P. F. Naudé, « Tunisie : Ennahdha renonce à introduire la charia dans la Constitution », 27/3/2012, in http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB201 20327091704/ (access 6/12/2016).

Constitution, that expresses the Tunisian people's 'commitment to the teachings of Islam, to their spirit of openness and tolerance', and to 'the foundations of our Islamic-Arab identity'.[15] Furthermore, Article 1 reads: 'Tunisia is a free, independent, sovereign state; its religion is Islam, its language Arabic, and its system is republican. This article may not be amended'.[16]

It could be argued that supporting the reference to Islam in the Constitution was part of the Islamic movement's search for a moral principle to credit the post-revolutionary ruling class with the authoritativeness it still lacks, having inherited the governmental structures from the previous regime. In other terms, from 2011 to 2014 the Islamic movement has been trying to strike a balance between such structures and a sovereign principle - Islam - to legitimize itself as the ruling party. Having gained the NCA majority, Ennahdha was invested with the task of leading the transition from Ben Ali's autocratic power to democracy, in a complex phase for the country. Indeed, besides economic stagnancy, the country was in the sights of the growing international Islamic terrorism, that struck Tunisia with violent attacks with few precedents in the country. Well before the tragic massacres of Bardo and Sousse (2015), the Islamic majority cabinets had to face dozens of jihadist attacks against military and police targets (the worst in Chaambi on 29th July 2013 and in Sidi Bouzid on 23rd October of the same year) and several political homicides (the most notorious being those of Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, on 6th February and 25th July 2013).

The Islamist cabinets thus focused on the technocratic character of the executive, focusing on security policies, more and more detached from society and from the control of other powers, a crucial aspect of governmentality. According to Butler,[17] who effectively summed up Foucault's reasoning, governmental power is exercised through regulations that replace the State laws and are not bound by international law. Power is thus delegated to civil servants that act as managers with limited sovereignty, interpreting and enforcing the regulations unilaterally. Sovereignty is thus understood as an 'extra-legal authority that may well institute and enforce law of its own

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[15] Tunisian Constitution of 2014, Full Text, in https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tunisia_2014.pdf (access 6/12/2016).

[16] Ib.

[17] J. Butler, *Vite precarie. Contro l'uso della violenza in risposta al lutto collettivo*, Meltemi, Roma, 2004.

making'.[18] Such delegation of power is justified by a state of emergency, as in Tunisia in the decade before revolution, when the struggle against terrorism was a power strategy of the regime, aimed officially at protecting the West and the secular elites from jihadism. Under such cover the Ben Ali's regime prohibited any kind of political opposition and reduced the media to silence. The anti-terrorism law issued in December 2003 gave full governmental power to the security forces, legitimizing arbitrary arrests, torture, rough trials and the suppression of opponents.[19] Countering the 2011-2013 jihadist attacks, the Islamist cabinets stressed their governmental features – e.g. former Minister of the Interior Ali Laarayadeh was appointed as Prime Minister in reply to the complications of the Belaid affair – and strengthened the security apparatus, that despite the regime change was inviolate after the revolution.[20]

Furthermore, the new Tunisian Constitution does not define the power balance between governmentality and the law: convicts' rights are stated in the abstract and the constitutional structure of police and security forces is not well defined.[21]

The draft counterterrorism law, discussed in 2014 and 2015, was criticized by Tunisian public opinion; Human Rights Watch warned that it confirms the police's arbitrary power, and 'contains a broad and ambiguous definition of terrorist activity that could permit the government to repress a wide range of internationally protected

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[18] Ib., p. 60.

[19] Nawaat 2008, « La torture en Tunisie et la loi «anti-terroriste» du 10 décembre 2003 », http://nawaat.org/portail/2008/07/10/la-torture-en-tunisie-et-la-loi-anti-terroriste-du-10-decembre-2003/ (last accessed 29/11/2013). The article 48 for instance provided for the protection of the identity of the judges and policemen in charge of establishing and punishing terrorist crimes, delivering them from the limitations made by the Convention against torture, though both president Bourguiba and Ben Ali signed it in 1987 and 1988.

[20] According to Bel Hadj Amor, the security apparatus, the main expression of the State, is legitimized by the 'plenty of regulations, procedures, authorizations and agreements (…) that invest civil servants discretionary power, which causes abuses, injustice and corruption. Administration thus becomes the law'. W. Bel Hadj Amor, « Mais que savent donc les Américains? », in *Leaders* 29 (2013), pp. 40-41, p. 41.

[21] K. Roach, 'Security Forces Reform for Tunisia', in Z. Al-Ali - R. Stacey (eds.), *Consolidating the Arab Spring: Constitutional Transition in Egypt and Tunisia*, Stockholm - New York, International IDEA & The Center for Constitutional Transitions at NYU Law, 2013.

freedoms'.[22] Furthermore, against the grain of Human Rights concerns, it introduces the death penalty. It is possible that the counterterrorism law provided the tinder for the tragic attack at the Bardo Museum on 18th March 2015, the same day the draft was discussed in Parliament, the centre of which adjoins the Museum.

In Foucault's theorization, governmentality is the power of regulation rather than the law, and it pertains to the executive rather than the sovereign. The latter's moralizing orientation is excluded from the 'governmentalized' State, which does not need any ethical principle to accomplish its ruling tasks. At the same time, governmentality retrieves sovereignty and the law as tactics of self-legitimization.[23] Therefore, in Foucault's reasoning governmentality does not exclude sovereignty and discipline: Foucault does not foresee a linear evolutionary process among these forms of power. He detects a relationship of complementarity (or triangulation) among them instead, since the management of population (the task of governmental power) involves its disciplining, and the disciplining of the population involves in turn the question of the authorizing principle that underpins sovereignty.

Though the Islamic movement in Tunisia does not claim the sovereign power of some moralizing institution, as could be the case with some *'ulamā'* cabinet in an Islamic form of State, it has been looking for a balance between a moral principle (Islam) and the governmental power inherited from the autocratic regime. Indeed, the shift from opposition to power entailed the movement's shift to the governmental techniques, as expressed by the technocratic character of the Islamic cabinets from 2011 to 2013. The governmental techniques of the previous regime are seen as the despotic aggravation of the modern disciplinary power, yet the Islamic movement is not aiming at replacing it with some sovereign power with the Islamic law at its core. It is looking for a triangulation among these forms of power instead; the reference to religion in the Constitution is aimed at the quest for the sovereignty of the law, whose authority in this case is linked to the divine message, as the foundation of power despite the plight of the governmental fragmentation of the State powers. The religious reference in other terms is a tactic inside the quest for an

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[22] Human Rights Watch, 'Memo on Counterterrorism Law in Tunisia', 8/4/2015, in https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/08/memo-counterterrorism-law-tunisia (access 6/12/2016).

[23] Butler, *Vite precarie*.

authorizing principle of sovereignty. One may consider *sheikh* Rachid Ghannouchi's refusal of any institutional post as part of this tactic; the President of Ennahdha preserved his role as a moral, political and strategic guide for the activists and the Islamist representatives in the NCA and later in the Parliament elected in 2014. This helped to keep both the balance between the secular and religious forces, and the triangulation of the forms of power.

Rather than considering democracy and authoritarianism as radically opposed, the comparative analysis of experience-near and distant concepts of governmentality, Islamic rule and *sharī'a* show the convergences between such political systems. Governmentality represents the continuity existing between the authoritarian rule in Tunisia and the emerging forms of power.

Reflexivism

The major historical dimension of change, introduced - quite suddenly, one might say - in the Middle Eastern scholarship by the so-called Arabs springs, directly influenced my own minor story as an anthropologist with a Middle Eastern ethnographic pedigree and much hoped-for academic career. Indeed, at the beginning of December 2010 I was granted by Milan-Bicocca University a four-year contract as a researcher, on the basis of a project aimed at studying the 'patrimonialization' of Syrian cultural heritage, following the main topic I had been developing during the previous seven years. After a few days, the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi gave rise to the Tunisian revolution; in just a few weeks the revolutionary wave expanded to Egypt and in a few months it inflamed other Arab countries. In Syria, the violent reaction of the establishment provoked the civil war that had been avoided in Tunisia and Egypt thanks to the cautious behaviour of the local armies that did not act as the watchdogs of antidisestablishmentarianism. The Syrian plight forbade the prosecution of my fieldwork there, whereas the revolutionary process in Tunisia was stimulating for my anthropological interests; furthermore, after a few months of fieldwork there, I started to cope with the dimension of change in my main anthropological paradigms, introduced by the hermeneutic and existential condition that anthropologists term 'being there', namely the ethnographic experience that shapes the researcher's theoretical concerns and fieldwork itself.

The reflexive approach in the anthropological study of cultures disseminated the idea that the deeper the involvement of the

researcher in the reality s/he is studying, the more comprehensive is the understanding of that culture and society. Thus the presence of the researcher in the field, far from being considered a misleading interference in the setting of fieldwork, that could distort the results of research, is enhanced by this approach. The description of one's involvement in the studied context is fundamental to introduce convincingly to that culture the readers of the final essay. Explaining this involvement, bringing it from the personal experience of the researcher to the public presentation of his/her methodological tools, allows the anthropologist to keep the needed balance between immersion and detachment.

Immersion in the post-revolutionary Tunisian context was easy for me, as an ethnographer that had spent already several years of fieldwork in other Arab countries. This is likely to be due to the compelling wave of freedom of expression in Tunisia after the revolution, which makes that context attractive for anthropologists and researchers in Middle Eastern issues. Had I to compare the troubles I faced in Syria (strangers' suspicion, control by the security service), though studying an apparently apolitical issue (the patrimonialization of cultural heritage), to my ease in conducting an inquiry on a topic – the Islamic youth associations – considered sensitive in Tunisia until just a few months before my stay there, I would stress how research practices have been influenced by historical change. This would be no patchwork comparison, if one considers the similarities between the Tunisian and Syrian autocratic regimes during the last 20 years.[24] Speaking freely about Islam and how this religious tradition influences politics, daily life, and people's social interrelationships

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[24] F. Rizzi, *Mediterraneo in rivolta*, Castelvecchi, Roma, 2011; M. F. Corrao (ed.), *Le rivoluzioni arabe. La transizione mediterranea*, Mondadori, Milano, 2011; M. B. Ayari - V. Geisser, *Renaissances Arabes. 7 questions clés sur des révolutions en marche*, Les Editions de l'Atelier, Paris, 2011; Council on Foreign Relations, *The New Arab Revolt. What happened, what it means and what comes next*, Council of Foreign Relations, Lexington, 2011; J. A. Goldstone, *Understanding the Revolutions of 2011: Weakness and Resilience in Middle Eastern Autocracies*, Council of Foreign Affairs 90/3 (May-June 2011); J. P. Filiu, *The Arab Revolution*; M. Campanini (ed.), *Le rivolte arabe e l'Islam: la transizione incompiuta*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2013; S. Mehli, « La Syrie, deux siècles de révolutions », in *Revue Averroès* 4/5 Spécial Printemps arabe (2011), pp. 1-8; C. Ryan, 'The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria', in *Middle East Report* 262 (Spring 2012), http://www.merip.org/mer/mer262/new-arab-cold-war-struggle-syria; A. Cantaro (ed.), *Dove vanno le primavere arabe*, Ediesse, Roma, 2013.

and worldviews, in particular, was one right claimed by the revolution and gained through the liberation from a totalitarian regime that forbade the public expression of religious conviction and belonging, under the guise of a modernist and secularist ideal.

The reflexive approach pursues one of the aims of cultural anthropology, that is bridging the gap between different cultures, by stressing the similarities existing beside differences; the researcher in this approach becomes the living proof of continuity between cultures, rather than the external observer of the Other. The presentation of the anthropologist's life-story during fieldwork shows how the society and the culture s/he studied reflect on his/her subjectivity as a Western or Westernized researcher; Abu-Lughod's *Veiled Sentiments*, a complex work that opened several horizons to the anthropological study of the Middle East, among other things is the story of the progressive tuning between the researcher's and the researched's emotions, sentiments, interpretations of relationships, and subsequent behaviours and worldviews. This approach is particularly fruitful for the study of the Arab world and the Middle-East, since it is liable to tone down the sense of otherness spread by the traditional ethnographic descriptions of these cultures. Indeed, reflexivity in anthropology shows how the Western self-changes through the prolonged contact with the others.

As a consequence, the description of the anthropologist's positioning in the studied field is not pushed into the background as a methodological aside; it is rather conceived of as an authoritative part of the account, key to the author's reasoning and understanding of the other culture. The sense of freedom researchers experience doing fieldwork in post-revolutionary Tunisia is related to the historical change and conquered freedom of expression. Researchers are likely to work without obstacles in such a context; as social actors living in the field they are working in, they are likely to act at ease. Those studying the political movements that fostered freedom of expression during the revolutionary process cannot help dealing with the climate of their stay in the studied field. The reluctances of my Syrian informants (at least in the first part of my fieldwork there) and, on the contrary, the openness of Tunisians steered my research towards different directions. The caution my Syrian acquaintances often showed speaking with me and, on the other side, the flood of information that often overwhelmed me during my conversations and interviews in Tunisia (in a few weeks, I filled almost half the number of notebooks I had filled in over two years in Syria) drove me to different ways of

conceiving the ethnographic fieldwork and understanding these cultures. In Syria, my undesired encounters and forced rendezvous with security service officers and would-be informers, acted as wake-up calls which served me to overcome naivety in relationships and taught me caution and endurance in my methods. Furthermore, on the one hand I noticed that sometimes it was me who was perceived as a potential informer for the authorities, especially when my participant observation included following practices that did not abide strictly by the law (such as some loose restorations of ancient private houses); on the other hand, sometimes my relational skills (part of the anthropologist's tool kit) were exploited by social actors to communicate with each other despite the different socio-economic status and position in the arena of the patrimonialization of cultural heritage.[25] This led me to observe the ethnographic encounter (the observation of participation in Tedlock's terms)[26] as one between different subjects (the anthropologist and the informants) who were likely to convey information to other people and whose identities were the product of mutual negotiation.[27]

The choice of the very subjects of my research was influenced by the different climate of my fieldwork. The topic of Islamic activism was peripheral in my Syrian research, since it was surrounded with general suspicion there and concerned small niches of the population. Mosque discussions were always controlled by security officers; only one of my informants was a frequenter of such meetings, from whom he drew his worldview and behaviour patterns. On the contrary, in Tunisia my understanding of Islamic activism was influenced by the fact that it was victorious in the post-revolutionary Tunisian society.

As an aside, both the extraordinary historical circumstances and the suitability of Tunisia as an ethnographic field are pushing many Middle Eastern anthropologists to move there from other troubled contexts in the area. This is likely to lead to the construction of a new

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[25] D. Copertino, 'The tools of the Trade: The materiality of Architecture in the Patrimonialization of "Arab houses" in Damascus', in *Journal of Material Culture* 19/3 (2014), pp. 327-351.

[26] B. Tedlock, 'From Participant Observation to the Observation of Participation: The Emergence of Narrative Ethnography', in *Journal of Anthropological Research* 47/1 (Spring 1991), pp. 69-94.

[27] U. Fabietti, *Antropologia culturale. L'esperienza e l'interpretazione*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2005; R. Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1981.

'zone of theory', in Abu-Lughod's terms (1989): besides being the anthropologists' preferred conceptual frameworks, the zones of theory are also the most frequently chosen geographic areas for ethnographic fieldwork. Noting that Geertz chose Morocco – as many other anthropologists – for his fieldwork and likened it to the American Far West, Abu-Lughod stated that the Middle Eastern anthropologists' preferred geographic zones were the peripheries of the Arab world, the farther from the central areas, often at war or in political turmoil, the better.

Praxiology

The main contribution of Bourdieu's theory of practice to the current debate in anthropology is the redefinition of culture by means of the concept of *habitus*. Through the notion of *habitus* as related to specific social classes, Bourdieu added new layers of complexity to both the Marxist notion of class and the anthropological notion of culture: class structures play a role in people's life, though they do not determine social action; they activate systems of permanent dispositions (*habitus*) that in turn generate practices or social action. Therefore, people's practices, acts, thoughts, perceptions, expressions and utterances emerge in Bourdieu's theory as regulated improvisations produced by *habitus*; they are limited by the material, historical and social conditions under which they are produced. Practices generated by *habitus* reproduce such objective conditions. Regularities in social action are due to these permanent dispositions that people internalise as a form of ingrained knowledge rather than a set of cultural rules. Thanks to Bourdieu's formulation, anthropologists no longer do not need to write lists of the norms people follow in their daily behaviours, activities and interrelationships; getting to know people's *habitus* and sharing it with them provides the researcher with a framework within which to locate and understand both cultural regularities and exceptions, improvisations, and the violation of rules. Some Islamic activists, for instance, though promoting the norm of gender segregation, do not always observe it strictly; but they are nonetheless not considered bad practitioners of the principles they promote. Indeed, rather than a norm, Islamic activists' ideas of gender are part of their wider *habitus* of homosociality, understood as a framework according to which they act in their daily interrelationships and interpret other people's positioning, interactions, distancing from the rules. One day, while I

was having a conversation with two young activists about their ideas of proper gender interactions, they spotted two friends of theirs in the same coffee bar where we were sitting, one boy and one girl, both members of their association, sitting at a table. Although gender promiscuity is avoided in their activities, after some momentary surprise, they said it was alright, since they were sitting in a public venue and they were not doing anything on the sly.

Islamic activists gained freedom of expression by taking part in the revolution, though acting as individuals rather than movements. Living in a secularized society, they sense secularization in their daily lives, activities and interrelationships. Their project of spreading the Islamic tendency in politics and society is not in contradiction with the secularization of Tunisian society and the State. Rached Ghannouchi often referred to the concepts of 'procedural secularism' (*'almāniyya ijrā'iyya*) and 'partial secularism' (*'almāniyya juz'iyya*), to explain that the separation of powers in the State is not in contrast to its fundamental religious convictions. In other terms, the Islamic movement rejects reducing the different meanings of secularization – separation of powers, decline of the levels of belief, disenchantment of the conditions of belief –to the simple exclusion of religion from the public sphere, what Ghannouchi terms 'integral secularism' (*'almāniyya shāmila*).[28]

Tunisian Islamists see their activism as a contribution to the pluralist public sphere in the post-revolutionary Tunisian society. Among the goals of ash-Shabab ar-Rissali is 'Fostering the logic of dialogue (*manṭiq al-ḥiwār*) and the value of coexistence (*at-tā'ish al-mushtarek*)'. Young engineer Yahia Kchaou, an activist from the association I met in 2013, explained to me that

> Tunisian Islam is tolerant: that's why we organize open discussions, with believers and nonbelievers. This is secularism: it's a framework of respect for difference. Dialogue is different from tolerance, though the Islamic State safeguards non-Muslims and the Coran protects nonbelievers.[29]

The Islamist discourse about pluralism covers the active confrontation with people who do not share religious convictions, pregnant with meaning in Tunisia, considering the scope of the

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[28] C. Taylor, *L'età secolare*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2009.
[29] Interview with the author, Tunis, September 2013.

secularist world in Tunisian society, inside which the Islamist discourse involves but a limited part of the population. Ash-Shabab ar-Rissali activists' daily interrelationships involve mainly people who do not share the Islamist discourse; the neat distinction between secularists and Islamists, often stressed by both Tunisian and foreign observers, is sometimes the subject of the *shabāb*'s jokes. Once Yahia, asking me how my research was getting along, said: 'So? Did you meet any *'almāniyyīn* (secularists)?'.[30]

Besides personal interrelationships, in the last decades there has been a political and intellectual convergence between Tunisian secularists and Islamists, what Yadh Ben Achour[31] termed 'the Islamization of the democrats and the democratization of political Islam'.[32] The opposition movements have combined their efforts against the regime since 2015, when they formed the 18th October Committee, a trans-ideological movement composed by personalities from the Congrès pour la République (CPR),[33] the Parti démocrate progressiste,[34] activists from the Islamic movement,[35] secularist[36] and Islamist[37] journalists. The Committee rejected the regime's anti-Islamic rhetoric, shared by part of the opposition (e.g. Et-Tajdid party).

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[30] Interview with the author, Tunis, September 2013.

[31] Ben Achour, 'Religion, Revolution, and Constitution: the case of Tunisia'.

[32] Ib.

[33] Among whom Abderraouf Ayadi e Fethi Jerbi; CPR was founded in 2001 by Moncef Marzouki, former President of the Republic.

[34] Among whom the leader of the party, Nejib Chebbi.

[35] Such as Ziad Daoulatli and Samir Dillou.

[36] Such as Lofti Hajji, director of the magazine *Leaders*.

[37] Such as Mohamed Fourati, who was imprisoned several times because of his adhesion to Ennahdha (V. Geisser - E. Gobe, « Des fissures dans la « Maison Tunisie ? » Le régime de Ben Ali face aux mobilisations protestataires », *L'Année du Maghreb II Dossier: Femmes, famille et droit* (2005-2006), pp. 353-414). Furthermore, 18 October Committee brought together the opposition parties and organizations represented in Paris (V. Geisser - E. Gobe, « La question de « l'autenticité tunisienne » : valeur refuge d'un regime à bout de soufflé? », in Y. Ben Achour - E. Gobe (eds), *Justice politique et société au Maghreb. L'Année du Maghreb III*, CNRS Editions, Paris, 2007, pp. 371-408), such as the CPR itself, the Forum démocratique pour le travail et les libertés, Ennahdha, the Tunisian Workers Communist Party, the Nasserist Union, the Association of political prisoners' families and relatives, the Tunisian Committee of Human Rights, Solidarité tunisienne, Voix Libre.

Thus the Islamic movement has practiced pluralism over the last decade. As MP Meherzia Labidi told me in March 2015,

> It's intellectual pluralism. This was one of the first issues Ennahdha dealt with, since it was founded: we were aware we didn't represent the whole Tunisia. Pluralism emerged in the movement's mentality and action: in 2015 we joined the 18th October coalition, with personalities from the centre, the left, liberals and communists, about the core issues in building the new Tunisia: democracy, citizenship, change in power, opposition to Ben Ali.[38]

Nonetheless, the Islamic discourse is hegemonic, in Gramsci's terms (1966).[39] Bourdieu's praxiological approach provides the conceptual tools to interpret Gramsci's idea of hegemony from an anthropological perspective. Hegemony indeed does not describe people's coercive abidance by norms and ideology; it accounts for the spontaneous prevailing of consensus about certain shared ideas and behavioural patterns. Drawing on Campanini and Mezran's work,[40] I analysed Gramsci's theory of hegemony as part of the Tunisian *du'āt*'s (those who pursue *da'wa*) practices and ideas of Islamic social and political activism. In Gramsci's reflection, hegemony implies the complex ways coercion and consensus interact to maintain the domination of the masses; the Italian intellectual shows the overlapping of forms of power exerted by the political society, institutions and government on the one side (coercion), and those wielded by civil society, private citizens and intellectuals on the other side (consensus). Hegemony is thus the way power relationships are produced and reproduced, sustaining social inequalities.[41] As a 'complex interlocking of political, social and cultural forces',[42] hegemony covers the social process through which the dominant ideology (as an articulate, conscious and formal system of values, meanings, ideas and convictions) is lived and practically organized through dominant meanings and values. Besides indoctrination and exploitation, it covers a whole system of practices,

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[38] Interview with the author, Tunis, March 2015.

[39] A. Gramsci, *Quaderni dal carcere*, Einaudi, Torino, 1966.

[40] M. Campanini - K. Mezran (eds.), *I Fratelli musulmani nel mondo contemporaneo*, Utet, Torino, 2010.

[41] A. F. K. Crehan, *Gramsci, cultura e antropologia*, ed. it. a cura di Giovanni Pizza, Argo, Lecce, 2010, p. 114.

[42] R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford University Press, London, 1977, p. 108.

expectations, and the ways people perceive themselves and their world. Like religion in Durkheim's[43] and Geertz's[44] view, hegemony is a lived system of meanings and values that confirm each other, being experienced practically.

The Islamic movement in Tunisia is trying to produce its hegemony in society, having developed its counter-hegemonic discourse for decades under the secular regimes. It covers both political and civil society, that in the Islamic hegemonic project do not appear as separated universes, but rather as a weaving of interests and interrelationships. The ethnographic glance shows the continuities existing between Islamic political representatives and *du'āt*; in my research I got to know both thanks to their mutual acquaintance. Though some young *du'āt* accept the *islāmī* (Islamist) designation, others refuse such self-identification. Achref Wachani, a computer engineer in his twenties and an activist from the Shabab ar-Rissali youth association, once told me:

> I hate the term "Islamist"! For me, my Muslim belonging descends from tradition. Islam invites to be active citizens rather than activists! Problems get solved through commitment, not through Islamic slogans. Many call themselves Islamists, but they don't do anything but waving their flags to attract people. Furthermore, those involved with the recent terrorist attacks call themselves Islamists, which scares people.[45]

Achref had followed a course in Islamic finance and wished to work for Zeytouna, the only Tunisian bank inside the financial circuit observing the shariatic rules concerning credit. Though holding ambitions of changing the Tunisian banking system following Islamic rules, in 2013 he was working for a bank that did not practice them. In mid-2014 he decided to change jobs and got a job in a technology development company; though earning less, he was happier, having followed his conscience. Furthermore, for *du'āt* pursuing the rituals is not enough to live in accordance to Islam; one day in March 2015 I was walking with Achref in Bourguiba ave, in Tunis, which was packed with people going to the mosques for the Friday prayer (*al-*

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[43] É. Durkheim, *The Forms of the Elementary Religious Life*, Translated from the French by Joseph Ward Swain, Collier Books, New York, 1961.

[44] C. Geertz, *Interpretazione di culture*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1998.

[45] Interview with the author, Tunis, April 2015.

jumū'a); the crowd was such that many were praying in the street. Achref said:

> They hardly give over one hour per week to religion: they rush to the city centre, they pray and then go back to their daily activities. They separate religion from life. For me and my friends it's different. Islam gives us a model to live an engaged life and work hard for our society. Islam counters easy money and invites to work hard.[46]

Indeed, for Tunisian *du'āt* Islam is not just an intellectual conviction nor a belief to be lived inwardly. Achref told me:

> We don't agree with those who say that Islam is only an inner dimension of the heart, as religion is conceived of in the European or American tradition.[47]

Islam for them is a framework showing how to be active in society, not as activists but as citizens. Islamic education, the main aim of Shabab ar-Rissali, is intended as an invitation to young people to live as active Muslims. This is how they construct their hegemonic discourse, aimed at making Islam a spontaneous inclination in daily life.

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[46] Interview with the author, Tunis, April 2015.
[47] Ib.

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