The London School of Economics and Political Science

From Resistance to Revolutionary Praxis: Subaltern Politics in the Tunisian Revolution

Jann Boeddeling

A thesis submitted to the Department of Government of the London School of Economics for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, London, April 2020

Declaration

I certify that the thesis I have presented for examination for the MPhil/PhD degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it).

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. Quotation from it is permitted, provided that full acknowledgement is made. This thesis may not be reproduced without my prior written consent.

I warrant that this authorisation does not, to the best of my belief, infringe the rights of any third party.

I declare that my thesis consists of 86,014 words.

Abstract

How and where did mass mobilization for radical demands emerge in the process of the 2010/11 Tunisian revolution? And how can this inform theories of revolution, especially considering conditions of hegemony? These questions were addressed using secondary and archival sources as well as an event catalogue to identify time periods, localities and social groups for ethnographic study, leading to a focus on subaltern social groups, primarily in the provincial interior, where eight months of fieldwork and over one hundred open, narrative interviews were conducted. The thesis argues that provincial subalterns responded to their hegemonic disincorporation and increased policing during the Ben Ali regime by developing new forms of politics and resistance. Entailing interactions with political activists and unionists as well as significant levels of self-activity, this process furnished local solidarities, defensive logics, and principally economic-corporate claims which drove mobilization in the Tunisian interior during the first three weeks of the revolution. For the people there, indiscriminate violence and killings caused a collapse of existing hegemony, leading them to re-interpret their struggle in revolutionary terms by drawing on local histories of revolt. This revolutionary praxis of subaltern social groups and the radical demands they articulated pushed UGTT leaders and coastal middle-classes to turn against Ben Ali, thus creating national-level revolutionary mobilization. From this it is concluded that scholarship on the Tunisian revolution has assigned undue weight to organized and activist agencies while largely ignoring subaltern self-activity. It also suggests that Tunisian studies had overplayed the social and regional reach of the Ben Ali era hegemonic formation. The conclusion that revolutionary praxis developed among disincorporated subaltern groups in Tunisia further intervenes in studies of subaltern politics which have tended to posit everyday politics, hidden resistance, and defensive mobilization as a certain ceiling to subaltern self-activity. Addressing critical theories of revolution, the thesis concludes that self-change through revolutionary praxis appears possible in the context of a contemporary hegemonic formation, pointing to potentials for subaltern self-emancipation. Absent significant (organic) intellectual labor and organizational resources, however, revolutionary transformation will likely be limited by persistent forms of domination, counter-revolutionary forces and hegemonic ideas.

Dedication

To my mother
Dr Elisabeth Lohmann
8.11.1958 – 18.12.2016

Acknowledgments

A Note on Transliteration

I have used a simplified version of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* transliteration system when rendering Arabic words into the Latin alphabet. Diacritics are used for the Arabic letters ʿayn (ʿ) and the long vowels alif (ā), wāw (ū) and ya (ī). When quoting colloquial Arabic, I follow the Tunisian pronunciation. Whenever my interlocutors use a particular of spelling their names, I follow those. I also use Anglicized or French variants of places and names, which are spelled according to convention.

Table of Contents

I. Introduction

I am seeking to rescue the poor […] from the enormous condescension of posterity. […] Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience. (Thompson, 1963, pp. 12–3)

We demand at least that history does us justice, that people say: "Thank you, sons of Kasserine. Thank you, sons of Thala, of Hay Ennour, of Hay Ezzouhour." The least of things, thanksgivings. Because we liberated you. We ended your exile. We allowed you to live freely in your country. (Choukri Slougui, unemployed youth, Kasserine)

The motivation of this thesis is to understand the role of subaltern politics in the revolution of 2010/11 which ended the rule of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia. It builds on the finding that we know astoundingly little about how "ordinary" men and women, and particularly those at the margins of society, featured in this momentous social and political change. Their agency, struggles, and aspirations are acknowledged only in passing by most scholars and have not yet been made the focus of much empirical research. Interest tends to be devoted instead to those elements that are held to have been more decisive: the agency of powerful elites, of opposition groups and networks who mounted a challenge to them, notably trade unionists and other activists, and the processes of social, economic, cultural, and pollical change which play into, or are held to explain, these agencies. Taking inspiration from the work of thinkers like E.P. Thompson and Antonio Gramsci, the approach of this thesis is a different one. It seeks, in reference to Thompson's afore-quoted words, to give testimony to the agency of people whom scholarship all too often excludes from history as the record of "what mattered". With Gramsci, the thesis understands people who are thus excluded as being part of subaltern social groups. The theoretical framework in chapter three defines this concept in more detail, but subaltern social groups can provisionally be understood as

encompassing workers, peasants, and the urban and rural poor, but also women, the unemployed, and various minorities. In this broad sense, then, subalterns are those who are not middle-class men, social elites, or otherwise privileged groups, but are in a subordinate social, economic, and cultural position. Among subalterns in Tunisia thus understood, the thesis focusses on young, marginalized men coming from provincial and popular quarter backgrounds who, unlike members of organized groups foregrounded in the scholarship on the Tunisian revolution, had little prior involvement in politics.[1]

The foregoing appear as good reasons to expect that, parallel to their marginalized position in society, independent initiative of subalterns did not have much influence on the development of the revolution. And yet, the statement of Choukri Slougui that is quoted above, a young unemployed man from the remote city of Kasserine in the Centre-West of Tunisia, suggests that subalterns do not share such an assessment. Indeed, Choukri states in no uncertain terms that he believes the actions of people like him – young, marginalized men in provincial regions of the country – had been decisive in the making of the Tunisian revolution. How can that be? How did members of subaltern groups develop such a profound sense of historical agency? In other words, might their role in the revolution indeed have been a significant one? Rather than seeing statements like Choukri's as expressing an inflated sense of self-importance, hurt masculine pride, or something similar, the path chosen here is to keep open and explore such questions. To do so, the thesis presents a historical narrative

---

[1] When I use the term subaltern (social groups) without further qualification, it refers to the above provisional understanding as a social position of (intersecting) marginalization and subordination (see chapter three). When indicated, I use "subaltern" in a narrower sense to designate the young, mostly unemployed men without prior involvement in politics who are the main protagonists of the thesis. From their experience, I sometimes generalize to speak about Tunisian subalterns in the first sense. Relatedly, I mainly use the term "politics" to refer to its more formally organized manifestations from which these young men – but not all subalterns – were or felt excluded. Political activism is understood as participation in parties, the trade-union, and civil society organizations that interact with and seek to influence public authorities, the government, or policy decisions on the national or supra-local level. If usage of these terms departs from the above, it is indicated through an epithet. Finally, and while some of the activists who feature in the thesis come from a subaltern background, they are sometimes distinguished from subalterns because of the level of access which they have to politics. This pertains particularly to most trade unionists due to the degree of state-domination, clientelism, and material rewards within union structures (see political context section below).

that seeks to understand how young men like Choukri came to engage in the struggle which brought down Ben Ali despite their lack of experience with formal political activism. It describes how their lifeworlds gave rise not just to grievances and reasons to do so but also provided them with their own knowledge and logics that allowed them to mobilize independently as well as in interaction with other social groups – subaltern and otherwise – in the context of the revolution.

The thesis puts this independent initiative by diverse members of subaltern social groups center stage. It is understood in terms of subaltern self-activity, which, with Gramsci, is agency that is 'not the result of any systematic educational activity on the part of an already conscious leading group,' but which is informed by 'everyday experience illuminated by […] the traditional popular conception of the world' (1971, pp. 198–9). In other words, it is subaltern agency that is self-directed rather than due to the leadership of other social groups. At the same time, it is not autonomous but draws its intention and purpose from subaltern experience of the world and their interpretations based on popular forms of knowledge. It is historically and culturally embedded in conditions which, as chapter three discusses, will largely be understood through the lens of hegemony. Through these latter aspects, it can be appreciated as spontaneous not in the sense of being unthinking or otherwise the opposite of a rationally organized agency (Snow and Moss, 2014), but in a Gramscian meaning in which 'the "most spontaneous" movement […] is simply […one where] elements of "conscious leadership" cannot be checked, have left no reliable document' (1971, p. 196). This paucity of historical documentation distinguishes subaltern self-activity from the agency of more formally organized groups and easily leads to an evaluation of its lacking efficacy. To develop a richer understanding and against a silencing of subaltern experience, we need to seize on 'every trace of [their] independent initiative' to allow us to see their role as 'protagonist[s] of a real and effective historical drama' (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 55, 130). The thesis follows this Gramscian imperative to uncover traces of subaltern self-activity that help us understand

their historical agency. It does so mainly by drawing on sources of oral history in which members of diverse social groups recount their lived experience of the Tunisian revolution.

Based on this original ethnographic evidence, the thesis argues that subaltern self-activity contributed centrally to the development of the revolution in Tunisia. Members of subaltern social groups will be shown to have engaged in a broad range of activity under Ben Ali through which they resisted conditions of their own marginalization. Some unfolded in interaction with more formally organized agencies such as trade unionists of the *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail* (UGTT), while others had no discernible relationship with them. Based on these experiences, subalterns in the regions of the Tunisian interior mobilized from mid-December 2010 onwards, interacting with and at times supported by local activists. However, it was the self-activity mostly of young, unemployed men in these provincial settings which transformed struggles directed against socio-economic marginalization and police oppression into mass mobilization around revolutionary demands. In the course of their own struggle, rather than through the leadership by other social groups, subalterns made the decisive passage from demanding improvements of their particular conditions to seeking the overthrow of the political regime. Through this, the thesis argues, their self-activity came to constitute the main social force to which diverse social groups reacted in ways that ultimately led to the creation of a revolutionary situation in the country. In other words, members of subaltern social groups were indeed key protagonists in the historical drama of the revolution. Thus, the first main contribution of this thesis is to provide a historical narrative that details the important role played by subaltern self-activity in the context of the Tunisian revolution. This adds, and partially sits as a corrective, to a scholarship which has thus far not devoted significant empirical attention to their agency.

Drawing on a perspective that emphasizes dynamics of learning and development in struggle, the thesis makes a second main contribution that pertains to our theoretical understanding

of subaltern politics in the context of revolution. It shows that such a perspective can help us grasp how subalterns identified and overcame broader structures of their subordination, as well as where they were unable to do so, and thus illuminates the possibilities and limitations of subaltern self-emancipation under conditions of hegemony. The thesis argues that we can understand crucial transformations of localized and defensive mobilizations as resulting from dynamics of learning and development in struggle. Members of subaltern groups drew on the knowledge which they had gained in resisting forms of hegemony and domination to expand their mobilization and develop it into local revolts. Through this, they created qualitatively different situations in which not just them, but a broader cross-section of the population gained new experiences, notably entailing exposure to extreme repression by the regime. This led people in the rebelling communities to reinterpret their situation by drawing on popular notions of resistance to unjust rule and develop new conceptions that fundamentally put into question the legitimacy of the regime. When they rearticulated the purpose of their collective struggle as wanting to bring down that regime, a process of popular learning in struggle had given rise to revolutionary praxis. However, this "situated" learning also meant that revolutionary demands remained under-specified and were not developed beyond expressing an opposition to the existing regime. Driven mainly by subaltern self-activity and not commanding significant intellectual and organizational resources of its own, popular forces were unable to construct detailed conceptions for the transformation of society, let alone a sustained project for bringing about such changes. By analyzing them through a context understood in terms of hegemony, the thesis contributes a theoretically grounded understanding of these achievements and limitations of subaltern self-emancipation in the Tunisian revolution.

To develop these arguments, the thesis is structured as follows. The remaining two sections of this introduction clarify key terms used in the thesis and provide a brief overview of the Tunisian political context including a timeline of main events in the revolution. Chapter two

then reviews the literature on the Tunisian revolution to identify to what extent it has addressed the role of subaltern social groups. The chapter finds that the scholarship has not devoted significant attention to the question how subaltern agency might have contributed to creating a revolutionary situation in Tunisia and identifies a subaltern politics perspective as a suitable theoretical framework for addressing this gap in the literature. The following chapter elaborates this theoretical framework by drawing on the thought of Antonio Gramsci and perspectives of learning in struggle developed by other critical scholars. The chapter also describes how the research project of the thesis developed and discusses the methods used in the empirical research, its limitations, ethical considerations, and reflections regarding my own positionality. This concludes the introductory part of the thesis.

The main part of the thesis is divided into four chapters that analyze the empirical material. Chapter four of the thesis begins by discussing the lifeworlds prior to the revolution of the young men who were my key subaltern interlocutors and the activities with which they responded to the conditions they faced. The latter will be understood primarily in terms of hegemonic contractions that led to their economic disincorporation as well as to an increased policing of their everyday lives. The chapter details the forms of subaltern politics in which they engaged under Ben Ali and provides the historical context for understanding the self-activity of my interlocutors in the revolution. The next chapter then details the development of mobilization by diverse members of subaltern groups in several localities of the Tunisian interior over the first three weeks following the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi on 17 December 2010. It shows that the struggles of the young men in these localities, while bearing many similarities, being mutually reinforcing to some extent, and interacting with organized activist agencies, were not uniform but had important local causes and purposes. Indeed, it was based on these localized struggles that their self-activity developed into forms of revolt which then created greater unity both between and within localities, giving rise, among others, to new forms of solidarity.

Chapter six provides the climax of the historical narrative. It argues that the new situation created by the self-activity of the youth enabled people in the rebelling localities of the Tunisian interior to break free of the strictures posed by hegemony and unite in a struggle for the purpose of overthrowing the regime. Here, mass mobilization around radical demands for the end of the regime occurred for the first time, thus creating a revolutionary situation on the local level. The last empirical chapter argues that these developments gradually caused parts of the UGTT leadership to turn against the regime and call for strikes which eventually led to a revolutionary situation on the national level. The chapter suggests that this increased role of the union was concomitant to a moderation in demands to which members of subaltern social groups responded by occupying the central government square in Tunis. Here, they managed to develop important specifications of revolutionary goals and push through their realization. However, these did not entail conceptions and strategies for deeper transformation of Tunisian society and subalterns eventually ceded the stage of national politics to an electoral and constitution-drafting process. The final chapter of the thesis concludes that members of subaltern social groups played a key role in the Tunisian revolution but that the degree to which they were able to achieve self-emancipation was limited by their own weaknesses in leadership and organization that ultimately gave counter-revolutionary forces the upper hand.

Definitions of Key Terms

Any study of the developments that led to the overthrow of Ben Ali and the establishment of a democratic system in Tunisia necessarily confronts the question whether they can be defined as revolution. The purpose of this thesis is not to contribute to the research on this question but to understand the role of subaltern social groups in these developments, irrespective of whether they are conclusively considered as a revolution. As such, this section

will only briefly discuss the scholarly debate in order to define the usage of this terminology in the scope of this thesis. As the foregoing already suggested, the thesis refers to the events of 2010/11 in Tunisia as a revolution. The immediate reason for this choice is that it reflects the language used by my subaltern interlocutors. Most notably, they considered their actions as revolutionary ones. Since the thesis is concerned with the actions by members of subaltern social groups and the degree to which they contributed to the historical events in Tunisia, answering these questions arguably hinges on trying to understand how my interlocutors experienced and interpreted them. Because of this perspective, and since the thesis principally works with sources of oral history, using a different terminology would lead to constant contradiction of my interlocutors and thus to a tension that would preclude precisely the kind of historical understanding which this thesis strives for. While the thesis thus adopts the designation of revolution in accordance with the language of my interlocutors, the following offers a brief review of scholarly discussions and clarifies definitions of key concepts around revolution as they will be used here.

The debate on what constitutes a revolution has a long history in the social sciences. A definition frequently referred to as authoritative is given by Skocpol who holds that what she terms social revolutions are marked by 'the coincidence of societal structural change with class upheaval; and the coincidence of political with social transformation' (1979, p. 4). She uses this to distinguish them from revolts that do not cause such structural change and from her definition of political revolutions that 'transform state structures but not social structures, and […] are not necessarily accomplished through class conflict' (ibid). Tilly agrees that transformative changes are a necessary feature of revolutions, but defines such revolutionary outcomes more broadly as those cases in which 'a transfer of power over the state occurs such that a largely new group of people begins to rule' (2008, p. 126). According to him, this is to be distinguished from a revolutionary situation which precedes these changes. He holds that, 'in a revolutionary situation, at least two centers of power emerge,

16

each of them commanding significant coercive force and each of them claiming exclusive control of the state. […And] a full revolution combines [these] two elements: a revolutionary situation and a revolutionary outcome' (ibid). Drawing on Trotsky, Tilly specifies his understanding of revolutionary situations in terms of multiple sovereignty which he holds is precipitated by three factors: 'the appearance of contenders, or coalitions of contenders, advancing exclusive alternative claims to the control over the government […] commitment to those claims by a significant segment of the subject population […and] incapacity or unwillingness of the agents of the government to suppress the alternative coalition' (Tilly, 1978, p. 200). Others hold that we need to understand the 'changes that develop before the overthrow of the old regime […as:] 1. elite defection and the formation of opposition, 2. polarization and coalition building, 3. mass mobilization' (Goldstone, 2009, p. 20).

The scholarship has offered various explanations for the occurrence of these revolutionary situations and outcomes (for a review see e.g. Goldstone, 2001; Lawson, 2016). Some have argued that populations left behind by processes of economic modernization develop grievances which are sufficient to account for the emergence of revolutionary mobilization (Gurr, 1970). Others discussed a broader constellation of structural developments and macro conditions that lead to the formation of coalitions between peasants and bourgeoisie (Moore, 1966), state crisis through war and divisions in the ruling elite (Skocpol, 1979), or a weakening of its legitimacy as well as intra-elite competition (Goldstone, 1991). What has been referred to as the "fourth wave" of theories on revolution has sought to add to such structural factors of state weakness an analysis of 'leadership, ideology, and processes of identification with revolutionary movements as key elements in the production of revolution' (Goldstone, 2001, p. 139). This scholarship emphasizes that revolution needs to be understood in processual terms. As such, Lawson holds that 'revolutions are sequences of events that attain their significance as they are threaded together in and through time' and this means that 'all explanations are "case-specific"—revolutions are particular assemblages

that combine in historically discrete ways (Lawson, 2016, pp. 111–2). He thus argues against generally applicable models for explaining revolutions. Still, Goldstone (2013, pp. 16–25) finds that revolutionary situations are necessarily precipitated by an "unstable equilibrium" in which conditions of fiscal crisis, elite divisions, new forms of exclusion, popular grievances, and favorable international relations combine to create social instability as the fundamental cause of revolution.

With these conceptions of revolution, scholars have argued that the 2011 wave of mobilization in the Arabic-speaking world are best understood as 'non-violent, political revolutions [...that are] distinct from their predecessors' (Allinson, 2019, p. 143). By contrast, Lawson holds that they 'share a familiar revolutionary heritage [...] within the framework established by the 1989 negotiated revolutions that ousted state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe' (2015, p. 466). Other scholars agree that they can be understood as political revolutions that were similar to the transformations after the fall of the Soviet Union in that they featured unarmed movements against dictatorship and for democracy (della Porta, 2014a, 2016; Ritter, 2015). However, most regional experts have opted for a more cautious definition, calling them the "Arab uprisings", and pointing to a lack in terms of social, political, and economic transformation, the success of counter-revolutionary movements, and limits in terms of the aspirations of popular mobilization (e.g. Achcar, 2013, 2016; Chalcraft, 2015; Gerges, 2015). In line with these scholars, I will use the term Arab uprisings to refer to the 2011 episodes of contentious mobilization in the Middle East and North Africa. Looking more specifically at Egypt and Tunisia, Bayat made an important contribution. He argues that the novelty of the developments there was that they featured a 'profound disjunction between two key dimensions of revolution: movement and change', adding that they 'had a character of their own, marked by a mix of revolutionary movements and reformist change' which he terms "refolution" (2017, p. 154). Bayat thus draws on the distinction between revolutionary situation and outcomes discussed above and holds that, while not in terms of the latter, we

can understand developments in Tunisia as having featured the kind of mobilization that characterizes the former.

To a certain extent, I follow Bayat's distinction between revolution as movement and as change, as well as the understanding of the latter in Tunisia in terms of reform. While the thesis also discusses the reformist trajectory which Tunisia took, its principal concern is with the phenomenon of revolution as movement. Indeed, this is closest to the sense in which my interlocutors used the term revolution to designate the mass mobilization for the overthrow of Ben Ali which they engaged in. In this thesis, then, the developments in Tunisia are discussed as revolution only in so far as they refer to what I will call revolutionary mass mobilization. Thus, and in agreement with Bayat's overall evaluation of revolutionary mobilization and outcome taken together as "refolution", my usage of the term is not meant to designate that the transformation of Tunisian society corresponded to the above definitions of revolution. Certainly, they did not come up to the level of a social revolution according to Skocpol, and even the criterion of a transfer of power to Tilly's "coalitions of contenders" appears unmet. Indeed, the absence of revolutionary forces capable or willing to govern instead of the old regimes is exactly what leads Bayat to conclude that we need to speak about reformist rather than revolutionary outcomes. However, this raises the question, in turn, of how to understand the notion of a revolutionary situation which, with Tilly's above definition, is often conceptualized as the emergence precisely of a rivalling group ready to take power.

How, then, can we conceptualize a situation which features revolutionary mobilization but does not entail a coherent movement that seeks to take state power? I hold that such conditions are best understood with Gramsci as a "crisis of authority" which can emerge when 'huge masses […] have passed suddenly from a state of political passivity to a certain activity, and put forward demands which taken together, albeit not organically formulated,

add up to a revolution' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 210). In the context of this thesis, the term revolutionary situation will be used to refer to this Gramscian definition for a crisis of authority. Such a situation does not include a coherent movement that 'seeks to control the state [...and] aims (among other things) to transform more or less fundamentally the national society' (Goodwin, 2001, p. 10), and is thus different from Tilly's above notion of "multiple sovereignty". Rather, a revolutionary situation is understood here to exist once masses begin to mobilize for revolutionary demands. In other words, it is defined for the purposes of this thesis as the occurrence of revolutionary mass mobilization. Finally, the term revolutionary process is used here to designate the series of events in which such a situation is created, sustained, and eventually ended. With these specifications, the principal research questions of the thesis are: How was a revolutionary situation created in Tunisia? And what was the role of subaltern social groups in revolutionary mass mobilization? In order to contextualize the discussion in the thesis, the following section provides a brief overview of historical conditions in Tunisia leading up to the revolution.

Political Context

Prior to the Arab uprisings of 2011, Tunisia received relatively scant attention in the Anglophone academy. A small country of just over 11 million inhabitants located at the crossroads between the Eastern and Western Mediterranean, it featured little of the natural resource wealth, entanglement in the Arab-Israeli conflict, or history of military coups and ideological conflict that drew scholarly attention to other states of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Indeed, it has been argued that, 'politically, Tunisia remained an inconspicuous island of calm in troubled seas prior to December, 2010' (Alexander, 2016, p. 1). This appeared to be the case certainly as far as significant episodes of popular politics and mobilization are concerned. In his survey history on *Popular Politics in the Making of the*

Modern Middle East, Chalcraft (2016), for instance, makes reference to Tunisia mainly for comparative purposes. He remarks that 'where state centralization was less violent, and where it took more "national" forms, such as in Tunisia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, protests against central power were less marked' (ibid, p. 151). This is similar to Tripp (2013, pp. 150–1) who discusses Tunisia outside of the dynamics of the Arab uprisings only regarding UGTT-organized protests against IMF and World Bank-imposed reforms in 1977-78 as well as the Bread Riots which broke out for similar reasons in the south of the country over the winter of 1983/84. By contrast, Beinin and Vairel's (2013) volume on social movements and mobilization in the MENA do not discuss the country before the Arab uprisings at all. Scholarly attention was mirrored in the media. Outside of the Francophone press, few international news outlets even had journalists in the country (Jebnoun, 2012, p. 60). It is probably not too big an exaggeration to say that Tunisia was considered relatively dull by many international observers.

To some extent, this record had been set in the comparatively "uneventful" process of Tunisian independence from colonial rule. Whereas other countries in the MENA region went through prolonged periods of armed conflict and popular mobilization, Tunisia was able to achieve what some have called a "negotiated independence" (Willis, 2012). Pressure by armed insurrection in neighboring Algeria forced the French to focus their resources on this more valuable colonial possession and allowed Habib Bourguiba, leader of the main Tunisian movement for independence, the Neo Destour party, to negotiate a withdrawal of French colonial forces in 1956 (ibid, p. 30). Bourguiba, a lawyer from the coastal city of Monastir who had studied in Paris, chiefly determined the strategy of the party. It drew its membership largely from the new urban middle-class which had grown under colonial rule, shared 'a modern, secular upbringing [...,and] were mostly employed in modern strata of the labor market, be it in the new liberal professions or in the emerging public sector' (Erdle, 2010, p. 56). In line with the interests and values of his own class background and support base,

Bourguiba championed social modernization and orientation towards Europe. He was challenged by Salah Ben Youssef who sought to take over the leadership of the Neo Destour and favored closer ties with the Arab world, notably Nasser's Egypt. The rivalry resulted in an armed conflict in which the Youssefists took to guerrilla-style campaigns in the rural regions of the country's interior that formed the core of their support base and which cost the lives of over a thousand Tunisians, around twice as many as the struggle against the French (Willis, 2012, p. 40). Bourguiba, with the support of UGTT militants as well as French forces, emerged victorious and became the first president of independent Tunisia in 1957 whereas Ben Youssef fled to Egypt.

With these developments, two important patterns of political developments in Tunisia would be set. The first was that Bourguiba established an authoritarian style of rule based on the Neo Destour as the single state party and followed his strategy of economic and social modernization as well as foreign policy and cultural orientation towards Europe rather than the Arab world (Camau and Geisser, 2003). Stylizing himself as the "supreme combatant" of the independence struggle and "father of the nation" he built a strong leader cult around himself. In his own words: 'I have created a nation largely around myself, around my person, and I wish to see that nation strengthen itself around the state, which should endure' (Habib Bourguiba, quoted in Murphy, 1999, p. vi). Bourguiba established a system in which 'formal institutions or mechanisms designed to allow ordinary Tunisians to participate in the decision-making process were kept to a minimum in favour of a form of authoritarian paternalism that sought to guide Tunisia along a "correct path"' (Alexander, 2016, p. 71). For some time, Bourguiba was judged successful as Tunisia experienced stable economic growth rates, increased living standards and levels of education, and improved women's rights. In lieu of electoral politics, political inclusion was achieved in two ways. The Neo Destour itself as well as UGTT were set up as the two main channels of interaction between political elites and the population. The former was turned into a mass party, and 'the UGTT, the only other

organization with nationalist credentials and organizational power to rival the Neo-Destour, became an integral element of Bourguiba's support coalition' (Warkotsch, 2015, p. 69). This strong role of the single national labor union became the second feature of Tunisian politics established under Bourguiba.

The function of UGTT in post-independence Tunisia has been described as a "transmission belt" that aided in the implementation of economic policy and relayed popular demands to the central government through its grassroots structures (Yousfi, 2015a). In addition, most of the Bourguiba era developmentalist programs had its origin in UGTT, especially when its powerful secretary general Ahmed Ben Salah was made super minister of finance, planning and economics in 1961. Adopting a classical import substitution regime, these programs included modernization (and partially collectivization) of agricultural production as well as industrialization through state-led investment and the creation of public companies (Murphy, 1999). An expanding state administration provided further employment opportunities in the public sector, befitting the swelling number of university graduates which policies for increasing access to higher education produced. While the experiment with "Tunisian socialism" proved relatively short-lived and Ben Salah was dismissed in September 1969, his legacy lingered as the state remained heavily involved in the economy throughout the Bourguiba period (e.g. the state investment ratio stayed above 50%), and subsequent economic liberalization was limited (ibid). UGTT also played an important role as a mechanism for job allocation in the public sector where it flanked the official bureaucracy and entry examinations. These channels and policies provided opportunities for upward social mobility which benefitted broad segments of the population and reduced economic inequality, including between coast and interior. Scholars have argued that, 'under President Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia's single-party system was authoritarian enough to provide stability while remaining open to new constituencies and responsive to new concerns[..., and] the government pursued a pro-Western policy abroad and a pragmatic development strategy'

(ibid, p. 2). With the noted exceptions of UGTT's influence and pro-Western policy, the Tunisian system thus bore important parallels to the "populist authoritarianism" set up in numerous countries of the MENA region in which lack of political rights were accepted by many for the benefit of economic development and redistribution (Hinnebusch, 2006).

Indeed, like many of those systems, the Bourguiba regime faced a series of challenges when, in the 1970s and 80s, accelerating foreign debt forced the country to seek assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that were tied to programs of structural adjustment in economic policy. While growth remained high in Tunisia over the 1970S, averaging 7% annually, state-investments were increasingly debt-funded and, over the period of 1970-1985, Tunisia's long-term debt increased roughly tenfold, reaching over 60% of GDP (Murphy, 1999, pp. 84–5). It was on the back of these developments, and under conditions imposed by the IMF, that the regime embarked on a program of economic liberalization and austerity measures. As the state withdrew from its redistributive role and tightened its authoritarian rule (Bourguiba was declared president for life in 1975), the union leadership decided to engage in a long struggle for greater autonomy from the regime and finally, after a period of increased sectoral strikes, called the first national strike on 26 January 1978 since independence (Yousfi, 2018, pp. 14–5). Bourguiba used the army to repress revolts that had erupted in several cities, leaving 200 people dead according to some estimates (Tripp, 2013, p. 150), and plunging UGTT into a deep crisis as many of its leaders were arrested (Yousfi, 2015a). Having managed to put down the uprising, the regime continued the shift in economic policy.

When a cut of subsidies on basic staples including bread and flour was announced in December 1983, large parts of the country's rural and southern regions rose in revolt, leading to the Tunisian bread riots of 1984, although this time a domesticated union leadership meant that only grassroots trade unionists were involved (Yousfi, 2018, p. 17). Indeed, and

while the Islamist MTI movement had been growing over previous years, these 'riots were spontaneous expressions of discontent from below, independent of the organizational efforts of political forces […as] neither the UGTT, nor the MTI had a role in their organization' (Warkotsch, 2015, p. 83). As with the general strike before, Bourguiba relied on the military to confront the riots which only ended when he revoked the price hikes in one of his last public speeches. In parallel, the regime moved decisively to reign in the union which had continued its own strike actions. In January 1986, UGTT headquarters were invaded, its unruly leadership arrested, and replaced by regime loyalists in a special union congress in 1987 (Bellin, 2002, pp. 112–3). By the mid-1980s, then, the Bourguiba regime had become visibly unstable and corporatist integration through UGTT had been weakened. In this context, army general Zine El Abidine Ben Ali had first been made head of national security to combat the union, general social unrest, as well as the growing Islamist threat. After being promoted to Prime Minister in October 1987, he seized power in a bloodless coup d'état the following month.

The growing opposition against Bourguiba and the fact that Ben Ali managed to give his seizure of power a legal veneer resulted in strong initial support for the new president (Erdle, 2010). Indeed, Ben Ali appears to have succeeded in pacifying the social and political unrest which had been building over the previous decade. He dissolved the presidency for life, rescinded economic hardship measures, freed union leaders and Islamist prisoners, and presented himself as a champion of democratization and economic reform. The central measure in establishing his rule was the 1988 National Pact which bound together all political parties in the country under a renewed pledge of unity (Anderson, 1991). The pact acknowledged an Islamic heritage against Bourguiba's staunch secularism, guaranteed periodic, free elections, protection of human rights and basic liberties, and promised a fair distributing of economic benefits, while emphasizing the need for solidarity, collective effort, and responsibility of all Tunisians. Scholars have argued that, through 'the National Pact, Ben

Ali recreated the image of an organic corporatist state, reinvigorating the role of national organizations as partners with the state, […and established] the theme that […] the problems of the country had stemmed from abuse of power under Bourguiba' (Murphy, 1999, pp. 174–5). In creating this appearance, the pact bought Ben Ali enough time and maneuvering room to solidify his rule.

Promises of democratic opening were retraced after a comparatively strong showing of Islamist candidates winning 17% of the vote in the 1989 parliamentary elections which gave a pretext to crush the movement, leading to thousands of arrests and its de facto dismantlement by the early 1990s (Warkotsch, 2015, p. 90). The secular opposition, shocked by its own weak results in the elections, supported the crackdown, and Ben Ali succeeded in exploiting fears of an Islamist takeover among elites to legitimize a severe intensification of policing during much of his rule while he continued to rhetorically endorse their agendas for political reform. He also curbed opposition within the Neo Destour, which he renamed the *Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique* (Constitutional Democratic Rally, RCD), and that was effectively turned from a party for mass-inclusion into a system of patronage that created dependencies which solidified his personal hold on power (Hibou, 2006). After Ben Ali had consolidated his position, the 1990s witnessed a tightening of political space for all political actors and an increase in policing that turned Tunisia into a veritable "security state" (Sadiki, 2002). An important element in ensuring the stability of this system was the regime's changed approach towards UGTT. Under the terms of the National Pact, the union was given a new role as a partner in a newly established collective bargaining system with the national employer's association which served to fundamentally shift its tactics from strikes to negotiations. As a leading scholar on UGTT noted, the result was that '"associative participation" subdued the fighting spirit of the union movement that had developed in the 1970s; key social objectives were brushed aside as the parties worked together to meet competitiveness targets' (Yousfi, 2018, p. 23). In parallel, Ben Ali continued policies of co-

optation by stacking the union leadership with RCD members and from the union congress of 1994 onwards, the UGTT secretary general was effectively a regime appointee.[2]

Aside from neutralizing the organized political opposition and contestation out of the trade union movement, the most important element for the stability of the Ben Ali regime came from its comparative success in stabilizing the economy. Centered around the promotion of an export-oriented growth model in line with Washington-consensus economic policies, macroeconomic indicators improved as inflation and the budget deficit were reduced (Yousfi, 2018, pp. 21–2). Indeed, 'the government's policies generated one of the most impressive records in the Middle East and North Africa […and,] by the mid-1990s, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and most Western governments hailed Tunisia as one of the best exemplars of structural economic reform' (Alexander, 2016, p. 3). This development was also reported by Tunisian authorities to have benefitted the poor. According to official statistics, 'Tunisia succeeded in cutting the overall poverty rate by about 80 percent' in the two decades leading up to the year 2000, while achieving stable growth rates above 4% in 1995-2000 (Ayadi et al., 2005). Other scholars have argued that the benefits of economic growth were overwhelmingly allocated to an increasingly small support-base of the regime among the coastal middle-classes and business elites, leading to increasing inequalities that affected people in the marginalized regions of the country's interior particularly severely (Warkotsch, 2015). In this sense, Tunisia seemed to be following a regional pattern whereby populist authoritarian regimes, in the wake of neoliberal economic reforms and the reduction of social provision through the state, secured their rule through a system of "crony capitalism" that primarily benefitted social elites (Hinnebusch, 2006). Indeed, while Ben Ali had seemingly managed to subdue organized politics and

---

[2] While my broad definition of subaltern social groups includes workers, it is due to the degree of state domination over UGTT discussed here that trade unionists in Tunisia cannot *tout court* be understood as subalterns – even if, as the below shows, some continued to advocate subaltern causes.

opposition to his rule, unrest of economically marginalized groups began to show again in the late 2000 in the interior of the country.

The revolt that erupted in the center-south region of Gafsa in 2008 constituted the most important episode of popular mobilization in the country since the 1984 bread riots and has been regarded by the scholarship as the main precursor event of the revolution (e.g. Allal and Geisser, 2011a; Hmed, 2015). At the heart of it were grievances of the local population around general economic marginalization and corrupt hiring practices of the main regional employer, the state-owned *Compagnie des phosphates de Gafsa* (CPG) (Chouikha and Geisser, 2010; Geisser and Gobe, 2007). After the annual recruiting for new CPG employees left most of the local candidates unemployed and with the few available jobs reportedly given to applicants with ties to RCD, people from the town of Redeyyef in January 2008 mounted a protest campaign with the support of their local UGTT branch. Protests spread to several other towns in what is known as the Gafsa mining basin and lasted for several months. Over this period, the regime imposed a literal siege on the dissenting towns and largely succeeded in keeping the events out of the heavily controlled national media and most ordinary citizens remained unaware of the events for months. By that time, the regime had managed to forcefully put down the local uprising, leading to the death of three protesters and the arrest of its charismatic trade unionist leaders in June 2008 (Allal, 2010). While major episodes of popular protest had been absent in Ben Ali's Tunisia for almost twenty years, the events of Gafsa were followed in the summer of 2010 by riots in the city of Ben Guerdane at the border with Libya, showing that discontent was once more brewing in the marginalized regions of the country.

What became apparent through the involvement in the Gafsa revolt of local union structures was that UGTT continued to harbor militant tendencies in its grassroots structures that were ready to support local struggles (Yousfi, 2015a). These were significantly smaller

mobilizations than the wave of labor uprisings involving industrial workers all over the country that the official union leadership had endorsed in the 1970s and 80s (Beinin, 2015; Feltrin, 2018a). Indeed, scholars have argued that what became visible in the later Ben Ali years was a pervasive divide between "two UGTTs": a leadership loyal to the regime and base structures in which more radical activists were to some extent able to continue a minimum of opposition activities (Camau and Geisser, 2003). To a certain extent, this was said to have been in continuity with a function of the union since Tunisian independence by which it had provided a space for the expression of critique to the regime and of political tendencies that were not represented, first in the single party, and then in the RCD. Indeed, this role of the union has been characterized as a "refuge" for opposition politics both under Ben Ali and before (Yousfi, 2015a). In the aftermath of the Tunisian revolution, scholars identified more signs that opposition and resistance had not altogether disappeared under Ben Ali. This literature will be discussed in the following chapter since it has more direct bearing on the questions of how a revolutionary situation was created in Tunisia, and what the role of subaltern social groups was in this process.

In terms of the broader political context since independence, however, it appeared that the system of political containment set up by Ben Ali was effective compared, for instance, to the period of strikes and mobilization that had spelled the end of Bourguiba. As such, some scholars held that, since 'the mid-1990s […] the rowdiness was gone. The government deftly hijacked the opposition's democratic rhetoric while it waged open war against anyone who dared to criticize the president and the ruling party […and, thus,] Tunisian politics had lapsed into another period of theoretical irrelevance' (Alexander, 2016, p. 3). Others agreed that Ben Ali had created conditions under which Tunisian society suffered a "political death" (Camau and Geisser, 2003). Mass consent was also argued to have been achieved by regulating access to the spoils of comparatively strong economic growth via the regime's influence over the political economy that created conditions of dependency and surveillance

through a dense network of regulations, debt, and a still sizeable welfare state (Hibou, 2006). As such, the preeminent sociologist working on the Ben Ali regime, Beatrice Hibou, summarized that the regime had managed to elicit "voluntary servitude" from 'the vast majority of the population – not to say almost all if it' (Hibou, 2011a, pp. 9, 211). To reiterate, these dynamics were complemented by a particularly intense form of securitization in which the security apparatus became the primary mechanism for governing Tunisians (Ismail, 2003), making Tunisia one of the most oppressive states in the MENA (Black, 2010).

In this context, the sequence of events that unfolded over the 29 days from 17 December 2010 to 14 January 2011 when they culminated in the flight of Ben Ali from the country came as a major surprise to observers of Tunisia. Protests first erupted in the city of Sidi Bouzid following the self-immolation of Mohammad Bouazizi, a young local fruit vendor. Confrontations between several hundred protesters and security forces were first reported in Sidi Bouzid the following day, Saturday 18 December, and the regime sent additional police forces to quell the unrest on Sunday. The local confrontations continued and on 24 December the first reported protest events occurred in some of the smaller towns of the Sidi Bouzid region, while in neighboring Kasserine a group of lawyers staged a demonstration (ICG, 2011, pp. 4–5). As in Gafsa two years earlier, local trade unionists got involved in the protests in Sidi Bouzid. They succeeded to spread information about the local events, especially in international and online media, whereas the heavily controlled domestic news sources did not report on the unrest. By the end of December, the regime announced development measures for the Sidi Bouzid area and Ben Ali gave a televised speech on 28 December in which he denounced the unrest. A protest by several hundred had taken place in Tunis the day before in front of the UGTT headquarters and lawyers organized a demonstration in solidarity with Sidi Bouzid, but the capital otherwise remained calm.

Developments accelerated after the beginning of the new year. On 3 January, student protest occurred in the town of Thala and three days later lawyers went on strike across the country. On 7 January, the regime moved to arrest bloggers and cyber-activists who had been spreading news about the unrest online and Al-Jazeera reported a national uprising (Ryan, 2011). Protest dynamics escalated when police forces killed up to 50 people during three days of heavy crackdown on protesters in Kasserine and Thala between 8 and 10 January, followed by a sudden withdrawal of security forces from that region (ICG, 2011, p. 5). The regime tried to maintain a socio-economic reading of the protest and Ben Ali gave a second televised speech on 10 January in which he promised to create 300,000 new jobs over two years but also continued to condemn the mobilization which he claimed was instigated by foreign forces (Randeree, 2011).

Subsequent to these events, cracks emerged within the national UGTT that had been loyal to the regime up until that point and on 12 January the first mass protests occurred in Sfax, Tunisia's second city, when the regional union leadership there called for a general strike (ICG, 2011, p. 6). Confrontations with security forces had spread to the capital's popular quarters the night before, but it was not until UGTT called for a general strike on 14 January that the streets of Tunis swelled with crowds. As thousands gathered in front of the Ministry of Interior on the capital's main Avenue Bourguiba and shouted for his departure from the country, Ben Ali fled the country in the afternoon hours of that day (Kirkpatrick, 2011). The following chapter opens the discussion of the thesis by reviewing the scholarship that has sought to explain these rapid developments, placing special attention on the extent to which it has discussed the role of subaltern social groups.

II. Reviewing Scholarship on the Tunisian Revolution

This chapter reviews the literature on the Tunisian revolution and seeks to identify a suitable theoretical framework for the thesis. As the introduction set out, the first concern of this thesis is with the question of how a revolutionary situation was created in Tunisia. Thus, and following the distinction introduced by Bayat (2017), the focus is on "revolution as movement", or on revolutionary mass mobilization (RMM), rather than "revolution as outcome" in terms of social and political transformations. Second, the thesis is concerned with the role of subaltern social groups in creating and shaping the revolutionary situation. The chapter proceeds in four sections. Section one discusses studies which seek to explain the Tunisian revolution through anterior causal factors. They are subjected to a critique from arguments for more processual accounts of revolutions. Section two reviews contributions which avowedly or implicitly take on board those critiques. It finds that they explain the creation of RMM primarily through the leadership of activist groups or dissolve agency into transformative events. They do not devote much empirical or theoretical attention to the agency of subalterns without prior engagement in politics and are subject to challenges on their empirical foundations. Section three then turns to studies drawing on critical theories of revolution and subaltern studies. It finds that they address the challenges faced by other studies. While they provide significant insights on the role of subaltern social groups in revolutionary processes and thus suggest a subaltern studies framework for this thesis, the scholarship in this paradigm does not offer detailed investigation of the creation of RMM in Tunisia. The chapter concludes by finding that explanations for the emergence of RMM in Tunisia are subject to theoretical challenges and are often weakly grounded in empirical research, while the role of subaltern social groups in the Tunisian revolution is left under-researched, thus constituting a significant gap in the scholarship which this thesis addresses.

Arguments on Causal Anteriorities

This section reviews studies which attempt to explain the Tunisian revolution through what can be classified as primarily structural factors as well as a set of anterior developments that produced a mobilizing potential. One cluster of studies comes from the comparative study of authoritarianism and is based largely on a "transitology" framework of democratization. It discusses structural weaknesses in the existing regimes to explain the Arab uprisings more broadly, including the Tunisian revolution. One of its main findings is that only authoritarian regimes termed "sultanistic", understood as combining weak bureaucratization and strongly personalistic rulership, succumbed to uprisings (Stepan and Linz, 2013). Scholarship in this paradigm tends to attribute the weakness of such regimes primarily to the configuration of the security apparatus, focussing particularly on explaining breakdowns of elite coalitions in the form of defections in the military. Regarding Tunisia, defections in the armed forces are variously held to have resulted from a military leadership alienated by the regime (Barany, 2011; Goldstone, 2011), its degree of professional-bureaucratic rather than patrimonial organization (Bellin, 2012; Burns, 2018), dissenting junior officers (Nassif, 2015), or a combination thereof (Brooks, 2013). Some explain the relevance of these factors in turn through decision-making of officers at critical junctures (Gallopin, 2019), while others see military defection as an expression of an overall lack of repressive capacity which is explained through the absence of oil-rents and hereditary regime succession (Brownlee et al., 2013, 2015, chap. 2). Given their focus on macro factors and an assumed decisiveness of disembedded state structures and elite agencies, studies under this paradigm offer only limited insights into the questions that animate this thesis.

Employing variants of modernization theory and political economy perspectives,[3] other scholars have focused on identifying structural developments which they hold gave rise to the grievances and dissent that fueled the Arab uprisings. These studies tend to foreground neoliberal economic developments and regime policy choices. More broadly, they identify a regime type termed "post-populist authoritarianism" which excluded growing numbers from state benefits and economic opportunities (Hinnebusch, 2015). For the case of Tunisia, studies in this vein discuss increasing socio-economic marginalization subsequent to the breakdown of a social contract which traditionally incorporated broad segments of society through the distribution of economic benefits (Achy, 2015). Others found that the fiscal policies of Western countries after the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 led to increased inflation (Farha, 2014), and that privatization in the economy was coupled with extreme corruption, especially in the inner circle of the president (Gherib, 2012). Moreover, failed developmental strategies produced inequalities between coast and interior as well as high youth unemployment (Achy, 2011; Alexander, 2011). According to some, this was exacerbated by an export-oriented agricultural policy which worked to the detriment of subsistence farming that had previously served as a safety net for unemployed youth in the interior regions (Gana, 2013a).

In an important comprehensive assessment, Hibou (2011b) finds that the failure to economically integrate the youth, particularly of the interior regions, and the subsequent increased policing of their discontent, violated the moral economy established previously by the authoritarian social compact. Some have stressed that these unemployed youth were not only regionally concentrated but, due to a concomitant expansion of university enrolment,

---

[3] Not all studies referenced here explicitly draw on modernization theory or political economy, the most notable exception being those discussing new technologies and social media. However, their underlying argumentative structure still corresponds to the logic of these theoretical paradigms.

increasingly highly-educated (Blavier, 2016; Campante and Chor, 2012). Beissinger et al. summarize the gist of these arguments in finding that

Ben Ali 's [...] policies, exacerbated two significant inequalities in Tunisian society: one age-based, as job creation did not keep pace with population growth, and one spatial, between the capital and the regional periphery [, ...so that] the unemployed were overwhelmingly young and spatially concentrated in peripheral areas, including the Center-West region [...] where a third of the population lived below the poverty line (2015, pp. 13, 16).

Other scholars drawing on a critical political economy perspective have stressed the role of the working classes and labor movements as well as of new technologies in the Arab uprisings. Such perspectives hold that 'the balance of class forces, [... especially prior] organization and consciousness of workers and their participation in the revolutions' were decisive (Allinson, 2015, p. 295). Indeed, several important studies have singled out the differing degrees of working-class organization as the key explanatory factor for popular mobilization in Tunisia and Egypt (Beinin, 2015, 2016), stressing 'the fact that Tunisia had the strongest working class in the Arab world' (Feltrin, 2018b, p. 44). As such, Beinin concludes that the 'most important conclusion to be drawn from Egypt and Tunisia is that class continues to matter [...and that] Tunisia's advantage over Egypt was the existence of the UGTT' (2014, pp. 43, 45).

Kindred arguments can be found in Gilbert Achcar's work. However, he holds that in Tunisia the labor movement was insufficient to account for RMM (2013, chap. 4), and that '"cyber-activism" played a crucial role in bringing about a "scale shift" in the struggle and transforming it into a general uprising' (ibid., p. 133). Other scholars have explored this combination of economic developments with the spread of new technologies and social media (Honwana, 2011, 2013; Rivetti, 2015). While most of the studies reviewed thus far foreground structural causes, including economic and technological changes, and grievances as the main explanations for the Tunisian revolution, the accounts discussed last also touch on the development of oppositional politics. The studies which will be reviewed next can be

characterized as explaining the revolution through such dissent-formation in the political and cultural fields.

The explanatory structure of studies emphasizing opposition politics is that various kinds of dissent pre-dating the revolution add up to 'a cumulative process of learning and resistance' (Ayeb, 2011, p. 475) which fashioned 'the networks or informal connections between activists of which the Tunisian revolution is the product' (Hibou and Khiari, 2011, p. 33). Gana argues that this dissent was underpinned by a tradition of "cultural critique" in Tunisia which, in 'the months leading up to the revolution [, … became] more and more adventurous, vocal, and direct, particularly on YouTube and Facebook which circulated, among other things, explosive hip hop videos' (2013b, p. 19, also 2014). Some have echoed the importance of a resistance culture in rap music for inspiring youth protesters (Bouzouita, 2013; Ovshieva, 2013), while others have claimed that more traditional poetry, and especially the legacy of Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi, Tunisia's poet of resistance against French colonialism galvanized protesters in the revolution (Elbousty, 2013; Omri, 2012; Rice and Hamdy, 2016).

Allal and Pierret's (2013) edited volume discusses the emergence of the Arab uprisings through the lens of "dissenting communities", with their contributors singling out, in the case of Tunisia, football fans, cyber activists and lawyers. Gobe has further developed his analysis on the lawyers and claims that they had become particularly vocal in their criticism of the regime (2016), while others have added the importance of resistance to land-appropriation by farmers, especially in the governorate of Sidi Bouzid (Gana, 2013a, pp. 64–6). An emphasis is put by scholars on almost a decade of resistance and dissent-formation among youth who were socially "degraded" [*déclasser*] by being excluded from state benefits and who expressed frustration with corruption, unemployment and regional as well as generational cleavages (Allal and Geisser, 2011b). This had found its most notable expression in the 2008 revolt in the Gafsa mining basin (Allal, 2010; Allal and Bennafla, 2011; Chouikha and Gobe,

2009; Gobe, 2010), which is almost unanimously seen by the scholars cited in this section as the key precursor movement to the revolutionary mobilization. These developments, then, in combination with increasing cyber-activism, were said to have constituted an 'extra-institutional and informal continuation of oppositional politics under Ben Ali' (Chomiak, 2011, p. 75). Some have argued that these prior experiences of protest and resistance, together with everyday forms of politicization, 'accumulated within the minds of individuals […], becoming a leitmotif for their subsequent engagement in the "revolution"' (Allal, 2012a, p. 62). Finally, Ayari has claimed that 'a prior semantic framing in terms of a "struggle for dignity" […] has allowed for the alliance between the different social categories of Tunisian society' (2011, p. 209). This framing, he holds, was an "unintended effect" of previous struggles, notably by the communist party and the revolt in the Gafsa mining basin (ibid., pp. 213-5), to the effect that 'from the start of the social riots and violent clashes in Sidi Bouzid […] requests in terms of work and bread [were] already transcended' (ibid., p. 215).

The scholarship reviewed in this section discusses numerous elements of a possible explanation for the Tunisian revolution, thus addressing the first research question on the emergence of RMM. First, more structuralist accounts have identified a complex set of grievances ranging from weaknesses of the regime, including rampant corruption, clientelism and an increasingly unstable "authoritarian social compact" which excluded increasing numbers from state benefits. Moreover, important economic misalignments led to growing inequalities between rich and poor as well as between coastal and interior regions, and to spiraling youth unemployment, breaking the link between educational attainment and social mobility held up by the regime as a key promise. All of these are important factors which this thesis will continue to discuss. However, claiming that they sufficiently explain mobilization, let alone revolution, entails a certain "spasmodic" conception of human agency whereby people cannot but respond to (a sufficiently large degree of) structural changes (and concomitant grievances) by rebelling. Such arguments have been subjected to critique for

ignoring that mobilization, though building on grievances, is a process requiring mobilizing activities and ideas, viz. products of human agency, as well as resources to succeed (e.g. McAdam, 1982; McAdam et al., 2001; Opp, 2009; Snow and Benford, 1988; Tarrow, 1994; Tilly, 1978). In other words, short of wanting to claim that the factors discussed above had already created 'a revolutionary situation that needed only a "spark" to ignite it' (Owen, 2014, p. 257), they do not explain RMM. Hence, for the purposes of this thesis, causal anteriorities are treated as necessary but insufficient conditions of RMM in Tunisia. Consequently, and while they have featured as workers, unemployed, rappers, and more, the agency of members of subaltern groups in creating RMM, too, is left unaccounted for by this scholarship, relegating them to a status of aggrieved communities surging into action.

The case is somewhat different regarding accounts which focus on the political pre-history of the revolution. They point to important activities of various groups in Tunisian society including cyber-activists, lawyers, grassroots trade unionists, and members of political opposition parties. Particularly pertinent for this thesis, they also noted previous acts of resistance by members of subaltern groups, such as small-scale farmers and the young unemployed, many of whom were residents of the interior of the country. These accounts, as well as more structuralist perspectives on "working class power", thus discuss groups which would become active in the revolution and effectively argue for the development not just of reasons *for* but a capacity *to* mobilize. Their argumentative structure takes that an accumulation of struggles explains the revolutionary process because the amount of experience gathered, and attendant mobilizing capacity built, had reached a point of sufficiency. Therefore, scholars employing this perspective hold that the summary of these developments had, at least with hindsight, made the Tunisian revolution "almost pre-announced" (Ayari et al., 2011). While these accounts discuss developments that were vital to the revolution, they also face significant challenges.

On the one hand, they struggle to account for which groups and dynamics contributed to this accumulation, what concrete tactics participants adopted in 2010/11 based on this experience, or how and where learning occurred – on the level of individuals or of organizations, for instance? On the other hand, the argument is not so different from structuralist accounts in the sense that here, too, sufficient explanation of the revolutionary situation is claimed based on causal antecedents. Hence, it risks falling into historical determinism and does not leave room for the many ways in which people acted creatively, learned in the process of struggle, and came up with innovative ways of challenging the regime in power. Such accounts cannot explain how key challenges were overcome in the revolutionary process – notably how localized, sectorized, and largely socio-economic protests spread and unified different social groups, and how radical political demands were articulated.

Against such arguments, a growing number of scholars have made the case that explanation based on causal antecedents cannot account for the emergence and development of revolutionary situations (Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule, 2012; Kurzman, 2004a, 2012) or, more broadly, many other instances of social and political transformation (Jasper and Duyvendak, 2015; Sewell, 2005). A central claim here is that certain situations are sufficiently different from "normal times" to require specific empirical and theoretical analysis (della Porta, 2016). Scholars differ in their assessment of whether there is an ontic discontinuity that does not allow for the application of social-scientific modes of causal explanation (Kurzman, 2004b), if a mode of theoretical explanation specific to those situations of crisis is required (Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule, 2012; Dobry, 1986), or if one needs an altogether different approach in social theory that accords greater space to agency and structural transformation (Jasper and Duyvendak, 2015; Sewell, 2005). While these contributions are substantially different, a notion common to all of them is that the situations under question, whether revolutionary ones or a broader category of transformative events, entail much

greater latitude for agency than usual, as they are marked by conditions in which social structure becomes less binding and orienting – a condition variously conceptualized as uncertainty (Kurzman, 2004b), de-structure (Sewell, 1992), structural fluidity (Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule, 2012), or the intensification of strategic action dilemmas (Jasper and Duyvendak, 2015). As proponents of one perspective summarize, 'revolutions and other political outcomes must be traced through micro-level, cultural, and strategic interactions, because initial conditions are never enough' (Jasper and Volpi, 2017a, p. 25).

For the purposes of this thesis, these interventions are taken as arguments in support of the claim that causal antecedents, while providing important conditions of possibility for revolutionary situations, do not offer sufficient explanation for them, including in the Tunisia case. Moreover, these approaches, by emphasizing the importance of protest experience including by participants without prior engagement in activism, also appear to make space for an analysis of the role played by members of subaltern groups in revolutionary situations and social transformation. Finally, these interventions share an insistence that research seeking to explore these situations requires empirical, and where possible ethnographic, work that can understand and account for the "lived experience" of those who participated in them. The following section looks at a literature that seeks to develop such "processual" or "eventful" accounts of the Tunisian revolution.

Processual and Transformation Perspectives

This section reviews studies that deal with the revolutionary process in Tunisia. They explore in detail how RMM was created, addressing issues such as how the geographical spread of, diversity of participants in, and the increasing politicization of protest were brought about. Some have a comparative lens, but many are single case studies. The contributions discussed

in this section are theoretically diverse, but most draw either on a variant of Social Movement Theory (SMT),[4] Strategic Interactionism Perspectives (SIP), or on the French Sociology of Revolutionary Situations (SRS), which takes its main inspiration from Dobry (1983, 1986). The section discerns two main explanatory patterns. One, less developed, looks at dynamics of various social groups' politicization in the later stages of the revolutionary process, mostly by emphasizing "transformative events" (Sewell, 2005).

Another pattern, more dominant in the scholarship, asserts that the initial protests in Sidi Bouzid and its environs established two key transformations and dynamics which, through their subsequent intensification and extensification, explain the emergence of RMM. First, a strategic representation, mostly by cyber-activists, of Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation and subsequent events bridged cleavages and convinced previously uninvolved people to join protests. Second, initial events are claimed to have activated networks of activists, mostly grassroots trade unionists, who organized further protests which, in turn, led to an increase in base pressure that gradually drew regional and then national UGTT structures into the struggle. In what follows, this second pattern is treated first, as it emerged earlier and partially influences later accounts.

Some scholars arguing along this latter line hold that, though the 'majority of protesters were youth form the popular quarters' (Allal and Geisser, 2011b, p. 64), UGTT, first on the level of local union members and ultimately through its national leadership, supported, protected, connected, and politicized the mobilization in 2010-11 sufficiently to create RMM in Tunisia (ibid., pp. 66-7). Such accounts claim that UGTT's gradual assumption of a leadership role in

---

[4] While some hold that SMT is an inherently structuralist perspective that is incapable of developing agentic and processual explanations (e.g. Goodwin and Jasper, 2004; Jasper, 2010; Kurzman, 2004b), the contributions reviewed in this section coming from an SMT perspective draw on elements of it such as emotions, framing, and collective identity which proponents of the SIP take on board (Jasper and Duyvendak, 2015; Jasper and Volpi, 2017b). Moreover, it appears difficult to argue that, at least in its later iterations (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011; McAdam et al., 2001), SMT is not full of dynamics and processes.

the struggle as well as the convergence of the diverse opposition forces were sufficient to create a revolutionary coalition which bridged existing social divides (Alexander, 2011; Ly Netterstrøm, 2016; O'Brien, 2015; Penner-Angrist, 2013). Some submit that this was achieved by a vanguard of radical trade unionists and activists from the banned communist party (del Panta, 2019). Others, noting the origin of unrest in popular quarters, hold that it was chiefly cyber-activists who, by diffusing shocking images of the 8 to 9 January violence in Kasserine, managed to connect and politicize previously largely isolated, socio-economic protests (Chouikha and Gobe, 2011). Such arguments stress that cyber-activism led to improved information flows during the Tunisian revolution compared to previous episodes of contestation (Axford, 2011; Chomiak and Entelis, 2011; Wulf et al., 2013). Others have emphasized the intersection of social and new satellite media, most notably *Al Jazeera*, in diffusing information during the revolution (Rane and Salem, 2012).

A notable issue in these studies is that their claims for the leadership role of the respective activist communities which they foreground are only weakly grounded in empirical research. Indeed, none of them are based on detailed ethnographic study. Their accounts are thus problematic, seeing as "processual" and "eventful" arguments on the development of revolutionary situations need to be developed based on understanding the lived experience of participants. This is not necessarily helped by combining the arguments to claim that revolt was transformed into a national revolution through tactics of mobilization contributed by UGTT activists, alongside the framing of the struggle in terms of dignity by cyber activists (Zemni, 2015a). Indeed, there are no more than three main studies to date using ethnographic research to establish claims on how exactly activists purportedly organized, spread, and politicized protest during the revolutionary process in Tunisia. Given the centrality of these studies, they will now be reviewed in greater detail.

Arguments on the efficacy of the cyber-activist community are developed empirically in Lim's much-cited study (2013). Her key claim is that cyber-activists successfully bridged social divides and facilitated street protests because they spread 'dramatic visual evidence that turned a local incident into a spectacle […and produced] a master narrative that culturally and politically resonated with the entire population' (ibid, p. 921). She takes this to answer her central question: Why did protests spread across Tunisia in the revolution when they had remained localized to Gafsa two years earlier? The protagonist in this account is a distant cousin of Mohamed Bouazizi. He 'skillfully amplified the burning body story by […] adding these two ingredients – a university graduate and a slap – […] convince[ing] the country that the uprising in Sidi Bouzid was a fight for justice […thus] distancing it from the notion of "bread riots" […which] was very important in mobilizing Tunisians, especially the urban middle-class youth in more affluent regions' (ibid, pp. 927-8). Lim notes that the diffusion of this "master frame" relied on a "hybrid network" combining social media, satellite TV, and mobile phones. As cyber-activists connected these infrastructures, information flowed freely and 'had a direct influence on the proliferation of protests. As information travelled from one place to another, Sidi Bouzid's struggle for justice, freedom, and dignity journeyed with it […] reproducing the protests' (ibid, p. 936).

This key account was amplified by Breuer et al. (2015) who contributed their own fieldwork and claim that cyber-activists from Tunis broke the media blackout by travelling to the interior and providing on-the-ground coverage of events.[5] They similarly hold that the "emotional mobilization" through images of regime atrocities 'led to the formation of a national collective identity supportive of protest […which] facilitated a large "cycle of protest"' (ibid, pp. 766). From a theoretical standpoint, these arguments on diffusion raise questions about the leader-centrism and voluntarism of "framing entrepreneurs" to whose

---

[5] According to my own interviews, the information which the Tunis cyber-activist community diffused was overwhelmingly sourced online, while only two of its members travelled to the interior before 14 January.

43

"smart ideas" others cannot help but respond with protest, as well as elements of technological determinism and a certain "hydraulic" notion of how ideas travel which these arguments entail (see Chalcraft, 2017 for a critique along these lines). Empirically, it is worth noting that the above studies are based on two (Lim, 2013) and four (Breuer et al., 2015) interviews with cyber-activists only – alongside social media data, for which it is hard to establish who read it and what effect it had outside the online community. This is hardly enough to support claims that it was their activity which convinced the entire country to engage in revolutionary struggle.

The empirical basis of arguments on the efficacy of radical union members is somewhat stronger. Here, the key reference is the contribution by Hmed (2012) who provides an ethnographic account of "lived experience" during the first days of the revolution. He begins by showing that initial demonstrations in the city of Sidi Bouzid were marked by a separation between night-time "riots" of economically marginalized "neighborhood youth" and largely peaceful daytime demonstrations of "precarious middle classes" which involved 'members of the banned political parties involved in local chapters of the sole union [UGTT]' (ibid, p. 37). It is the linking of these two groups which he holds explains the "local revolutionary process". He claims that, though youth brought in crucial knowledge of their quarters for fighting the police, local trade unionists provided two tactics that were vital to guarding 'the movement from being surrounded and geographically confined' (ibid, p. 39), and which they had learned from the uprising in the Gafsa mining basin.

The first tactic was to organize more demonstrations in Sidi Bouzid as well as to convince contacts in other local union branches to do the same. This, Hmed claims, citing a trade unionist in Menzel Bouzaiane, led to the first confrontations between youth and security

forces in that town during which two protesters died (ibid, p. 40).[6] The second tactic, for which he draws on testimony by several local union members, was to "politicize Bouazizi's suicide" by linking it to the region's dire socio-economic situation – thus "generating an event" – and to diffuse this narrative through the media (ibid, pp. 40-42). This, he claims, was done by committees of activists, whose members coordinated with the youth and 'discreetly instigated protests in which […they made] the connection between social and political demands' by supplying slogans and tactics of mobilization (ibid, pp. 45-48). Thus, Hmed's argument is that grassroots trade unionists provided effective leadership to a nascent revolutionary movement by organizing, spreading, and politicizing protest, as well as by forging the crucial link between night-time "riots" by subaltern youth and more middle-class protests during the day. It merits pointing out that he corroborates these key activities only through interviews with trade unionists and one with the same cousin of Mohamed Bouazizi who featured in the above accounts on cyber-activists.

Hmed's study strongly influenced the literature on the Tunisian revolution and is, together with the work of pre-eminent UGTT scholar Hèla Yousfi, the principal source referenced by scholars claiming an organizing and leadership role for trade union activists prior to the Sfax general strike. Yousfi makes the broader claim that 'in the absence of a leadership […] trade unionists furnished the physical, organizational, and political resources that permitted the progressive transformation of a spontaneous uprising into a revolutionary process' (2015a, p. 96). While she agrees that they did not "start the movement", the overall function of the trade unionists in the revolutionary process is described by her as "framing" (*encadrement*), which she defines as 'the politicization of the movement, the coordination between the different groups of actors […] and the mediation with the different union and political authorities' (ibid, p. 63). Aside from her own interviews with UGTT members and leaders, she

---

[6] It merits noting that this claim, that trade unionists managed to spread protests from Sidi Bouzid to other locations, is the most frequently cited finding of the study, and is backed only by a single interview. It will be contested in this thesis since I was unable to confirm it in my own interviews.

references Hmed (2012) to support her claims, holding 'union dynamics that initiated at Sidi Bouzid spread to other regions (Yousfi, 2015b, p. 324).

She also holds that it was only after the killings in Thala and Kasserine that the situation reached "a point of no return", as mounting base pressures finally swayed the members of the UGTT executive committee to decide, on 11 January, that constituent union branches could call for regional general strikes (2015a, pp. 71–3). She quotes the UGTT deputy secretary general, who stated that 'following the repression in Kasserine, we broke away from the social partnership state of mind and clearly moved to the political level' (2015b, p. 325). Based on the arguments of Hmed and Yousfi, scholars have come to assign a pivotal overall role to UGTT in the revolutionary process. This chimes with findings on the weakness of other civil society and opposition groups under Ben Ali (Camau and Geisser, 2003; Hibou, 2011a; Hudáková, 2019), meaning that there was simply "no other force available".[7] However, this explanation for the creation of RMM – especially in light of the weakness of others – entails very strong claims on what local trade unionists and the resources they commanded were able to achieve. Finally, the studies empirically corroborating these claims do so only through interviews with trade unionists, disallowing for conclusive assessment of whether subalterns without prior activist experience would confirm their leadership role.

A different explanatory pattern is found in those perspectives which place less emphasis on leadership through activist agencies but foreground "transformative events" instead. This is the case for della Porta's two major studies (2014a, 2016) comparing the Arab uprisings to democratization in Eastern Europe and aiming 'to understand the specific mechanisms of eventful democratization' (2014a, p. 23). She characterizes events as situations in which

---

[7] This was quite different from the situation in Egypt where scholars have shown that the fall of Mubarak was preceded by a "decade of protest" in the course of which various opposition movements that came to play an important role in the revolutionary process there took shape, built mobilizing capacity, and bridged divides by engaging in joint mobilizations, some of which will be discussed below (see e.g. Abdelrahman, 2013, 2015; Clarke, 2011; El-Ghobashy, 2012; Mahmood, 2012; Shehata, 2012; Shorbagy, 2007; Singerman, 2013).

'structural constraints are, if not overcome, at least weakened by the very capacity of mobilization to quickly transform relations [… so that] the event is strongly constitutive of identities' (ibid, pp. 19, 63). Della Porta (2016) identifies three sets of cognitive, emotional, and relational mechanisms that produce these effects, specifying them as "framing in action" based on ideas about participatory and deliberative democracy, "emotional prefiguration" that reduces fear and creates a sense of empowerment, and "time intensification" that leads to an accelerated formation of individual and organizational ties (ibid, pp. 22-23).

In the Tunisian case, she holds that a unifying cognitive framing resulted from an accumulation of opposition-cooperation prior to the revolutionary process (ibid, pp. 296-8), but gives prominence to emotional shifts through moral shocks during the latter. She claims that moral shocks produced by the killing of demonstrators, especially in Kasserine, marked a "point of no return" that, in turn, created momentum and helped to overcome fear. In this way, protests were radicalized, politicized and drew in new groups, especially youth in the capital (ibid, pp. 275-6, 300-1). Finally, she briefly mentions that time was intensified in street battles as well as through "revolutionary euphoria" (ibid, p. 305). Thus, her explanation for the radicalization and spread of protests in Tunisia is based primarily on emotional dynamics. Specifically, she draws on an argument developed in her case studies on Eastern Europe (ibid, pp. 117-27), whereby repression 'backfired, producing anger rather than fear' which, alongside outrage and hope, 'contributed to fuel rebellion, up to the breakdown of the regimes' (ibid, p. 118). However, she does not provide empirical details on how these emotional mechanisms led to RMM in Tunisia.

Other scholars have embarked on developing the *Microfoundations of the Arab Uprisings* (Jasper and Volpi, 2017b) by drawing on the emerging Strategic Interactionist Perspective

(SIP).[8] A detailed study of cases in North Africa including Tunisia from an SIP is found in Volpi (2016), who states that he 'places the protest event, as a potentially "transformative event", first in the causal narrative' (ibid, p. 14). He underlines that, protest spreading from the city of Sidi Bouzid to surrounding areas over the first ten days of the revolutionary process were "un-revolutionary" as they did not entail challenges to the regime, remaining focused instead on socio-economic demands (ibid, pp. 77-79). He submits that a revolutionary situation only emerged in the first two weeks of January when security forces deployed lethal force against socio-economic protests in the governorates of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, and the national UGTT began to openly criticize the regime's tactics (ibid, p. 100). Based on these developments, he claims that the decisive transformation was brought about when 'new media […] facilitated the emergence of a new discourse about "revolution" that formalized and advertised the transformative nature of these protests', concluding that 'the increased level of material and discursive confrontation between the protesters and the regime led to a qualitative shift in the articulation of the protest' (ibid, p. 101).

Volpi's main explanation, then, is not so much in terms of agency but of an efficacy of contingent sets of interactions that make a transformative event, which in turn produces information that, if spread, also spreads its "transformative nature". Indeed, for Volpi, 'it is not so much that actors create revolutions, as that revolutions create actors' (ibid, p. 16). Others have echoed this claim, stating that overall conditions of fluidity and innovation during the revolutionary process led to a "collective psychological transformation", so that it is 'not the revolutionaries who make the revolution, but the inverse' (Hmed, 2011, p. 17). However, neither account provides empirical detail or theoretically founded arguments as to

---

[8] While this major edited volume does not contain an empirical study of Tunisia, one of the contributors does underline the importance of emotional dynamics for the case of Egypt (Khosrokhavar, 2017).

how the transformative power of these events came about – or indeed how it worked itself out to produce revolutionary consciousness.

Only loosely fitting with the perspective of "eventfulness", Allal (2012a, 2012b, 2013) traces how experiences of resistance and protest on the level of individuals and small groups prior to the revolution shaped their engagement in the revolutionary process. While his arguments are thus principally in terms of causal anteriorities, he also searches for transformations during the revolutionary process. He finds that, for a middle-class former RCD member, 'the photos […] of the mutilated bodies of young men brutalized during the events in Thala and Kasserine on January 8 and 9, 2011, were what ultimately pushed her to turn to collective protest' (Allal, 2013, p. 195). He also looks at 'categories of the subaltern population' (Allal, 2012a, p. 66), including the participation of youth from two popular quarters in Tunis. Building on their experience of police violence, often at football matches, and drawing on informal networks of friendships as well as forging new links with neighboring quarters, Allal discusses how these youth battled with the police, came to "hold the quarter", and establish themselves as "real men" and "revolutionaries" in the process (2012b, 2012a). However, he does not detail how this constituted the crucial "transition to politics" (*passage au politique*) of those youth who were lacking prior activist experience. Instead, he concludes that 'social interaction at the neighborhood and family-level, the (inter)play between generations, the memories of past protests, and/or the experience of police repression all constitute […] mainsprings of engagement in the "Revolution"' (Allal, 2012a, p. 76). While these are important factors and his are the only ethnographic studies investigating the participation of subaltern youth in the revolution, he ultimately does not conceptualize or offer much detail on how their agency contributed to transformative dynamics in the revolutionary process.

Finally, by far the most comprehensive chronicle of the events in Tunisia between 17 December 2010 and the flight of Ben Ali is Salmon's (2016) study of the *29 jours de revolution*

(29 days of revolution). Salmon discusses events between 3 and 11 January in Kasserine, Regueb, and Thala at length as the passage from "revolt to uprising" (ibid, pp. 191-219). In his concluding chapter, he also echoes the claim that the bloody repression of protests there centrally facilitated the decision of the regional UGTT in Sfax to call for a general strike (ibid, p. 299). Deciding consciously to stay on the side of descriptive historiography, however, he holds with Foucault that the actions of those who risked their lives in the protests in the interior were "finally inexplicable" (ibid, pp. 218-9). Still, his study provides important insights into phases of the revolutionary process which empirical research has thus far largely sidelined. In so doing, he adds to the narrative attention which several earlier publications by Tunisian researchers had sought to draw to the events in Kasserine, Regueb, and Thala (Aleya-Sghaier, 2012; Aloui, 2012; Guessoumi, 2012).

The scholarship developing a "processual" or "eventful" account of the Tunisian revolution can be said to make two overarching arguments, assigning transformative developments, first, to the agency of various groups of activists or, second, to protest events. The first account holds that activists, having learnt from previous struggles, most notably the 2008 revolt in the Gafsa mining basin, established dynamics of mobilization which succeeded in turning local, class-divided, and socio-economic protests into RMM. Two explanatory pathways are offered: either local grassroots trade unionists or the online activities of local and Tunis-based activists worked successfully to connect and politicize initial protests. They then managed to spread those protests to new localities and social groups by ways of a "gradual capture of UGTT" or "a resonant framing and diffusion of information", respectively. While contingent events and factors are added along these pathways, the explanatory account in both cases is firmly in terms of a leadership role played by groups of activists. Crucially, the relevant dynamics were established by those activists over the first days of protest in Sidi Bouzid, so that developments later in the revolutionary process are taken to be brought about by an extensification of those dynamics – reaching new localities and social

groups – while leading simultaneously to their intensification – providing more "base pressure" (UGTT argument) or "shocking information" (cyber-activist argument). Given the importance of these arguments in the literature, their relatively thin ethnographic basis deserves scrutiny as they establish their key claims based on interviews with members of the respective activist groups alone. Thus, they leave unexplored whether those allegedly led by them, notably diverse members of subaltern groups, would concur with such an analysis.

The second group of accounts gives prominence to events later in the revolutionary process, most notably those of 8 and 9 January in Kasserine, Regueb, and Thala. Here, it is held that political radicalization and the spread of protest to the coastal cities was precipitated by the "moral shocks" and "revolutionary discourses in the media" which these events produced through the extreme violence they entailed. Problematically, transformative effects and creativity seem to disappear altogether into "the event" as we do not learn how those events were, in turn, brought about through human agency. Moreover, these accounts do not provide empirically grounded arguments for how such transformative effects materialized, ultimately relegating them to relatively abstract dynamics of emotions and the diffusion of information. Thus, while it provides plenty of indication that events later in the revolutionary process mattered, the scholarship to date does not develop empirically grounded arguments for how this might have been the case. The noted exception are the massacres of Thala and Kasserine which are held to have been relevant as a final swaying of UGTT leaders.

Finally, and particularly pertinent to this thesis, diverse members of subaltern groups not already involved in politics figure, at best, as youth making their own "transition to politics" late in the revolutionary process (Allal, 2012b). In the main, however, they are held to become relevant beyond their own "riots" only once they have been stitched into "the people" through the leadership of activists or the transformative force of events beyond their control. In other words, the agency and experience of subalterns, particularly those living

outside of Sidi Bouzid or Tunis, are taken to merely "fuel" a revolutionary process already set in motion, but do not contribute identifiable transformative agency and dynamics of their own. Thus, they become once more '"those that history passed by" […] in favor of "big history" - that of the "big men"' (Allal, 2012a, p. 76), even if in the accounts reviewed here, subaltern self-activity and experience must give way not just to "big" union leaders and military officers, but to more "medium-sized" activists and events. The scholarship reviewed thus far, then, leaves largely unexplored the role of subaltern social groups in the revolutionary process in general, and particularly between the initial protests in Sidi Bouzid and the 12 January general strike in Sfax.

Critical Perspectives on Subaltern Politics

Are we to conclude from this that members of subaltern social groups – outside a handful of grassroots trade unionists – did not contribute significant agency to the creation of a revolutionary situation in Tunisia? In the chapter so far, we have heard of "riots" that developed independently of mobilization by activists in the popular quarters of provincial cities as well as in the capital. Some mentioned that members of subaltern groups fought the police, contributing knowledge of their urban terrain and experiences with clashes from football matches, or small-scale networks of friends that aided in their mobilization. But with the exception of Allal (2012b) we do not learn much about the lifeworlds of subalterns or the ways in which they moved from resistance to national politics during the revolution. In the above accounts, their agency does not figure in any of the crucial transformations which turned localized, sectorized, and socio-economic protests into RMM. A "transition to politics" by the masses as a necessary element of RMM is held to be subject to outside intervention

in their lives, either through the agency of activists or through depersonalized events.[9] The

contribution by members of subaltern groups, it appears, was to supply bodies – living ones

to create masses to be led, or dead ones providing moral shocks. But what about the socio-

cultural fabric of their lives, their aspirations, as well as their experiences, actions and (dare

we say) critical agency before and during the revolutionary process? Did none of it matter?

To approach these questions, this section reviews a final group of studies which specifically

seek to explore the role of subaltern politics in the Arab uprisings. This scholarship is

informed by diverse, but mostly critical perspectives ranging from Marxist and most notably

Gramscian to postcolonial and poststructuralist theory. Most focus on Egypt, but the

contributions by Bayat and Tripp which will be reviewed first also investigate Tunisia.

Asef Bayat, adding to earlier work on a "post-Islamist turn" (1996, 2007), contributed

significantly to the study of subaltern politics in the Middle East through a series of

publications which he summarized in *Life as Politics* (2010). He argues that the "political

street" of the Arab world allows 'the relatively new subaltern of the neoliberal city' to engage

in what he conceptualizes as "nonmovements", 'the collective actions of noncollective

actors' (ibid, pp. 12, 14). These are non-ideologically driven practices of everyday life

common to millions of subalterns who remain fragmented and do not typically involve

protest, thus remaining "quiet" (ibid, pp. 19-20). The effect of nonmovements is twofold. If

left undisturbed, they progressively and quietly "encroach" on resources such as public space

or urban services for economic benefit and for attaining degrees of cultural and political

autonomy 'in a quest for an informal life' (ibid, pp. 56-59). However, when their cumulative

advances are threatened, subalterns activate "passive networks" 'established by a tacit

recognition of their common identity [...in] real and virtual space' which allow for collective

---

[9] The exception is, again, the studies by Allal (2012b, 2012a). However, he only investigates this for the cases of two popular quarters in Tunis where he pinpoints the decisive "transition to politics" to the moment when, on 13 January, the young men he studies developed the revolutionary ambition to "take the quarter" (from the police), and thus after the creation, with the 12 January general strike in Sfax, of RMM on a national level.

resistance (ibid, p. 63). Thus, 'what mediates between passive networks and possible collective action is a common threat' (ibid, p. 24). Bayat, makes clear that Middle Eastern subalterns were far from politically insignificant, as their "street politics" frequently force responses from authorities. Moreover, in larger and possibly revolutionary episodes of contention, 'nonmovements [...] burst collectively into the open once they [find] a political opportunity' (ibid, p. 250). The latter, he holds, is typically produced by the agency of more middle-class groups in conjuncture with international factors (2010, chaps. 12, 13).

In his interventions on the Arab uprisings, Bayat focusses on understanding their particular form which he defined as '"refo-lutions", that is 'revolutionary movements that wished to compel the incumbent regimes to reform themselves' (Bayat, 2013a). To this end, he introduced the distinction between "revolution as movement" and "revolution as change" and submits that a scholarly focus on the former had 'served to obscure [...] a key anomaly of these revolutions: they enjoyed enormous social prestige, but lacked administrative authority; they achieved a remarkable degree of hegemony, but did not actually rule' (Bayat, 2013b). In *Revolution without Revolutionaries* (2017), his main purpose is to explain those outcomes, attributing them to the lack of a revolutionary leadership and ideology under conditions of neoliberal hegemony. He also engages in a discussion of subalterns in the revolutionary process by suggesting that it was primarily "neoliberal urbanity" which led to the 'formation of dissent, the raw material for the Arab uprisings' (ibid, p. 96). In this context, subalterns formed passive networks that facilitated their collective resistance, so that 'squares represent the spatial locus and political form of subaltern struggle in the Arab revolutions' (ibid, p. 112).

In Tunisia, he points out that subalterns formed 'innumerable small [...] cliques (shillas) [...which] generated alternative norms and narratives', giving the example of 'unemployed youth who [...] carried out subversive actions against the police and local authorities' (ibid,

pp. 140-1). Noting in addition resistance by workers, farmers, and bloggers, Bayat finds that

'these largely disparate voices and practices seemed to coalesce [… forming] the backbone

of what came to be known as the Arab Spring' (ibid, p. 143). The chapter discussing *Radical*

Impulses of the Social states that 'young activists of the new Arab public played a critical role

in initiating the uprisings [...but] subaltern acts of claim making in the social domain

radicalized those otherwise nonradical revolutions' (ibid, p. 179). However, he discusses such

dynamics of subaltern self-activity exclusively for the period after the fall of Ben Ali, leaving

the contribution of their self-activity for the creation of RMM in Tunisia unexplored.[10]

While the discussion of Egypt in this chapter similarly focuses more on dynamics after the fall

of Mubarak (2017, chap. 9), it provides more detail on RMM and the role of subalterns in it.

Here, Bayat reiterates his earlier position on the mediational role of the middle-classes for

bringing subalterns into larger episodes of mobilization. The account follows that in an earlier

article in which he suggested that subalterns 'avoid direct involvement in large-scale

uprisings, the nature of which they do not comprehend, [however] the "middle-class poor"

[…] tend to engage in and lead others to these broader revolts' (Bayat, 2015, p. S31). He

develops this claim by discussing events in Cairo, where

the very poor preferred to stay away […] For them, revolution was too abstract to capture its dynamics. They would rather get engaged in the local struggles that they found manageable and meaningful […It was] the "middle-class poor" […who] linked the local struggles of their dispossessed parents, relatives, and neighbors to the […] cyberspace, associational activism, and the main streets. […Still,] when the police retreated and disappeared from the public arenas on January 28, the "revolution was over for the poor". (ibid, p. S37)

---

[10] Indeed, the book is much richer in ethnographic detail on Egypt than it is on Tunisia. This is understandable since most of Bayat's previous research was on Iran and Egypt. However, this leads him at times to transpose explanations well-grounded in the Egyptian case to the Tunisian revolution, as exemplified in the claim on the role of youth activists and urbanity. While his contributions are highly suggestive, he leaves the central question of this thesis on the role of subaltern self-activity in creating RMM largely unexplored for the case of Tunisia.

In Bayat's work, then, we find rich arguments on the interplay of subaltern self-activity and politics. Emphasizing nonmovements and neoliberal urbanity, his contributions are suggestive for thinking about how the lifeworlds, experiences and capacity of subalterns played into the revolutionary processes in Tunisia and Egypt. However, and partially owing to his focus on "revolution as change", he leaves largely unaddressed the central question of concern to this thesis, namely how their self-activity contributed to the creation of RMM in Tunisia. Giving a suggestive pointer, he notes that one may want to explore how 'protesters became "revolutionary" mainly when they experienced the power of mass protest [...inducing] a sudden shift in consciousness' (Bayat, 2017, p. 165).

This latter aspect is given more prominence by Tripp. His (2013) detailed study of the Middle East grounds subaltern politics in resistance against systems of exclusion from the colonial period to the present, discussing, aside from more organized forms of industrial activism and armed movements, resistance in "everyday" practices of economic life, urban space, and gender, as well as in cultural forms through conceptions of history and the arts. He finds that, while 'not hav[ing] an explicitly political aim', such dispersed forms of everyday resistance may 'feed into [...] more general and public politics of contention' (ibid, pp. 10, 312). Building on this work, he proposes that the Arab uprisings can be understood as a "performative politics" where 'resistance followed the capillary forms of power itself [...and for which] the ground had long been prepared [...] by years of quiet encroachment and not so quiet resistance' (2014, pp. 135, 137).

The decisive difference to those prior forms of resistance came about, according to Tripp, when people drew on these experiences to 'form an activist public, re-appropriating public space' (ibid, p. 140). Tripp holds that it was physical co-presence in urban space and joint performance of acts of resistance which led to "self-discovery" of this activist and rights-bearing public as 'a new kind of political actor', making it an act of "self-constitution" (ibid,

p. 141). However, he concludes that, while this assertion of a 'common political identity as citizens' temporarily overcame existing forms of difference (ibid, p. 148), the leaderless way in which it came about meant that this achievement was difficult to sustain. Substantiating his arguments further for the case of the Tunisia, Tripp (2015) traces the lineages of artistic and urban forms of resistance prior to the revolution. He finds that these dynamics created "radical ideas" which, together with 'bodily performances and engagement became marked features of the Tunisian revolution, helping […] in the construction of public space and the emerging consciousness of the public' (ibid., p. 14). In Tripp, we thus find a highly inspiring account of how the self-activity of joint resistance – without mediation by activists or leaders – led to the "self-constitution" of a collective subject. For the earlier stages of the Tunisian revolutionary process, however, we may wonder about the centrality he assigns to urban space in bringing about these developments.

Adopting a similar urban focus, Ismail submits contra Bayat that 'the political agency of subaltern forces is not merely reactive […but builds on] everyday forms of organization and modes of governance […that] furnish mobilizational resources, and generate shared understandings and feelings that constitute the oppositional subject' (Ismail, 2013, p. 878). She draws on her earlier studies where she found that such "oppositional subjects" were formed in the popular quarters of Cairo. This resulted from neoliberal governmentality, experienced by urban subalterns above all in the form of forceful and arbitrary policing, giving rise not only to a deep sense of humiliation undermining notions of masculinity, especially among the youth, but simultaneously producing resisting subjects (Ismail, 2006, 2011). Hence, she holds that, for those groups, engagement in the revolution was essentially one "against the police", leading her to conclude that 'the collective subject of the revolution was constituted in the coming together of social forces and individuals formed as oppositional subjects in interaction with the police' (Ismail, 2012, p. 458). In this process, 'territorialized and localized […] resistance [of the popular quarters was…] articulated with

the national project of transformation' (Ismail, 2013, p. 873). She provides ethnographic description for how the experience in battling the police which football ultras contributed was important to the success of the revolutionary mobilization (see also Dorsey, 2012; Gunning and Baron, 2014, pp. 174–81). Although her argument rests on an anterior formation of collective subjects and is tied to an urban context, her contributions are highly suggestive for understanding the role of Tunisian subalterns in creating RMM. This pertains, for instance, to how confrontations between young men from subaltern groups and the police may have contributed to a revolutionary transformation of the struggle.

De Smet also analyses the role of subaltern social groups in the Egyptian revolution, although, in a more classical Marxist sense, he holds that it is the proletariat which 'transcends its economic outlook and develops into a political force' (De Smet, 2012, p. 142). He proposes that by looking at the 'development of subaltern self-determination, self-consciousness, and self-organization […we can understand the revolutionary situation as] an explosive and salient moment within a protracted, molecular process of "economic" strikes and "political" protests that stretched back to the early 2000s' (De Smet, 2014, p. 12). Centre-stage in this process is what he terms 'dialectical pedagogy: a continuous exchange between "intellectuals" and the "masses"' (De Smet, 2012, p. 142).[11] Such a process, he claims, had mostly unfolded in Egypt prior to the revolution through a series of strike actions resisting neoliberal economic development in the context of which 'intellectuals […] offered the emerging worker Subject […] forms of assistance […and] enabled workers to imagine themselves as a coherent working class' (ibid, p. 149). While demands had remained socio-economic in kind, it was through 'the "school" of revolutionary insurrection […in which] the

---

[11] De Smet develops a complex combination of the pedagogical theories of Vygotsky with the Gramscian concept of organic intellectuals to conceive of this as a drawn-out process of "proletarian sociogenesis" that is, however, beyond the scope of this thesis to review (cp. De Smet, 2015, chaps. 4, 5).

worker Subject participated […that] political and economic protests and their Subjectivities became entwined' (ibid, p. 152).

Here, a new form of dialectical pedagogy unfolded in the context of the Tahrir occupation, in which 'intellectuals [were] giving leadership and direction to the movement' and occupiers 'began to discover themselves as "the people" […] which pointed toward a development in the[ir] consciousness […,] the formation of a popular will […,and] of the national-popular subject' (De Smet, 2015, pp. 339, 342). For de Smet, then, it was through this double process of dialectical pedagogy involving "learning from activity" facilitated through "solidarity and assistance" provided by intellectuals that, first, a collective worker subject and, then, a national-popular one was created in Egypt in the contexts of a decade of labor struggles and the occupation of Tahrir square, respectively. Drawing on Luxemburg, this latter phase is also understood by him and his collaborators in terms of a "mass strike", involving in the Tunisian context 'the organizational work of local Union militants […and] a preponderant role of the lawyers [which together], were important in reframing the demands for economic justice and opportunities into larger questions of political freedom' (Zemni et al., 2013, pp. 900–1). This emphasis on "situated learning in struggle" in the moment of the "mass strike" is evocative for thinking towards a more transformative subaltern engagement in revolutionary processes. However, the grounding of this perspective in an anterior formation of a "worker subject" and the necessity of intellectuals makes these contributions less fruitful for understanding the Tunisian case.

Chalcraft builds on his earlier work on popular and labor history as well as questions of hegemonic formation in the Middle East (2005, 2009; Chalcraft and Noorani, 2007) and proposes a focus on subaltern social groups in the Arab uprisings. Looking at Egypt, he finds that 'educated youth, the labour movement, and [formally organized groups…] have attracted more than their fair share of scholarly attention', suggesting instead to explore

'popular politics in Egypt's uprising [, …particularly] the vital role played by the urban poor' (Chalcraft, 2014, p. 155). He understands the historical context as a "slow-burning crisis of hegemony" produced by foreign-policy failures of the regime, a thinning-out of its antiimperialist legitimacy, an increasing cooperation of opposition forces, and an erosion of social protections through neoliberalism. Leading to a 'concomitant increase in collective action', this constituted 'dominance without hegemony – a situation in which coercion outweighed consent' and where there was 'a clear sense that Egyptians were holding the regime responsible for their problems' (ibid, pp. 162, 165, 167). He points out that, in these "enabling conditions", an initial call for protest by activists led to a spontaneous uprising which, although facilitated by their horizontalist organizing, took everyone by surprise since 'what was decisive in the dynamics of the situation was precisely the unruly collective action of those who moved for the first time' (ibid, p. 172). Tracing violations of their moral economy and their everyday modes of resistance, he finds that subalterns 'turned their hitherto unsung plight of survivalism, inflation, stifled aspirations, male honour, police violence, and official corruption and indifference into the basis for, and origin of, a major political and historical change' (ibid, p. 174). He concludes that their participation, inspired by the example of Tunisia and given an initial opening by the activists, as well as the experience they contributed were essential to the success of the uprising as 'it is difficult to see how the barrier of fear could have been broken, the police degraded, and the army neutralized without it' (ibid, p. 174).

Elsewhere, Chalcraft argues that 'coordination amid spontaneity' in the Egyptian uprising was enabled by the "horizontalist" mode of organizing which activists espoused, allowing for common ground to be discovered in action, and making the uprising "leaderful" rather than leaderless (Chalcraft, 2012). Indeed, he finds that this 'participatory democratic style […] made possible alliances between diverse and usually mutually divided groups' as it drew in the labor movement and the urban poor, neither of which would have participated in an

uprising led in a traditional vanguardist style (Chalcraft, 2015, p. 8).[12] It was in this context that 'one of the most important forms of creativity [emerged…:] the on-the-spot and unpredetermined constitution of *the people* as a rights-bearing, activist, diverse, demanding, and sovereign subject' (ibid, original emphasis). This unity originated 'in the heat of the action […as] new connections between […] subordinated constituencies […gave] rise to new feelings of empowerment, the collapse of the "wall of fear" and new forms of collective solidarity' (ibid, p. 9). Leaderfulness, explosion of the poor, and situated creation of a new collective subject were thus important historical achievements in which subaltern self-activity was prominent.

But while successfully challenging regimes weakened by crises of hegemony, he points out that these features produced only transient unity and purpose, that "the people" could be outflanked and, as in Egypt, willing to give the army a chance to rule (2014, 2015). He also underscores that 'the Egyptian uprising, unlike that of Tunisia, was indeed in some measure planned because Tunisia had proposed a political model and tactics with it' (2014, p. 169). This example was so extraordinarily inspiring because, just as in Tunisia, "hegemonic disincorporation"[13] elsewhere had produced an "unruly latency" in the form of 'dissenting constituencies […] alienated from existing forms of contained contention […who] engage in a search to make a wide variety of "attributions of similarity" (Chalcraft, 2017, p. 45). Tunisians articulated this "people/power bloc contradiction" which provided 'a new diagnosis of the situation and its dominant contradictions, and […] a viable path out of a situation of domination […that] implied new ways of constructing what was held in common' (ibid, p. 53). The contributions by Chalcraft thus provide a rich conceptual vocabulary for

---

[12] Page numbers refer to the version of this article available under http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/65449/. This case of improper referencing was incurred due to finishing the thesis under the movement and library access restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

[13] Disincorporation refers to a (possible) result of "hegemonic contraction", which is understood here as the retraction, for whatever reason, of sites and processes of incorporation that leaves (members of) social groups excluded from previously established rights, benefits, etc. (cp. p. 72 below).

analyzing subaltern politics in revolutionary processes. Hegemonic contraction and its attendant unruly latency as well as leaderfulness and the construction of new solidarities and commonalities in the context of struggle provide important pointers for thinking about subaltern self-activity in the Tunisian revolution.

Abdelrahman echoes the theme of horizontalism in her work. She had found previously that opposition groups in Egypt developed cross-ideological links and more decentralized modes of activism (Abdelrahman, 2004, 2009). This "decade of protest" led to an accumulation of experience and a politicization of society (Abdelrahman, 2015, pp. 69–71). She defines her task as investigating the 'nexus between loose organizational structures […thus created and the] revolutionary process' (Abdelrahman, 2013, p. 570). While the "absence of leadership" contributed to successful mass mobilization, it was also accompanied by a "hierarchy of struggles" as the 'pro-democracy movement […] failed to address the concerns of the classes and social groups most affected by neoliberal policies' (Abdelrahman, 2012, p. 618, also 2015, pp. 80–85). As such, it was unable to link up with what she defines as "citizenship-based protests", grassroots struggles which were 'the outcome of privatization and the withdrawal of the state from its traditional role of provider for low-income groups' (Abdelrahman, 2013, p. 579). She stresses that unity was nonetheless achieved as 'a revolutionary subject and project could well be born out of these events rather than give birth to them in the first place' (Abdelrahman, 2015, p. 91). However, lacking an organizational mass base, this unified mobilization fragmented rapidly and allowed for 'a pared down notion of revolution […as] the struggle for "freedom" […thus enabling the] elite's tactic of reducing Egypt's revolutionary process to an "orderly transition to democracy"' (Abdelrahman, 2012, p. 626).

In summary, then, the critical perspectives on the Arab uprisings discussed in this section have established a much greater role for subaltern self-activity in the revolutionary processes

than the scholarship reviewed before. Diverse members of subaltern social groups were argued to have experienced regime policies, particularly neoliberal reforms and securitization, in ways that differed from those of more protected – or hegemonically incorporated – groups. Weakening hegemony and increases in coercion apparently marked the lives of many subalterns, producing an "unruly latency" and leading them either to engage in silent forms of resistance, more audible strike actions, or actual confrontations with the police. These accounts stress that subalterns were not masses to be led but had distinct motivations to mobilize and contributed their own informal networks and experiences of resistance. Some scholars argue for an anterior formation of oppositional (collective) subjects ready to join a national revolt. Others emphasize that the coalescing during the revolution of subalterns with members of other social groups had a radicalizing effect, allowing for a performative constitution of "the people" as a new collective subject.

Providing rich ethnographic detail from Egypt, scholars have shown that subaltern self-activity produced vital transformations, most notably in confronting the police and breaking the barrier of fear. Rather than (mostly middle-class) Egyptian activists politicizing the crowds, it was only in interaction with subalterns that they came to espouse radical demands and thought beyond one-off protests. As such, these critical perspectives provide key insights into the question of how subaltern self-activity contributed to the creation of revolutionary mass mobilization (RMM) in Egypt. This poses exciting and under-researched questions regarding the Tunisian revolutionary process. Hegemonic contraction as well as prior subaltern resistance and politics clearly mattered, as we learn from Bayat. But how did this contribute to the dynamics of "learning in struggle" during the revolutionary process, such as expanding solidarities and the discovery of common ground between previously divided groups which scholars have pointed out in the Egyptian case? Was there a self-constitution of a revolutionary collective subject as Tripp suggests? If so, how and where was it achieved? Might subaltern self-activity in violent confrontations with the police have had

transformative effects, as they did in Cairo? And did subaltern agency contribute to the coalescing and politicization of struggles by different social groups? Given that it allows for these rich questions to be posed, a subaltern politics perspective clearly suggests itself as a theoretical optic for this thesis. With these considerations, the research question of the thesis can be re-formulated as: To what extent can we understand the Tunisian revolution from the perspective of subaltern self-activity?

Conclusion

This chapter has found that existing scholarship established important insights into the conditions of possibility for the Tunisian revolution. Elements which this thesis will continue to discuss include rampant corruption, clientelism, failed developmental policies, and exclusion of growing numbers from state benefits, all contributing to mounting inequalities between coastal and interior regions and concentration of youth unemployment in the latter. Particularly for the subaltern youth there, the promise of social mobility through educational attainment was broken which, together with increased policing of their discontent, violated the moral economy established previously by the authoritarian social compact. Dissent formed concomitantly in the political and cultural fields as various groups engaged in acts of resistance – ranging from cyber-activists and lawyers to grassroots trade unionists and to the self-activity of not formally organized subalterns. However, research on the revolutionary process was found to be lacking in accounts of how members of diverse subaltern groups mobilized, moved from self-activity to politics, and contributed to the creativity and innovation necessary to effect crucial transformations which would turn turned localized, sectorized, and socio-economic protests into RMM. Explanations for those achievements were given by the scholarship through a leadership role played by groups of activists or made to disappear into transformative events and left unaccounted for in terms of human agency.

These explanations were argued to be unconvincing and weakly grounded in ethnographic research, while leaving little role for subaltern social groups other than as masses fueling a revolutionary machinery, the purpose of which they did not contribute to. Finally, critical and subaltern studies were found to address these issues, providing insights regarding the role of subaltern social groups in revolutionary processes. While they do not investigate developments in Tunisia in detail, these contributions thus suggest a viable theoretical framework for this thesis to address the question: To what extent can we understand the Tunisian revolution from the perspective of subaltern self-activity? The chapter has thus identified significant gaps in the scholarship and a theoretical perspective from which to address them. It will be the task of the following chapter to clarify this framework and describe the methods which undergird the research for this thesis.

III. Theoretical Framework and Empirical Research Process

The purpose of this chapter is to lay out the theoretical perspective that informs the discussion of the empirical material in the rest of the thesis as well as to describe the research process through which this material was generated. The chapter is divided into two main parts. Part one provides the conceptual optics through which the thesis approaches the central research question on the role of subaltern self-activity in the Tunisian revolutionary process. To this end, it sets out a Gramscian perspective on subaltern politics that wrestles with questions of hegemony, possibilities for learning in struggle, and the challenges of subaltern self-activity in the context of revolutionary processes. Part two of the chapter follows on from the conceptual discussion and describes the development of the empirical research project as well as the methods used.

III.i. Hegemony, Subalternity and Incorporation

The theoretical framework of the thesis is rooted in a broadly Gramscian perspective exploring the potentials and limitations of subaltern politics through an analysis of hegemony "from below", viz. as it is concretely experienced and contested, rather than through abstracted effects of discursive power or capitalist exploitation (e.g. Chalcraft, forthcoming, 2016; Cox and Nilsen, 2014; Motta and Nilsen, 2011; Nilsen and Roy, 2015a; Salem, 2018). Hegemony constitutes the central analytical scheme in Gramsci's thinking (Femia, 1981). It draws on an analytical 'distinction between civil society and political society, between hegemony and dictatorship' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 271). Thus, hegemony is distinct from domination through force realized principally through the coercive powers of the state. Rather, it entails 'intellectual and moral leadership' (ibid., p. 59) that needs to be won in the field of civil society. The latter is understood by Gramsci as 'the ensemble of educational,

religious and associational institutions [...] that create and diffuse modes of thought', meaning that hegemony has a key "cultural emphasis" (Femia, 1981, pp. 24–6). As such, Gramsci defined the

functions of social hegemony and political government [...as, respectively,] consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group [...and] the apparatus of state coercive power which "legally" enforces discipline on those groups who do not "consent". (1971, p. 12)

This distinction, however, is largely analytical (Femia, 1981). Ultimately, hegemony should be understood in terms of social "totality", an ensemble of political, cultural, social and economic forces that allows us 'to narrate the aggregate dynamics of society as a whole' (Chalcraft, 2016, p. 31). Towards this end, the historical analysis in this thesis uses the distinction between "hegemonic formation" and coercive apparatus, foregrounding different aspects at different times, while emphasizing their unity in a concrete historical state.[14]

In this Gramscian perspective, social groups rather than individuals constitute the "unit of analysis". At the center of the hegemonic formation is the dominant group which rules in alliance with other social forces, forming a "historical bloc". Hegemony, as we have seen, means precisely that social groups not immediately part of this dominant coalition are not ruled by force. Rather, the "great masses" consist precisely of those groups which are hegemonized – always selectively and in gradations – to win their consent. Thus, and unlike in the notion of social classes, social groups and the relations between them are not just understood in economic terms but are defined by their positions within the hegemonic formation. Indeed, it is precisely the degrees and nuances of hegemonic incorporation that define multiple social relations in terms of power and subordination, including, for instance, race, gender, or social status – all of which intersect in composing the "stratified categories"

---

[14] This follows Gramsci's definition of 'state = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armour of coercion' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 263).

of various subaltern social groups (Galastri, 2018). As such, the latter are understood here as a 'wide range of groups who possess a subordinate social, political, economic, and ideological status […including] large, even preponderant, groups, such as the urban poor, the working class, the peasantry, […] slum dwellers and the unemployed' but also women, slaves and minorities (Cronin, 2008a, p. 2). Importantly, the emphasis is on subaltern social positions as marked by a "similarity of fate" (Chalcraft, forthcoming) and thus *not* on an "identity effect" produced by systems of exclusion. 'On the contrary, subaltern social groups are […] actively "included" or integrated into the hegemonic relations […and this is why it is] useful to speak of the "constitution" of subaltern social groups (Thomas, 2018, pp. 3–4). Subalternity, then, is 'above all a positionality of adverse incorporation in a certain set of sociohistorical power relations' (Nilsen and Roy, 2015b, p. 15).

While adverse compared to others, incorporation is not without benefits to subaltern social groups. [15] As Gramsci notes, 'hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that […] the leading group should make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind' (1971, p. 161). Indeed, others have argued that 'hegemonic incorporation […] always involves economic [benefits such as…] welfare, jobs, pensions […] to win the consent of a wide variety of social groups', including subaltern ones (Chalcraft, 2016, p. 34). Through economic incorporation, then, subalterns have a (potentially sizable) degree of their material interests met, giving them concrete reasons for consenting to the existing system of rule. However, hegemony also emphasizes cultural and political forms of integration, ranging from associational life in civil society to forms of political inclusion such as voting rights, that produce more than "passive

---

[15] It is on this notion of *adverse* incorporation that a certain distinction between different subaltern social groups will become apparent in the following chapters for the Tunisian context. As the section on "sites of enquiry and access" in this chapter discusses, most inhabitants of the economically and politically marginalized regions in the Tunisian interior can be regarded as "subaltern". However, some are still middle-class in terms of their profession and local social status. This pertains notably to trade unionists, lawyers, and activists who, moreover, are distinguished from the subaltern youth by their access to and experience with politics – and a certain overall level of *beneficial* incorporation.

acceptance". Rather, they are 'bound up with the concept of "legitimacy", with a belief that the demands for conformity are more or less justified' (Femia, 1981, p. 38).

These forms of integration importantly invoke what Gramsci referred to as "common sense", and which he defines as 'the traditional popular conception of the world', or 'the generic form of thought common to a particular period and a particular popular environment' (1971, pp. 199, 330). Common sense as a mode of thought is imprinted into "language itself" (ibid, p. 323), structuring the ways in which people are capable of conceiving, interpreting, and expressing their lifeworlds and experience. Through this notion of dominant conceptions of the world, hegemony entails an account of "mass consciousness" which is diffused by

the institutional mechanisms through which perception is shaped - the schools, the Church, the conventional political parties, the mass media, even the trade unions […, so that] the very framework for […] analysis of the existing system is fixed by the dominant ideology […and the masses] lack the conceptual tools, the "clear theoretical consciousness", which would enable them effectively to comprehend and act on their discontent. (Femia, 1981, p. 44)

This does not render hegemony a veil of "false consciousness". Rather, it draws attention to how material and ideal reasons which members of subordinate social groups might have for offering their consent to an often recognizably unequal society, are produced and maintained through processes of inclusion. This entails creating sites of political incorporation and "contained contention", such as the parties and trade unions mentioned above, that constitute "hegemonic ways" in which diverse social groups, including subaltern ones, can voice and potentially find redress for their grievances. As Cox and Nilsen summarize, hegemony thus understood is about meeting

diverse needs selectively, in ways which reinforce existing power relations […] In this complex process, the existing social order is variously represented and experienced as natural (unchangeable), as purposive (and beneficial to subaltern interests), and as legitimate (and offering a language through which subaltern grievances can be expressed). (2014, pp. 66–7)

Finally, the notion of incorporation mechanisms underlines that hegemony needs to be understood not as a "thing" but in terms of historically constructed processes that are subject to change. While it creates the structural positions of social groups, these positions require constant reproduction through sites and processes of incorporation. Indeed, we can understand the effect of these incorporation processes as defining the extent or scope of the hegemonic formation at any given point in time. Through them, 'the dominant group is coordinated concretely with the general interests of the subordinate groups [...in] a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 182). As will be discussed next, it is hegemony's never seamless, perpetually unfinished, and always unstable nature that provides space for contention and subaltern self-activity.

What are the bases for subaltern self-activity under conditions of hegemony? Understanding this begins from recognizing that, while shaping and constraining subaltern self-activity, hegemony is never total. Rather, it contains "fissures" (Reguillo, 2012) and gives rise to contradictions. This can be explored through what Gramsci described as the 'healthy nucleus that exists in "common sense" [...] which can be called "good sense"' (1971, p. 328). Good sense is, on the one hand, a form of "practical consciousness" produced through active experience of the social world and its contradictions and, on the other hand, informed by elements of popular culture not assimilated into and frequently in contradiction with common sense. This latter aspect means that common sense contains not only present ruling ideas but "sedimentations" of older ones, such as elements of philosophies or religious ideas, leaving in it what Gramsci suggestively called an "infinity of traces" (1971, pp. 324–6). Chalcraft points out that popular culture is "necessarily fragmentary" because of these deposits 'left over from previous but now defunct forms of hegemony, [...meaning it] has different vernaculars, regional particulars, [...] ambiguities, contradictions, and forms of relative autonomy' (forthcoming). We can interpret such deposits as having a "dominant reading" which, by virtue of their only partial integration into and latent contradictions with

common sense, is only imperfectly fixed. This leaves them particularly open to conscious reinterpretation which can develop "oppositional readings" (Hall, 2006, pp. 171–3).

Good sense idioms and stories, as it were, thus furnish a popular language which can be mobilized for subaltern resistance, as was shown regarding "memories of revolt" in Palestine (Swedenburg, 2012). This good sense present in fissures of hegemony is one important way in which common sense contains contradictions present in the consciousness of subaltern social groups. Moreover, contradictions result from and are exacerbated by the "practical consciousness" side of good sense. It develops through "experience" understood as

the practical and tacit knowledge that human beings produce […] as they engage and interact with […their lifeworld. It furnishes an] unruly body of half-submerged knowledge mediating between objectively existing conditions and social consciousness of these conditions […, that is,] "good sense" rooted in our actual experience, as *against* the hegemonic "common sense" which tells us how things are supposed to be (Cox and Nilsen, 2014, pp. 33–4 my emphasis).

Good sense, then, is both based on and builds experience as conflictual with common sense, producing an "unruliness" that can render "dominant readings" unstable. It thus 'exerts pressure upon existent social consciousness [or common sense]' (Thompson, 1978; quoted in Cox and Nilsen, 2014, p. 34). This conflict between good and common sense constitutes a key condition of subalternity, which Gramsci conceptualized as "contradictory consciousness". The subaltern, he writes,

has a practical activity, but has no clear theoretical consciousness of [it…] His theoretical consciousness can indeed be historically in opposition to his activity. One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity […] and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 333).

In the condition of contradictory consciousness, then, common sense ideas 'which cast the status quo as purposive and legitimate, and, more generally, hegemonic ways of being in the world, are fused with the practical and often tacit subaltern experiences of an existing social

order as problematic' (Cox and Nilsen, 2014, p. 67). This condition can be understood as an important source for an additional instability of common sense, thus opening possibilities for developing "oppositional readings". Consciously contradictory experience of the world by subaltern social groups can be heightened by what Chalcraft conceptualizes as "hegemonic contraction". These changes occur

when elites [...] shut down forms of participation [...,] ignore existing sites of contained contention, reducing the possibility for the redress of grievances through authorized channels [..., or withdraw] social and economic rights [..., and thus] undermine existing forms of [...] political, economic and discursive [incorporation...] without replacing them with satisfactory alternatives. (2016, pp. 36–7)

Hegemonic contractions are not necessarily produced by acute crises but may result from dynamics aimed at maintaining or rearticulating the dominant bloc. Invariably, breakdown or erosion of existing sites and processes of incorporation infringes upon the rights, status, or benefits to which affected social groups have become accustomed. As such, they can be likened to violations of their "moral economy" (Thompson, 1993). Unless they are successfully legitimized, such violations will intensify conditions of contradictory consciousness as they produce further instances in which experience no longer matches, viz. can no longer be made sense of with, common sense. Thus, hegemonic contractions can produce an "unruly latency" as they give subaltern groups 'reasons ideal and/or material to mobilize contentiously [...and form an] enabling condition for transgressive contention' (Chalcraft, 2016, p. 39, also 2017).

However, the fissures, contractions, and good sense which could summarily be termed forms of hegemonic incompleteness constitute precisely that: enabling conditions for subaltern self-activity and politics. Even as good sense arises from consciously experienced contradictions and creates a potential source of hegemonic instability, its tacit, implicit, and unclear nature means it cannot inform a subaltern politics, especially not of a more contentious or transgressive kind. Indeed, such latent forms of knowledge and consciousness

rooted in contradictory consciousness and good sense are best understood as forming a 'reservoir of practical consciousness that may serve as a basis for subaltern resistance' (Cox and Nilsen, 2014, p. 74). The following section elaborates a "developmental perspective" on subaltern politics which emphasizes how dynamics of learning might draw on and advance these bases for struggle.

Subaltern Politics and Learning in Struggle

A process of learning and development that widens the bases for struggle sets out from the many instances of subaltern resistance, ranging from its most "hidden" and everyday forms (Scott, 1985), to the collective actions of nonmovements (Bayat, 2010), and finally to open revolt and rebellion (Brown, 1990; Chalcraft, 2016; Cronin, 2008a; Thompson, 1993). With Gramsci, these forms of subaltern self-activity are understood as the "most spontaneous" that are 'characteristic of the "history of the subaltern classes", and indeed of their most marginal and peripheral elements' (1971, p. 196).[16] Considering the foregoing discussion, we can unpack a profoundly Gramscian understanding – central for this thesis – of much subaltern self-activity as "spontaneity" by conceiving of it precisely as grounded in good sense and contradictory consciousness. This means that self-activity has its own reasons rather than being irrational. It develops in response, for instance, to infringements through hegemonic contractions upon the rights and benefits which members of subaltern social groups have become accustomed to. It is also thoughtful rather than spasmodic or unthinking, drawing precisely on the kinds of practical and popular consciousness latently present in good sense. Finally, this self-activity is "knowing", making use of the experiential knowledge and techniques which subalterns have developed in dealing with a contradictory world. Such a historically, culturally, and cognitively rich understanding of self-activity is what

---

[16] For Gramsci, this includes "spontaneous revolts" which can be the 'result of an oppression which had become intolerable' (1971, p. 199).

Gramsci meant when he wrote that spontaneous mobilization has its own 'rudimentary elements of conscious leadership', which, however, 'cannot be checked' (ibid, pp. 196-7) – or are, at the very least, easily overlooked.

To sharpen the focus on these "rudimentary elements", we can conceive of them as constituting a subaltern agency informed by what Cox and Nilsen suggestively term the "local rationalities" contained in good sense. These describe the 'ways of being, doing and thinking […] rooted in the experience of [contradictions…] that people develop in attempting to oppose the routines and received wisdoms that define the hegemonic elements of common sense […and which often have] a defensive character in opposition to attempts from above to reorder structures [of inclusion]' (2014, p. 74). They give rise to struggles they term "militant particularism", which develop 'when local rationalities are transformed from tacit potentialities to explicitly oppositional practices deployed in […] open confrontation with a dominant group in a particular place and […] time in a particular conflict over a particular issue' (ibid, pp. 76-7). The particularity of a struggle's time, space, and content means that it can emerge in a similarly situated manner through "catalytic events" developing in the context of confrontations. In these situations, the 'legitimacy of dominant power relations are demonstrably reversed, [...so that they] raise broader questions about "official reality" and encourage people to think anew, to discover and articulate their own local rationalities' (ibid, p. 78). This understanding of how the knowledge and experience of good sense informs subaltern self-activity, then, stresses the developmental dynamics and potential of those struggles. This is because, on the one hand, any episode of struggle furnishes new experience and techniques that further the local rationalities already contained in good sense. Importantly, this allows us to comprehend how struggles might have cumulative effects in popular consciousness. On the other hand, the potential of subaltern self-activity for more open and coherent resistance by larger collectivities is exemplified by the development of militant particularisms and revolt:

The social group in question may indeed have its own conception of the world, even if only embryonic; a conception which manifests itself in action, but occasionally and in flashes – when the group is acting as an organic totality. […But it has] adopted a [hegemonic] conception […] which it follows in "normal times" – that is when its conduct is not independent and autonomous, but submissive and subordinate. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 327)

Gramsci here suggests that an embryonic conception of the world becomes visible precisely in subaltern resistance. However, he states quite clearly that such an embryonic conception does not constitute the break with dominant conception of common sense required for attaining autonomous agency. As such, 'subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up' (ibid, p. 55). This lack of a "new language" also illustrates the limitation of such spontaneous self-activity to what can summarily be understood as "defensive mobilization". Not having produced a break with it, it necessarily expresses its goals in the language of common sense. Thus, such struggles have been found to 'make appeals in the language of legitimacy and justice and protest against their violation […They are not] a comprehensive defiance of, or aimed to transcend, the existing order' (Cronin, 2008b, pp. 2–3). Instead, defensive mobilization is often rooted in violations to the moral economy of subaltern groups and can be understood as aiming to protect or extend some existing form of hegemonic incorporation.

How, then, can more "offensive" forms of mobilization develop that stand a chance of challenging, rather than adjusting to, an existing hegemonic formation and its conditions of subalternity? In the above quote, Gramsci suggests that sustained action as an "organic totality" requires the development of a more mature conception of the world. Indeed, he states that a 'historical act can only be performed by "collective man" [sic], and this presupposes the attainment of a "cultural-social" unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world' (1971, p. 349). Thus, a shared conception of the world – a new language which, unlike common sense, allows for the articulation of

75

challenges to the existing order – is required to create the unity of a "collective will" around a purpose to affect such change.[17] Indeed, Chalcraft states that

the emergence of the collective will, then, is the key moment in the shift from a subaltern status […] In collective will a subject, a will immediate to itself and acting for itself, is forged. […It marks] the transition to transformative politics […as] subaltern social groups, in a process of transformation, discover not just who they are […] but what they want. (forthcoming)

Developing shared conceptions of the world and a collective will thus appear as interrelated processes central to challenging conditions of subalternity. Building on one another, they enable a transformation of largely spontaneous and reactive self-activity into an offensive against (elements of) a hegemonic formation. The essential dynamic here, according to Chalcraft, is "articulation" which 'involves both an expression in language and conception on the one hand, and a joining of two elements previously sundered on the other […through] a new form of signification' (ibid). Articulation results from intellectual labor that is intimately connected with and reflects upon subaltern lifeworlds, producing abstractions from the dispersed and fragmentary elements of knowledge which inform and are developed by subaltern struggles as well as combining them with existing philosophical insights. It is in this proximity and interaction between intellectual labor and subaltern struggles that a more coherent conception of the world can be developed, one that is "organically" connected to the contradictions of subalterns lifeworlds and that allows for their expression in language (ibid). Here, then, the process of learning in and through subaltern struggles continues, albeit on a more abstracted level involving what Gramsci called "organic intellectuals" (1971, pp. 5–14).

---

[17] This is also brought out by Gramsci's statement that, conversely, a 'group which is still subaltern, […] has not yet gained consciousness of its strength, its possibilities, of how it is to develop, and […] therefore does not know how to escape from the primitivist phase' (1971, p. 159). For a clarification of the primitivist phase in terms of the fragmentation of agency lacking a collective will, compare Gramsci's discussion of the general strike and spontaneism (ibid, pp. 126-30).

Making a kindred argument, Cox and Nilsen suggest that it is possible to generalize the subaltern knowledges and practices that make up local rationalities. They stress that this requires those involved in similar defensive struggles to engage in 'activities of mutual learning and development of self-understanding' through which they can find 'conceptions that resonate across difference' (2014, p. 79). Developing a coherent conception of the world that organically expresses and points to a way out of subaltern conditions can here be understood as the 'articulation, sharing and formalisation […] of practice-based and situated "good sense" against ideological and hegemonic "common sense", or of the articulation of previously tacit knowledge in struggle' (Cox, 2014, pp. 964–5). This 'translation between and abstraction from local struggles' resonates with the work of "organic articulation" and, indeed, can lead to a "social movement project" as a 'collective agency from below […with the] capacity to identify its own actors socially […and which] posits the social totality as the object of challenge and transformation' (Cox and Nilsen, 2014, pp. 82–3). It thus constitutes the formation of something not unlike a collective will, whereby the abstraction and coherence involved results from "learning in struggle". Indeed, 'mobilisation entails profound changes in consciousness; […] a process through which reflexive self-activity engenders a distancing from the hegemonic elements of common sense and simultaneously a process through which "good sense" is rendered "more unitary and coherent"' (ibid, p. 88). Two elements are decisive in this process of reflexive self-activity. First, it requires activists and "movement intellectuals" forming alliances and new connections with one another to exchange knowledge gained in struggle and engage in "popular education" (Cox, 2019; Cox and Nilsen, 2014). Secondly, more advanced learning and will-formation requires the organizational development of struggles as creators of knowledge and of "pedagogical settings" for exchange where knowledge is articulated more abstractly and coherently (Cox, 2014; Motta, 2017; Motta and Nilsen, 2011, chaps. 6, 8).

We can now see that transformations of defensive into offensive struggles, understood as developing and disseminating organic conceptions of the world, and thus the formation of a collective will around them, are mediated by intellectual labor and organizational activity within and between those struggles. Organization is key in the formation of a collective will and agency as it allows for ideas to be exchanged and disseminated, new connections to be forged, and alliances to be made. In other words, it is through organizational activity that collectives coalesce and expand around the unifying purpose articulated in a conception of the world. As Chalcraft remarks, a Gramscian perspective

points away from any panacea in everyday modes of resistance by insisting on organization [...which is required] to express, make concrete in practice, and diffuse the collective will. [...] Organization is a unifier of theory and practice, and a site of learning: a place where the educator [as organic intellectual] can be educated [by subaltern struggle]. (forthcoming, my glosses)

Indeed, Gramsci wrote that it is organization which enables the development of organic ideas in a 'dialectic between the intellectuals and the masses [...in which] every leap forward towards a new breadth and complexity of the intellectual stratum is tied to an analogous movement on the part of the mass' (1971, p. 334). He concretizes this for the case of political parties which play a key role in 'the elaboration and diffusion of conceptions of the world [...thus] providing an organic leadership [... through which the masses can become] to a certain degree coherent [...and act with] a precise and decisive will' (ibid, p. 335). Organization, then, is the "historical laboratory" in which conceptions of the world and a collective will can be created.

From a Gramscian perspective, the transition from self-activity that is defensive to a collective agency that challenges (aspects of) the hegemonic formation can thus be understood as involving two dialectically related tasks or dynamics. First, that of abstracting and rendering coherent the good sense produced in subaltern struggles, thus producing a break with common sense and enabling the articulation of challenges to the hegemonic

formation as the purpose around which a collective will can coalesce. Second, the concrete

formation and expansion of that collective will through connection, exchange, and alliance-

formation between different struggles. The dialectic thus flows between practical and critical

self-activity, masses and organic intellectuals (or leaders), spontaneity and organization,

praxis and philosophy – and the unity of these seeming contractions is precisely what Gramsci

conceptualized as "organicity". As the following section discusses, this understanding of a

gradual process of learning and development through struggle is also how Gramsci thought

about the challenges of revolutionary politics under conditions of hegemony.

Revolutionary Processes and Vectors of Mobilization

The conceptual framework of a Gramscian perspective on hegemony and subaltern politics

allows us to understand how conditions of hegemonic incorporation entail both constraints

and possibilities for subaltern self-activity. By emphasizing processes of learning in struggle,

it also helps us conceptualize how such self-activity might develop beyond its initial

limitations to more spontaneous, episodic, and defensive forms. Through this learning,

members of subaltern social groups can acquire the capacity and will to mount challenges to

the existing hegemonic formation. Required are the development of coherent sets of ideas

that break with common sense – a new conception of the world – as well as the formation of

a collective will and agency around those ideas. This crucially entails a dialectic of intellectual

and organizational work which serves to organically root the articulation of ideas in subaltern

struggles as well as to, in turn, disseminate those ideas, making them inform the will and

activity of growing collectives. However, this does not necessarily relate to revolutionary

processes and politics. Indeed, this conceptual framework is useful for understanding the

development of a range of different struggles which, although articulating systemic

challenges of some kind, do not need to be of an outright revolutionary nature or involve

movements large enough to achieve such goals. How, then, does this conceptual framework help address the central question of this thesis: the creation of revolutionary mass mobilization and the role of subaltern self-activity therein?

The answer to this question is that Gramsci developed his conceptualizations of hegemony precisely to devise a revolutionary strategy under such conditions, notably for the Italian Communist Party of the period between the two World Wars (Femia, 1981; McNally, 2015). The following proposes that this can be unpacked by considering how two distinguishable "hegemonic effects", although dialectically unified in the concept of hegemony, were understood by Gramsci as disabling the main revolutionary strategies discussed at his time, and how he sought to develop a strategy to address these challenges. With the above discussion, we can see that the two hegemonic effects are mass consent produced by hegemonic incorporation and common sense produced by dominant conceptions of the world (cp. Cox and Nilsen, 2014, pp. 66–7). Gramsci refers to two polar positions on revolutionary strategy as voluntarism/vanguardism and economism/spontaneism, which he realized would be disabled by these two effects of a developed hegemonic formation (1971, pp. 126–9, 158–68, 196–205). The former entails political agitation based on a revolutionary theory developed by radical intellectuals and party activists who, once they believe the time to be ripe, engage in a "vanguard move" to capture key institutions of government, thus initiating a revolutionary process to which the masses would rally. The latter, by contrast, assumes that mass mobilization will emerge spontaneously because of economic contradictions and that the key task is to provide the masses with organization and resources which direct and sustain their revolutionary energy.[18]

---

[18] Both positions are obviously much more complex and specific than this. However, rather than those schematic positions, what is of interest here is how they relate to the Gramscian conceptualization of hegemony.

Considering the conceptual framework above, we can see how neither strategy successfully addresses the conditions created by hegemony. Voluntarism/vanguardism is of less interest here as it involves no strategic element of subaltern self-activity. Under conditions of hegemony, members of subaltern groups have reasons, material and ideal, to offer their consent to the existing order. Thus, they cannot be expected to simply accept leadership by conspiratorial circles whose theories for revolution have developed in the abstract and are not based on the contradictions which, consent notwithstanding, mark the condition of subalternity. Revolution, Gramsci tells us, requires 'mass politics and not merely an adventure by groups claiming to represent the masses' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 198). Lacking connection to the lifeworlds of and consent by subaltern groups, then, means that voluntarism would result in revolutionary politics without mass mobilization. Conversely, conditions of hegemonic common sense result in spontaneism not doing anything to create a shift from mass mobilization to revolutionary politics. Here, lacking learning from and development of the many struggles of subaltern groups that fall short of spontaneous revolt and mass risings means that no organic articulation of revolutionary ideas has taken place. Hence, neither was common sense broken, nor a collective will formed around the purpose of revolutionary action. Even if violations to their moral economy might push subaltern groups into mass action, they would still reject the "revolutionary leadership" they are being offered as an outside imposition. Rather, they are more likely to seek redress for their grievances through the hegemonic formation's ideas and institutions.
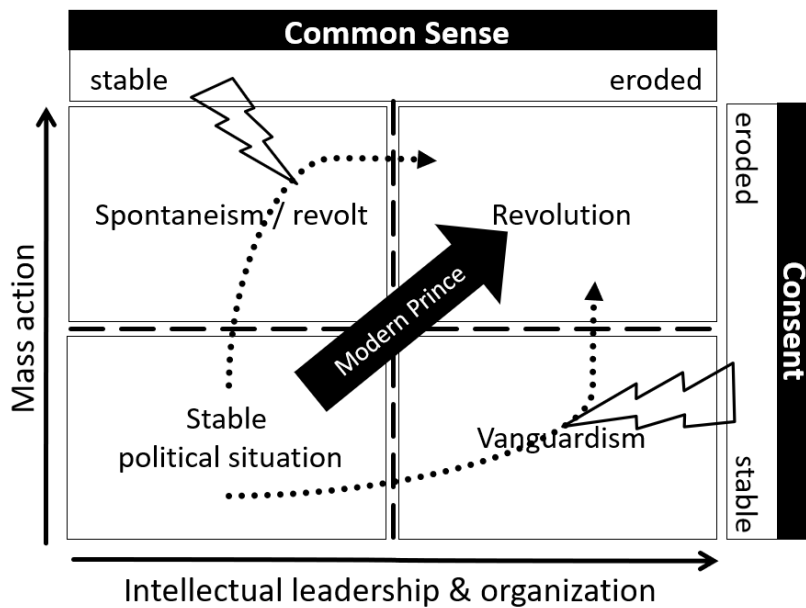
Figure 1: Revolutionary Processes in orientation to Gramsci (1971), source: own rendering

The Gramscian revolutionary strategy addresses both common sense and consent and consequently unfolds as a dialectical unity similar to that of hegemony. In short, it is a strategy of "counter-hegemony" (Femia, 1981), and is represented with the other two schematic strategies in the graph above. It entails precisely the dynamics of developing a new conception of the world and forming a collective that were discussed in the previous section. It is also centrally premised on intellectual and organizational work of the organic kind. Gramsci discusses this under the two notions of the "philosophy of praxis" and the "modern prince", respectively. The philosophy of praxis constitutes the development of a new conception of the world in the form of an organic articulation:

A philosophy of praxis […] must be a criticism of "common sense" […] renovating and making "critical" an already existing activity […] It affirms the need for contact between intellectuals and [masses…to] lead them to a higher conception of life […and] to construct an intellectual-moral bloc which can make politically possible the intellectual progress of the mass and not only of small intellectual groups. (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 330–3)

In this, he adds, 'philosophy […] coincides with "good" as opposed to "common" sense […] which deserves to be made more unitary and coherent' (ibid, pp. 326, 328). Here, vividly

82

expressed, is the task of mutual learning producing coherent articulation of the knowledge contained in good sense and of the need for the conceptions generated this way to educate the masses politically. Articulating a new conception of the world, then, requires an organizational context that forms and trains organic intellectuals. However, organizational work becomes even more important if a mass educational activity of such proportions is to be carried out, as the philosophy of praxis 'must reach for […] the creation of a new integral culture, having the mass character of the Protestant Reformation and the French Enlightenment' (Gramsci quoted in Femia, 1981, p. 122).

This organizational activity, which finally results in the creation of a collective will for revolutionary change, is discussed by Gramsci as the task of a political party which, referencing Machiavelli, he calls the modern prince. What is required, he states, is 'the formation of a national-popular collective will, of which the modern Prince is at one and the same time the organiser and the active, operative expression' (1971, p. 133). Forging a collective of such national-popular proportion is why a counter-hegemonic strategy can only be carried out on the terrain where hegemony itself is created, namely in civil society. Here, an attritional tactic which Gramsci likens to a "war of position" is to be carried out in which the philosophy of praxis is spread through educational, cultural, and political institutions, gradually replacing common sense. The social groups thus educated are to be allied to the revolutionary movement, forming a new "historical bloc" to rival that of the dominant group. It is precisely because both consent and common sense need to be comprehensively eroded that Gramsci finds 'a social group can, and indeed must, already exercise "leadership" before winning governmental power' (ibid, p. 57). Hence, forming such a revolutionary collective will constitutes a 'long labour' (ibid, p. 194) with an important organizational grounding.

Relating the conceptual framework and the Gramscian revolutionary process discussed here to the critical perspectives reviewed in the previous chapter generates additional questions

for this thesis to explore and motivates a final conceptual development. The critical works reviewed in one way or another all addressed the Gramscian challenges of an organic conception of the world, collective will-formation, organization, and the creation of new alliances. They did so primarily for the case of Egypt, where an inclusive mode of horizontalist organizing, developed across a decade of struggle in civil society, allowed for collective will and alliance formation based on an image of the world and a model of mass action successfully appropriated from Tunisia. The Tunisian revolutionary process, however, could not draw on similar ideational and organizational mediations. This makes the research question on the role of subaltern self-activity in the Tunisian revolution all the more pertinent. Re-expressed through the conceptual framework: How might subaltern self-activity and learning in struggle have featured in the creation of revolutionary mobilization? Did subaltern struggles overcome the key challenges posed by common sense without significant mediation through the agency of intellectuals or formal organization? Particularly, how were organic conceptions that could break aspects of common sense articulated? This can be summarized in a second main research question for the thesis: To what extent can we understand the Tunisian revolution through the possibilities and limitations of subaltern self-emancipation in the context of a contemporary hegemonic formation? To approach these questions, the thesis will use an additional concept termed "vectors of mobilization" that complements the above framework.

The thesis proposes "vectors of mobilization" as a key descriptive workhorse to broach questions on subaltern self-activity and transformative learning in struggle in the context of a revolutionary process. The main purpose of this lens is to explore the conceptual space of struggles developing between the possibilities of more formally organized activity and the limitations of more spontaneously defensive ones. To this end, a vector groups together phenomena and episodes of (subaltern) mobilization which do not recognizably involve a shared project or collective subjects but might nonetheless produce cumulative effects of

84

learning in, as well as transformation of, struggle. Here, they take inspiration from what Gramsci called "molecular processes".[19] Vectors capture such processes, first, through the notion of vector trajectory and, second, through different types of trajectories and situations. Quantitative or cumulative processes of learning and development in the course of mobilization are captured in terms of the "distance travelled" along the trajectory of a vector, relative to the dimensions of consent and common-sense of the hegemonic formation – in other words, as struggles that move against and progressively erode consent and common sense. Qualitative or transformative developments, by contrast, are captured by shifts in trajectories and the creation of situations that entail new experiences. We can distinguish four ideal-typical vectors: hegemonic, insurgent, transgressive, and revolutionary.

Mobilization unfolding along a hegemonic vector does not challenge consent or common sense and is marked by a relative absence of learning-effects. Vectors of this type are meant to capture mobilization entailing accepted practices of claims-making and their expression in terms of common sense. They directly involve organizations which function as sites of political incorporation and draw on their resources. Mobilization under hegemonic vectors is directed towards a resolution of its underlying grievances through (the expansion of) existing incorporation processes. This type of vector serves to produce and maintain the boundary of an existing hegemonic formation defined by these processes of incorporation – this is why it does not feature many dynamics of learning in the sense which is of interest here.[20] In other words, the trajectory of this vector "bends" (subaltern) struggles into the hegemonic formation. The second type of vector can be understood as insurgent in that it captures subaltern self-activity that does not unfold under a hegemonic vector. However, it mainly

---

[19] Gramsci used "molecular" to speak of 'social transformation which takes place as it were beneath the surface of society' (1971, p. 46). He suggestively drew on it to describe processes leading to 'changes which in fact progressively modify the pre-existing composition of forces' or to 'accumulation of elements destined to produce an "explosion", that is, an upheaval', as well as 'the moment in which the real hegemony disintegrates at the base' (1971, pp. 109, 280, 370).
[20] However, mobilization under this vector might still be generative of solidarities and networks as well as provide participants with activist experience.

involves tolerated practices of mobilization, makes claims in the language of common sense, and seeks resolutions of grievances through existing processes of incorporation. As such, insurgent vectors capture mobilization which does not intentionally breach the boundary of the hegemonic formation. Such struggles generate learning-effects by developing knowledge and capacities for future mobilization, including activist experience, solidarities, and organizational resources. Since they constitute movement within the scope of the hegemonic formation, both insurgent and hegemonic vectors constitute contained contention.

If mobilization under insurgent vectors is left protractedly unresolved, its cumulative effects may prepare the ground for a qualitative shift to a transgressive trajectory that entails learning against common sense, for example through the development of the "militant particularism" discussed above. The principal feature of struggles under transgressive vectors is that they entail practices which are not sanctioned under the hegemonic formation and thus transgress its boundaries. This means that they are frequently met with repression by the state, as a movement beyond the scope of the hegemonic formation encounters what Gramsci called the state's "armour of coercion" (1971, p. 263). Movement along a transgressive vector produces cumulative or quantitative learning-effects similar to those under insurgent vectors. Under a transgressive vector, parts of the subaltern population also travel a "significant distance" out of the hegemonic formation and into a situation of revolt that entails qualitatively different experiences. However, the dynamics of militant particularism captured by this vector do not constitute a break with common sense. The trajectory thus remains within the realm of revolt rather than being directed towards revolution. Mobilization under this vector will feature only the articulation of demands that can, in principle, still be addressed within the existing hegemonic formation. In other words, mobilization under this vector remains defensive.

Shifting from a transgressive to a revolutionary vector thus requires the organic articulation of a revolutionary conception in and through struggle. Moreover, and in order to successfully travel the distance from revolt to a revolutionary situation along such a trajectory, it requires mass mobilization for such a purpose, viz. a collective will. The following chapters will draw on the conceptual framework of subaltern politics and the notion of vectors introduced above to understand whether subaltern struggles produced dynamics of learning and transformation and, if so, how they may have contributed to creating and shaping the Tunisian revolutionary process. Doing so will hopefully offer new insights into the potentials and limits for subaltern self-emancipation in a contemporary hegemonic formation, thus informing our theoretical perspectives through the knowledge created in subaltern struggles. Before moving to discuss the empirical material in the rest of this thesis, the second part of this chapter describes how that material was collected.

III.ii. Empirical Research and Methods

This second part of the chapter describes the development of the empirical research project as well as the methods used. Research on subaltern agency in the Tunisian revolution faces two methodological challenges. First, identifying sites of enquiry and, second, gaining access and gathering material in those sites. The first challenge was mainly addressed through researching primary sources in the form of news articles, social media content, as well as consulting secondary sources. Here, an event catalogue developed from news articles proved particularly helpful. The second challenge was addressed through working with local colleagues and using ethnographic methods, combining prolonged fieldwork stays and ethnographic observations at sites of enquiry with in-depth, narrative interviews, whereby

the latter was the principal method used.[21] The following discussion proceeds in four

sections. The first section describes how focus sites of enquiry were selected using an event

catalogue. Section two introduces the main localities of ethnographic fieldwork and discusses

questions of access. Section three describes my interlocutors, including the main subaltern

groups that I worked with, the interviews conducted, and the methods used therein. It also

discusses questions of ethics and data security. The chapter closes with self-reflective notes.

Event Catalogue

The research question on the role of subaltern self-activity in the Tunisian revolution

developed inductively and relatively late in the research process. Initially, my focus was to

identify the transformative dynamics in the revolutionary process to which subaltern agency

likely contributed. The notion of transformation was conceptually open rather than based on

the development and learning perspective on subaltern struggle laid out above. In many

ways, the project confronted challenges like those faced by what the previous chapter

discussed as "processual and transformation perspectives". For just like with an emphasis on

"transformative events" and "microfoundations", subaltern agency was likely plural and

dispersed throughout the revolutionary process. Thus, a first puzzle was: How to identify sites

of enquiry that would allow broaching these questions? Since I was after more informal

---

[21] A note on the genealogy of this research project is in order. I was originally studying the Egyptian revolution which I had the privilege of witnessing in Cairo. The first two years of my PhD were dedicated to this project. Because of the atrocious murder of our colleague Giulio Regeni by the Egyptian authorities, whose memory I herewith honor, my fieldwork application was rejected in September 2016. Having to redirect my research project, I arrived in Tunisia in December 2016 without prior desk research, familiarity with the country, its history, or local contacts. As a result of this, I spent the first nine months catching up on some of this, gaining a basic level of the local Arabic, and carried out almost all desk-based empirical research for this thesis while already in the country. Over this period, I lived in *Beb Jdid*, a popular quarter of Tunis, which helped my understanding of these communities. It was only towards the end of 2017 that I had developed a focus for my research and felt relatively prepared to do fieldwork in the communities of the interior provinces which I had identified as my main sites of enquiry. Hence, almost all interviews were conducted between December 2017 and July 2018.

agencies, this challenge could not be resolved by focusing on formally organized groups or activist circles. The 12 January general strike in Sfax is generally recognized as a turning point in the revolutionary process and marked the first instance of revolutionary mass mobilization (RMM) entailing an undeniable organizing role of UGTT. If there was a significant role for transformative subaltern agency in creating RMM, it would likely have played out before the events in Sfax and the subsequent emergence of RMM in the capital. Still, protests with significant engagement by subaltern social groups prior to those events had been plentiful. To negotiate this challenge and identify sites of enquiry I analyzed primary media sources, most notably news articles and social media content. The goal was to identify transformative dynamics by tracking down innovations and novelties, such as qualitatively new forms of protest or the emergence of slogans articulating radical political demands, that emerged in the revolutionary process.

While social media analysis provided signposts for the period after 8 January, it was the event catalogue which proved most useful in delimiting localities and time periods to an extent that made ethnographic research appear feasible. For it, I analyzed more than 350 articles and transcripts of news broadcasts reporting on protest events and regime actions, dating between the eve of Mohammad Bouazizi' self-immolation on 17 December 2010 and 28 January 2011 (the end of the first Kasbah occupation). State-run and independent news media were drawn on. Local news sources included *Al-Chourouk* and *As-Sabah*, as Arabic newspapers, transcripts of Tunisian *Channel7* broadcasts, and *La Presse de Tunisie* as well as *Le Temps* as French publications. International news sources were taken from transcripts of *Al-Jazeera TV* in Arabic, as well as articles on *France 24* in French, and *Al-Jazeera English*, *The New York Times*, and *The Guardian* in English. Sources were coded for key information such as date, time and location of events, number of reported protesters, names of individuals, groups and organizations, protest practices, the practices of security forces, deaths and injuries, as well as slogans and demands raised.

Most of the coding did not reveal noticeable clusters or shifts. Reporting on numbers of protesters, protest practices, as well as the nature of demands, for instance, showed fluctuation, with growth and radical nature only becoming apparent from around 11 January. However, the event catalogue brought two key insights. First, the number of protest events between 17 December 2010 and 14 January 2011 did not grow steadily. Rather, protests in the interior of the country seem to have peaked on 25 December, remaining concentrated in the Sidi Bouzid governorate, and were followed by almost a week of lull from 28 December onwards.[22] Protests re-commenced in the town of Thala in the Kasserine governorate on 3 January and centered on that governorate for seven days. The second insight gained from the event catalogue was that this phase, from 8 January onwards, was also marked by a qualitatively new development: a significant increase in the killing of protesters. Figures varied from 21 to 50 casualties over two days, compared to two casualties and three suicides before that date. This far exceeded the four casualties of the Gafsa revolt two years earlier (Chouikha and Gobe, 2009), and marked a level of violence not witnessed in the country since the bread riots of 1983/4. The number of protest events and of deaths are plotted in the graph below.

---

[22] Event catalogue data shows that the five reported demonstrations between 28 December 2010 and 2 January 2011 all took place in Tunis. These were organized either by political activists or lawyers (Volpi, 2016). Moreover, protests in coastal regions prior to Januar were only reported in Sfax (one) and Tunis (five). Those remained small, and were organized by and drew in mainly lawyers, trade unionists, and political activists (see discussion in chapter 7).
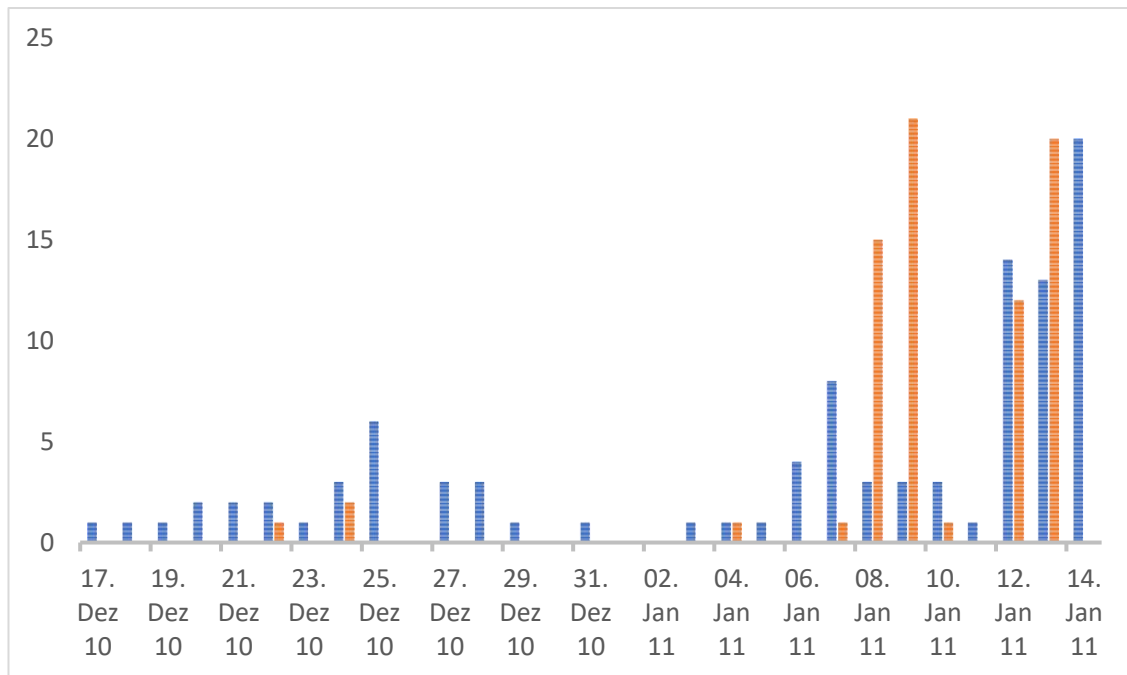
Figure 2 : Number of protest events (blue) and of protesters killed by security forces (orange) in Tunisia 17 Dec 2010 – 14 Jan 2011, Source: own research

These initial findings put into question the linear narratives on the revolutionary process reviewed in the previous chapter which posit that dynamics emerging over the first week of protests in Sidi Bouzid gradually intensified and spread protest across the country. Instead, they suggested a focus on the under-researched events in Thala which appear to have re-ignited protests, alongside Kasserine and Regueb as the other two centers of protest in the period immediately predating the Sfax general strike. Thus, I followed a hunch that events in these communities might have entailed transformative dynamics of subaltern agency that altered the balance of social forces going forward and settled on them as focal sites of enquiry for my ethnographic research. In addition, I conducted interviews in Sidi Bouzid, Sfax, and Greater Tunis. The geographical centers of protest in the revolutionary process, including these localities, are shown in the map below. In terms of methodology, the first phase of the research suggested that, while useful in identifying focus sites for ethnographic research, event catalogues of the kind used in the study of contentious politics (Tilly, 2002), did not

produce much insight for understanding the role of subaltern agency – or, as I would come

to conceive of it, self-activity – in revolutionary contexts.
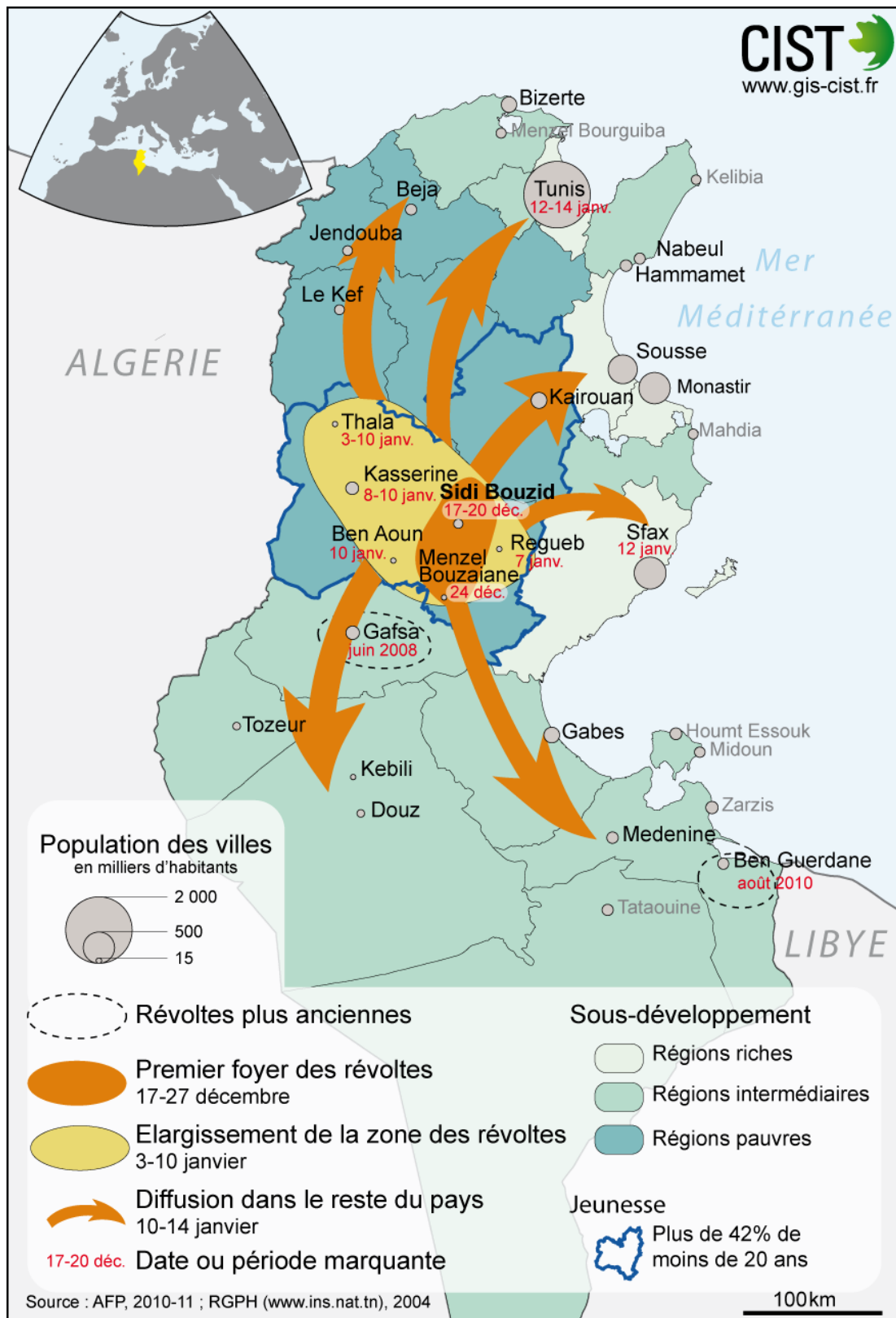
Figure 3 : Map of The Propagation of the Revolution, Source: Timothée Giraud, International College of Territorial Sciences (CIST), available online at: http://cist.cnrs.fr/en/geomedia1/

Sites of Enquiry and Access

This section describes the localities in which ethnographic work was conducted and discusses questions of access. The main sites of enquiry were the cities of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, and the towns of Thala and Regueb, with the three latter localities having been the center of protests between 3 and 11 January. Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine are the administrative seats of the two governorates by the same names, while Regueb and Thala, are smaller, largely agricultural towns in the Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine governorates, respectively.[23] The two governorates form part of the Tunisian "interior" away from the littoral regions. Like much of the country's South and Centre-West, both are economically linked with the Sfax metropolitan region, largely as zones of resource extraction and agricultural production – Sidi Bouzid, for example, produces a fifth of the nation's vegetables as well as fruit for export (Gana, 2013a). The governorate of Kasserine is more remote, situated on the south-eastern slopes of the Atlas Mountains. It features cross-border trade with Algeria, including petrol smuggling, and produces cellulose, textiles, and construction material, including marble (Feltrin, 2018a). According to the 2014 census, both governorates have roughly 430,000 inhabitants each out of a national population of 11 million.

For Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine illiteracy stands at 29 % and 32 %, respectively, against a national average of 18.8%, and unemployment at 17.7 % and 22.7 % against a national average of 14.8% (INST, 2015). The two governorates ranked least (Kasserine) and third least (Sidi Bouzid) developed in a comprehensive survey by the Ministry of Planning in relation to education, employment conditions, public health, and social equality (Ben Rabah, 2012). However, Tunisia's overall economic and infrastructural development is high and poverty rates are low by regional standards (Ncube et al., 2014). For instance, both governorates

---

[23] Tunisia has 24 governorates which are the main administrative divisions. They are shown as "regions" in the map above.

apparently feature only 1% of homes that are not connected to the utility network (INST, 2015).

As the seats of their respective governorates, the cities of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine are important regional economic and administrative centers. Sidi Bouzid has a population of about 50,000 (INST, 2015). It is located 265 kilometers away from Tunis and travel takes about four hours. Kasserine's population is double the size, around 100,000 (ibid). It is roughly equidistance from the capital but due to road conditions the journey time is at least five hours. The population of both cities is noticeably class stratified. On the one hand, they feature members of the middle-classes, mostly employed in public administration, education, and the judicial system. While middle-class citizens are typically not rich by national standards and neither city has residential areas that are visibly affluent, they are still wealthy by local standards, including in social and cultural capital. They also often play the role of intermediaries between the urban poor and the authorities (fieldnotes, 2018). On the other hand, both cities contain sizeable popular quarter. Inhabited by members of subaltern social groups, and marked by poverty and informal economies, they have grown considerably over the past decades due to rural in-migration. Social relations, particularly in the popular quarters, are relatively conservative, for instance regarding gender, but both cities also have bars which serve alcohol and are hubs of transregional movement, featuring direct bus services to the capital and local hotels. Kasserine feels notably poorer and less developed compared to Sidi Bouzid, having none of the latter's public green spaces or modern shops, and fewer well paved roads.[24] The adjacent mountains, including the highest summit in the country, *Jebel ech Chambi*, have long provided hideouts for armed groups, including resistance to French colonialism, as well as, since 2011, groups linked to *Al-Qaeda*. This latter development also meant that, while both places have a national reputation for unruliness,

---

[24] Some of this is an effect of post-revolutionary development programs which centered on Sidi Bouzid.

the region around Kasserine saw episodic fighting during the period of my fieldwork and was considered by Tunisians as particularly "dangerous" (fieldnotes, 2018).

The towns of Thala and Regueb were my other two main field sites. Thala, located 50 kilometers from Kasserine, has a population of roughly 18,000 (INST, 2015). At an altitude of 1,000 meters, it is Tunisia's most elevated community. Like its regional capital, the town is known as a center of resistance. It was the hotbed of two important revolts – of Ali Ben Ghedhahem against the Bey of Tunis in 1864/5, and of Amor Ben Othman against the French occupation in 1906. Thala's local economy is largely based on subsistence agriculture but is also known for its prickly pears, merguez sausages, and for a rare yellow marble quarried outside the town. Regueb, by contrast, is a comparatively rich agricultural town which produces a sizable proportion of the country's olives and fruit exports. It has a population just above 11,000 and is located 40 kilometers south of Sidi Bouzid (INST, 2015). Together with the popular quarters of Kasserine, these two provincial towns constituted the centers of open confrontation between protesters and security forces between 3 and 11 January 2011 (e.g. Aleya-Sghaier, 2012). As I spent more time in these localities, I noticed that their social and urban structures bore important similarities. Hence, the thesis frequently refers to them under the category "popular quarters and provincial towns".

These popular quarters and provincial towns are internally relatively homogenous and close-knit communities. While some of their residents have middle-class professions, the majority are relatively poor, do not have high levels of formal education, work low-paid and informal jobs, including subsistence businesses and agriculture, or find themselves unemployed, especially if they are young. The built environment typically features narrow residential streets and alleys surrounding one or two main streets on which most shops, cafes, and businesses, as well as mosques and some public institutions (schools, local administrations, and sometimes cultural facilities) are located. This setup is referred to by the youth of these

communities as "two houses and a dog" (*zouz diar w kalb*), an idiom expressing lack of entertainment and opportunity. The public life of the male population that I almost exclusively interacted with has a rhythm structured around work and visits to the cafes as the main sites of sociality. Cafes are frequented in the morning, afternoon, and at night, after the main meals. Those not in regular employment – or where office jobs permit it – often spend much of the intervening periods at the cafes as well.[25] It is here that friendship circles meet, cards and other games are played, networks are forged, and occasional jobs and favors obtained and exchanged.

Public life in these popular quarters and provincial towns is male dominated, socially conservative (though not visibly religious), and provides residents with strong local identities and networks. In all of the above, these communities share important similarities with popular quarters in Tunis, whose population is mostly made up of provincial migrants (Allal, 2012b; Ben Amor, 2015). Indeed, popular quarters and provincial towns – the former in Kasserine and, to a lesser extent, in Sidi Bouzid and Tunis, the latter in the form of Thala, Regueb, but also Menzel Bouzaiane – became my principal sites of enquiry. This resulted from the fact that these localities were the centers of open confrontations with the police during the revolution in which I grew particularly interested. The social conservatism and close-knit social fabric of these communities posed additional challenges in terms of access that exacerbated the problems I already confronted through researching localities remote from the capital. Here, my lacking fluency in Tunisian Arabic became a serious obstacle. Not being a Middle East scholar by training, my Arabic proficiency was limited and acquiring a new dialect while re-activating my French proved challenging. As the research focus took shape, it became clear to me that my language skills would not suffice to lead interviews independently in context where local dialects and lacking fluency in French of my subaltern

---

[25] Among the young men, additional sites of sociality include places like video gaming shops and gyms, but cafes remain most important.

interlocutors provided additional challenges. These difficulties convinced me to work with local "fixers" who arranged and led most of the interviews, allowing me to concentrate on listening and posing follow-up questions.

Via contacts in Tunis, I established links with three people who had experience in journalism: Mohamed Alahmadi, Rabii Gharsalli and Shady Rabhi. Mohamed, with whom I conducted almost all my interviews outside of the Kasserine governorate, is 32 years old and hails from a small village close to Regueb. From a family of farmers and the only of four brothers to leave Regueb, he managed to move from a local community radio station to working with international media in the capital despite not having a university degree. His knowledge of places and people throughout the country, and acumen in communicating with members of different social groups, were invaluable. Rabiaa and Shedi are both from Kasserine and had worked on journalistic and photography projects together, though they could hardly be more different. Shady is 28 years old and his parents are high school teachers who are well-known and respected in Kasserine for their leftist politics and activism. He left the middle-class quarter where his family lives to study biochemistry in Monastir but, unable to find a job after graduating, returned to his native city. Rabii is 39 years old and has spent all his life in Kasserine. He comes from a poor family living in one of the two biggest popular quarters, Hay Ennour, and is highly respected – almost revered – by the other young men of the popular quarters. He has an air of severity and integrity and people listen to him, although he mostly prefers to stay silent. Both are popular figures in Kasserine and had contacts in Thala as well. Shady is well-spoken and empathetic and led most of the interviews, while Rabii's habitus and standing amongst youth of the popular quarters were instrumental in gaining access.

None of them were married or in fixed employment at the time of my research, meaning they were mostly free to work with me.[26] They became valued colleagues and friends without

---

[26] Rabii also worked at a local public swimming pool and had a post in the local administration. Showcasing the flexibility of many work arrangements in places like Kasserine – and the degree to

whom the research would have been impossible for me to carry out. Indeed, the project turned into a collaborative effort as all three had a personal interest in researching the local histories of the revolution and invested themselves in the work beyond what was justified by the low rates that I was able to pay compared to an international journalist. The nature of our relationship also developed since gender and age, amidst many differences, allowed us to connect amicably and we spent much time together outside the interview work. Their social standing made questions of access much easier to negotiate than anticipated, including dealing with local authorities. Nominally for reasons of protecting me as a foreign national, the project would have required permissions by national and regional administrations that were time intensive and unlikely to be obtained for the "dangerous places" we worked in. Alternatively, it could have resulted in obstructive police accompaniment during my time there. As a result, and noting that my presence could not be kept secret, we decided to circumvent these issues on the local level. In Kasserine, for example, we declared my presence to a contact who, as head of the National Anti-Terror Brigades which oversees all security issues there, gave us verbal permission to work freely, telling us to refer to him any policeman who might obstruct our work.

Ease of access also materialized regarding interlocutors. Unlike what I had experienced with activists in Tunis, people in the popular quarters and provincial towns – facilitated by the rapport of my colleagues – tended to openly share the story of themselves and their communities in the revolution. Many of them had never spoken to an outsider about this and they often expressed the opinion that this was an important part of history yet to be written. However, my access largely remained limited to the male population and naturally incurred certain biases resulting from the local networks of my colleagues. As such, the story which this thesis tells focuses on the experience of men in the popular quarters and provincial

---

which public sector jobs often constituted benefit-allocation rather than soliciting of labor – none of these interfered significantly with our work.

towns in the revolution, leaving much to be discovered by future research on how other subaltern groups engaged in it. The following section describes the ethnographic research, the social groups on which it focused and discusses questions of method.

Social Groups, Interviews and Ethical Considerations

The purpose of this section is to describe the social groups on which the ethnographic work focused, and to discuss the interviews and questions of method as well as ethical considerations. Overall, more than one-hundred interviews were conducted. The aim of understanding the role of subaltern agency in the local development of mobilization informed the group-composition of the interviewees. The research focus was on the young, mostly un- or underemployed men of the popular quarters and provincial towns as the main subaltern social group with which the thesis is concerned. This group is defined by its "social" rather than biological age. They are considered "youth" as they still live with their parents and cannot afford to build a house – the main prerequisite in Tunisian society to getting married, starting a family, and thus being recognized as an adult man. The main condition preventing this is lack of economic capital. Absent most other forms of social recognition, reputations of masculinity, of being a "real man" – including the ability to defend oneself and the community, were vital for members of this group (Ben Amor, 2015; for Egypt, cp. Ismail, 2006). Often lacking formal employment, they spend a significant part of their days socializing in local cafes, and thus frequently have strong local networks. Overall, one third of my interlocuters corresponded to this broad category.

Interviews with other subaltern residents of popular quarters and provincial towns included workers, small business owners, civil society activists, and family members of martyrs of the revolution, bringing the total number of interlocutors from subaltern social groups to roughly sixty. The other more than forty interviews were conducted with members of diverse but

mostly middle-class groups. The biggest category here were political activists ranging from trade unionists (mostly teachers) and opposition party members to bloggers and lawyers, together making up 33 of my interlocutors. Overall, almost eighty interviews were conducted in the interior of the country and the rest in Tunis or Sfax. In those latter localities, interviews were conducted with activists, trade unionists, lawyers, politicians, and journalists, but also with eight residents of popular quarters.

Interlocutors were mostly approached through the networks of my local colleagues. Some, such as trade unionists or lawyers, could be identified by their membership in a group or organization which had been reported in the media and secondary sources as particularly active in the development of local mobilization. However, identifying the young men who fought the security forces proved more challenging. Some were known for their role in the revolution, but these individuals frequently turned out to have been observers who uploaded videos rather than having been involved in the mobilizational dynamics of the frontlines. Relatives of those clearly involved in the latter, namely the martyrs, also knew relatively little about those dynamics. Here, the most important technique proved to be identifying friends who had been fighting next to them as they were killed.

Once contacts had been made with members of a given group, snowballing was used to approach further interlocutors as is common practice for research in densely knit communities (Clark, 2006). To allow for a relaxed and informal conversation, interviews were always conducted at places chosen by my interlocuters, mostly the cafes they frequented and where they felt comfortable. Conducting one interview frequently led to another with a friend or other contact of the previous interlocutor who was quickly called to come to the same café. Female interlocuters who did not want to meet in cafes, those who had offices of their own or other professional facilities (mostly lawyers, trade unionists, and activists, but also shopkeepers and craftsmen) were interviewed in offices or other workplaces. Only seven

interviews were conducted in private homes, mostly in Tunis. Due to the number of interviews and settings, ethnographic descriptions can only be provided relatively briefly in the following chapters.

For the most part, the aim of the interviews was to understand the development of mobilization on the local level. As such, the open, in-depth, narrative format common in oral history and movement research was chosen (Perks and Thomson, 1998; della Porta, 2014b). Interviews lasted for an average of 86 minutes, producing a total of 146 hours of recording. Interviews were overwhelmingly conducted in Tunisian Arabic and led by my colleagues, while the language of conversation was French and English in eleven and four cases, respectively. Interviews always opened with a set of standardized questions on biographical information, personal history of political activism, experience with protest prior to the revolution, and on how information on events connected to the revolution was first obtained. A question on the first personal participation in local events led to an open conversation which mainly proceeded through pauses, encouragement to elaborate on points already made, or follow-up questions. The focus throughout was on the lived experience of my interlocutors and the conversation was frequently re-centered by prompts to narrate those events that were personally witnessed and to describe in detail the actions taken personally or by peers (e.g. other trade unionists or youth).

Interviews generated themes and insights into key local events that were followed up on and sometimes included as directed questions in further interviews. Themes followed throughout included interactions with the police as well as with other protesters (notably those from different groups) prior to and in the course of the revolutionary process. In general, interviews with members of different groups and in each locality continued until information on key themes and events became repetitive and I felt I had understood local developments during the revolutionary process. I also kept a field journal to record observations and

thoughts that could complement the interview material. While there was thus an attempt to triangulate key pieces of information (della Porta and Keating, 2008), the methods of oral history used meant that the research depended both on the memory of my interlocutors and on my own judgement, making it rich in interpretation and subjectivity (Abrams, 2010; Portelli, 1981). This was the approach best suited to a project aimed at writing a subaltern history of the Tunisian revolution, and thus of groups whom 'objectivity is always directed against' (Fanon, 1963, p. 37).

As the project involved gathering personal and potentially sensitive information, it raised important questions regarding ethics and data protection. These were addressed through careful obtainment of consent and data storage. First, it should be noted that risks to my interlocutors from participating in the research are low, given present political conditions in the country. None of my interlocuters were deceived as to the nature of the project and verbal consent was obtained before each interview.[27] Consent questions entailed making participants aware that everything they said would become part of an academic publication, possibly including direct quotes, that they could opt not to disclose any personal details regarding themselves or others, choosing aliases if they desired, and asking whether I could record the interview. Only five participants preferred partial anonymization (last name or details like profession) and two complete anonymization (choosing an alias). This, as well as the overall openness and eagerness with which my interlocutors – especially from subaltern social groups – shared their stories, signaled that the project, while sensitive in many ways, was regarded as desirable by participants. Recorded interviews were not kept on local devices but uploaded to a secure LSE cloud storage at the end of each day. Handwritten notes were always either directly in my possession or kept in a locked drawer in my private apartment. The only instance in which data was transferred from the LSE cloud storage was

---

[27] Asking for written consent would have introduced an element of formality not conducive to the atmosphere of the interview and could have embarrassed participants with lower or no literacy.

for interview transcriptions. These were done by a Tunisian researcher who signed a data protection clause permitting him to temporarily keep interview files in his personal *OneDrive* which is considered a safe storage according to LSE standards.

Finally, theoretical analysis drew both on inductive and deductive approaches. key themes were developed by coding of interviews in NVivo (della Porta, 2014b). This means that the thesis followed a grounded theory approach to some extent (Peters, 2014; Strauss and Corbin, 1994). While a broadly Gramscian perspective guided the thesis from the beginning, key themes such as subaltern self-activity and a developmental perspective on struggle emerged inductively. In this sense, the project followed the logic of the extended case method aimed at increasing the empirical reach of theories (Burawoy, 1998). This approach draws on existing theories and seeks not just 'confirmations but refutations that inspire us to deepen that theory' (ibid, p. 16). A commitment to learning from the experience of my interlocuters meant that the conceptual perspective was used to create 'the boundaries and structural plot of the [thesis] narrative' (Tavory and Timmermans, 2009, p. 255), while considering the empirical material as a source for advancing and refining those same concepts. This approach constitutes a recognition of subaltern social groups and their struggles as producers of knowledge rather than "testing grounds" for deductive hypotheses, as well as a personal commitment to struggles for self-emancipation. A discussion of this latter aspect, alongside a general reflection on my positionality, follow in the below closing section of the chapter.

Self-reflective Notes

My commitment to subaltern struggles, as well as to questions of learning and self-emancipation in and through those struggles, is indeed itself a posture which developed over the course of this research, particularly through learning from my interlocutors. As such, I am

not an "organic intellectual". Rather, I was born to the intersectional privileges of a white, middle-class, Western European man, who went to elite educational institutions. I had no interaction with subaltern struggles until my professional career led me to work in the Middle East. Experiencing occupation in Palestine and revolution in Egypt changed me fundamentally and ultimately led to the development of my PhD project. Embarking on this research has been for me a journey of "unlearning" (some of my) epistemic privilege through which I came to see my own role as that of a "translator", whose main contribution is to relate the knowledge generated by subaltern social groups to larger bodies of theory, thus potentially furthering our collective learning from and for struggles of emancipation. This commitment informs the thesis, giving it a strongly subjective and normative basis.

When I managed to learn from my interlocutors, being educated this way allowed me to perceive my own positionality not just as privilege but as limitation. My lack of understanding and a sense of moral superiority, for instance, caused me to resist a lifeworld of masculinity that appalled me, where superstition, racism, misogyny, conspiracy theories, hypocrisy, and more appeared to be commonplace. As such, my own values and formal education meant that comments on the physique of women from my native Germany or on the Second World War registered with me as misogyny, lack of education, and antisemitism. Frequently, however, they were attempts by my interlocutors to connect, find a common language, and express admiration. There were also my own limitations in terms of cultural adaptability as sheer endless periods of waiting for people in cafes ground down on my spirits and I proved incapable of putting up with the dullness in places like Kasserine, causing me frequently to withdraw to my bourgeois life in Tunis.

And yet, the fieldwork allowed me to see subaltern social groups as producers of knowledge in their own right. As I worked with people in the "periphery of the periphery" (Gilsenan, 1996) who were extremely distant from my own positionality in terms of social, cultural,

economic, and, importantly, epistemic privilege, I realized that they knew more about emancipatory struggles than I did. They had battled down the coercive apparatus of the state. They had learned to maintain discourses and sources of pride amid domination. And they had used all of it to mount a revolutionary struggle. Holding a normative belief in the necessity of such struggle, I was compelled to learn from them. Thus, a dialectic between unlearning my epistemic privilege, and consequently acquiring an ability to learn from my interlocutors, on the one hand, and persistent cultural resistance and blindness, on the other, enabled and limited a thesis marked by these very contradictions.

Such contradictions and my own privilege are manifest in it in other ways as well. The research gave me the honor of interacting with and learning from people who gave me their trust and generously shared their knowledge. For a time, we became fellow travelers in a quest for articulating some of their most transformative experiences and struggles. But while their daily lives remain enmeshed in these struggles, I was able to withdraw – not just to Tunis during the fieldwork, but most notably when I left the country. Moreover, what I learned from them now gets written down into a work that furthers my career, serving only to widen the gulf of privilege between us. I can only hope to work towards some reciprocity by trying to live up to the promise that many of my interlocutors asked of me: to write, as accurately as I can, the history of their struggles. This strengthened my commitment to seize on 'every trace of [their] independent initiative' to understand their role as 'protagonist[s] of a real and effective historical drama' (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 55, 130).

Many – if not most – of those traces were doubtlessly lost on me. For example, a whole world of female experience was mostly inaccessible to me as a man and a foreigner. Here, my positionality did not give me privileged access. Moreover, not having studied Tunisia before, and thus with limited knowledge of the country's history and culture, and insufficient command of local Arabic, meant that I grasped shamefully little in terms of detail and nuance

in those conversations that I did have. Alas, I often wish that someone more suitable and knowledgeable would have carried out this project. But, somehow, my interlocutors were given none better than me to write the history of their protagonism in the Tunisian revolution. Maybe the thesis will inspire other scholars to follow up on this historical task. For the moment, I can only hope that the pages which follow do at least some degree of justice to it.

IV. Subaltern Politics on the Eve of the Revolution

This chapter develops a perspective "from below" on the hegemonic formation of the Ben Ali regime on the eve of the revolution and describes subaltern politics that unfolded within this context. It does so primarily for the specific group of the subaltern population whose agency I came to understand as key in the context of the revolution: the young, mostly un- or underemployed, male residents of popular quarters and towns in the country's interior. Thus, the main purpose of the chapter is to understand the reasons for dissent and experiences of resistance with which these young men entered the popular politics of the revolutionary process. Sometimes, for reasons of brevity, they will be referred to simply as "(subaltern) youth", "young men", or "the unemployed". Other subaltern and middle-class residents of my focus localities – the cities of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, as well as the towns of Menzel Bouzaiane, Regueb, and Thala – will feature to the extent that they shared and explained youth grievances to me. The experience of hegemony under Ben Ali described here, then, is primarily that of the young unemployed men of the interior, as are the forms of subaltern politics which this chapter discusses. Hegemony is used as an optic on the historic-cultural context with which subaltern politics is at any point inseparably intertwined (Nilsen and Roy, 2015a). Through this lens, the agency of my interlocutors becomes intelligible as historically and culturally conditioned – at once constrained by hegemony and motivated by the contradictions that mark subaltern lifeworlds in its fissures.

The chapter proceeds in four sections. It first discusses how divides and inequalities between marginalized interior and more affluent coastal regions of the country deepened due to neoliberal economic policies under Ben Ali. These hegemonic contractions produced rampant unemployment which affected young men in the interior particularly severely and led to feelings of disincorporation from society. Section two argues that, in lieu of hegemonic incorporation, subalterns experienced an intensified policing as the key mode of governance

through which the regime sought to control their discontent. The chapter argues that the conjuncture of oppressive policing and economic disincorporation hit young men most intensely and made their lives almost impossible. The following sections argue that these conditions were experienced by the young men in the country's interior as violations of their moral economy and sense of dignity, to which they responded by engaging in various forms of resistance. Section three shows that those seeking improvements to their economic situation turned towards UGTT, as the hegemonic vector of subaltern politics in the country but also engaged in various forms of independent mobilizations ranging from sit-ins to hunger strikes. In parallel, young men also found other ways to express their discontent, as they clashed with the police in football stadiums or targeted symbols of state authority in their quarters. Jointly, these developments formed an "insurgent vector" of subaltern self-activity that signaled withdrawal of consent and produced effects of learning in struggle, forming "local rationalities" (Cox and Nilsen, 2014) of activism and embryonic resistance cultures. The chapter concludes that, on the eve of the revolution, conditions for subalterns in the interior resembled a slow-burning "crisis of hegemony" in which their consent was fading and coercion mounting (Gramsci, 1971), thus laying the bases of a resistance that pointed towards larger struggles to come.

Economic Disincorporation

As Ben Ali came to power, postcolonial authoritarian legitimacy built around the charismatic leadership of Bourguiba as the deliverer of independence was waning and the regime sought to replace it with a narrative built around a reformist government that brought social and economic development (Camau and Geisser, 2003; Hibou, 2011a). This was combined with preserving certain promises of the Bourguiba era – such as social mobility through education guaranteed by public sector employment, and state social provisions – which, in the face of

neoliberal reforms, proved increasingly difficult to maintain (Achy, 2015). On the surface, neoliberal economic development in Tunisia appeared successful. The country outperformed regional peers, posting annual growth rates averaging 5% over the decade ending in 2010, and increased per capita income from $2,713 in 2005 to $3,720 in 2010 (Achy, 2011, p. 4). However, this growth coexisted with highly unequal regional distribution of gains. It appears that hegemonic processes which had served to economically incorporate populations in the interior of the country contracted under Ben Ali as inequalities between regions grew. Contradictions thus emerged between common sense notions of progress and development propagated in regime discourses and the experience of my interlocutors in the interior regions.

While inequalities between coastal and interior regions can be traced throughout the country's history (Clancy-Smith, 2014), they were exacerbated under the neoliberal approach to economic development implemented over the Ben Ali years (Beissinger et al., 2015). The principal driving factor behind this was a growth model focused on exports, tourism, and private sector development. Export-oriented infrastructure and private businesses clustered along the coast, creating few employment opportunities in interior regions. At the same time, privatization, downsizing of the public-sector, and reduced investment in public companies diminished existing employment opportunities in places which had previously benefitted from state-led investments in agriculture and industry (Blavier, 2016; Murphy, 2013a; Tsourapas, 2013). Growing regional inequality affected the Centre-West region (governorates of Sidi Bouzid, Kairouan and Kasserine) particularly harshly, as shown in a study by the national statistical institute (INST), published in 2012. In 2000, extreme poverty in the Centre-West was about five times higher than in the Greater Tunis area, but by 2010 this ration had increased to almost fourteen times higher (INST, 2012, p. 16). And although poverty in the Centre West fell from roughly half to a third of the regional population over the same period, and extreme poverty from a 25% to 15%, the region was by far the poorest

in the country and had been most left behind in relative terms. Indeed, by 2010, more than 40% of all Tunisians living under conditions of extreme poverty were concentrated in these three governorates (ibid, p. 18). That economic policies under Ben Ali marginalized the governorates of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine was conveyed to me by many of my interlocutors there. Lazher Gammoudi, regional secretary general of UGTT in Sidi Bouzid, gave this testimony when we spoke over tea in his spacious office:

There was no development, no employment. Under the dictatorship, it was the littorals that benefited. There are airports, ports, industrial zones. All the investment went there […] We, on the other hand, have no factories and nothing else. Everyone is trying to find bread as best they can.

Development projects and state investment, then, were almost completely absent in the Sidi Bouzid governorate. Private sector activities were equally scarce and, in 2010, this region with a population of roughly half a million had only 2,750 employees working in industrial enterprises, mostly in textiles and the processing of foodstuffs (Feltrin, 2018a, p. 235). Agriculture was the most important sector of the regional economy and had benefitted from investment programs under Bourguiba which increased productivity, established state-owned farms, and supported smallholders through cheap loans (Attia, 1984). Conditions for agricultural development were affected drastically by neoliberal restructuring under Ben Ali, as public lands were sold to private investors and indebted smallholders forced to do likewise when the government cut subsidies, and many were no longer able to pay their instalments. The impact of land sales was felt throughout interior regions, where families often dependent on subsistence agriculture and those previously working on state-owned farms were forced into unemployment or to accept inferior labor conditions (Gana, 2013a). They also affected many of the young men in the popular quarters and towns of the Sidi Bouzid governorate, who relied on income from agricultural activity, including Mohamed Bouazizi who used to work a plot of land which his uncle owned in Regueb, a town adjected to Sidi Bouzid (Hmed, 2015). This was relayed to me by Badreddine Masoudi, head of the primary education union

in Regueb, whom we met in the small premises of the local UGTT. Surrounded by walls covered with mementos of struggles ranging from those of the local farmers to banners declaring solidarity with the Palestinian people, he told us this:

Regueb's lands were sold to investors from other regions and the Reguebians became simple workers without any rights. […] Mohamed Bouazizi had an uncle who owned land here. He was among the small farmers who did not have the money to pay the bank [loan]. The bank therefore took over the land. […] This is what the banks did in Regueb. The farmers were forced to sell their land and then became mere workers on their own land.

Economic conditions in communities like Regueb clearly declined under Ben Ali due to the commodification of agricultural land. Badreddine notes how smallholders were affected particularly negatively and suggests that the fate of Mohamed Bouazizi was shared by many of the young men in those areas. Conditions in the neighboring Kasserine governorate were no better. The arid soils of this region limit agricultural activity largely to low income generating pastoralism and cultivation of fruit such as prickly pear, although the sector still accounts for roughly 30% of employment (GIZ, 2015, p. 16).

Under Bourguiba, the region received targeted investments in industry, the flagship project of which was the significant expansion of a cellulose factory in the city of Kasserine. Transformed into the state-owned *Société Nationale de Cellulose et de Papier Alfa* (SNCPA), it was inaugurated by the president himself (Bourguiba, 1964). By the mid-seventies, paper production alone had created more than 3,500 jobs in Kasserine according to government sources (IBRD, 1974, p. 26). However, the condition of state-owned companies declined significantly under Ben Ali. SNCPA, for example, employed less than 1,200 people in 2005, and neither new public nor private investments produced significant amounts of jobs, with overall employment in industry across the governorate standing below 7,000 in 2011 for a population just under half a million (GIZ, 2015, pp. 22, 24). Several trade unionists that I spoke with remarked that the region had been hit hard by a lack of economic development. As such, a high school teacher from Kasserine said that 'there is no agriculture, no tourism, no projects

[…] Everyone is poor and miserable' (Choukri Hayouni). The head of the local UGTT in Thala, meanwhile, gave the example that 'in our region, we only have one factory, because we are a forgotten, marginalized region' (Ezzedine Negrichi). This lack of economic development was denounced by many of the young men I spoke to, such as Imed Mourali from Kasserine. In his mid-thirties, he had to drop out of school to support his family and was making ends meet with a small locksmith workshop in the city center where we met. His hands blackened from the work, he offered us tea as we sat around a dusty table:

Kasserine lacks development. It is on the last place in all areas. […] We have an old factory that gave jobs producing cellulose. Now it doesn't even employ 200 people. […] For 23 years [of Ben Ali], Kasserine got nothing. They didn't add anything to Kasserine. Nothing after the cellulose [factory]. Did you set up a prickly pear factory for me so I can work? No, nothing at all!

He expresses how the Ben Ali years had not brought any economic opportunities for those seeking employment in manufacturing or agriculture and gives the impression that people like him felt they had grown up under a regime which ignored their plight. Others were even more clear in expressing that unequal development between regions made them feel they were being left behind and excluded from the national progress propagated by the regime, materializing for others but not for them. This was the case with Ghassen (alias) who lived with his family in the neighborhood of Hay Ennour, one of Kasserine's popular quarters. In his late thirties, he had never found regular employment and, under Ben Ali, spent most of his days in cafes trying to secure day labor or delivery jobs which he carried out on a scooter, his most valuable possession. Now holding a position in public administration, he visited me one evening at my hotel in Kasserine where we sat over beers as he recounted his old life and conditions in Kasserine:

We lived under enormous pressure! Penniless, not a cigarette, with unemployment. And we saw other regions, the Sahel and Tunis, how they live, and we compared with our situation. Automatically you got this feeling of hatred against the regime. […For example] in Thala, they put the stones in trucks and transport them to factories in Sousse to process them into marble. And here the people of Thala

are unemployed. Our factory, the national cellulose company, was the leading [paper] producer in Africa. Go see now: it is stagnating.

The words of Imed and Ghassen manifest the intense burden experienced by many of the young men I spoke to, expressed through the decline of employment opportunities in their communities and the economic hardship it induced. Ghassen, who would become active in civil society projects after the revolution and was interested in local history, also conveys an image of the interior as being exploited for its natural resources, while wealth accumulated along the coast where economic conditions were arguably improving under Ben Ali. While the situation of young men without higher education degrees was dire, unemployment also struck those who had managed to go to university. In Kasserine, there were no employment opportunities for people like 34-year-old Houssem Allali, for example, who had studied fine arts and filled his time before the revolution by volunteering at the local cultural center. He met us at small café where him and his friends were watching a football match over cups of cheap tea:

People were staying unemployed for 10, 15 years! [...] In 2008, I had barely lived through two years of unemployment. I didn't want to talk about my graduation date. We all felt gloomy about the future. We wanted a job in the public service, everyone wanted to be a public servant.

According to Houssem, decade-long unemployment seemed a likely future and the only hope that young graduates like him could imagine was to somehow secure public sector a job. This expectation was based on the fact that the public sector in Tunisia had historically played an important role in absorbing university graduates, whose numbers expanded under Ben Ali from about 20% to 40% of an age cohort (Campante and Chor, 2012). But in the 2000s, neoliberal cuts meant that 'civil service and state-owned enterprises, which were the traditional avenues for high-skilled graduates, could no longer guarantee employment' as annual public sector job creation fell from roughly 20,000 prior to 2006 to less than 10,000 by 2010 (Achy, 2011, p. 9). Indeed, those with postsecondary qualifications were hit hardest by increases in unemployment as their share of all jobseekers rose from 20% to 70% over the

final decade under Ben Ali (ibid). These conditions violated a key element of the moral economy established by an authoritarian social compact which had promised social mobility through educational attainment (Hibou, 2011b). This was expressed clearly in my conversation with a high school teacher and trade union activist in Thala who remarked that 'a public sector job is a right!' (Jamel Boulaabi). Here, too, there was a clear regional pattern as graduate unemployment reached 40% in parts of the interior whereas it stood at some 10-15% for Greater Tunis (Blavier, 2016, p. 68). With the decline of alternative sources of income such as agriculture that had historically served as a remedy to temporary unemployment, including for university graduates (Gana, 2012), the young men in the interior faced worsening economic prospects regardless of their level of education.

Hegemonic contractions affected people in the interior not just through the decline of local state investments and job creation. In addition, my interlocutors said that they were actively discriminated against by the administration when applying for public sector jobs, permits, or the allocation of social benefits. This is significant because these mechanisms of inclusion operating through the political economy were argued to have effectively ensured support for the regime (Hibou, 2011a). That this was not the case for young men in the interior was expressed by Naoufel Abbassi, a 38-year-old from Menzel Bouzaiane, who is now an elementary school teacher but had been previously excluded because of his regional origin. This made him realize that 'there was marginalization and a feeling of contempt: You pass a competition [entry exam], and they send you home because you are Bouzidi [from Sidi Bouzid]' (Naoufel Abbassi). A similar sentiment was relayed by Arbi Kadri, a 35-year-old from Regueb who had tried in vain to find a job as a secondary school teacher under Ben Ali. We met in a café just outside the local school where he now works. Arbi was well dressed, exhibiting the more elevated social status he had gained, and described eloquently how graduates in the interior had experienced marginalization and exclusion:

I succeeded in the written phase of the competition [for recruiting teachers]. But in the oral examination, I was excluded without any valid reason. I imagine you know very well that this competition could be bought. [… It was a] system that only benefitted the "lucky" classes and excluded those already marginalized and forgotten.

He points to the issue of corruption in public sector recruitment. To him, it was clear that these comparatively well-paid jobs were being allocated to those who could bribe officials, while people from already marginalized communities such as Regueb were kept out. Similarly, scholars have argued that the system of nominally competitive exams for entering public service had under Ben Ali increasingly been replaced by nepotistic hiring practices, through which the ruling party, the *Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique* (RCD), assured political loyalties (Hibou, 2011a). Indeed, in my interviews, the issue of party control over public sector recruitment discriminating against applicants from the interior came up frequently, as was the case in the conversation with Ezzedine Negrichi, head of the UGTT branch in Thala. Ezzedine received us in the union premises of the town where we sat down in a small meeting room. A retired teacher and respected local trade union activist, he spoke in a clear and determined manner:

Recruitment in the public service was subject to the agreement of the head of the regional RCD office. [… Similarly,] whatever authorization you need, even to sell tobacco, was given to you only if the RCD agreed. And so, the inhabitants of Thala were aware that the RCD was the obstacle which prevented especially the young people in the region from finding work and livelihood.

He states that not only public sector jobs but also authorizations required for setting up businesses became impossible to obtain without party approval. He also made clear to me that the effects were devastating for the already marginalized young men, who consequently came to see the RCD as the main impediment to their ability to make a living.[28] Indeed, party corruption and nepotism was viewed by many of my interlocutors as frustrating their efforts

---

[28] My use of the term "youth" parallels that of my interlocutors in the interior in that it is understood to refer to the young *men*. Women in these communities, while often contributing to family income, were not considered in need of regular employment, as the main responsibility of providing for the family was that of the men.

to find work. This was expressed, by Maher Khadraoui, now in his mid-twenties, from the popular quarter of Hay Ezzouhour in Kasserine who spoke of his efforts to find a job as he approached the end of high school. He was wearing torn jeans and a colorful t-shirt when he met us in a café on the city's central square and told us that: 'I had a neighbor who was an [RCD] cadre. And he knew that I had nothing. I begged him to help me, to find me a job. He said "okay, okay" but he gave his favors to his brothers or cousins' (Maher Khadraoui).

Just as Ezzedine suggests, the RCD and its local cadres were anything but an avenue for economic inclusion for the young men, who instead experienced the party as a system of exclusion. People like them, without high-level connections or abilities to curry favors, were being left behind. This was summarized by another young unemployed man from the same neighborhood, who preferred not to be identified, as a system in which 'if you know someone, you can work, but if you don't know anyone, you can't work' (Nizar, pseudonym). This structure of disincorporation of the young men from regular economic life led them to search for opportunities elsewhere. According to a trade unionist from Regueb it contributed to the 'the appearance of the phenomenon of the shadow economy, that of smuggling' (Nasser Zribi). In Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, the smuggling economy involved chiefly petrol and cannabis brought in from Algeria and Libya. Engaging in these activities was risky and conversations about it brought out another role played by the RCD: surveillance.

While the police were clearly visible and typically patrolled main streets, youth who had been engaged in the shadow economy told me that party informants were much more difficult to spot and could appear discretely in the residential quarters. Fathi from Thala, for example, who preferred to give his first name only, said: 'I'll explain to you how the RCD worked. They had ears in all the quarters. If there was an "RCDist" and he saw me or my brothers, he went straight to the police to cause us trouble' (Fathi). At the same time, local party leaders tried to control or take a share of the profits from shadow trade (Hibou, 2011a). One example was

116

given to me by Tarik Aidoudi from Hay Ennour in Kasserine. In his mid-twenties, he had still

been in high school during the time of Ben Ali. Tarik arrived at the small restaurant in the city

center where we met wearing a grey tracksuit likely coming from his work in the semi-legal

trade in container loads of faulty cloths and stock-clearances of European stores for which

Tunisia is a sorting and redistribution hub. He explained to me how a local RCD cadre from

his neighborhood enriched himself by simply taking from those stocks what he wanted:

When the cars with clothes were coming […] Nejib arrived and took what he wanted. […] He was part of the RCD, I hate him. We were poor and he, on the other hand, takes clothes and everything. Ahmed, his son, was our classmate. He wore very nice clothes, whereas we had the same shoes all year round.

Squeezed out of the regular labor market by unequal regional development, corruption, and

nepotism, the young men confronted predatory party cadres even in the informal economy

giving them, as Tarik suggests, a clear sense of injustice. From what my interlocutors told me,

they stood at best a chance of getting charity – although that came at the hefty price of

stigmatizing those already-marginalized even further. The most prominent case for this was

perhaps the *Fonds National de Solidarité* (FNS). Set up by Ben Ali himself and administered

directly through his office, the FNS was tasked with supporting communities designated as

the "zones of shadow" in the country, which the fund aimed to "eradicate" (Tsourapas,

2013). An intense media attention created around the fund was aimed to evidence the

benevolence of the president, and so it provides a highly salient exemplification for the

discursive othering of subaltern populations in the country by the highest echelons of the

regime. This official stigmatization did not escape the attention of my interlocutors. Choukri

Slougui, an unemployed university graduate in his mid-thirties from Hay Ezzouhour in

Kasserine whose family had been receiving support from the FNS said that he felt 'there was

a policy of impoverishment and handouts. The regime treated me like an animal, not like a

human being' (Choukri Slougui).

For the young men from subaltern social groups living in the towns and popular quarters of the interior, the Ben Ali regime's image of economic development and progress clearly did not match with experience. To them, as Choukri expresses it, the regime denied the most basic sense of humanity and dignity. As processes of economic inclusion contracted and no longer operated for their benefit, the experience of these young men became one of disincorporation from society, leading to feelings of unworthiness and a kind of social death. Nizar and Maher, the young men whose lack of connections left them jobless, express this in the following way: 'Unemployment, poverty, injustice – our lives were worth nothing. An obscured life […] we did not see anything, no light, no happiness' (Nizar, Kasserine). Maher added that they 'lived in a prison; the entrance of this city is a prison and its end is a cemetery' (Maher Khadraoui). This sentiment is echoed vividly by Karim Delhoumi from Hay Ennour. Now in his mid-twenties, he had dropped out of high school, feeling that education had become worthless and was mostly hanging out with his friends. Meeting us in his regular café, he said: 'Frankly, we weren't living. […] It was a country in which, even when you study, you become nothing. We had no perspective. Tunisia was a cemetery' (Karim Delhoumi).

As Karim alludes to in mentioning the broken promise of social advancement through education, the young men experienced their disincorporation as violations to a moral economy which had established expectations of progress and an, if not affluent, then at least decent life. I read the feelings which my interlocutors express as imprisonment and being dead alive as articulating conditions of contradictory consciousness. Their disincorporation meant that they were precisely not "alive" in the way laid out by common sense. Their existence had little resemblance to the regime's images of economic progress and neoliberal consumerist modernity. Experiences of poverty, unemployment, marginalization, and discrimination stood in stark contrast with these hegemonic conceptions of what life in Tunisia was supposedly like. While conditions of contradictory consciousness caused by hegemonic contractions appear in the conceptual lenses of the thesis as bases for subaltern

118

politics, the sense of being stuck and seeing no way out which my interlocutors expressed already indicated that there was not a straightforward path to resistance. As the following section discusses, heavy policing of everyday life in the interior under Ben Ali served both to heighten and suppress discontent.

The Policing of Everyday Life

This section shows that everyday life for subaltern men, especially for the youth, in the interior was shaped by the intense presence of the security apparatus. Policing served to both augment and suppress discontent brought about through economic marginalization. Indeed, the condition of the young men was precisely one of far-reaching hegemonic disincorporation, as they encountered the state as a primarily coercive force rather than through mechanisms of social, economic, and job provision. Coercion, and the pervasive fear it created, was described to me by my interlocutors as a key factor keeping them from expressing their discontent. This is what Kais Bouazizi told me, a 31-year-old cousin of Mohamed Bouazizi living in one of the popular quarters in Sidi Bouzid. Like his deceased relative, Kais does not hold a university degree and was unemployed before the revolution. He has since found modest sources of income in civil society work and underlined his improved social status by wearing a large watch and smoking a comparably expensive brand of cigarettes during our conversation:

Most of the young people rejected the situation and the policy of the regime but could not speak out because they felt isolated. We were afraid to speak. It must not be forgotten that the Ben Ali regime was a dictatorial and police regime under which few dared to speak up.

Kais states that draconian policing instilled fear and a sense of isolation among his peers which barred them from expressing their dissent. Intimidation was created by what has been described as the omnipresence of the police (Hibou, 2011a). Although the number of police

officers per citizen was not particularly high by regional standards (roughly 1/200), the Ben Ali regime deployed police forces extensively into public space and gave them unusually high patrol duties and long twelve-hour shifts (Lutterbeck, 2015). This was combined with a condition of "opacity" whereby 'lack of formal regulation […and] the absence of clear rules […gave] the regime a "freer hand"' which constituted 'a notable difference between the Ben Ali and Bourguiba periods' (ibid, p. 819). As such, a 2006 decree on police duties allowed them to investigate 'everything which is relevant for political, economic, social and cultural life', whereby 'this intelligence function […was] defined independently of any specific threat which might be posed to individuals or the state' (ibid, p. 821). This account of the policing regime's arbitrariness and intense presence in public space corresponds strongly to my interlocutors' everyday experience. This was brought out vividly by the comments of Hamza Aloui, a 29-year-old without a university degree who had been unemployed before the fall of Ben Ali. A resident of Kasserine's destitute Hay Ennour neighborhood, he describes how the local police chief denied the young unemployed men like him even the small pleasure of socializing in the popular cafes, thus targeting their basic participation in public life:

[Local police chief] Wissem Ouertatani ruled like a king here. If he found young people in the street, he got out of his car and slapped them. He entered the cafes and started beating young people who had nothing else to do but sit in the café and have a good time. He chased us out of the café! He would not let us hang out in the streets or at night outside the house either. […] The youth of Kasserine lived in poverty and marginalization. But on top of that, they lived it all in silence, with repression, humiliation, insults etc. […] our mothers were insulted, we were humiliated in a thousand ways.

Here is the omnipresence and arbitrariness of policing. It did not matter where the young men were or what they were doing, their mere presence in public space was enough reason for the local police chief to subject them to violence. This led to young men feeling squeezed out of the social fabric itself, compounding the humiliation produced through economic marginalization discussed in the previous section. This was echoed by Amine Abidi from Regueb, a 30-year-old trained pastry chef who works on a large farm. Visibly enjoying his

coffee and smiling across his sunburned face, he recounted how people like him had been forced out of the streets by the police even in their own neighborhood: 'At 8 p.m., the police would arrive in our quarter and tell us "Go home". We did not do anything. And yet, we were chased away. Oh, I hated the police' (Amine Abidi). Having no limits to their authority, the police ruled over every aspect of public life. And Naoufel, the teacher from Menzel Bouzaiane, underscored insults and humiliation by the police as he recalled that 'the youths were angry with the police. They provoked everyone, insulted and humiliated people, treated them with contempt' (Naoufel Abbassi). This quotidian experience of contemptuous and humiliating treatment was also forcefully described by Ghassen, the former day laborer.

Unemployment and marginalization had become commonplace. What was worse was the fact that you were subjected to the injustice of the state, the police machinery. The police despised people. They humiliated you, beat you in the street, insulted your mother. This will produce hate in you. [...] There was very blatant injustice. The police who randomly slap young people, things like that became our daily life in Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, etc.

Ghassen suggests that the treatment which subaltern youth received by the police was even more strongly constitutive of feelings of injustice than their economic marginalization. Being beaten and verbally abused in public, including, as Hamza similarly mentioned, by police hurling insults of their mothers at them, was experienced by the young men as particularly humiliating. Scholars have argued that a sense of dignity and masculine honor is constructed by young Arab men from subaltern social groups around the ability to move freely in their neighborhoods and be perceived as strong men capable of protecting their families (Ismail, 2006). This is not an essentializing, orientalist point about "Arab men and their pride". Research in marginalized communities the world over has found that young men, having little else around which to construct a sense of self-worth, develop a type of "strong-man subjectivity" (see e.g. Whyte, 1943, for an account from the US). It was precisely these basic notions of dignity and masculinity which the police were denying subaltern youth in the interior by publicly demeaning them and the honor of their family. As it appeared to me, this

was a main reason why the young men I spoke with felt such intense hatred of the police. But violence did not stop at the level of beatings and humiliation of dignity.

Aside from attacks in public space, several of my interlocutors also experienced intense forms of physical violence, including torture, that were administered more discretely. Indeed, the Tunisian police were notorious for using arbitrary arrest and torture (Ismail, 2003; Lutterbeck, 2015). As such, Human Rights Watch found that, despite a nominal ban under Ben Ali, 'security forces continued to torture persons with impunity during interrogations' (HRW, 2011). An earlier report by Amnesty International concluded that, under the pretext of anti-terrorism measures, Tunisian security forces held people 'in prolonged incommunicado detention […] during [which] detainees are systematically tortured and otherwise ill-treated' (AI, 2008, p. 33). They found that 'illegal detention and enforced disappearance […] since the entry into force of the Anti-terrorism Law [in 2006,… affected] hundreds, possibly thousands, of people', and that practices of torture included 'suspension by the ankles or in contorted positions […] electric shocks; burning with cigarettes […and] sexual abuse' (ibid, pp. 11, 16). The above-quoted young man from Kasserine who preferred to go by the alias Nizar said that he had been detained and tortured on multiple occasions:

The police tortured me! They put me in prison many times! A lot of injustices. They created charges without foundation and arrested you even when they found you on the street. […] Without reason. They didn't let you live quietly, freely. They didn't let you breathe.

This testimony underlines that forced disappearance and torture occurred without victims having committed an offense. This suggests that arbitrary police violence, including extreme forms, marked the lives of subaltern men in the interior to a significant extent. Coercion, then, was an important part of the atmosphere of fear through which the regime sought to control subaltern groups and which Nizar described as literally suffocating. This was also brought out in other conversations I had, such as with Fadhel Bouzidi, a carpenter in his late fifties who received us in his workshop in Kasserine's Hay Ennour neighborhood. He had been

detained frequently due to his Salafi affiliation. As we sat around a small fire which he built to keep out the winter cold, he told us that, in Kasserine alone, there had been 'five or six centers where they tortured us: the center of terrorism, the center of state security, and several sections of the national guard. This is what made Ben Ali and the police so hated in Kasserine' (Fadhel Bouzidi). Physical violence at the hands of the police seems to have been the lot of subaltern men irrespective of their age or activities. As I learned in my conversation with Saif Seyhi, a young man from Thala in his mid-twenties, even young boys were at risk of being detained if they crossed the path of the police at the wrong moment. He met us in a small eatery in Kasserine where he now lives and told us this:

The police wanted to arrest people who worked in drugs, and we fled […] I was arrested […] I was in front of the commissioner, he said to us: "Imagine what this generation is capable of: At 8 years old, he runs away from the police!" Then he slapped us and let us go home. […] I hate the police. When I see a policeman, I run away.

This story suggests that the young men in the interior of the country grew up learning to hate and avoid the police whenever possible. Here, again, arbitrariness and fear reinforced each other, as my interlocutors were never sure what might draw the attention of the police. Karim, the young school dropout from Kasserine, told me that this could happen simply because they did not correspond to the image of squalidness deemed proper to a subaltern status: 'We didn't smoke cannabis; we didn't even drink. [… But] if you dressed well, you were accused of selling cannabis [... and] you could spend the whole day at the police station' (Karim Delhoumi). From these accounts we see that the police controlled every aspect of the lives of subaltern youth in the interior – from the physical spaces they could occupy right down to what clothes they could wear without arousing suspicion – all the while maintaining a state of perpetual opacity as to the rules to be followed. In other words, the law was what the police said it was. Through this opacity and arbitrariness, the police put further strain onto the precarious economic lives of young men like Hamza:

My brother had a small business of "Mlāwi" [a cheap sandwich]. And since it's a popular quarter, everyone gathered there. [... Local police chief] Wissem Ouertani came to close the shop for no reason! Like that, just so that his orders are carried out. [...] They didn't let you live, work.

He says that people like him were being denied the possibility simply to live and work. Here, the effects of arbitrary policing appeared to have merged with the processes of hegemonic contraction discussed in the previous section to jointly render life impossible for subaltern youth in the interior. In these experiences, the police came to be identified with the state more broadly and the hardship which its policies caused for members of subaltern groups. Helmi Cheniti, who had dropped out of university to work in a chemical factory in the coastal city of Monastir, expressed this sentiment in the conversation we had in his family home in Thala. The older brother of a young man who was killed during the revolution, he spoke passionately about the police in those years:

In our mentality, the police were the state. When you saw a policeman, for you it is he who prevented your livelihood. He is responsible for your empty pocket, your frustration, your poverty, the injustice you feel etc. We knew nothing, only the police.

The police appear here as the principle manifestation of state authority and are thus held responsible for economic marginalization and injustice. In this, what Helmi terms "our mentality" can be understood as a local rationality. Derived from concrete experience of hegemonic contractions and contradictions with common sense notions of what life was supposed to be like, Helmi expresses a "good sense conception" of the state as equivalent with structures of coercion. That such notions might have foreshadowed developments to come was also suggested by a comment which Karim made after recounting his experiences with the police under Ben Ali: 'Our dreams were very simple. I wanted nothing at all, no job, nothing – just that the police would not humiliate us and lets us live in peace' (Karim Delhoumi). Essentially, Karim is voicing political demands for a dignified life, although they were not abstracted beyond the immediate source of repression in the form of the police. Here, we can see the kernel of demands expressed through good sense, and which held the

potential for political articulation. These responded a local conditions of a slow-burning "crisis of hegemony" (Gramsci, 1971) in which consent faded and was increasingly replaced by coercion. As the following two section discuss, forms of subaltern politics building on these conditions could be observed well before the onset of the revolutionary process.

Self-Activity of the Unemployed

How, then, did the young subaltern men in the interior respond to their conditions of hegemonic disincorporation and to the oppressive policing of their everyday lives? What avenues did they pursue for voicing discontent and putting pressure on authorities? In other words, to what extent did the bases for dissent discussed thus far lead to subaltern politics under Ben Ali? This section argues that UGTT structures allowed for a certain level of subaltern mobilization and economic claims-making. Yet, my interlocutors also engaged in various forms of self-activity, including mobilizing efforts by the unemployed, localized resistance, and their own independent claims-making. These developments signaled the emergence of an insurgent vector of mobilization which, although evolving in a complex relationship with the union, was largely independent from formal politics.

The weakness of pre-revolutionary formal political structures in the Tunisian interior – for example, opposition parties and civil society – was something that I noticed early on in my fieldwork.[29] More than two thirds of my subaltern interlocutors stated that they had no interaction with any political organization prior to the revolution, and only little more than 10% said they had personal experience of political activism.[30] This corresponds to scholarly findings that suppression of their activities made opposition parties and politically active

---

[29] The noted exception is, of course, UGTT which will be discussed separately below.
[30] As footnoted above, I define political activism as engagement with formal political structures (including UGTT). By contrast, the activism of the unemployed prior to the revolution will be understood as a case of subaltern self-activity.

NGOs under Ben Ali essentially a Tunis and middle-class affair (Hudáková, 2019; Warkotsch, 2015). It suggests that the opening up of the political and civil society spheres under Ben Ali, relative to the Bourguiba era, created precious few sites for the political inclusion of subaltern groups.[31] This was the impression given by Bassem Hajji, a 28-year-old university graduate in literature from Thala, who had been unemployed under Ben Ali. An articulate young man who now runs a small NGO, he received us in his office, well-equipped with modern IT. Though he had always been interested in politics, he said that the structures of political opposition parties were hard to access for young men like him:

Maybe the [opposition] parties were meeting discreetly. What was their program? I have no idea […] Maybe they were politicized, and they knew what the regime was. But we, the young people, didn't know any of that.

He suggests that the inaccessibility of opposition groups meant that becoming politically engaged was difficult for the youth and limited their ability to develop an understanding of politics. This had been the case even for someone like him whose uncle was a member of the banned *Parti Communiste des Ouvriers de Tunisie* (PCOT, but mostly called POCT). As Choukri Hayouni, a trade unionist from Kasserine and former POCT activist, pointed out, this was also due to the lack of activity by these groups. An Arabic teacher in his mid-fifties, well-known and respected by many of my young interlocutors from his quarter of Hay Ennour for his overt criticism of the Ben Ali regime, Choukri left the POCT after the revolution. He met us at a café in the city center frequented by trade unionists and conveyed a strong feeling of disillusionment with the opposition parties that existed under Ben Ali:

---

[31] After coming to power, Ben Ali introduced regular multi-party elections. Yet, the few parties which managed to obtain registration were carefully selected and created little more than a veneer of pluralist politics (Murphy, 1999; Willis, 2012). Many opposition movements remained illegal, and even legal parties were subject to surveillance, restrictive party financing, and other forms of repression that confined their public activities to election campaigning, publications, and events in their headquarters (Hibou, 2006; Warkotsch, 2015).

We had secret organizations which were practically not active. We called each other "comrade" or "brother", but there was neither practice nor anything. There were also legal organizations, but they were a façade.

While Choukri suggests that political parties had been a mere façade or crippled by secrecy and inactivity, he also mentions the solidarity which these organizations cultivated among members. This corresponds with what scholars have described as "abeyance networks" for Tunisian politics which, although not offering much in terms of opposition activity, cultivated connections among activists and provided the potential for mobilization (Hmed, 2012). The principal context in which these networks were maintained was UGTT. Indeed, opposition political parties and civil society organization rarely acted outside UGTT which was effectively the sole tolerated space for activism and social mobilization in the country.[32] This function of the union has been described by scholars as a "refuge" for opposition political tendencies (Yousfi, 2015a). That UGTT was de facto the only locus of politics under Ben Ali – and thus the only site of political inclusion that subalterns could turn to – was brought out in my conversation with Fathi. A man from a provincial town in his late forties who had been active with the POCT during his sociology studies, he preferred to give his first name only:

There were no mobilizations. Political life was almost dead. [...] The people were under UGTT, and UGTT was to be criticized: there were those who were for and those who were against Ben Ali. Its mobilizations were social; there was no politics. It was very controlled.

Fathi's comments correspond with the notion that there was no significant opposition politics under Ben Ali, and that mobilizations which did occur happened under the umbrella of UGTT where it was nevertheless tightly controlled. He also remarked critically that trade union mobilizations were limited to socio-economic issues and that many trade unionists were regime loyalists. This latter point has been described by scholars as the presence of "two

---

[32] This role of UGTT developed in lieu of electoral politics during the Bourguiba period when the union became the sole space in which political currents not represented in the single party, such as communists and Arab Nationalists, could express themselves. This state of affairs continued under Ben Ali (Yousfi, 2015a).

UGTTs" (Camau and Geisser, 2003), in which a largely co-opted leadership and a more militant base coexisted within the organization. Discussing UGTT's complex history of entanglement with the postcolonial state is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, it is important to repeat that the union was integrated with the state as a sort of "transmission belt", aiding in the implementation of economic policy and relaying popular grievances to the central government through its grassroots structures (Yousfi, 2015a). For this double function to be effective required the union to have some freedom as a space for political expression. This, therefore, made it the main hegemonic vector of social and, in a tightly limited form, political mobilization, including for subaltern social groups. The way this played out was illustrated most clearly in the 2008 Gafsa revolt, the most salient and dramatic incident of subaltern mobilization during the Ben Ali years.

At the core of the revolt in the Gafsa mining region, bordering Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine to the south, were grievances of subalterns around regional economic marginalization and corrupt hiring practices. Here, they centered on the main regional employer, a state-owned mining company. In January 2008, unemployed men from the town of Redeyef began to protest their exclusion from company hiring, with the support of their local union branch (Chouikha and Geisser, 2010; Geisser and Gobe, 2007). These protesters first raised the slogan "*At-tajghīl istihqāq ya is-sābet as-sorrāq*" (A job is a right, you pack of thieves), which would become a signature of mobilizations by Tunisian unemployed activists (Beinin, 2015, 2016). In so doing they clearly articulated their grievances in terms of violations to their moral economy (Thompson, 1993). The local grassroots mobilization led to the involvement of "the other UGTT". The role of the union leadership in this context was critically described to me by Fahem Arbaoui, a grassroots trade unionist and secondary school teacher from Thala. Looking friendly over his spectacles, he spoke to us in the local union office:

When the government is unable to cope with the masses, the UGTT would negotiate with the protesters and sometimes managed to find solutions. For example, in Gafsa, the government did not

go to meet the protesters. Instead, a member of the executive committee of UGTT went to find a solution. When there is a popular rejection of [state] power, there is not necessarily popular rejection of the UGTT. It's a questionable role.

He opines that the role which the UGTT leadership played in Gafsa perfectly exemplified its function under Ben Ali whereby the union would act as a mediator between the regime and protesters. This function was crucially enabled by its popular legitimacy. But it also meant that the union leadership contributed to stabilizing the regime. In other words, UGTT was precisely a hegemonic vector of mobilization in that it functioned to direct popular discontent towards resolution within the existing hegemonic formation.[33] In the case of Gafsa, however, union mediation did not result in a peaceful solution. Rather, the regime first imposed a media blackout and cut all road access to the center of the revolt in Redeyef. It then moved to forcefully put down the mobilization, leading to the death of three protesters and the arrest of its charismatic leader, local UGTT leader Adnan Hajji (Allal, 2010).

Despite their ending, the events of Gafsa were mentioned by several of my young interlocutors as an encouragement to try and press their own economic demands. For the revolt had created an important precedent in which local trade unionists and the unemployed had mobilized together against the systematic economic marginalization of subalterns in the interior. As such, Hamza Sayhi, a 29-year-old from Thala without a university degree, said that, after Gafsa, he and other unemployed men began addressing the local UGTT with their grievances. Visibly proud of the café he now owns and where he received us, he spoke smilingly about the emerging activism at the time:

Demonstrations which raised demands concerning the economic and social situation of people only emerged after Gafsa in 2008. The fear decreased among the people and they mobilized. [...] We used

---

[33] The example of Gafsa thus illustrates how integration of UGTT into the hegemonic formation meant that (at least during the Ben Ali regime) it *cannot* be considered as a vector of subaltern self-activity. Together with the rest of this section, however, it also shows that grassroots trade unionists, often coming from subaltern social groups, were part of such self-activity.

the UGTT to put pressure on local or regional authorities to attain our rights. […] The young [unemployed] turn to the UGTT to claim their right to work and to life.

Hamza describes how subaltern youth like him felt encouraged by the events in Gafsa to defend what they regarded as their right to a livelihood that the regime had been denying them. Here, just as in the case of the Gafsa revolt, we can see how deteriorating economic conditions due to hegemonic contractions were understood as violations of the subaltern moral economy to which they responded by engaging in self-activity (Cronin, 2008a; Thompson, 1993). That these young men sought out the support of UGTT also underscored the union's continuing role as the principal organizational site for subaltern mobilization and claims-making under Ben Ali. The events in Gafsa similarly invigorated the self-activity of unemployed university graduates in the interior who, from the mid-2000s onwards, had begun mobilizing locally to articulate their grievances, especially demands for public sector jobs. This is what Arbi, the formerly unemployed teacher from Regueb, told me. He had been involved in activism that led to the founding of a union for unemployed graduates (*Union des Diplômés Chômeurs*, UDC) in 2011[34]:

In Sidi Bouzid we boycotted the CAPES in 2005. […] It was the first spark. [... We tried to] create the UDC, but the system refused to authorize this organization and we had to hold our meetings discreetly in cafes. Our mobilizations were not recurrent because of police repression. But in 2008, we mobilized after the events in the [Gafsa] mining basin. […] The local UGTT helped us, they opened their office for our meetings.

Unemployed graduates, then, experimented with various tactics for making their grievances heard, such as the boycott of the CAPES, the notoriously corrupt recruitment exam for public school teachers. As Arbi states, the mobilization of the unemployed in the Sidi Bouzid governorate – just as elsewhere – was obstructed by the police and remained sporadic. In the aftermath of the Gafsa revolt, him and his fellow activists began to turn more systemically

---

[34] While activists involved in mobilizations by the unemployed had been organizing locally since 2005, the UDC was founded officially only after the revolution, in 2011 (Badimon, 2011; Gordner, 2017).

towards the local UGTT for support. As sympathetic trade unionists gave them access to their spaces, the unemployed graduates, just like other activists, found in UGTT a "refuge" from state repression. While local union branches were willing and capable to offer protection within their premises, there were, nonetheless, limits to the degree of mobilization which they would actively support. This is what Cherif Khraifi suggested, a 38-year-old history graduate who had been involved with the communist party since his university days and became one of the co-founders of the UDC. An experienced and well-spoken activist, he received us at the POCT headquarters in Tunis where he now works as the chief-editor of the party magazine:

For the UGTT, its purpose is to defend people who have a job. But the unemployed are not part of its strategic interests [...] So basically the relationship was this: some trade unionists supported us by sharing our press releases and signing our petitions. But that was all.

This difference in strategic interests between UGTT and the unemployed graduates, then, meant that individual trade unionists were willing to support the unemployed, but that union structures generally would not get involved in the kind of contentious mobilization that had been seen in Gafsa. This was similarly brought out in the comments of Houssem, the unemployed arts graduate from Kasserine. He and other graduate job-seekers had 'in 2008, felt that this was our opportunity to defend our rights. We demanded public sector jobs [...and] did a hunger strike in front of the RCD office, then at the UGTT, but nothing came of it' (Houssem Allali). As Houssem describes it, unemployed youth in the interior experimented with various forms of self-activity, including hunger strikes, and chose strategic locations to articulate their grievances, suggesting an awareness of existing sites of hegemonic incorporation. Yet, as he tells us, the marginalized young men were ignored both by the ruling party and by UGTT, suggesting that support by local union branches was far from universally forthcoming. The image that emerges is one in which groups of marginalized young men defended their perceived right to employment, especially in the public sector, by engaging in

forms of localized self-activity that found varying degrees of support through local UGTT structures and trade unionists. These efforts were sometimes crowned by small successes, an example of which was relayed to me by Bassem, the young NGO-founder from Thala:

The only movement I joined before the revolution was in 2008 […] with a group of other unemployed. […] We organized a sit-in claiming our right to work […] Two or three of us found a job and there were many who thought that they had secured those jobs in a revolutionary way […] neither through the RCD, nor through the UGTT.

As Bassem suggests, engaging in self-activity to pressure authorities for employment rather than going through established sites of inclusion – UGTT or the RCD – was perceived by many as a substantial innovation, even if successes were few. Through their emerging self-activity, unemployed young men in my field sites, both with and without higher education degrees, gained experience and forged new connections amongst themselves and with local trade unionists. These, then, were precisely instances of subaltern politics, in which experiences of hegemonic contractions and attendant contradictions with common sense stimulated self-activity and entailed processes of learning and development. The young men who defended their perceived right to work developed new solidarities and ways of claims-making, learned about their possibilities and limits, including the degree of union support in their localities, and thus produced good sense knowledge for how to deal with their situation.

This reading suggests that the localized efforts of the unemployed in Gafsa and beyond signaled the formation of an insurgent vector of mobilization among the (mostly young) subaltern men in the interior. That insurgent vector developed in a complex relationship with, but remained clearly independent of, UGTT as the hegemonic vector of subaltern politics. In other words, subalterns cultivated local rationalities of activism which contributed to and shaped the constellation of social forces in the country. These were doubtlessly important achievements. However, they did not entail sites of, and a language for, articulating grievances that went beyond socio-economic ones, notably the suffocating

policing of everyday life to which young men were subjected. Here, discontent showed in more fleeting, half-articulate, and hidden forms. As the final section of the chapter will argue, such less visible gestures hinted at embryonic resistance cultures in the popular quarters and towns in the Tunisian interior.

Cultures and Spirits of Resistance

The activism of the unemployed left historical traces as it developed through the Gafsa revolt and produced an organizational legacy in the form of the UDC. Other forms of self-activity by subalter youth who refused to quietly submit to disincorporation and coercion under Ben Ali remained more hidden. In my interviews, I learned of several small-scale acts of resistance and other traces of defiance. They appear to have centered precisely on experiences of subordination and domination in everyday life for which, unlike with notions of socio-economic rights, the language of common sense did not offer expression. The most notable examples I came across revolved around acts of resistance directed against the police. As I learned from Helmi, a 25-year-old from Hay Ennour in Kasserine who preferred to go by his first name only, such resistance could take the form of attacks against institutional manifestations of regime repression in their popular quarters. Having still been a high school student under Ben Ali, Helmi explained to us that he was part of a circle of friends who braved the regime by engaging in such acts under the cover of the night:

We would meet at a PlayStation gaming room. Everyone in the neighborhood went there. And there it [planning] started […] We jumped on the RCD premises at night, surrounded it with tires and set it on fire. You set fire and you fled, at the time […] We burned, and we left, we did not stay. Burn and get lost! – at Hay Ennour.

The acts of resistance that Helmi describes developed out of everyday socializing spaces for the youth of the popular quarters. Tellingly, the friends did not randomly vandalize in their

quarter but chose as their targets the two main organs of the state through which they experienced exclusion and humiliation: the RCD and the police. Unable to confront the police directly, they went for the RCD office, thus forcing the local police to chase after them at night when the young men could easily disappear. Tarik Aidoudi, the school-dropout who described party cadre corruption above, was part of the same circle and told me that their actions involved careful planning, including a red herring for the guard of the RCD office who was invited to a small eatery. Tarik called their motives plainly as "taking revenge on the police and the RCD". They subverted the seeming omnipotence of the police and exposed their inability to keep order at night, while simultaneously showing the party cadres that they, too, were vulnerable. By undermining the regime authority that humiliated them, young men were able to regain a sense of dignity by displaying courage and masculinity – precisely those attributes that they were being denied through daytime police encounters. And yet, such contestation was not possible out in the open. Rather, the pattern that Helmi describes was night-time "hit and run" actions.

The one context in which direct confrontations with the police did take place was during football matches. Attendance of these events was highly popular among young men in the interior who would travel long distances, including to the capital, to watch their favorite teams play (Allal and Pierret, 2013). Several of my interlocutors told me that those matches frequently entailed clashes with the police. Amine, the farm worker from Regueb, said that 'there were conflicts in the stadium: we threw stones, they [police] responded with teargas, and there were scuffles' (Amine Abidi). And Maher from Hay Ezzouhour in Kasserine commented that 'in the stadium, we insulted the police and there would eventually be clashes. In the stadium, I took revenge on the police' (Maher Khadraoui). Maher and Amine suggest that, in the stadium, the youth found strength in numbers, and inflicted payback for the insults that the police usually directed against them and which could not be reciprocated in the everyday encounters.

134

The football clashes and nocturnal actions in the quarters were, then, a means through which young men in the interior expressed their discontent. By engaging in these forms of resistance, they also forged solidarities and gained valuable experience in confronting the police, learning their strengths and weakness, thus building local rationalities of resistance. Scholars have observed such patterns in other countries as well, noting that they constitute ways in which young men from subaltern groups cultivate a "resisting subjectivity" (Ismail, 2006). Indeed, several studies found that experience with clashes in stadiums provided subaltern youth with vital knowledge and skills in confronting the police during revolutionary mobilization in both Tunisia and Egypt (Allal, 2012a; Dorsey, 2012; Ismail, 2012).

From my conversations with young men in the interior, I understood that these self-activities of resistance were more than mere outbursts of frustration. On the one hand, they can be read as defending popular moral values – here of a dignified life violated by police oppression – much in the same way as the unemployed did regarding the moral economy. Beyond this, however, these fleeting forms of resistance seem to have been attempts at more directly political expression that, unlike socio-economic demands, did not have a language in common sense. Based on how they experienced politics and the state, targeting the police thus becomes legible as the only form of political expression which young men with limited or no access to sites like UGTT could imagine. Such a reading was suggested to me by Seif Hamdi, a 28-year-old road construction worker from Thala without tertiary education, who had been unemployed before the revolution. We met in a café at the entrance to the town and, after quizzing me about the nature of the research, he gave the following comment about his understanding of the police under Ben Ali:

The police were the only face of the authorities we knew. It was the only means to put pressure on the authorities who ruled the country. We never saw an official who came to speak to us. So, to send a message to the authorities, we only had the police.

This conveys not only that the police were the principal way in which the state manifested in the lives of subaltern youth, but that taking it on was also the only way in which he felt political expression was possible. This implies that acts of resistance through which the young men targeted the police need to be understood as purposeful activity conditioned precisely by the relative absence of a political language and sites of articulation. In other words, they were "half-articulate" ways (Chalcraft, forthcoming) in which subalterns sought to express the contradictions they experienced. Lack of political language and conception is also what Choukri, the unemployed graduate from Kasserine's Hay Ezzouhour, alludes to when he said: 'Even though we were not political activists, we felt that there was injustice, that we lived in a police state and dictatorship. We felt it, but we did not have the means to speak and express ourselves' (Choukri Slougui). Distinguishing their situation from supposedly more knowledgeable activists, Choukri suggests that it was the lack of means for articulation which kept him and his fellow youth from expressing their discontent in political language. This supports the notion that their small-scale acts of resistance constituted half-articulated expressions of a refusal considering the broader political and economic conditions that subalterns were living under. Moreover, they were forms of self-activity which signaled a readiness to confront and battle with the state.

Noticing that the condition of my interlocutors involved "hegemonic silencing", I became more attuned to popular forms of political conception which they used to describe their situation. I realized that my interviewees frequently offered interpretations of their situation under Ben Ali that drew on informal political knowledge that was present in popular accounts of history. These stories – at least as far as they were told to me in the context of interviews about the revolution – were histories of resistance by their communities, most of which transmitted orally. Indeed, in all my main field sites, interlocutors told me stories of this kind through which conditions under Ben Ali were historically contextualized and framed as forming part of a legacy of marginalization and oppression predating his rule. Beyond

temporal embedding, these stories drew connections between suffering and resistance as a collective response. Here, in other words, was a political language expressed in the terms of good sense knowledge. Kais from Sidi Bouzid, for example, gave this historical account:

Poverty and marginalization, not just in Sidi Bouzid, was a 60-year policy. Before with Bourguiba, then Ben Ali continued the marginalization and impoverishment of all the regions of the interior [... because they had] pledged allegiance to the Youssefists. Even before, under the Bey, the *Hmamma* were hated. Bourguiba took revenge on Sidi Bouzid, and Ben Ali continued in the same vein.

Kais offers here an interpretation of the economic marginalization of the Tunisian interior as resulting from a punishment by successive regimes for the disobedience of these regions extending back to the period prior to French colonization. He also mentions the trans-regional collective of the *Hmamma*, the ʿ*arsh* (tribe) of the Sidi Bouzid area (Camps and Martel, 1998), as the object of repression by the authorities. While the post-independence state claimed to have overcome those tribal divisions, it implemented, according to Kais, a pattern of regional discrimination corresponding to those divisions. That this contributed to marginalized and stigmatized populations holding on to tribal senses of belonging and solidarity was suggested to me by Hajer Assoudi from Kasserine, a 26-year-old woman from Kasserine who teaches Islamic education. As one of the few young women from a popular quarter whom I was able to speak to, she agreed to meet in the offices of a religious NGO:

We have a lot of pride in Kasserine, we consider it the source of the revolution, of dignity, of bravery and of resistance. […] I belong to the *Fraichich* tribe. It is a rebellious tribe, which has resisted since French colonization.

Hajer attaches a sense of pride and dignity to both Kasserine and the confederation of the *Fraichich,* whose constituent tribes populate a large part of Tunisia's Centre-West region (Camps and Martel, 1998). She relates this pride and sense of self-worth to the resistance by these collectives since French colonial times. Local high school teacher and union activist Abdelwahed Homri provided a summary of the many different periods in which the people of Kasserine were involved in such acts of resistance against the central authorities: 'There

was the revolt of Ali Ben Ghedhahem against […] the increase in the *majba* [tax], in 1861, the revolt of the peasants in 1906 in Thala, the Youssefist opposition was rooted here, and so were the bread riots [of 1984]' (Abdelwahed Homri). The revolt led by Ali Ben Ghedhahem, which Abdelwahed mentions, was one of the most important cases of resistance to the modernizing Beylical state in the 19th century; specifically, against the imposition of new taxes (Guellouz et al., 2010). This uprising, as well as the first armed resistance to French colonial rule, organized in 1906 by residents from the region of Thala, drew on the tribal solidarity of the *Fraichich* (Kassab et al., 2010). And like the *Hmamma* of Sidi Bouzid, the disobedient people of the Kasserine region participated prominently in the two major mobilizations against Bourguiba's rule, the Youssefist opposition and the 1984 bread riots (Murphy, 1999). Choukri Hayouni, Abdelwahed's Thala-born colleague cited above, took his hometown's historical marginalization to have been revenge taken by successive regimes:

If you look at the history of Thala, you find for example that the Youssefists implicated Thala in a confrontation with the Bourguiba regime. […] This implication caused the Tunisian regime to exercise a kind of revenge on Thala […] throughout the 60 years of the reign of Ben Ali and Bourguiba.

Many in the communities of the interior, then, interpreted their conditions of marginalization through their local and trans-local histories of resistance. Though almost certainly amplified by the recent overthrow of Ben Ali, they nevertheless constitute the very cornerstone of a local and regional sense of history. These memories of revolt had two important functions. First, they allowed for present conditions to be made sense of, by interpreting them as the result of political developments in which their communities had actively participated. Second, they provided a popular language rooted in good sense conceptions of history, which was able to give political expression to local rationalities of activism and resistance. In this, they furnished materials for an embryonic counterhegemonic narrative that could made sense of present experience. Against common sense notions presenting their marginalization as rooted in lacking modernity and cultural backwardness, subalterns could draw on popular

conceptions of history to see those same conditions as punishment for their past disobedience – and thus as consequences not of their weakness, but of collective strength and agency. The condition of subalterns in the interior was, then, marked by contradictions between hegemonic conceptions of the world and good sense knowledge, furnished both latently in their experiences of activism and resistance as well as by memories of revolt.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that, in the final years of the Ben Ali regime, the lives of young subaltern men in the Tunisian interior were beset with contradictions and rich with instances of mobilization and resistance. Regional economic marginalization, rampant unemployment, corruption, and discrimination broke the link between education and social mobility and excluded young subaltern men from the regime's promises of progress and consumerist modernity. This disincorporation from society violated their moral economy, created a sense of injustice (Thompson, 1993), and led to a feeling of being denied the right to life itself. Here were stark contradictions between what common sense held life was supposed to be like, and how subaltern youth in the interior experienced it. The discontent which this produced was both heightened and suppressed by an intense and draconic policing of their lives. Encounters with the police brought daily humiliations which undermined notions of self-worth and masculinity, constituting further violations of popular notions of a dignified life. Submitting (young) subaltern men to violence, humiliation, and further strain on their economic lives, the police became objects of hatred and the embodiment of an exclusionary and oppressive regime.

Thus, the situation for many members of subaltern groups in the interior differed markedly from one in which the Ben Ali regime, by skillfully producing economic dependencies

combined with subtle, panoptical forms of surveillance, was said to have elicited "voluntary servitude" and support from 'the vast majority of the population – not to say almost all if it' (Hibou, 2011a, pp. 9, 211). What this perspective fails to appreciate is that not all social groups were equally incorporated, that the hegemonic formation was "uneven", and that (at least certain) subaltern groups lived in its fissures. Indeed, especially the young men in the interior were confronted with a slow-burning "crisis of hegemony", in which coercion had largely come to replace consent (Gramsci, 1971), albeit one in which persistent common sense continued to limit their ability for political articulation.

Focusing on the young men of the interior, this chapter has shown that, in the face of these conditions, subalterns, were far from passive. Their experiences were not those of a society which had suffered a "political death" (Camau and Geisser, 2003; Hibou, 2011a); rather, they engaged in various forms of self-activity to address violations of their moral economy and resist oppressive policing. Subaltern youth in the interior neither "acted as if" (Wedeen, 1999) they consented, nor was their resistance "hidden in everyday acts" (Scott, 1985). Instead, they developed their own struggles and mobilizations. While these remained localized and largely unconnected, they were, nevertheless, instances of subaltern politics unfolding under a new, insurgent vector of mobilization that, while interacting with UGTT, developed largely outside existing political structures. Drawing attention to this emerging vector contributes to our understanding of subaltern politics and resistance under Ben Ali by showing that subaltern self-activity took plural and sustained forms beyond the Gafsa revolt and union structures (Allal, 2010; Chouikha and Gobe, 2009).

The events of Gafsa were recognized as important not just by Tunisia's political activists but by many unemployed young men, who used a language of economic rights to raise similar demands for jobs. They engaged with UGTT as the hegemonic vector of mobilization through which common-sense demands for economic development could to some extent be

articulated. But their mobilizations also took many independent forms ranging from sit-ins to hunger strikes through which they sought to put pressure on the state. Rather than engaging in "non-movements" to accrue "degrees of autonomy" (Bayat, 2010), their activism corresponded to what has been termed "defensive mobilization" around perceived rights as part of a moral economy (Cronin, 2008b; Thompson, 1993). Engaging in these forms of self-activity, members of subaltern groups gained mobilizing experience, forged new connections and solidarities, and developed local rationalities of activism.

While the unemployed could express demands for redress to (some of) the contradictions they were experiencing in a common sense language of rights, the situation was more complicated for those seeking to send messages of a more political nature. Here, the chapter has argued that the limited expressions of more systemic subaltern discontent with the regime resulted from a hegemonic formation leaving the young men devoid of language and sites for political articulation. Indeed, reading them through this "hegemonic silencing", fleeting and unconnected acts of resistance ranging from youth targeting symbols of the state authority in their popular quarters to clashes between football fans and the police become legible as a politics that was "half-articulate" (Chalcraft, forthcoming). Engaging these agents of the state in various ways, subaltern youth cultivated not just "resisting subjectivities" (Ismail, 2006, 2013) but also gathered experience that built local rationalities of resistance. Here, then, were kernels of a more unruly subaltern politics suppressed by a lack of language and conception as well as by a suffocating policing presence. Overcoming such conditions was not beyond the grasp of subalterns in the interior, though, as was indicated by the good sense conceptions of history present in their communities. These appeared like signposts to the path of open defiance upon which the young men would set themselves in the revolutionary process. As it produced dynamics of learning that worked and develop the good sense contained in the fissures of hegemony, subaltern self-activity itself contributed

to an accumulation of struggles that prepared the ground for these revolutionary

developments to come.

V. From Subaltern Politics to Local Revolts

This chapter discusses developments in the Tunisian interior over the first three weeks of the revolutionary process, beginning with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi on 17 December 2010. It makes the case that, over this period, conditions in several localities across the governorates of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine reached a state of local revolt and, further, traces the contribution of different social forces to these developments. The main argument is that, in all localities, complex interactions between two vectors of mobilization unfolded: a hegemonic one under which local activists organized largely peaceful daytime demonstrations articulating demands around economic development and police repression; the other one driven by the transgressive self-activity of marginalized young men who engaged in confrontations with the police at night in the residential quarters. Both can largely be understood in terms of subaltern self-activity.[35] However, the former meant that such self-activity remained circumscribed by hegemony, whereas the latter dynamic led to the development of local rationalities of activism and resistance, discussed in the previous chapter, into forms of militant particularism. As such, the chapter argues that subaltern self-activity which had unfolded as an insurgent vector over the final years of Ben Ali now developed into more transgressive forms, thus constituting the key social force that pushed the situation in the interior towards conditions local of revolt. Forms of mobilization along the hegemonic vector, most notably by local trade unionists, also played an important role in facilitating local struggles and functioned as their principal site of articulation. Mobilization, however, remained fundamentally defensive, as the demands which were

---

[35] I say "largely" because subaltern self-activity is, per definition (see introduction), activity not due to the leadership efforts by members of other social groups. As was discussed above, political activists and trade unionists are often (in the Tunisian interior) to almost exclusively (on the national level) members at least of the middle classes. Moreover, clientelism and material benefits for trade unionists mean that even some of a nominally subaltern status are stitched into the hegemonic formation. Finally, and in addition to the overall level of state-domination over UGTT under Ben Ali, this chapter will illustrate how mobilization by grassroots trade unionists was often confined by the very nature of UGTT as a hegemonic vector of mobilization, *viz.* one which could not openly challenge the status quo.

raised did not articulate a break with common sense but, rather, constituted bids for the improvement of the status quo. Moreover, the two forms of subaltern self-activity, while interacting and producing aggregate effects, remained largely separate in terms of participants. As such, the chapter concludes that a transformation of the struggle into revolutionary (mass) mobilization had not yet occurred at this stage.

The chapter is divided into six sections. Section one discusses events in the city of Sidi Bouzid and shows that the young men here were the first to openly confront the police in response to what they perceived as an assault on their local community. The following section discusses how activists and youth in other localities of the governorate subsequently mounted their own struggles, whose motivations varied from wanting to compete with their peers in Sidi Bouzid to seeing an opportunity to press their own demands for local development. The section argues that struggles across the governorate appeared to be on the verge of being contained through heavy police repression by the end of the year. However, as section three shows, a new front of mobilization opened in Thala at the beginning of January 2011. Here, a qualitatively new development occurred, as the two separate vectors of mobilization coalesced for the first time and an entire community united around a project of collective self-defense spearheaded by the youth. Section four argues that the limitation of this struggle at the level of defensive demands was brought out clearly by the developments in Thala. The penultimate section briefly discusses how mobilization began in parallel in the city of Kasserine and the final section draws out the chapter's conclusions.

The Young Men of Sidi Bouzid Rise Up

The situation in Sidi Bouzid in the immediate aftermath of Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation on Friday, 17 December 2010, was evidently tense. Within hours, a crowd had gathered in front of the governorate building. Several members of Bouazizi's family sought an audience with state officials. They were joined by trade unionists and other political activists who had learned through word of mouth about the attempted suicide and were gathering to acquire more information. Bouderbala Nsiri, a medical doctor in his early sixties, whose practice overlooks the square in front of the governorate building of Sidi Bouzid, provided a description of this first assembly. Having a long history of activism himself, including as a member of the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), outlawed under Ben Ali, he emphasizes the spontaneous and peaceful nature of the gathering that day:

On 17 December, there was a gathering of about 200 or 300 people in front of the governorate building. […] Information circulated by word of mouth, and others who were curious, who were politicized a bit, joined, but it was not organized […] and there were no confrontations on the 17th. […] The next day, at 10 a.m., there was a much larger crowd in front of the governorate.

Despite the tension surrounding the assembly and the crowd's size, there was thus no escalation on the first day. Bourderbala states that there had been no demands made that day other than those of the Bouazizi family. The following day, however, things changed rapidly. According to Bouderbala, the crowds on 18 December were significantly larger. As my interlocutors told me, there were chiefly two reasons behind this development. First, local trade union and unemployed activists had organized a demonstration. And, second, an increasing number of bystanders were drawn in, both from the surrounding popular quarters and the regional market held on Saturdays (Hmed, 2012). The first aspect was described to me by Lazher Gharbi, retired director of a local school and head of the regional primary education teachers' union. A longtime member of the banned communist party, he and other trade unionists as well as unemployed activists had met early in the morning to coordinate

145

for the demonstration that day. Lazher spoke to us in the same function room of the UGTT building where they had met before moving to protest in front of the governorate:

On 18 December, we came to this hall. We set up a commission in support of the events at the level of the regional UGTT to support the mobilization of the citizens with a participation of the trade unionists and the young unemployed. After that, the events started.

The action on the second day was thus different in the sense that it featured an intervention jointly organized by grassroots trade unionists and unemployed activists – in other words, the two main groups which had been mobilizing in the Tunisian interior over the final years of the Ben Ali regime. Indeed, as Mohamed Lazher Gammoudi, the trade unionist from Sidi Bouzid who is now its regional secretary general, and who was himself a secondary school teacher at the time, said the main slogans raised that day were precisely those of the unemployed movement and of UGTT: 'We were a group of unemployed, trade unionists, and political activists […] So on Saturday there were the slogans "Work, Freedom, National Dignity" [UGTT] and "A job is a right, you pack of thieves"' (Mohamed Lazher Gammoudi). The activists shouting slogans were joined in front of the governorate building by members of Mohamed Bouazizi's immediate family, who were seeking justice for their relative (Salmon, 2016). However, it seems that people outside these groups, even members of his extended family, originally felt little reason to get involved. For example, Kais Bouazizi, the distant cousin of Mohamed, told me that he and some friends who were unemployed like himself at the time had not joined the initial demonstration. They only approached the scene out of curiosity when they began to hear noise:

I was in a cafe near the governorate with a group of friends. We started to hear noise outside the governorate. […] We approached and saw the family of Bouazizi and some activists from Sidi Bouzid […] The event that blew things up, that was when a policeman slapped a woman and insulted her. So, he humiliated Sidi Bouzid. We started throwing stones at the police and they used teargas […] The weekly market was not far from the governorate and people started joining. So, at first, there weren't a lot of people but afterwards we grew very numerous and became courageous. […] The clashes

became violent, police reinforcements arrived, and clashes shifted to the neighborhoods, so the police were forced to fight there.

Based on Kais' account, the initial group of demonstrators comprising relatives of Bouazizi and activists had not intended an escalation with the authorities. Rather, it was an assault on a woman which provided the initial spark. Here was an important difference to the pattern discussed in the previous chapter. Whereas humiliation at the hands of the police was endured by the young men on a daily basis, it did not usually affect women directly. Kais suggests that violence targeting a female member of the community was perceived by him and other young men present at the scene as a humiliation to the masculine honor of the entire community, obliging them to counterattack. As police reinforcements arrived, the young men retreated to the popular quarters, forcing the police to fight on their home terrain. That what happened was in reaction to a perceived provocation by the police was also brought out in my conversation with Bilel Rebai, a 33-year-old resident of the same popular quarter of Hay Ennour as Kais. Bilel used to be a seasonal worker in a hotel resort on the coast and would come to spend the winters in Sidi Bouzid. He was present in front of the governorate on 18 December as well and recounted the events thusly:

A cop launched a teargas canister although the people did nothing. I remember it very well, it was in front of ordinary citizens, not even protesters. This was the cause of everything […] And we were just curious and wanted to watch, but the police targeted the people who watched. […] They had attacked us, a provocation, and we responded. Afterwards it became vengeance.

Rather than to a slapping of a woman, Bilel points to the first firing of tear gas as the police action that changed the situation. What both young men who participated in the subsequent clashes agree on, however, is their perception of a provocation by the police to which they, as bystanders, felt compelled to respond. While this again points to a situated and defensive reaction, Bilel also states that the motivation for young men like him was more active and, as the previous chapter discussed, historically grounded: revenge against the police. These accounts suggest that the first violent clashes in what would become the Tunisian revolution

emerged out of a conjuncture between different local rationalities that had developed over the preceding period: On the one hand, activists took an opportunity, here through a local event, to voice demands around issues of economic marginalization and unemployment. On the other hand, repressive police actions were seen by rebellious youth as provocations, including to male honor, that encouraged revenge-actions. In this context, the situated and contingent coming together of previously largely separate logics meant that police repression encouraged rather than suppressed mobilization. From this point on, though, the self-activity of the young men developed into a form that differed markedly from previous periods as they drew the police into their neighborhoods. Trade union leader Lazher Gammoudi said that fighting between the young men and the police persisted through the following nights:

After Saturday, there were no demonstrations because the police suppressed demonstrations during the day. But there were clashes at night and that really paid off. Without these nocturnal mobilizations, the revolution would never have succeeded. [...] All night long, the young people braved the police.

Here, local rationalities of resistance previously confined to the stadiums or limited to nocturnal hit-and-run actions broke out into the open and developed into a form that would become a signature of the revolutionary process: night-time confrontations between subaltern youth and the police. Subaltern self-activity in the form of these confrontations, then, constituted the principal dynamic that drove and sustained local mobilization. Without it, as Lazher's comment suggests, trade unionists and local rationalities of socio-economic claims-making could not have held fast in the face of police repression. In the words of another local trade unionist, 'the nocturnal actions of the youth were a new form of mobilization that took the police of Ben Ali by surprise' (Lazher Gharbi). Bilel described to me how the young men managed to put up this fight:

During the day, the policeman could even take his coffee next to you [...] Around 7:00pm, everyone gets ready. [...] We go out together. These are popular quarters, we know each other. We talk about the plan. We do what we want until the morning. If someone is stuck, we free him [...] [The police] did not know the quarters. So, when they come in, they face difficulties.

148

Three factors seem to have been decisive for the resilience of the youth, all of which drew on the young men's prior experience of resisting the police. First, they chose to confront the police exclusively under the cover of the night, thus concealing their identities and avoiding arrest. Second, they drew the police into their neighborhoods where the young men had superior knowledge of the urban terrain and could outmaneuver the police. This advantage weighed particularly strongly since many of the police reinforcements were brought in from other areas and so lacked familiarity with local conditions. Finally, the confrontations drew extensively on the intimate social fabric of the popular quarters which allowed for planning without the need for the kinds of formal organizational structures that the police could easily identify and squash. Coming out of seemingly informal chats in popular cafes and friendship circles, quelling this sort of "many headed" (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2002) or "leader-full" (Chalcraft, 2012) popular resistance would have required imposing a round-the-clock curfew. How much the fighting played out – at least initially – to the youth's advantage was emphasized by Kais who described their tactics and methods of communication:

We were talking to each other over the phone and on Facebook [...] The cause of the youth's victory was guerrilla warfare. We were trapping them in alleyways they do not know. [...] And we coordinated: the youth of [a neighboring quarter] told us that they could not hold up against the pressure anymore and that they wanted Hay Ennour's reinforcement, for example. [...] Initially, Sidi Bouzid was alone [...] but then Meknassi and Menzel Bouzaiane and Regueb mobilized to put an end to this isolation.

The young men mounted the defense of their quarters in a highly skilled manner, using their knowledge of the terrain for tactics of encirclement and coordinating through different channels to deploy their numbers to flashpoint sites. Kais points out that this amounted to a "guerrilla warfare" through which the youth were able to resist the vastly more well-equipped police forces, suggesting that their mobilization drew on significant degrees of prior experience. Here, then, a catalytic event requiring a defensive response by the young men in order to protect their community prompted them to develop their local rationalities of resistance into a militant particularism enabling open confrontation with the dreaded police

149

forces. Yet, Kais also suggests that the youth of Sidi Bouzid would not have held out for long, had it not been for the mobilization of adjacent localities. Agreeing with this assessment, a local trade unionist said that: 'What distinguished Sidi Bouzid [from the events in Gafsa] is that mobilization in the other municipalities of the governorate allowed the siege of the city to be broken' (Lazher Gharbi). As the next section discusses, the developments there entailed dynamics of mobilization that paralleled those in Sidi Bouzid, but also differed from them in important ways.

Spread and Containment of Mobilization

As chapter two discussed, the scholarship on the Tunisian revolution holds that trans-local mobilizing dynamics stemmed from the efforts of activist agencies which spread information and organized demonstrations in other localities (e.g. Allal and Geisser, 2011b; Yousfi, 2015a; Zemni, 2015a). A notable claim is that the first violent confrontations outside of Sidi Bouzid, in the 50-kilomter-removed town of Menzel Bouzaiane, were strategically organized by local trade unionists at the behest of their comrades in Sidi Bouzid to break the latter's isolation and avoid a repeat of the Gafsa scenario (Hmed, 2012). In my conversations, I was given a different account by local youth and trade unionists who suggested a greater role of their independent activity in this first spreading of mobilizations. This was the case with Ala Hidri, a 26-year-old who had been in his final year of schooling at the time of the revolution. We met him at a café popular with the youth of the town and he told us how he and his friends acted of their own accord, conveying a concern with the accuracy of the historical record:

The people arriving in the *louages* [collective taxis], told us about the teargas [in Sidi Bouzid...] We talked, and we said we must express ourselves and react. We are a town that is known to be difficult and which does not take these things. [...] So, we took to the streets on 19 [December], at night, and started burning tires.

Ala interestingly states that, rather than through modern communication technology, him and his friends first heard about the situation in Sidi Bouzid by simple word of mouth. He proposes that the response of the young men in Menzel Bouzaiane was motived by a desire to uphold the town's reputation as being a strong and resisting community. Indeed, I would frequently come across such motivational references alluding to a sort of competition between communities, often expressed in notions of masculinity, of needing to evidence that they were "the real men", and that, as Ala puts it, they "would not take" being seen as idle. Responding to the situation with their own acts of unruliness, the self-activity of young men appears once more as having been driven by a perceived need to defend male honor. These motivations, rather than a pre-conceived plan by the local UGTT, were behind the 22 December attack on the local police station which led to the death of two protesters. Or, at least, this is what Naoufel Abbassi, a local trade unionist and schoolteacher in his late thirties who had been unable to find work under Ben Ali, told me. He spoke to us in the café adjacent to the town's UGTT offices:

In the beginning, there was a spontaneous popular mobilization of the marginalized youth. [...] On 22 December, the UGTT organized a peaceful march. There were women in the march because their sons had been arrested and they demanded their release [...] But the police did not accept this demand and provoked people [... And] when they insulted the women, the young men attacked the police station [...] So the youth took control [... and] resisted. It was a guerrilla warfare: they blocked roads and climbed on rooftops - well-rehearsed tactics [...] The police fired tear gas, then rubber bullets and things escalated to the point when they used life fire.

Naoufel confirms that the youth had been mobilizing independently of UGTT before 22 December and his detailed account suggests that what happened that day was not planned by trade unionists. Instead, like events in Sidi Bouzid, the coming together of the wider community and young men who were ready to fight, produced a situation where assaults on women by the police pushed the youth to respond by counterattacking. Indeed, Naoufel states that the young men took control at this point, utilizing tactics for confronting the police honed during the preceding nights. That they had come prepared was emphasized by Ala:

'We were ready for a confrontation, but we didn't imagine that they were going to attack the women and children. It was a bit of a human shield. But they used gas [and…] finally they shot' (Ala Hidri). Ala suggests that he and the other young men originally felt protected by the presence of women and children in the crowd, but when the police aggressed the demonstrators regardless, the youth were compelled to defend them. As they put intense pressure on the policemen trapped inside their station, the latter eventually opened life fire, killing two protesters, before they eventually surrendered, and the young men burned down the building. This level of escalation remained singular over the coming weeks (Salmon, 2016), but it signaled that a constellation of forces had emerged in which local conditions could rapidly spiral beyond the control of the authorities.

The pattern in the two vectors – that of UGTT and of transgressive mobilization by subaltern youth – flowed together and created explosive conditions on the ground was repeated in other localities as well, although the way in which they interacted varied. The next place where mobilization occurred after Sidi Bouzid and Menzel Bouzaiane was the town of Regueb. Here, the very first mobilization to occur was organized by local trade unionists in solidarity with the people of Sidi Bouzid, as Walid Abidi told me. A forty-year-old graduate in history who had been involved in activism since university, he became active in the nascent movement of graduates who, like himself, could not find employment under Ben Ali. We met him at a busy café in the town center, where he told us that:

On 22 [December], UGTT decided to do the first mobilization in Regueb. It was in solidarity with Sidi Bouzid. 60 or 70 congregated at the UGTT, not more […] On the back of this, we decided to set up the [union for unemployed graduates] UDC.

Walid recalls that the UGTT-organized demonstration was relatively small and stayed confined to the union premises, suggesting that declarations of trans-local solidarity by activists did not mobilize large numbers at this stage. As with the events of Gafsa two years prior, though, he and other unemployed graduates saw the build-up of mobilization as an

opportunity to press ahead with their own activism. This was similarly described by Arbi Kadri, the formerly unemployed teacher who said that the unemployed activists of Regueb took a step towards formal organizing:

On 25 December, we released our very first press release as the UDC. And we went out to do a demonstration with UGTT where we demanded our rights […] It was a large demonstration that went around the town and there was no violent intervention by the police because it was organized by the local UGTT.

In a development similar to those in Sidi Bouzid, larger mobilization occurred in Regueb through a conjuncture between UGTT and the self-activity of the unemployed. They stepped up their efforts as they communicated their grievances under the name of UDC as an independent organization for the first time. The numbers of people protesting also appeared to have increased as UGTT now allowed the demonstrations it organized to be used as a platform for articulating the demands of the local unemployed. While trade-union sponsored mobilization and the self-activity of unemployed graduates produced a notably high level of organized socio-economic claims-making in Regueb, some of the most marginalized young men of the town did not consider these joint actions enough. Amine, the local farm worker who recounted being chased from the streets of his quarter by the police, suggested as much. He participated with his friends on 25 December and opined that 'the UGTT was demonstrating in the town center. […] They just did a little show and went home. They asked us to return home, but we continued' (Amine Abidi). Those without university education, then, felt that demonstrations calling for jobs would do little to improve their lot. Instead, they opted for more forceful action that targeted the local branch of the agricultural bank that had been behind many of the land sales threatening their livelihoods. This was what Nasser Zribi, head of UGTT in Regueb, suggested, although, at this stage, the local union branch could not back these actions:

We understood but did not support the demonstrations that occurred on the night of the 25th [of December], when a group of youth burned tires and set fire to the agricultural bank [… Afterwards,]

153

we received advice from the central union not to open our doors any more […] We work together, so we cannot ignore their suggestions […] We have to protect people […] The police asked for reinforcements […and] arrested around 30 young men.

Just as with the arson attacks discussed in the previous chapter, the young men chose their target strategically in an apparent attempt to send a political message. Nasser said that this was intelligible to trade unionists and they sympathized to an extent but, as they exceeded the UGTT-organized demonstration, the actions of the young men put the local union in a tight spot. Grassroots trade unionists like Nasser had to keep a delicate balance between supporting mobilization in their local communities and avoiding confrontation with central UGTT structures still loyal to Ben Ali. Rather than unconditional support for, let alone leading and galvanizing, transgressive youth mobilization (as claimed by Hmed, 2012; Yousfi, 2015a), then, local UGTTs limited themselves to facilitating subaltern self-activity in the form of peaceful demonstrations. Nasser's account suggests, further, that it was in the interest of the local community that trade unionists kept open channels of communication with the national leadership and the regime. The protection of the community this offered was needed urgently when the police used reinforced capacities to embark on a series of arrests. These developments indicate that a division (including of mobilizational labor) existed between those segments of the local population involved in more radical forms of struggle, chiefly the most marginalized youth, and others who sought to maintain local dynamics on a more conciliatory trajectory and keep open possibilities for compromise with the regime.

That such possibilities for compromise remained important was made clear when, following an intensification of arrests from 25 December throughout the Sidi Bouzid governorate, local and regional UGTT structures intervened to press for prisoner release. This was pointed out by Safuan Bouazizi, a 35-year-old from Menzel Bouzaiane, who had been expelled from the Sousse university due to his political activism. Unemployed and without hopes of finishing his studies, he was among the local youth who were confronting the police:

On the 25th [of December,] police reinforcements arrived and there was a wave of arrests. […] The youth fled to the countryside. [...] My father put me in the car and took me to my grandfather's house in the countryside […] A delegation of the regional UGTT from [Sidi] Bouzid went to [Menzel] Bouzaiane […They] demanded an end to the militarization of Menzel Bouzaiane and the lifting of the siege.

He describes local conditions from 25 December onwards in terms of militarization and siege and suggests that this effectively stifled their ability for resistance. Here, the regional UGTT intervened on behalf of the community. Indeed, the head of UGTT in Sidi Bouzid said that after a 'night when the best youth of Sidi Bouzid were arrested […] I spoke before everyone in front of the police station and we demanded their release' (Lazher Gammoudi). These interventions by local UGTT cadres suggest that the union continued to function as a site for the articulation of popular grievances in common sense terms. For example, Bouderbala, the doctor from Sidi Bouzid, stated that 'the demands were simple: We had entered into a cycle of arrests, so the local UGTT mobilized to liberate the people that had been arrested and to reduce the amount of security forces' (Bouderbala Nsiri). Effectively seeking a return to the status quo ante, the demands articulated by local UGTTs thus maintained the defensive character of their prior mobilization around socio-economic rights. From this, we can see that local trade union structures, precisely because they did not enter open confrontation with the regime, continued to function as sites of political articulation that mediated between local communities and the authorities. Just as with the socio-economic claims of the unemployed, the demands which trade unionists could thus articulate and press for remained circumscribed by common sense, viz. they did not entail fundamental critique or rejection of the existing system of rule.

UGTT interventions had modest success in securing the release of some prisoners (Salmon, 2016). However, the stifling police siege persisted and the youth who had pushed local mobilizations forward were forced to scale back their struggle. As such, Kais commented that 'things started to calm down in Sidi Bouzid, because there were a lot of arrests of the most active people' (Kais Bouazizi). Indeed, by 29 December, Al-Jazeera, which had covered the

events in Tunisia closer than any other major news source (Rane and Salem, 2012), reported that 'calm has returned to the discontented province' ("Al-Jazeera TV 29.12.", 2010). Kept under conditions of siege by the police, some of the local youth stated that they felt isolated during this period and that the situation began to resemble worryingly that of the Gafsa revolt in 2008: 'No one helped us, we were alone, like Gafsa […] It was Thala and Kasserine who freed us from isolation. […] The reinforcements left, and we could breathe' (Ala Hidri). Ala refers to the local mobilizations in Thala and Kasserine which began on 3 January as the events that brought notable relief. Kais, meanwhile, stated that 'the explosion at Thala and Kasserine breathed new life into the mobilizations in Sidi Bouzid' (Kais Bouazizi). Both young men agree that the continuation their struggle became possible because the siege did not persist – as it had two years prior in the case of Gafsa – and that relief was provided by other localities rising in revolt. As was suggested in chapter three, then, the last week of December 2010 marked the decline rather than steady growth, of mobilization in the country.[36] The situation at this point can be summarized as one in which the interaction between different vectors of mobilization had given rise to local revolts, advanced most notably the development by the young men of their local rationalities of resistance into a militant particularism enabling open confrontation with the police. However, these were evidently difficult to sustain in the face of heavy police repression, a notable absence of revolutionary demands, and unified mobilization.

---

[36] Event catalogue data shows that the five reported demonstrations between 28 December 2010 and 2 January 2011 all took place in Tunis. These were organized either by political activists or lawyers (Volpi, 2016).

A Unification of Struggles in Thala

What Kais referred to above as an "explosion" first occurred in Thala, high up in the mountains of the Kasserine governorate. Here, confrontations between protesters and police began on 3 January. These developments did not come from nowhere but built on a groundswell of self-activity by young unemployed men who, as the previous chapter discussed, mobilized in Thala from 2008 onwards. Like in Regueb, unemployed graduates in Thala had gained experience in working with the local UGTT to articulate their demands. And indeed, the first demonstration to occur in the town during the revolutionary process was organized at the intersection between these two vectors of mobilization – though it was the unemployed who made the first move. As Bassem Haiji, formerly unemployed but now running an NGO, told us, they took to the streets on 27 December. As we were sitting in his office, he began to chain-smoke when he started recounting the events:

Since 2008, we [unemployed graduates] tried to form a movement and claim our right to work […] We only had legitimate demands […] When the movement of Sidi Bouzid began, we were encouraged. We decided to do a protest […] So 2011 was an extension of what happened since 2008.

As Bassem relays it, the events of the revolutionary process were initially perceived by him and his fellow unemployed graduates in Thala as an occasion, not unlike that of Gafsa in 2008, to press ahead with their own demands for jobs. He also stresses that they perceived such claims as legitimate, thus reinforcing the notion that, as the previous chapter discussed, employment opportunities were considered to be part of the moral economy (Thompson, 1993). Local concerns, then, motivated the first mobilization in Thala. Much like in the localities of Sidi Bouzid, UGTT in Thala was ready to support mobilizations around demands expressed in common sense terms and joined the protest of the unemployed. The head of the local union branch, Ezzedine Negrichi, made clear that they did so precisely to back the socio-economic claims coming out of their local community:

For us [trade unionists], there was daily communication with Sidi Bouzid […] But the mobilization that occurred in Thala was a protest of the unemployed graduates on 27 December which we joined. Given the marginalization that we have lived through for decades, the claims made were uniquely those of Thala […] There was a demonstration on the main street […with] slogans like "A job is a right, you pack of thieves".

While Ezzedine and his colleagues kept themselves informed about events unfolding in Sidi Bouzid, they did not call for local mobilization in solidarity with the struggle there. Rather, they sought to denounce local conditions of economic marginalization. Here, trade unionists acted not so much as a network that trans-locally instigated mobilizations (Hmed, 2012; Yousfi, 2015a), but as a facilitator for the self-activity of the local unemployed young men. It was in such a capacity, and because of the protection from police repression which they hoped to gain from UGTT involvement, that the young men sought their support. Indeed, the flow of activity was frequently the inverse from what is claimed in the scholarship, as self-activity of the youth drove the action forward while trade unionists and other activists responded, facilitated, and at times tried to contain or steer mobilizations in the direction of common sense. This happened not just in the localities of Sidi Bouzid, but, initially at least, also in Thala. This was the case with the first demonstration to occur in the town. Hamza Seyhi, unemployed at the time and without higher education, was part of a group who joined this action:

The [unemployed] graduates mounted the first mobilization and we [other] unemployed joined them […] The unionists proposed to follow the old procedure, that is to say: bureaucracy, dossiers and depositions. […] I said: we have a group of unionists present who have a kind of immunity […so] we cut all roads and administrations. The authorities will have to listen to us. But there was nothing.

From the comments of my interlocutors, it is clear that the unemployed young men in the interior who held university degrees were willing to work with UGTT, as the extant channels of claims-making, in order to find a job, probably because they still perceived a chance of succeeding with this approach. By contrast, Hamza's comments suggest that those finding themselves in the even less favorable position of not having higher education felt that this

would not work for them. Like the young men who attacked the agricultural bank in Regueb, Hamza expressed the desire to adopt more radical tactics. While the nonconforming unemployed still wanted to address themselves to the authorities, they had the impression that more drastic action was necessary to gain the attention of the state. They were trying to sway the trade unionists to extend their "immunity", as Hamza puts it, to cover such actions. However, the trade unionists would not stand for it and the initial mobilization in Thala finished without disruptions and remained a one-off event for almost a week. Just as elsewhere, then, local trade unionists stayed away from acts of open defiance and transgressions of common sense. The developments that ensued in Thala would come to stand out precisely because they overcame this division of struggles and led to the unification of the local community around the kind of militant particularism that had elsewhere developed among the young men only. The dynamic came from an unassuming kernel: a demonstration which the school children of the town mounted on 3 January 2011.

On a Monday marking the first day of schooling after a two-week break, students from the Lycée Ibn Charaaf took to the main street in Thala to express their solidarity with Sidi Bouzid (Salmon, 2016). It appears that this demonstration was not intended to be a transgressive action. Rather, it was thought of as a demonstration like those which students had mounted many times over in solidarity with the Palestinian or Iraqi people. This is what one of the organizers, Omar Saidi, told me, who had been in his final year of high school at Ibn Charaaf at the time. Now unemployed and with lots of time on his hands, this energetic young man helped us in finding other interlocutors in Thala, where the particularly close-knit character of the community initially posed problems of access. We sat down with Omar in the municipal park, and he began to recount the transformative experiences he had:

Previously, when we did a demonstration, they let it happen. But this time, they directly started with teargas […] Other young men joined […] and it evolved into a confrontation that did not finish until

159

2:00 am [...] Things passed over into the quarters when it became impossible to build or hide behind a barricade [on the main road].

Omar points out that they were surprised by the forceful reaction of the police. Apparently, they had misjudged how sensitive the situation in the country had become from the perspective of the regime – to the extent that it would not permit demonstrations even by school children. When they were attacked by the police, other young men from the community quickly joined, paralleling the dynamic of defending women in Sidi Bouzid, and Omar recalls that the ensuing confrontations lasted into the night. Rather than trying to hold their ground on the main street, the youth withdrew into the neighborhoods that were more easily defensible. These same developments were also described by Hamza Seyhi, who had been trying to push the local UGTT for a more confrontative stance. He said that the unemployed young men reacted immediately to the police aggression:

Near the school there are two cafés, and, during the day, you find the unemployed [young men] there [...] We had our own brothers and sisters in the schools [...and so we] reacted and intervened. And it turned into clashes between the police on one side and the youth and residents of the quarters on the other.

Hamza suggests that it was natural for him and other young men present at the scene to intervene in order to protect their younger siblings. In line with Omar's comments, he also recalls that the clashes quickly moved from the main road into the residential neighborhoods. At this stage, however, a new kind of development occurred, as the youth were joined in their struggle against the police by other categories of residents. As in Sidi Bouzid two and a half weeks earlier, the first clashes had developed as a defensive reaction to acts of aggression by the police. The ensuing events in Thala, however, diverged significantly as not just the young men but the local community as a whole engaged in what amounted to a project of collective defense. Here, we can only speculate that the close-knit social structures of this comparatively small and isolated community with a strong legacy of radicalism made a substantial difference. Whatever the ultimate causes, even the more seasoned members

of the community perceived the joint struggle that emerged as a significant novelty. This was brought out by the 62-year-old local UGTT leader Ezzedine Negrichi who, a week earlier, had been advocating more moderate approaches to protest:

Everyone mobilized according to their position. There were women giving you water and making bread. And this created a kind of union between the inhabitants of Thala that, me at my age, I have never experienced [...] You could enter any house and you were taken care of: you eat, you sleep etc.

Here, the whole community mobilized to sustain confrontations with the police, creating new feelings of solidarity forged in struggle which united the people of the town (Fantasia, 1989). In this, the accessibility of every home – something utterly unthinkable in ordinary times where only men who are members or close friends of the family can enter the house – stands out as creating more encompassing feelings of solidarity. However, this did not mean that divisions and social hierarchies were done away with. Ezzedine's comments also bring out an important gender dimension, as he effectively said that the women of the community "stayed in their place", viz. they remained indoors and contributed care labor that sustained the fighting ability of the men.[37] The importance of the accessibility of homes was also emphasized by Bassem, who said that the young men found shelter there: 'When the police attacked, all of the houses opened their doors. You could enter any house and you find the women waiting […] with tomatoes, so that […if you were affected by teargas] she puts them on their eyes' (Bassem Hajji). From Bassem's comments, we gather again that women gave crucial care to the fighting men. The unity which the people of Thala thus forged in their struggle was strikingly expressed by Seif Hamdi, the road construction worker, who got so immersed in recounting the events that he kept flicking imaginary ash from an unlit cigarette. Describing the transformation that occurred, he said:

---

[37] I interpreted such comments by my male interlocutors primarily as statements emphasizing social cohesion in struggle. However, they also signaled the inscription of gendered power relations which appear to have persisted throughout the revolutionary process (e.g. Debuysere, 2016, 2018).

What drove us to mobilize was the contempt, the violence, the aggression. When you are being humiliated, you will react with the same rate of violence […] The dignity of Thala was at stake and the people mobilized to support themselves […] We forgot the struggle of Sidi Bouzid […] In this moment, Thala fought for Thala.

This suggests that the motivations which we had previously come across among the young men – reaction against police violence, resistance to feelings of being humiliated, and a perceived need to defend the dignity of the community – came to be shared by a broad cross-section of the local population. Upholding the reputation of Thala as a historical hotbed of revolt, as mentioned in the previous chapter, appears as a widespread motivational force.

Seif further proposes that, as the struggle grew more inclusive, it also became more focused. Rather than expressing solidarity with Sidi Bouzid, as the pupils had done in the beginning, the cause of their struggle became the defense of the local community itself. The cohesion that was thus created contributed to making the rebellion in Thala particularly resilient. Indeed, the town resisted hundreds of police reinforcements that began pouring into the town from 4 January onwards (Salmon, 2016). With residential quarters built on hills rising from the central thoroughfare, and whose labyrinthine alleyways, often too narrow for cars, were unfamiliar to the newly arriving police forces, the terrain of Thala was uniquely favorable to the defenders. The accounts by Hamza and Omar vividly described the effectiveness with which the residents of the quarters fended off the police:

A barricade was placed at each street corner and was manned by a small group [...] When the police attack the first corner, the protesters there flee, but the protesters of the next corner attack. That's to say that, if a police vehicle enters our field of vision, we can easily encircle it. It was not planned, but effective. (Hamza Seyhi)

When they changed techniques, we "the revolutionaries", if you allow, changed techniques, too. When they brought motorcycles, we also did our tricks: A cable between two poles on the right and left of an alley; the bike passes, the policeman falls [*laughs*] (Omar Saidi)

The two young men give us a good idea of the tactics deployed in this battle. Even lacking a coordinated strategy, the defenders devised maneuvers that corresponded to the terrain

that they knew so intimately. There was a mix of pitched and running battles in adaptive response to police actions. Police forces were "permitted" to advance into the quarter as the first line of defenders fled once it felt that its position was no longer tenable. However, the routed men would be absorbed into the next defensive structures and groups at a more uphill position. As such, each advance of the police only meant that it faced more resistance at the next crossing. Moreover, the deeper they penetrated the quarters, the more they found themselves surrounded, with protesters raining stones and Molotov cocktails onto them from all sides and from surrounding roofs. From the perspective of the police, the quarters of Thala were thus a "swamp" that absorbed and deflected their actions, and which offered no strategic position to be captured. When it tried to respond to this impasse by using motorcycles that were more maneuverable and could penetrate deeper into the quarters to try and make arrests while avoid being encircled, the defenders adapted in turn. Mounting this intense resistance, the people of Thala managed to defend their quarters, confined the police to strategically disadvantageous positions in the town center, and prevented the mass arrests through which the regime had quelled the revolts in Sidi Bouzid. In the process, they forged new solidarities among themselves and, as Omar's labeling of themselves as revolutionaries suggests, developed a heightened sense of self-worth. As the following section discusses, their resilience forced the regime to sue for a ceasefire and officially ask the people of Thala for their terms, thus giving them the opportunity to articulate their demands.

Articulating Militant Particularism

As the regime came to realize that it was unable to subdue the people of Thala with the techniques of repression that had proven effective elsewhere, events in Thala took an unexpected turn. On the evening of 6 January, having faced four days and three nights of stiff

resistance, the commanding police general announced through loudspeaker that the authorities proposed a 48-hour ceasefire to be used for negotiations (Salmon, 2016). This was accepted. My interlocutors, referring to this period as a *ḥudna* (truce), said that they were cautiously optimistic that a solution could be found. Bassem summarized the feeling among his fellow youth as: 'Our idea was to let the UGTT and the activists we knew talk [with the regime]. Maybe they would come up with a solution [...] I always say, if Ben Ali found a solution at that moment, everything would have stopped' (Bassem Hajji). Bassem signals clearly that many of the young men were ready to relinquish their struggle if the terms of a possible agreement turned out to be acceptable to them. Indeed, he suggests that this had been a crucial moment in which the regime could still have achieved a peaceful solution that did not challenge the national political status quo. The approach of negotiating with the authorities was accepted even by the more radical youth. For example, Hamza Seyhi, who had been among the unemployed arguing for transgressive tactics, suggested that a kind of popular consensus existed around demands for economic development and an end to police repression:

We agreed to the negotiations and waited [to see] what the authorities would propose [...] We thought that perhaps they would propose a factory project that would provide employment. We were expecting some jobs. That's what we expected. [...] During the first night of the *ḥudna,* on 6 January, [...] there was a peaceful protest in front of the police station, and all the inhabitants of Thala participated [...:] men, women, children, young people, old people [...] And among the slogans that were raised that night were "*Kharrjūlna wledna w okhrjū min bledna*" (Free our sons, and get out of our town/country) and "*Lā khūf lā roˤb, ash-shāraˤ milk ash-shaˤb*" (Neither fear nor terror, the street is the property of the people).

Hamza suggests here that the people of Thala, including more radical elements like himself, were ready to end their resistance if the regime promised to deliver solutions for regional economic underdevelopment and the lack of jobs. Thus, improvement of the economic situation remained the principal aim of the struggle. In addition, the slogans he mentions suggest that popular demands had also come to include issues of police repression,

164

previously the concern mainly of subaltern youth. Here, the fact that residents of the town had engaged in joint struggle over the previous days appears to have made a significant difference. The slogan demanding the freeing of prisoners and withdrawal of the police, for instance, has two possible meanings regarding the territory that the police were to leave as either the town or the entire country. Even more tellingly, the second slogan expresses the open defiance of authority that the community had shown in practice over the preceding days. The people of Thala were telling the regime in no uncertain terms that the barrier of fear and terror that had been containing dissent was broken. They also signaled that they would not relent until they had reclaimed their perceived right to a life free from coercion, in which they, and not the police, owned the streets.

Here, then, was the community-wide unification of struggles for local socio-economic and political goals, entailing both the willingness and demonstrable capacity to openly defy the authorities. In other words, the people of Thala had unified around the militant particularism of a local struggle (Cox and Nilsen, 2014). The negotiations that took place over the course of the *ḥudna* clearly articulated the goals of this struggle, providing an important historical document for the nature of popular demands at this stage of the revolutionary process. As Bassem had mentioned above, the people of Thala entrusted trade unionists with negotiating on their behalf. The talks were led by the head of the local UGTT, Ezzedine Negrichi, who described the demands that they made in the name of their community:

The negotiations took place between the police leadership and the local UGTT [...] We demanded the release of all prisoners and that the authorities assume full responsibility for all consequences of the protests. Secondly, to end the police siege applied to Thala and its inhabitants. Finally, that the regime must work on development and find radical solutions for the economic problems of the region. [...They said] that a representative of the president of the republic would come on 8 January, and he would hold a dialogue with the inhabitants [...] There were those who refused the outcome of the negotiations. They said that this is a ruse. But for us, the struggle itself was not the goal but the means to achieve our goals.

The demands that UGTT conveyed on behalf of the people of Thala were evidently assertive. Not only were all prisoners to be released, but the authorities were asked to assume responsibility for the degree of escalation that had taken place, and thus declare that it had been the regime rather than the resisting people which had been in the wrong. In line with the above slogans, in the demand to end the repressive policy of besieging communities we see the assertion of people's sense of a right to live in freedom from police terror. Finally, the demands for economic development asked for a comprehensive solution to the marginalization of the wider region, suggesting that what was expected was more than some jobs for the unemployed youth. Despite their forceful articulation, however, the demands which the people of Thala raised were also notably un-revolutionary. At least as far as they were – and could be – expressed through UGTT as a site of articulation within the existing hegemonic formation, the demands remained "defensive", lacking 'a comprehensive defiance of, or aimed to transcend, the existing order' (Cronin, 2008b, p. 3). While mobilization driven by subaltern self-activity had thus clearly reached the level of a local revolt, it had not (yet) produced the kind of transformative dynamics that would lead to the articulation of new, revolutionary conceptions.

And yet, the slogans quoted above also indicate that a potential for radical articulation was forming. Here, we can spot traces of 'a conception which manifests itself in action, but occasionally and in flashes', as people started to act 'as an organic totality' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 327). In these situations, the problem is posed by hegemony or, more specifically, by common sense and the existing sites of articulation which jointly function to deny subaltern social groups a language for expressing more fundamental social contradictions. What was being reached here, then, was not a limit in the developmental capacity of subaltern self-activity as the key motive force of the struggle to a kind of "economic-corporate consciousness" (Lenin, 1970). Rather, it was the language of common sense, and the sites through which subalterns could articulate their grievances in it, which were being exhausted.

This can be read from Ezzedine's suggestive comment above that, even as a trade unionist who had actively engaged in the struggle, the point was not so much to develop it further for its own sake, but to use it to secure the goals articulated through the local UGTT. The dissension he mentions, though, also signals that some felt a point of no return had been reached and stated directly that they did not believe in the regime's willingness to compromise. While a unification of struggle around the militant particularism of revolt had thus been reached in Thala, we see, too, that the persistence of a hegemonic language of common sense still prevented the potential for revolutionary politics from being articulated. In other words, radical dissent among the most marginalized young men still found itself bereft of a site of articulation. Their suspicions that the regime was merely engaging in a delaying tactic were already supported by news that the popular quarters in Kasserine had risen in revolt.

Revolt in Kasserine's Popular Quarters

From the evening of 8 January onwards, the day that the regime had promised to hold a high-level dialogue with the people of Thala, developments in this town and in Kasserine city would converge in important ways. The scene for this was set by the self-activity of the young men in Kasserine, which emerged in ways that both paralleled and differed from other localities. In this regional center of administration, the first protest during the revolutionary process took place as early as 22 December 2010. Unlike in other localities, it was organized neither by the unemployed youth nor by trade unionists, but by activist lawyers leaving the district court in solidarity with Sidi Bouzid. One of the lawyers who joined that day told me that 'twelve of us left the tribunal in our robes and we marched to the office of the UGTT. But they closed their doors and left us outside' (Jaafer Bouzidi). Lawyers protesting in their robes became a signature of demonstrations in Kasserine and subsequently the Tunisian

revolution as a whole (Gobe, 2016). Locally, they also played an important role as organizers and protectors of demonstrations, thus taking over some of the functions which, as Jaafer suggests above, UGTT refused to perform in Kasserine.

This fact was termed a disgrace by Choukri Hayouni, the trade union activist and former POCT member from Kasserine whom we heard from in the previous chapter. He participated in many demonstrations in Kasserine, where he works as a teacher, as well as in his hometown of Thala and expressed his anger at the regional union leadership: 'The door of the UGTT remained closed from that day [22 December 2010] until the 14th of January [2011]. They [the regional union leadership] fled in an act of historical cowardice […] If there is a disgrace in Kasserine, it is that of the regional UGTT' (Choukri Hayouni). In Kasserine, seat of the regional UGTT, the union thus continued to stonewall all efforts at local mobilization, just as it had done with the self-activity of the local unemployed youth in the final years of the Ben Ali regime, discussed in the previous chapter.

Lack of union support and protection was arguably one of the reasons why demonstrations in Kasserine did not take off. Moreover, as was discussed for other localities already, declarations of solidarity with Sidi Bouzid by lawyers did not to motivate many members of subaltern groups to join. In Kasserine, dynamics of subaltern self-activity would instead develop along a transgressive vector of mobilization with its own local rationalities. This time, it was an attempted self-immolation by a young unemployed man from one of the city's popular quarters that set things in motion. Fadhel Bouzidi, the carpenter from Hay Ennour who had recounted his experiences of torture before, told us that: 'The spark in Kasserine was Hosni, not Bouazizi […] On 5 January, Hosni Kala'iyya set himself on fire […] The next day, we heard that he was dead. Although, until today, he is still alive' (Fadhel Bouzidi). Hamza Aloui, one of the young unemployed men from the same quarter, similarly suggested that rumors about the death of their neighbor led to the first clashes:

On the 6th [of January], Hosni died, and the demonstrations started […] We were confronted by the police. They fired gas […] So it turned into clashes, into battles. Everyone fought in the quarter. […] Our motivation to fight was neither freedom nor democracy, national dignity, or anything like that. It was the police repression.

Having been among the young men humiliated by the local police, Hamza says that residents of Hay Ennour had first come out to demonstrate in reaction to an apparent act of desperation by one of their neighbors. What escalated the situation, much like it had in Sidi Bouzid and Thala, was the repressive response by the police that started firing teargas. Unwilling to take further humiliation, the men of the quarter fought back, and clashes raged throughout the night of 6 January in Hay Ennour. Thus, it was ominously on the very night when trouble started brewing for the regime in Kasserine that a truce was proposed in Thala. If the regime had been worried about where developments in Kasserine might be headed, the following day would prove them right. For, on 7 January, Tarik Aidoudi and his friends, who had previously attacked the local office of the RCD, decided to go one step further: 'The police were distracted. This was our opportunity. We burned down the RCD office and the police station located in Hay Ennour' (Tarik Aidoudi). As the first RCD building and the second police station after the one in Menzel Bouzaiane went up in flames, the police increased the pressure. In the aftermath of this daring act, what had begun as skirmishes with the police in Hay Ennour developed into continuous battles that engulfed the two main popular quarters of Kasserine.

Here, again, local catalytic events – a self-immolation and the daring act of setting fire to state institutions – prompted the young men of the community to transform their local rationalities of resistance into an open confrontation with the authorities. As such, Houssem Allali who was among the unemployed graduates that had been trying in vain to find the support of the local UGTT, suggested that he and other youth from neighboring Hay Ezzouhour now felt compelled to engage in the unfolding struggle: 'for us, the beginning was what happened that Friday [7 January] at Hay Ennour. […] They set fire to the police station

[…] To support Hay Ennour, but also to show that "we too can ignite things", the first tire was burned in Hay Ezzouhour' (Houssem Allali). In Houssem's comment, as before in the case of Menzel Bouzaiane, we can spot the traces of solidarity and competition between the young men of different localities, as they were motivated to come to the aid of their peers and to not be found wanting. Hamza relays that the joint struggle of the two largest popular quarters of Kasserine had the effect of forging new solidarities similar to those that were discussed above for the case of Thala:

The youth of Hay Ezzouhour and Hay Ennour had a certain specificity, because these two quarters have a rebellious nature […] An intense solidarity developed between the two quarters, a love that I have never seen before […] The quarters became like a fortress that the police could not take.

Hamza suggests that the ability and willingness of the young subaltern men in Kasserine to fight the police was the result of what he terms their "rebellious nature". In other words, their struggle drew on the experiences of resistance to police repression that they had been gathering before. As Hamza's comments show, it was the development of new solidarities in joint struggle through which local rationalities of resistance coalesced and developed. Here, as in Thala before, was the emergence of a militant particularism that informed a project for the collective defense of the popular quarters. These became, in Hamza's words, their fortresses that they were bound to defend at all cost. As Hasan Nasri, a 45-year old taxi driver from Hay Ezzouhour, put it: 'At the entrance to Hay Ennour and Hay Ezzouhour, there were confrontations. But in the city center there was nothing. From the 7th [of January], it was deserted' (Hasan Nasri). A local struggle largely driven by the self-activity of the young men fighting the police had thus made significant territorial gains. With these developments, the battle lines in the Kasserine governorate had been drawn for the evening of 8 January 2011, when the people of Thala awaited a presidential envoy.

Conclusion

Events in the Tunisian interior during the first three weeks of the revolutionary process, starting on 17 December 2010, significantly altered the constellation of social forces in the country as several communities across the Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine governorates entered a stage of revolt. These developments built on local pre-histories of interaction between trade union mobilization and the self-activity of subaltern youth, notably in the struggles of the unemployed young men, which continued to shape patterns of mobilizations across localities. In lieu of a trans-local organizational force driving the dynamics, a complex and contingent interaction between two vectors of subaltern self-activity – one shaped by transgressive actions of subaltern youth, and the other by trade unionist- or activist-organized mobilizations – occurred in all cases. Notably, the escalation of local conditions resulted from the former as young men engaged in defensive reactions to police repression and assaults on their communities. Common across different localities were confrontations between these young men and the police, mostly at night, in residential quarters. These confrontations were informed by and further developed local rationalities of resistance that had taken shape under Ben Ali. This provides evidence for how the formation of an insurgent vector of subaltern politics discussed in the previous chapter had entailed "molecular processes" which had 'modif[ied] the pre-existing composition of forces', leading to an 'accumulation of elements destined to produce an "explosion", that is, an upheaval' (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 280, 370). Indeed, what occurred across the rebelling communities of the interior was a dynamic whereby catalytic events were sufficient to transform existing local relationalities of resistance among the youth into militant particularisms (Cox and Nilsen, 2014). As such, a transgressive vector of subaltern self-activity driving and escalating local mobilizations to become conditions of local revolt emerges as the most clearly discernible pattern over the first three weeks of the revolutionary process.

The discussion in this chapter thus points to a prominent role of subaltern agency in the development of mobilizations in the Tunisian interior, a fact largely ignored in the existing scholarship. This provides an important corrective to analyses which credit trans-local activist networks centered on trade unionists with having organized, connected, and radicalized mobilizations, including by members of subaltern social groups, effectively creating revolutionary conditions on the local level (see chapter 2; e.g. Allal and Geisser, 2011b; Hmed, 2012; Yousfi, 2015a). Rather than contributing a strategic agency that led to the unification of struggles within and across localities, the role of trade unionists and other activists was much more in keeping with what this thesis defined as a hegemonic vector of mobilization that was, however, variously shaped by prior local struggles. As the case of Kasserine showed, this could mean even UGTT structures withdrawing completely, and activists organizing mobilizations without much popular support and participation. In most cases, however, trade unionists and local UGTT structures contributed actively to mobilizations in their localities. This included organizing peaceful demonstrations and supporting similar protests by the unemployed youth, as well as the important role of articulating and negotiating for the demands of the local community, including on behalf of the young men who got arrested. What local union structures and activists, with the notable exception of Thala, appear not to have actively supported or participated in were open confrontations with the authorities. In other words, they were demonstrably not the forces that drove the development of militant particularism and local revolt. Rather, these resulted principally from the self-activity of the young men. Here, previous research might have conflated the fact that trade unionists and other activists often spoke for their communities in the media and negotiated with the regime on their behalf, with an active promotion of these more transgressive mobilizations. Their role, then, was that of an important facilitator and site of articulation for a struggle that was primarily driven forward by those members of subaltern groups who largely lacked prior engagement in formal politics.

The chapter also argued that developments in the revolutionary process up until the point discussed here remained subject to and were shaped by hegemony in important ways. Rather than holding that something akin to a revolutionary situation had been developing in the interior of the country over the initial weeks of mobilizations (e.g. Hmed, 2012), the chapter showed that revolutionary transformations had not yet occurred for at least two reasons. First, with the noted exception of Thala, the rebelling communities did not yet witness de-sectorized mass mobilization (Dobry, 1986). Rather, a vector of activist-organized mobilization during the day, in which women and the local middle-classes participated, featured relatively low levels of violence and interacted but did not coalesce with a vector of mobilization by young men engaging in violent confrontations with the police at night. In other words, a separation of local struggles persisted, including among different subaltern groups. Here, a division could be spotted between members of the community seeking to achieve concrete goals around economic development, prisoner release, and general police repression, and others who were unsure whether this would ultimately improve their situation, and who might already have harbored more radical, though under-articulated, political conceptions. With unemployed graduates as well as (tendentially more middle-class) activists and trade unionists broadly among the former, the most marginalized young men seemed to also have been the most radical. Here, divisions created and maintained by hegemony, including among members of different subaltern groups, whereby structural positionalities accounted for differential engagement in vectors of mobilization, persisted to varying degrees, and a unified, de-sectorized struggle had, except for Thala, not emerged by 8 January.

The second reason for the lack of revolutionary transformations was that the effects of hegemony showed even more tenaciously at the level of articulated demands. Here, the role of UGTT as a hegemonic vector of mobilization and the principal site of articulation for subaltern politics compelled local union structures to avoid overtly supporting radical forms

of mobilization and to not articulate revolutionary demands. Indeed, it was partially in the interest of the local communities that they refrained from doing so, as this maintained an important channel for communication and negotiation with the regime. Yet, it also meant that articulation through UGTT remained bound by the language of common sense and could not serve as an expression for conceptions breaking with hegemony which had begun to show "fleetingly and in action" (Gramsci, 1971) in the attacks on police stations and the joint struggle of Thala. Like similar actions discussed in the previous chapter, these remained at the level of un- or under-articulated politics. With the unfolding struggles thus coming up against but not yet breaching the boundaries of common sense, they also maintained a fundamentally defensive character: they did not entail the articulation of new, revolutionary conceptions, but expressed their demands in terms of improvements to the status quo. While the forces of subaltern politics thus drove much of the dynamics at this stage, they were also limited by the perseverance of the hegemonic formation. However, a key difference was now being produced through "molecular processes" of subaltern politics, in that a militant particularism developed by the young marginalized men was pushing wider segments of the population into a situation of revolt. As the next chapter discusses, the situation that was so changed would eventually create the conditions for a revolutionary re-articulation of the struggle.

VI. Revolutionary Transformation of the Struggle

This chapter develops the argument that key transformations in the Tunisian revolutionary process were produced in the context of local struggles in the country's interior over a brief period dating roughly between 8 and 10 January 2011. Over the course of these days, people in the three centers of revolt, Kasserine, Thala, and Regueb, made the decisive passage from defensive struggles that had largely remained sectorized and divided between different vectors of mobilization to a unified struggle that articulated radical political demands. The chapter makes the case that these developments built on dynamics of subaltern self-activity, regime repression, and popular learning, not unlike those that had unfolded previously. As the first section of the chapter discusses, a qualitatively new situation was created when people interpreted the killing of protesters as demonstrating that hegemonic inclusion had become unattainable and that the regime had lost its legitimacy. Following the gradual erosion of hegemony through subaltern disincorporation as well as the intensification of local struggles over the previous weeks, these developments finally led to a collapse of hegemony. The second section argues that under these new conditions the situation was reinterpreted through a process of popular critical self-activity that articulated a revolutionary new conception: the people wanted to bring down the regime. At this stage, then, people in the rebelling communities of the interior broke with common sense and found a new language that allowed them to rearticulate the aims of their struggle in revolutionary terms. Drawing on by way of prior organic intellectual and organizational activity, the key resources for this process of critical self-activity came from good sense created in struggle and popular conceptions of history.

The third section argues that this popular interpretive work and the rearticulations it created allowed for the unification of the local populations under a new, revolutionary vector of mobilization. Here, a collective will to bring down the regime was formed, and revolutionary

situations were for the first time created on the local level. These changes brought about a first, symbolic victory for popular forces as the regime began to withdraw the police. The final section of the chapter concludes that these transformations in the Tunisian revolutionary process are best understood as resulting from popular self-activity in which subaltern agency played a leading role, rather than in terms of "events" or activist leadership. However, it also stresses that these achievements came with important limitations as conceptions and a collective will forged in struggle remained under-developed and prone to fragmentation.

From Revolt to Hegemonic Collapse

The events described in the previous chapter ended with a situation that was marked by significant developments and gains for the local revolts in the Tunisian interior but still appeared open to a peaceful resolution. In Kasserine's biggest popular quarters, Hay Ennour and Hay Ezzouhour, the young men had burned down a local police station and RCD office and managed to push the police back to the entrances of the quarters at the crossings with the city's main street. A similarly stiff and successful resistance by the people of neighboring Thala had already forced the regime to ask for a ceasefire, enter negotiations, and finally promise to send a presidential envoy to hear their demands. As my interlocutors in Thala said, they were ready to end their struggle if the regime made certain concessions, and there is no reason to assume that the youth in Kasserine would, given a similar opportunity, not have done the same. However, the suspicions of those in Thala who, like Hamza Sayhi, the young man who had tried to push local trade unionists for more radical action over unemployment, had never believed in the regime's willingness to compromise would be confirmed. He recounted how, rather than a presidential envoy and jobs, the regime sent a notorious police captain with orders to shoot at protesters:

On Saturday, [8 January] they changed captains and Moncef Laajimi came. He stopped Gafsa's movements in 2008 [...] We went down to the [police station on the] main road […then] we heard shots […and] people shouted: "it's real bullets, it's real bullets". Marouene, may God rest his soul, was shot dead. […] Why did the [government] official not show up even if there was an invitation and a red carpet? We realized: he had nothing to give and to add […After that,] there was no one who was against the mobilization.

Despite the arrival of a police commander known for repressive tactics, the use of live ammunition, which occurred only once before in Menzel Bouzaiane more than two weeks earlier, was clearly unexpected and led to shouts of horror. This unforeseen level of violence and the broken promise of dialogue, Hamza relays, convinced those who engaged in them that negotiations were pointless. But he suggests that the developments also caused him to rethink his opinion that increased pressure might lead to a more favorable response by the regime. In this new context, Hamza concluded that the nonappearance of the government official signaled that he, and by extension the regime, would have had nothing to offer to them no matter the circumstances. The regime's decision not to send a personification of hegemonic inclusion but someone applying extreme coercion rendered palpable a disarticulation of hegemony and the willingness of the regime to forcefully subdue the rebellious people. That this was indeed a decision of the central regime is suggested by the fact that police forces opened fire at protesters not just in Thala, but in the two defiant popular quarters of Kasserine at the same time (Aleya-Sghaier, 2012; Salmon, 2016). That night, Karim Delhoumi, the school dropout from Hay Ennour, and his mostly underage friends were making their way to the frontlines of the ongoing battle with the police. After two nights of fighting, they thought they knew what to expect:

We went together to the Hay Ennour roundabout. We were hooded, we took tomatoes and milk with us to protect ourselves from gas […] The police were at the gas station, just over there […] There was so much gas that you could not see. Then, a burst: five successive shots. And we found Slah and Raouf on the ground.

After recounting what happened to his two friends, Karim fell silent, gazing to the crossing where they died, meters away from the café where we were sitting. Conversations like this made me realize how dramatically the lives of my interlocutors, especially the young men who had lost friends, were wounded, or who generally had participated in these traumatic events, were altered by them. The situation they experienced, although qualitatively new, resonated in important ways with a prior feeling, discussed in chapter four, in which they had been "dead alive". Their hegemonic disincorporation, like Hamza's comment suggests, was now manifest as the regime demonstrated that it had nothing to offer them but death. Indeed, the youth who had already existed in a liminal state in which hegemony was fading and coercion mounting experienced that the latter only intensified as the situation of revolt that they created distanced them ever more from incorporated positionalities. In other words, they experienced that, unlike hegemony which is strongest in the core of the hegemonic formation, the state's "outer armour of coercion" (Gramsci, 1971) was getting thicker, as it were, the further they pushed down the road of revolt.

And yet, this new-found knowledge led the youth not to despair but hardened their resistance even further. This was suggested by Nizar, at least, the young man from Hay Ennour who had been tortured and preferred not to be identified. He said that: 'When Raouf died next to me, it was enough. When they fired gas, I threw [the teargas canister] back. Then, they focused on me. They shot me with a bullet in the arm, then again in the side' (Nizar). As he describes it, his reaction to the threat of imminent death was not flight, but extreme courage, relenting only when he himself was shot disabled. Seif Abadi, an unemployed young man from Hay Ennour in his mid-twenties, described a similar reaction to me. Like many of the youth fighting the police at the entrance to the quarter that night, Seif had still been in high school at the time. We sat in a small restaurant over breakfast and he went through an entire pack of cigarettes as he excitedly and empathically recounted:

When we saw the blood, we reacted in a weird way, the opposite way [...] It erased everything – doubts and fear – the sight of blood, the encounter with death. I was no longer afraid of dying because my life is no better than that of the martyrs. [...] You are part of this group. If you must die with them, you die, and that's it.

On the one hand, these accounts correspond to scholarly notions that increased repression may "backfire" and may lead to an increase and escalation of mobilization, rather than subduing it (della Porta, 2016; also della Porta and Reiter, 2006). On the other hand, and while certainly 'producing anger rather than fear', the reactions of my interlocutors to these "moral shocks" took more than emotional forms of "outrage and hope" (della Porta, 2016, p. 118). Indeed, hope was quite absent at this point. As Seif describes it, his was a conscious reassessment of the value his own life and a resulting defiance to stand in solidarity with his friends, even if it meant he would die. Here, structures of feeling that had devalued life itself, rationalities of resistance, and bonds of solidarity forged in struggle all appear to have come together driving conscious decisions to resist and, rather than outrage or hope, produced an extreme courage and "bravery" (Kurzman, 2012) that allowed the young men to keep fighting.

While this experience needs to be read through and is limited by the terms of masculinity discussed in the previous chapters, the demonstration of resolve by the young men inspired other members of the community. As such, Choukri Hayouni, the teacher and trade unionist from Hay Ennour, expressed his astonishment when he found that 'people no longer had a grain of fear! [...] With tear gas all over our faces, and live bullets flying, the people did not care and resisted. And the youth were shouting "Don't be afraid, don't be afraid!"' (Choukri Hayouni). The bravery of the youth, Choukri suggests, broke the barrier of fear and encouraged those who had stayed away from the fighting to join their ranks. Here, the use of lethal force by the regime indeed led to a new situation in that members of the rebelling communities engaged in direct confrontations with the police irrespective of their class background. This was brought out clearly by the statement of Neji Gharsalli, an experienced

activist and lawyer who had organized the first peaceful demonstration in Kasserine. In his sixties and with a dignified demeanor, he welcomed us in his office that was filled with memorabilia for the causes of Arab Nationalism. We were treated to coffee and sweets as he spoke pensively:

There was a real coalescing between the citizens. Since the death of the first martyrs, we became a united bloc; us [lawyers], the unionists, and the youth […] We were at the Hay Ezzouhour roundabout […] They fired rubber bullets and tear gas, and two lawyers were wounded […But] it was them [youth] who presented the martyrs. Without them, there would not have been a revolution.

Neji gives us a strong impression of the unifying effect that the regime's decision to use lethal violence had on the people of the rebelling communities. It appears that the situation changed in three important ways subsequent to that decision. First, hopes for hegemonic incorporation were eradicated and approaches like negotiations and common sense demands for the extension of incorporation were demonstrably exhausted. Second, and contrary to what the regime might have hoped for, the barrier of fear was broken as the youth stood their ground. Together, this caused activists like Neji and Choukri to rally to the militant particularism developed by the youth and join open confrontations with the police. All three aspects can be interpreted as unification under a transgressive vector of mobilization through which members of diverse social groups were now experiencing a substitution of hegemony with coercion, leading whole communities to withdraw their consent and engage in open revolt. As Neji and Choukri state, the development of this qualitatively new situation was driven by the subaltern youth. In other words, building on historical processes of hegemonic contraction and persistent expansion of its fissures through subaltern self-activity, local conditions had reached a "crisis of hegemony" that affected members of all social groups which the regime now ruled by 'exercising coercive force alone' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 276).

The unifying effect of this development was experienced not just by the middle-classes, but also by people like Fadhel, the carpenter who had been subjected to torture for his Islamist orientation. He said that: 'For the first time, I felt that the people of Kasserine loved each other. There were no more barriers […] From the 8th [of January], we were like one. There were no longer distinctions' (Fadhel Bouzidi). Social distinctions and divisions, another effect of hegemony, appear to have been overcome, at least partially, giving rise to feelings of solidarity, or even love, that united the local community.

Similar developments, having already occurred in Thala at an earlier stage, were expressed by my interlocutors in Regueb. As the previous chapter discussed, mobilizations in this town were divided between those organized by activists and trade unionists raising demands for incorporation and actions of more radical youth and had also slowed down towards the end of December. Abderraouf Abidi, an architect and civil society activist in his late thirties recalled that the local UGTT on 9 January called 'a general strike in Regueb in solidarity with the deaths in Thala and Kasserine' (Abderraouf Abidi), making it the first local UGTT branch in the country to officially announce a strike in the revolutionary process (Salmon, 2016). The regime, however, made very clear that it would have no such mobilization by trade union structures, and local police forces opened fire on the demonstrations that day, killing four protesters. As in Kasserine, this entirely new situation led to a unification of the community. This was relayed to me by Arbi, the unemployed activist who co-founded the local UDC at the end of December and had followed the approach of the trade unionists thus far: 'On 9 January, there was blood! So, there was nothing left to lose. […] Even the activists who did not support the confrontations before knew that we could no longer go back' (Arbi Kadri). And Hachem Maaidi, an IT graduate in his early thirties who had been unemployed at the time of the revolution, similarly said that: 'What changed was that even the people who were against the confrontations got involved in this fight, those who refused violence and all that' (Hachem Maaidi). Although people had thus found unity, the developments in Regueb

showed that they still faced a formidable adversary. Indeed, 9 January was the day which made this similarly clear in Thala and Kasserine as many more lost their lives there as well.

With three young men having been killed the day before in Kasserine and one in Thala, the morning of 9 January saw large funeral processions departing from the homes of the martyrs, with people from all classes, age-groups, and genders present. What was intended as peaceful and dignified burial processions turned into the first mass confrontations of the Tunisian revolution to occur in broad daylight as the police, to the disbelief of people, stuck to its crowd dispersal logic and attacked the funerals. In Hay Ezzouhour, the body of Mohamed Amin Mbarki, who had been killed at the age of sixteen, was transported by his neighbor Hasan Nasri in his car. Hasan, having himself faced dire economic circumstances that had led him to migrate, first to Morocco and then to Europe, in search of work, sympathized with the plight of the youth under Ben Ali. He described the events of that morning to us as we warmed over tea in a small café on a freezing February morning:

When I got to the Hay Ezzouhour roundabout, the police were preparing to intervene, so I wanted to turn around. But people didn't let me do it […] There were people behind me who started throwing stones, and the [police] responded with gas […] There were snipers on the roofs […] who were shooting people […] We had to confront each other! The people didn't want to run away, they wanted to confront the police in the funeral. It was either the death of the citizens or the burning of the police station. The youth weren't afraid, they attacked.

Fearing for the dignity of the funeral and the lives of the women and children in the crowd, Hasan wanted to retreat. But the steadfastness of people had grown so much that they withstood not just the tear gas but even sniper fire. Indeed, in the ensuing battle, the youth succeeded in burning down the local police station, although the price they paid in blood was high. The regime also attacked the other funeral processions and the demonstration in Regueb, killing an estimated total of thirty people that Sunday, 9 January 2011, thus turning it into the single bloodiest day in Tunisian history since the bread riots more than 25 years

earlier (Salmon, 2016), and constituting an unprecedented level of violence under Ben Ali.[38]

My interlocutors referred to these events as massacres that, as scholars have argued, shocked the country and significantly influenced subsequent developments on the national level (Aleya-Sghaier, 2012; della Porta, 2016; Volpi, 2016; Yousfi, 2015a; Zemni, 2015a).

Locally, the trauma was no less profound. Hamza Aloui, one of the young fighters from Hay Ennour who had been experiencing frequent police humiliation before, said that: 'We never thought they would forbid us to bury someone who died [...But] they even killed people at the funerals!' (Hamza Aloui). Hamza expresses his shock and a sense of violated honor that he felt for not being allowed to bury the dead. Others said that, under the impact of these events, people began to reconsider the situation. This was suggested to me by Mohamed Taher Khadraoui, a civil society activist from Kasserine in his fifties who had been affiliated with opposition parties under Ben Ali. He had made a small fortune working in the Gulf countries and received us in the office of the charity which he now runs:

At the funerals of Slah, Raouf, and Amin, the police intervened and dispersed us. The funerals were prevented, and the people were slaughtered! The largest number of people died in Kasserine and Thala that day. And there, the regime revealed its true authoritarian nature and that of the repressive apparatus. On 9 January, the real revolution began.

Denial of the dignity of burial and what Mohamed Taher called the slaughter of 9 January had a profound effect. As he puts it, they marked the beginning of the revolution as the new situation made the regime's authoritarian and repressive character plainly visible. In a more popular language, a similar point was made by Hsan Jamli, a butcher from Thala in his fifties and father of the first martyr of the town, who met us at the local UGTT office. He said that, 'at the funeral [...] they blocked the road and [...] shot at us with live ammunition and tear

---

[38] The number of casualties in the two nationwide revolts after independence that took place under Bourguiba, the 1978 General Strike of UGTT and the Bread Riots of December 1983 to January 1984, was around 200 in each case (Camau and Geisser, 2003; Kassab et al., 2010). By comparison, the previous major violent repression of protests under Ben Ali in the Gafsa mining basin in 2008, killed three people (Allal, 2010).

gas […] They allowed some women to pass, but not the men. You see the dictatorship!' (Hsan Jamli). Here, see how popular self-activity and repressive actions of the police constructed "catalytic events" in which the 'legitimacy of dominant power relations are demonstrably reversed' (Cox and Nilsen, 2014, p. 78). And indeed, both interlocutors suggest that there was a "revelation" that led to something like a final collapse of hegemony, the slow deconstruction over the previous years and weeks had accelerated dramatically with the disintegration of hopes for incorporation and the killings.

A similar chord was struck by Choukri Slougui, an unemployed graduate from Hay Ezzouhour in his mid-thirties, who pointed out that the situation caused people to reflect anew: 'We had been demanding bread, employment, etc. But with the massacres, he [Ben Ali] lost his legitimacy […] After the killings, consciousness was constituted' (Choukri Slougui). Choukri states that belief in the legitimacy of the regime – and thus the most important effect of common sense – was deconstructed in the catalytic events of 8 and 9 January. This, then, constituted a "crisis of authority" in which people became 'detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 276). But Choukri also hints at a transition from a deconstructive phase to constructive one by saying that changes in consciousness occurred at this stage. In other words, the struggle started coming up to 'a process through which reflexive self-activity engenders a distancing from the hegemonic elements of common sense and simultaneously a process through which "good sense" is rendered "more unitary and coherent"' (Cox and Nilsen, 2014, p. 88). As the next section discusses, this process unfolded through a popular work of reinterpretation.

Critical Self-Activity: Articulating Revolution

Breaking free from the constraints of common sense in the process of an intensifying confrontation with the state, subaltern self-activity produced conditions in which people began to reinterpret their experience, understanding of self, and their relationship to the regime. How did such processes unfold in a context where prior organic intellectual and organizational activity were clearly in short supply? In other words, what were the imaginaries from which people's critical self-activity might have constructed "oppositional readings" (Hall, 2006) of their situation? In our conversations, several of my interlocutors gave suggestive comments on how they began to relate their experiences of the qualitatively different situation that now prevailed to good sense conceptions of history as well as to a popular political language referring to Palestine. The latter reference was used by Sariha Hayouni, an Arabic teacher in her mid-forties. Like her cousin Choukri Hayouni who had organized the interview, she was from Thala but now teaches at a high school in Kasserine. When we spoke to her in the office of her husband's insurance company, she said: 'We now witnessed scenes at home that we used to see only in the news from Gaza' (Sariha Hayouni). And Hachem, the IT graduate and unemployed activist from Regueb commented: 'People started to compare our situation with Palestine. This ignited things.' (Hachem Maaidi). The statements by Sariha and Hachem suggest that comparisons with the situation in Palestine, one of the strongest allegories for injustice available in popular political language throughout much of the Arabic world, were made by people from different social groups. Under conditions of hegemonic collapse, then, powerful vocabularies of good sense political conceptions became available as foils with which people started to re-interpret their situation. This was expressed in a highly suggestive manner by Choukri Slougui, the unemployed graduate from Hay Ezzouhour, who made a further connection with the period of anti-colonial struggle:

It was a scene that can only happen between two enemies […] A real war! With one side an armed party, and the other people who defend themselves with stones. This scene is repeated in Palestine every day […] Mohamed Amin Mbarki, his grandfather was a great Moudjahid, a fighter against French colonization, one of Kasserine's revolutionaries. And so, the same scenario is repeated, but with internal hands. In the same way, Mohamed wanted to confront injustice […] I perceived that there was a confrontation between the people and the regime.

This comment provides an example of how popular critical self-activity drew on multiple forms of good sense to re-interpret the present situation and, as Choukri suggested before, constructed a different political consciousness. On the one hand, the qualitatively new situation gave rise to experience that is made sense of through comparison with Palestine as a referent for fundamental injustice, adversarial confrontation, and disproportionate power. On the other hand, good sense conceptions of history were drawn on to construct a parallel with situations in which the local community was engaged in righteous resistance. Here, the first martyr from Hay Ezzouhour was placed, through his ancestral lineage, in the context of "memories of revolt" against an unjust and foreign oppressor, allowing for his actions to be read in the light of those by his grandfather, and making him, too, a revolutionary. Thus, Choukri surmises that they were confronting an injustice like that in Palestine, or that experienced by their ancestors during colonial times, that was now being perpetrated by "internal hands", viz. by the domestic regime. Indeed, he states that he perceived that there was a confrontation between two enemies – "the people" and "the regime" – and thus a fundamental antagonism, effectively constructed through something akin to a "chain of equivalence" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) between legitimate struggles for overcoming unjust regimes and their own resistance. This suggests that a re-interpretation of the situation along revolutionary lines was taking place.

Here, what we are spotting here is a break with the language of common sense that had previously confined the struggle, at least in terms of articulate demands, to defensive forms. The good sense vocabularies and conceptions mentioned challenge fundamental elements

in the ruling ideology, notably the legitimacy of the post-colonial state as based on delivering independence from foreign rule (Camau and Geisser, 2003). As Choukri's comments suggest, this dominant conception was reversed, and the regime re-interpreted as a foreign oppressor. The people, by contrast, claimed for themselves the legitimizing conception of revolutionary liberators. Indeed, these developments apparently occurred in a process of popular critical self-activity, rather than through an intervention of outside intellectuals or leaders. In Gramsci's words, rather than a 'systematic educational activity on the part of an already conscious leading group', they were an 'auto-reflection on the part of the people - an inner reasoning worked out in the popular consciousness' (1971, pp. 126–7, 198–9).

Indeed, this process seems to have worked through those "sediments" of common sense – anti-colonial struggle – where good sense conceptions of history, or an "infinity of traces" (Gramsci, 1971), opened possibilities for "oppositional readings" (Hall, 2006). That placing their actions into a context of popular conceptions of history was a key process of reinterpretation that motivated the struggle of the people of Kasserine was suggested by Jaafer Bouzidi, one of the local lawyers. In his early forties, he had been politically active as a student, which earned him an expulsion from Tunis University and forced him to finish his legal studies in Libya. He received us in his office where, seated under a framed picture showing him in a row of lawyers marching, arms interlocked, at the helm of a demonstration during the revolution, he gave the following testimony:

I belong to the *Fraichich* [tribe of Kasserine], we have a past and a history. I am tough in a daunting present, and I try to reproduce my past. I try to reproduce the image of yesterday, the image of my revolutionary grandfather who fought colonization. We have these idioms here: "We fought colonization", "My grandfather is a *Falleg* [fighter against French colonialism], your grandfather is a bootlicker". We use these popular expressions to create a desire to excel despite your means […] All these complexes converged in a precise moment, and thus the revolution was born. And the foundations were built on the blood of men. I saw with my own eyes how these youth stormed the Hay Ezzouhour police station with nothing but a stone in their hands. I saw women forcing their sons

to join [...] The only concern was to be united against this machine of oppression, to beat the tyrant that was oppressing the people.

Jaafer asserts a sense of pride, dignity, and historical agency drawn from good sense conceptions of history. Just as Choukri, he lays claim to the past by rendering equivalent the revolutionary fight against French colonial rule by the tribal community and the present struggle against Ben Ali. Against the erasure of their tribal identity through hegemonic discourses of modernity – and, as one might add, against European intellectual perspectives rendering North African cities "places without history" (Camus, 1996) – Jaafer proclaims that the people of Kasserine have a past and a history. Indeed, he suggests that it is this very past from which courage to face up to a daunting present emerged as people reproduced the revolutionary struggle of their ancestors. Here, subaltern agency, especially of the young fighting men is, beyond their own experience, rooted in collective "memories of revolt", giving them the reassurance of hailing from a people who fought and won historic battles. This evocation of their revolutionary past served to construct a sense of historical agency implicating the people in a mobilization through which, as Jaafer puts it, the revolution was born, and a will emerged to beat the tyrant. Here, then, people made the crucial transition towards building a revolutionary collective will and sense of historical protagonism.

How can we understand these developments? With Gramsci, we would suspect that the creation of a collective will presupposes the development of unifying conceptions of the world (1971, p. 349). It appears that a vocabulary for such new conceptions came from "old good sense" and revolved around a historical re-reading of present experience. Drawing on what Jaafer called "popular expressions", constituting a kind of good sense oppositional language always latently present in the fissures of hegemony, it seems that a counter-hegemonic reading of the present was being constructed. This reinterpretation involved conceiving of the people as a unified subject, of the regime as its enemy, and of the struggle as aimed at bringing it down that stand in dialectical relationship with each other and laid

the ground for a revolutionary re-articulation of the struggle. Indeed, a decisive transformation was produced at this stage whereby new forms of signification that broke with common sense were expressed in language, thus articulating a new conception of the world around which a collective will for the overthrow of the regime could coalesce. Fadhel Bouzidi, the 62-year-old carpenter from Hay Ennour, suggested that, after the massacres, a revolutionary transformation of the struggle occurred:

He [Ben Ali] became an enemy, with all the meaning of the word. It's like a colonizer. It was not a Tunisian against a Tunisian, no. He's Israel, I'm Tunisia. [...] After the killings, it was politicized. The people came into being and this word began to circulate. The people accepted no less than the fall of the regime. […] And so, the slogan "*Ash-shaʿb yurīd isqāt an-niẓām*" (the people want to bring down the regime) appeared.

Fadhel draws together the different registers of popular language and expression through which people reinterpreted their situation and their struggle. He states that the regime was now seen as a colonizer, a foreign power, and that those struggling against it "became the people", representing the defenders of the true nation, thus expressing a claim to popular legitimacy. Re-interpreting themselves and the situation based on the solidarities and imaginaries of popular consciousness produced what Fadhel called a process of politicization. He places in this context the emergence of what would become the signature slogan of the Arab Uprisings: "*Ash-shaʿb yurīd isqāt an-niẓām"* (the people want to bring down the regime, henceforth ASYIAN).

In this slogan, we can see the articulation of a new conception of the world that makes sense of the present situation and its contradictions and points to a way out of them in terms of revolutionary change. It renders the people as a national-popular collective subject with the right, capacity, and will to overthrow an unjust regime. This articulation is deeply organic to the Tunisian popular imaginary. The expression "the people want" draws on the opening line of a poem by Aboul-Qacem Echebbi, considered the poet of the national struggle against French colonialism, which had been popularized by its inclusion in the first national anthem

of independent Tunisia (Colla, 2012). Organic connection to the present situation was constructed by rendering this enemy in terms of the domestic regime that the people had come to see precisely as parallel to the colonial oppressor of old. And finally, Fadhel suggests that ASYIAN emerged after the regime started killing protesters. Indeed, as Colla (ibid) points out, the meter and rhythm of ASYIAN is that of a slogan commonly raised at politicized funerals: "*Bil-rūḥ, bid-dam, nafdīk, ya* […]" (With soul, with blood, we sacrifice for you, oh [name of a martyr or cause]), meaning that it was likely first raised in such a context. Through this, ASYIAN can be understood as articulating a new conception of the world that re-cast the ongoing struggle in revolutionary terms that were organically rooted in present experience and the vernaculars of good sense.

It has proven impossible for me to determine when and where precisely ASYIAN was first articulated in the Tunisian revolutionary process. The suggestive evidence above points to on or after 9 January in Kasserine, a notion affirmed by some scholars (Aleya-Sghaier, 2012). Others claim that the slogan was first raised in the Sfax general strike on 12 January, though they do not provide evidence for it (Zemni et al., 2013; Zemni, 2015a). The first video documentation of a slogan approximating ASYIAN that I was able to track down dates from 11 January in Sidi Bouzid.[39] And while the full slogan appeared on Twitter only with the beginning of mobilization in Egypt on 25 January 2011, other clearly revolutionary articulations like "Ben Ali – Dégage!" (Ben Ali – Get out!) began to circulate from 10 January onwards. Summarily, this suggests that revolutionary transformation of the struggle in Tunisia is best conceived as a process, rather than a discrete event (Sewell, 2005), in which the first important articulations were likely created between 9 and 11 January.

---

[39] This is based on an analysis of videos posted on YouTube during this period by the Tunisian blogger collective turned thinktank *Nawaat* and my own research in the Tunisian National Archives which are collecting videos and photographic evidence from the period of the revolution. The video in question from 11 January 2011 in Sidi Bouzid can be accessed online at:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AMkiApAKA0&index=68&list=PLu9NNXunTgMOxAI52pb8PXINCfRFRU
c4n (last accessed 16.03.2020).

The process of popular critical self-activity described here, and ASYIAN as the most comprehensive revolutionary articulation it produced, are also notably different from what chapter three discussed as the "long labor" that gives rise to a collective will (Gramsci, 1971). Indeed, the dynamics discussed in the present chapter involved comparatively little of the organic intellectual and organizational activity required to develop coherent conceptions of the world, let alone a revolutionary strategy. As such, the level of articulation reached here clearly falls short of giving rise to a project in a more developed form, which 'posits the social totality as the object of challenge and transformation' (Cox and Nilsen, 2014, p. 83). In ASYIAN, no specification is given as to what exactly "the regime" is, who is included in "the people", let alone for how social relations, political and civil society, and the economy are to be transformed. Forged in the heat of the battle and with recourse to little more ideational means than those supplied by good sense and popular culture, the transformation into a revolutionary struggle remained, as it were, "under-articulated". Still, it marked the crucial 'transition to transformative politics […as] subaltern social groups, in a process of transformation, discover[ed] not just who they are, […] but what they want' (Chalcraft, forthcoming). With these transformations, a collective will, albeit in rudimentary form, of a people wanting to bring down the regime was born. For the first time in the Tunisian revolutionary process, this would lead to mass mobilization around revolutionary demands on the local level.

Symbolic Victory of Revolutionary Mobilization

As this section discusses, what occurred in the aftermath of the events in Kasserine, Thala, and Regueb on 8 and 9 January, can indeed be understood as the passage from revolt to a revolutionary struggle. My interlocutors from these three localities stated that, subsequent to the killing of protesters, demands for hegemonic incorporation were superseded by calls

for the fall of Ben Ali. With the struggle involving members from all social groups, this transformation can be understood as the emergence of revolutionary mass mobilization, and thus the creation of revolutionary situations on the local level. The force of the mobilization that thus developed also brought a first popular victory as the regime was eventually swayed to withdraw the police from the interior provinces – be it only to concentrate on the trouble that was brewing elsewhere. As such, Majdi Gharsalli, one of the activist lawyers in Kasserine, suggested to me that revolutionary transformation of the struggle occurred after the killing of protesters. In his late thirties and a resident of the popular quarter of Hay Ennour, he was known, as he put it, as a "human rights defender" and had been involved in the local mobilization of his colleagues from December onward:

The killings were decisive in the Tunisian revolution. If he hadn't ordered the use of the live bullets, Ben Ali would still be in power today […] The slogans at the beginning were very general slogans, not aimed at overthrowing the regime. The slogans which aimed at the overthrow of the regime came after the killings.

In no uncertain terms, Majdi opines that Ben Ali's own decisions led to his demise. The aim of overthrowing the regime was articulated only after orders to kill protesters had been given. This was correspondingly expressed by Hamza, the unemployed young man from Hay Ennour who had expressed his horror at the regime's attack on the funerals above. Indeed, he said that: 'After the funerals, our demands changed […] The demands for employment turned into an aspiration for the fall of the regime' (Hamza Aloui). He suggests that the transformation of their demands meant that the local mobilization acquired a different quality, becoming a revolutionary effort to bring down the regime. And Arbi, who co-founded the local UDC, relayed that a similar transformation occurred in Regueb. He said that: 'After 9 January, the demands were no longer the same. At the beginning, our slogans concerned socio-economic rights […] But when the blood was spilled, the slogans changed. They became political […and expressed] a refusal of the regime' (Arbi Kadri). He goes as far as calling the demands before the massacres "non-political". Considering the suppression of dissent under

192

Ben Ali and some of the clearly political – if particularistic – slogans that circulated before, including those raised precisely by the unemployed movement (Beinin, 2015), I understand this comment as asserting the legitimacy of the previous demands in terms of common sense – and thus as entailing the claim of being "blameless" regarding the escalation of violence. My interlocutors clearly agreed that their mobilization acquired a revolutionary nature only after the regime started using lethal force. That this transformation entailed the emergence of a collective will to bring about the fall of the regime was suggested, for example, by Omar Saidi, who had participated in the revolution as a high school student, and Seif Hamdi, the unemployed road construction worker:

After the deaths, the slogans changed. There were […] slogans directed at Ben Ali. After the people died, everyone mobilized, even the oldest. […] This person killed my brother, so I can't live with him anymore, it's very simple! We cannot live together after this massacre. Either we keep killing each other, or Ben Ali gets out. (Omar Saidi)

Everyone took to the streets, girls and boys, without exceptions. In short, there we can speak of a revolution. After the massacre, we no longer talked about Thala, we talked about Ben Ali and his regime. Before the massacre, the essential demand was to release the detainees, but after blood was shed, the essential demand was the fall of Ben Ali. (Seif Hamdi)

Omar and Seif relay that the emergence of a struggle aimed at the fall of the regime was concomitant to the beginning of a struggle that involved the entire local population regardless of gender or age. At this point, mobilization involving members of diverse social groups also, for the first time since protests had begun more than three weeks earlier, raised demands for radical political change. Omar drastically states that the revolutionary situation that ensued on a local level was perceived by him as a conflict in which only one side could survive, suggesting that no possible regime concession could have ended hostilities at this point. And Seif suggests that, having found a language to "talk about Ben Ali", a passage from defensive demands occurred as people articulated the fall of the regime as the essential aim of their struggle.

Here, we can also spot the kind of determination that comes with the emergence of a collective will for revolutionary change. For the popular force created by the unification of "dispersed wills" that were now 'welded together with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 349), meant that the regime no longer confronted the same adversary. Within days of the massacres, mobilization making demands for incorporation by separate groups in which only the young men had openly confronted the police had transformed into revolutionary mass mobilization. Driven by the protagonism of the subaltern youth and with little recourse to (prior) organic intellectual or organizational labor, people in the Tunisian interior made the decisive transition to mobilizing around a shared conception for revolutionary change. This, then, marked the period in which the 'forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny' (Trotsky, 2008, p. ii) first occurred in the history of the Tunisian revolution, thus creating a revolutionary situation on the local level.

The developments in Kasserine, Thala and Regueb around the weekend of 8 to 9 January, then, marked the emergence of a new kind of social force: mass mobilization for revolutionary goals. This local transformation of the struggle created a qualitatively different situation that began to impact on the national constellation of forces. Here, rather than faceless "transformative events" producing "moral shocks" (della Porta, 2016; Volpi, 2016), the collective agency of those struggling against the regime and the interactions this produced with its repressive apparatus brought about decisive transformations. As articulation of radical conceptions shifted mobilization from a transgressive to a revolutionary vector, it was the popular self-activity of a unified struggle by these communities for such goals that created local revolutionary situations.

My interlocutors suggested that the will and determination which they had developed meant that a dangerous impasse emerged in which either the regime or their communities would

have to perish. With the balance of forces still clearly in favor of the former, lawyers in Kasserine made an attempt to deescalate the situation by convincing the president of the powerful National Bar Association to intervene directly with Ben Ali. This is what Maher Bouazzi, an activist lawyer from Kasserine in his early forties who would become the city's first freely elected mayor after the revolution told me. When we spoke in his office, he recalled that: 'We called [president of the Bar Association] Abderrazek Kilani. We told him that he had to do something to stop the massacre […] We asked that the police of Ben Ali leave. It was the only possible solution' (Maher Bouazzi). This account was confirmed in my conversation with Abderrazek Kilani. Having since withdrawn from politics, he received me in the Tunis-based law firm which he now runs and said that, on 10 January:

I found colleagues in my office who told me there is a massacre. They handed over a call live from Kasserine, and I heard the sound of ambulances and people shouting [...] I called Ben Ali [...] I told him [...:] "Colleagues from Kasserine tell me that there is a solution to stop all this, if the police withdraw and are replaced by the army." […] He said: "Okay, I'm going to give the instructions." […] After several hours, my colleagues from Kasserine called me again and told me that the police were beginning to withdraw and that the army was taking its place.

As the police forces gradually withdrew from Kasserine and other localities in the interior, leaving the region completely on 12 January, the intervention of the lawyers appears to have been decisive in preventing further bloodshed there. It will probably remain unknown what ultimately swayed Ben Ali to give these orders. The regime may have been contemplating another shift in tactics and simply sought a pause in fighting to regroup its forces on the ground. More likely, as the next chapter will discuss, was that Ben Ali had become aware of a meeting by the national UGTT leadership that day at which the head of the powerful union branch in Sfax had been announcing his intention to call for a general strike. This, as well as the beginning of mobilization in the popular quarters of the capital from 11 January onwards, certainly factored into the decision to withdraw police forces from the interior and concentrate them in these strategically much more vital cities. What was evident is that the

balance of forces on the national level was beginning to shift based on the new situation created by the struggle of the people in Kasserine, Thala, and Regueb. For them, these developments came as a relief. This was expressed by Hsan Jamli, the butcher from Thala who had lost his son in the fighting. He stressed the importance of the developments in Sfax in leading to the withdrawal of the police:

The demonstration in Sfax on the 12th [of January] forced them to transfer their agents. When the UGTT started organizing this demonstration, we were relieved here, and the pressure dropped a lot. On the 12th, there was no longer any police at Thala.

For the people in the interior, the shifts that began to occur at the national level were felt instantly as the police pressure on their communities dropped. From the day of the general strike in Sfax on 12 January, according to Hsan, the police had disappeared from Thala. These developments were interpreted by many in the communities of the interior as an important achievement. Indeed, my interlocutors stated that withdrawal of the police led a gasp of relief as local mobilization calmed down. This was expressed by Ali Rebah, for instance, a musician in his late thirties who had been unemployed under Ben Ali and founded the city's first independent radio station after the revolution. One of the local tech-savvy young men, he had been filming and posting online information about the local mobilization and recalled: 'the absence of the police changed everything, people became calm […] Life basically returned to normal' (Ali Rebah).

Others went further and framed the situation in a way that suggested that at least some of their aspirations had been met. As such, Mongi Zorbi, a worker from Kasserine's Hay Ennour in his sixties who had lived through the bread riots under Bourguiba stated that he had felt liberated: 'Personally, I felt freedom on the 12th [of January]. Did he [Ben Ali] flee? No. But for the first time I have my freedom. […] When you walked around in the market, you were free, you were your own boss' (Mongi Zorbi). Looking at me smilingly when he said those words, Mongi conveyed how intensely the lives of subalterns in the interior had been marked

by the repressive presence of the police. While he suggested that the struggle was not over yet, the disappearance of this immediate face of oppression apparently allowed him to feel a sense of freedom he had never known.

Mongi's words recall comments by my interlocutors cited in chapter four who suggested that the police were the principal manifestation of the state in the lives of subalterns. Indeed, several of my subaltern interlocutors in the interior experienced police withdrawal as a victory despite the radicalization of the struggle that had occurred. This brings out the under-specification of the demand for the overthrow of the regime. It suggests that, to many, the latter may have remained coterminous with the police, pointing to a possibility for a collective will forged in the heat of battle to fracture equally quickly. Indeed, after Mongi had given the above comment, his friend Fadhel Bouzidi, the carpenter in whose workshop we were sitting all together, made a statement that pointed towards such a reading. He said that: 'Here in Kasserine, we gained our independence on 12 January. The army was circulating, and no one was governing us. We created neighborhood committees. We did not have a regime anymore' (Fadhel Bouzidi). Fadhel describes here an experience of self-governance through local committees that were created in communities across the country to guarantee local security once the police had been withdrawn (Berry-Chikhaoui, 2011). While these have importantly been analyzed as politicizing experiences for members of subaltern groups (Allal, 2012b), Fadhel's comment also suggests another reading. For, together with the strong identification between the repressive forces and the regime, they were interpreted by some as indications that the regime had, as far as their local conditions were concerned, been brought down. That this was understood by some as an effective end to the revolutionary process was suggested by Bassem Hajji, the young NGO-founder from Thala, who remarked that: 'On 12 January, the revolution in Thala was over. We went home' (Bassem Hajji). While this opinion sounds drastic and was certainly not shared by many of my interlocutors, it points to persistent differences in political interpretation.

As far as the situation in the communities of the interior on the eve of 12 January was concerned, feelings of relief and achievement were mixed with uncertainty and fear. For, a sense of liberation notwithstanding, people were of course aware that Ben Ali remained very much in power. Many surmised that the withdrawal of the police might have meant no more than a respite from repression. Such a cautious tone was struck by Walid Abidi, the history graduate and unemployed activist from Regueb who said that: 'Of course, we were happy because the military came, and the police left. But we were also conscious that we had only achieved a symbolic victory' (Walid Abidi). Walid states that the victory which the people in the interior had won was but a symbolic one, suggesting that people still considered their position vulnerable.

Indeed, in the suspense that was created between the beginning of the police withdrawal and the 12 January general strike in Sfax, rumors about an impending bombardment of the rebelling communities began to circulate. Tounsi Nasri, owner of a small corner store in the city center of Kasserine who was among the wounded of the previous days, for instance, said that: 'Without Sfax, Kasserine would have been reduced to nothing. Because Ben Ali wanted to bomb Kasserine. Until the day when Sfax went on a demonstration' (Tounsi Nasri). Like Tounsi, many of my interlocutors from subaltern groups emphasized the importance of the Sfax general strike as a turning point in the revolutionary process. This was suggested by Karim Bouzidi, older brother of Raouf, the first martyr from Hay Ennour, who had been working in a factory in Tunis at the time of the revolution and returned to Kasserine after the news of his brother's death. He recalled: 'For us in Kasserine, it was a story of planes and bombing that they were preparing for us! People were scared. It changed when Sfax made the decisive demonstration of the revolution' (Karim Bouzidi). Both men state that people in Kasserine feared the regime would move to eliminate their entire community and that this existential worry only abated after it became clear that people in Sfax were beginning to mobilize. With that latter development, the center of the revolutionary process would shift

towards the coastal regions. The next chapter discusses these stages of the revolution and how my interlocutors in the interior as well as other members of subaltern groups inserted themselves in them.

Conclusion

A momentous development occurred during the short period of a few days in the rebellious communities of Kasserine, Thala, and Regueb in the Tunisian interior. Struggles which had waxed and waned over the preceding weeks, and in which different vectors of mobilization had, amid interaction and partial reinforcement, remained largely separate, now transformed themselves, creating revolutionary situations on the local level. Here, a decisive shift was made from a mainly defensive bid for incorporation to the articulation of radical political demands for the fall of the regime around which diverse struggles united. This coalescing of vectors into revolutionary mass mobilization was achieved by the people in the interior in an active response to the qualitatively new situation created by the interactions between the self-activity of the subaltern youth and the repressive apparatus. As these escalated into the killing of protesters, possibilities for a peaceful resolution through concessions in the form of hegemonic incorporation seemed demonstrably exhausted. The calamitous actions of the regime were interpreted by people in the local communities as its delegitimization, creating a situation of hegemonic collapse in which the people rearticulated their understanding of self and the aims of their struggle in revolutionary terms. Around these new articulations, a collective will for the overthrow of the regime formed for the first time in the Tunisian revolutionary process. Through popular self-change, or "self-constitution" (Tripp, 2014), and in response to a situation created by the struggles of the subaltern youth, the collective subject of "the people" had been born. This unification and revolutionary transformation of struggles subsequently began to shift the balance of forces

on the national level and prepared the ground for a revolutionary process that had thus far been pushed forward by the agency of people in the interior to finally reach the coastal cities.

The discussion in this chapter showed that these decisive developments are insufficiently grasped by the concept of transformative events. While accounts from this perspective have stressed the importance of events that were discussed here, they do not offer an understanding how the agency of people in Kasserine and elsewhere created both the events themselves and subsequent changes. As such, they attribute revolutionary transformation of the struggle either to emotional dynamics (della Porta, 2016), or to media discourses around events (Volpi, 2016), both understood as occurring on an abstract national level. Through such accounts, creative agency and processes of learning in struggle, including importantly by members of subaltern groups, are obscured and assimilated into "the event" which is understood primarily in terms of "regime violence" and emotional reactions to it. The latter two aspects were undoubtedly important in the developments discussed here. However, and while "hope" was often in scarce supply, emotions went beyond "outrage", involving rather the mustering of courage and bravery (Kurzman, 2012), in which feelings of loyalty to deceased friends and good sense conceptions of history including "memories of revolt" (Swedenburg, 2003) were crucial.

Over and beyond these dimensions, there were processes of active reinterpretation as people involved in these events both deconstructed the legitimacy of the regime and constructed a new, revolutionary reading of their struggle. These rearticulations, rather than merely "shocking news", decisively influenced the constellation of social forces in the country going forward. In the account given here, then, revolutionary transformation becomes intelligible as an achievement of popular critical self-activity which is, quite literally, effaced by "eventful" perspectives on the Tunisian revolution. It thus suggests that, rather than through a "transformative event" (Badiou, 2012; Sewell, 2005), decisive changes in the

Tunisian revolutionary process were brought about by processes of unification, interpretation, and articulation in which subaltern agency was the key motive force.

The chapter argued that these transformations are best understood in terms of popular critical self-activity producing a break with common sense and articulating new conceptions of the struggle in terms of revolutionary demands around which a collective will for the overthrow of the regime coalesced. In this process, changes in collectivities and consciousness stood in a dialectical relationship, whereby the emergence of "the people" and of revolutionary goals were mutually constitutive. In many ways, the dynamics at hand resembled those of a "popular learning in struggle" discussed in the previous chapters, where experience of social contradictions and changed situations enables people to create good sense knowledge and solidarities. However, what occurred at this stage was more than an accumulation of learning, but a situation in which such "molecular processes" produced a shift and "quantity became quality" (Engels, 2017, chap. 12). For as a situation still understandable as revolt intensified with the falling of the martyrs, people considered the legitimacy of the regime to have been demonstrably reversed and an enfeebled hegemony effectively collapsed. This condition of hegemonic collapse, long prepared by contractions and subaltern struggles, led to an active search for a new political language which could give expression to and point a way out of the contradictions which people experienced. Here, experiences of martyrdom and shared suffering were interpreted by developing "oppositional readings" (Hall, 2006) of good sense conceptions of history sedimented in the fissures of hegemony. People constructed equivalences between the legitimate revolts of their ancestors against colonial rule and their own situation. This made it possible to conceive of the regime as an external oppressor, of the people as an integral community with claims to embodying the true nation, and of the two sides as locked in an existential conflict. As popular critical self-activity thus drew together experiential and historical good sense, this knowledge was rendered "more unitary and coherent" (Gramsci, 1971) and allowed for a

new conception of the world to be organically articulated: the people were engaged in a struggle to bring down the regime.

Recalling the conclusions reached in the previous chapter, activist agencies credited in the literature on the Tunisian revolution with politically radicalizing, organizing, and leading mobilization, notably trade unionists (Hmed, 2012; Yousfi, 2015a), were, although not absent, far from a driving force behind the developments discussed in this chapter. What occurred is best understood as a unification of the vector under which diverse members of the local communities mobilized, including activists and lawyers, with a transgressive vector of mobilization spearheaded by the subaltern youth. This coalescing took place under conditions that were principally created by the latter, and the dynamics of joint revolutionary mobilization which ensued crucially drew on knowledge and solidarities created by subaltern self-activity, making it the leading force from which revolutionary mass mobilization developed in the communities in the Tunisian interior. Indeed what occurred can be understood as 'the articulation of previously tacit knowledge in struggle' (Cox, 2014, p. 965) with an "infinity of traces" in the form of good sense conceptions of history (Gramsci, 1971) into an organic new conception of the world.

Largely absent, however, were organic intellectuals engaged in processes of "popular education" (Cox, 2019; Cox and Nilsen, 2014) and the forms of organized pedagogy that could have allowed this knowledge to be articulated more abstractly and coherently (Cox, 2014; Motta, 2017). Consequently, the new conceptions and the collective will which formed around them remained under-articulated, under-specified, and fragile in many ways. Rather than emerging from the "long labor" of a counter-hegemonic project, they appear to have been created by a "spontaneous" form of 'auto-reflection on the part of the people - an inner reasoning worked out in the popular consciousness' (1971, pp. 126–7). The limitations this entailed notwithstanding, a collective will for the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime emerged

from these processes which transformed localized, sectorized, and defensive struggles into revolutionary mass mobilization. Occurring first in the rebelling communities of the interior, this "birth of a revolution", as one of my interlocutors had put it above, was felt across the country. As the next chapter discusses, it factored decisively in a realignment of forces on the national level that would spell the end of Ben Ali's rule.

VII. Coalescence and Divergence in the Revolutionary Process

This last empirical chapter of the thesis focusses on the later stages of the revolutionary process and primarily discusses developments that occurred on a national level. It argues that, until 12 January, mobilizations by trade unionists and other activists in coastal regions had remained small, episodic, and without decisive effects. Subsequent to the massacres in Kasserine, Thala, and Regueb, and the attendant articulation of a collective will for the downfall of the regime, however, UGTT structures began calling general strikes that escalated into revolutionary mass mobilization, notably in Sfax and Tunis. In this context, a national-popular collective will for the end of the Ben Ali regime coalesced, showing that UGTT as the hegemonic vector of mobilization remained essential for bringing about changes at the national level. The chapter also discusses how members of subaltern groups, particularly in the interior of the country, felt side-lined by the attempts of formal structures and counterrevolutionary forces to determine the political process after the departure of Ben Ali. In a response suggesting how profoundly the struggles of the previous weeks had transformed political subjectivities, a significant number, mostly of subaltern youth, left their home regions to occupy the Kasbah, the central government square in the capital. The chapter argues that their bid to reassert popular control over the revolutionary process succeeded in winning important concessions that put the country on a path of transition towards electoral democracy. However, this also closed possibilities for a deeper transformation of Tunisian society, thus effectively ending the revolutionary process in the more immediate sense that is of concern to this thesis.

The discussion of these historical developments is structured into five sections. Section one describes the development of the 12 January general strike in Sfax, arguing that this marked the beginning of a decisive role for UGTT in the revolutionary process. The second section shows that mobilization in Tunis had been limited before that point, and the third section

argues that UGTT as a vector of mobilization became essential for the creation of mass mobilization in the core of the hegemonic formation. Section four discusses the occupation of the Kasbah and the more specific content of demands that were articulated there as the highpoint of subaltern self-activity in the revolutionary process, while the final section argues that a lack of leadership and organizational resources kept radical impulses from developing into a counter-hegemonic project.

A Turnaround of UGTT in Sfax

As the closing scenes of the previous chapter unfolded and the people of Kasserine, Regueb, and Thala cautiously celebrated the withdrawal of the police from their communities, the center of revolutionary development shifted to the city of Sfax. Scholars have argued that the 12 January general strike which the regional UGTT organized in this second city of Tunisia constituted a turning-point at which the revolutionary process reached a nation level (Salmon, 2016; e.g. Zemni, 2015a). As my interlocutors in the interior stated, it was only with the mobilization in Sfax, often referred to as the country's economic capital, that their isolation was broken. Featuring concentrations of industry, the largest port in the country, and a highly productive agricultural hinterland, the city is also home to the largest and most powerful regional branch of UGTT (Feltrin, 2018a; Yousfi, 2015a). As Ghassen Besbes told me, however, the presence of this commanding trade union had at first been an obstacle to the mobilizing efforts by local activists. A grassroots trade unionist and lawyer from Sfax in his early forties, who had been active with the banned communist party, we met in the lobby of a colonial era hotel close to the law office where he now works in downtown Tunis. He recounted the events in Sfax prior to the general strike:

The first activity was on 25 December. We were about thirty people maximum [in front of the regional UGTT]. We were opposed by the regional union leadership […] They sent their security service to

assault the demonstrators […] On 1 January, there was also another rally which was larger […] Us activists were desperately trying to force the regional union to organize a demonstration. I now see that this was an erroneous approach. We did not engage in any awareness raising activity that tried to mobilize the people. It was restricted to intellectuals, trade unionists, etc.

This comment provides a valuable glimpse of the variable role played by official trade union structures and regional leaderships. Not unlike what had occurred in Kasserine, the regional UGTT denied any support to mobilizations by local activists. Going even further, the Sfax union leadership apparently even tried to suppress demonstrations. As Ghassen indicates, though, lack of union support was only one reason why no significant mobilization occurred in Sfax prior to 12 January. Indeed, he opines that the grassroots activists' "desperate" focus on UGTT was itself part of the problem. This suggests that UGTT's effective monopoly on the limited political activity in the country (Yousfi, 2015a; also see chapter 4) – in other words its function as the hegemonic vector of mobilization – powerfully circumscribed the political imagination of activists. In seeking to organize demonstrations, they could not conceive of a way other than going through UGTT. Despite the prominence of subaltern self-activity in the mobilization in the interior, Ghassen states that activists like him did not attempt to reach out to the broader masses. Indeed, the situation in Sfax only changed after the events discussed in the previous chapter caused the regional union leadership to reconsider its position. This was suggested to me by Moncef Guebsi, a professor of sociology at Sfax university and secretary general of the local higher education union. He participated in meetings of the union leadership at the time of the revolution and freely shared his impressions as we sat over tea in a café close to his house:

The grassroots trade unionists asked leaders to take a firm stance and to issue a press release. The position that everyone expected was a call to end the massacre […] Mohamed Chaabane made a turnaround. He is very intelligent. At the beginning, he was against all mobilizations […But then] he called a meeting of the regional administrative commission in Sfax on 9 January where the [general] strike of the 12th was decided.

Moncef states that the massacre of 8 and 9 January in Kasserine, Thala, and Regueb led to a reversal in the position of the UGTT leadership in Sfax, most notably of Mohamed Chaabane, the regional secretary general at the time. Moncef's statement also corresponds to findings in the scholarship that it was the mounting pressure by grassroots trade unionists subsequent to these events which swayed union leaders (Feltrin, 2018a; Yousfi, 2015a). Evocatively, Ghassen designates the "turnaround" made by the regional secretary general as evidencing his "intelligence" rather than, say, moral integrity or compassion, possibly indicating that union leaders perceived that the balance of forces in the country had begun to shift to the disadvantage of the regime. Whatever his reasons, Mohamed Chaabane took one of the most consequential individual decisions in the revolutionary process when, on 9 January, he called a meeting of the UGTT leadership in Sfax and informed them of his intention to call a regional general strike. As the preparations for the strike began in secrecy the following day, Mohamed Chaabane headed for Tunis to join a meeting of the national UGTT leadership where, as he told me, he tried to convince other union leaders to follow suit.[40] Sitting in the courtyard of his estate on the outskirts of Sfax, to which he had since retired, he explained to me his reasoning at the time:

After the events of Thala and Kasserine, the general atmosphere showed that there was concrete solidarity, there were people who wanted to mobilize […] So I announced the general strike, whatever the opinion of the national executive committee […] On January 10, there was a meeting of the extended executive committee. I showed the union leaders that it was illogical for UGTT to remain silent about the massacres that took place in [the governorates of] Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, and that Sfax had decided to go on general strike on 12 January […] And yet, they did not decide a [national] general strike […] Hence, the decision of the general strike [in Sfax] was historic and brave [...] Historically, Sfax has always led the way [...] We organized general strikes before independence, in the fight against French colonialism.

---

[40] This 10 January meeting in Tunis was not called to deliberate the current events in the country but was 'scheduled long before to talk about the topic of social protection and welfare in the country' (Interview Mohamed Chaabane).

Mohamed relates his decision to call a general strike to what he termed an "atmosphere of solidarity", suggesting that he indeed felt that popular sentiment was changing in the aftermath of the massacres. As other trade unionists intimated, pressure from the union base in Sfax had concomitantly been building. Mohamed certainly took a serious gamble by exposing his intentions to a national UGTT leadership that was firmly loyal to Ben Ali. And indeed, as he describes it, he failed to convince the rest of the leadership to call for a national general strike and the press release that was issued went no further than condemning the use of live ammunition.[41] While the 10 January meeting conceded that individual union branches could call strikes, and some did so on 13 and 14 January (Feltrin, 2018a; Yousfi, 2015b), the burden of the first mover thus fell on Sfax. Interestingly, Mohamed framed the decision to go ahead with the scheduled action in terms of historical agency and obligation, which he derived from the history of resistance by the people of Sfax against French colonialism. Through this, he expressed a mode of sense-making of the conditions which he faced through historical embedding that strongly resembled that which people in Kasserine and elsewhere deployed. And just as in those localities, claiming such historical agency did come at a cost. It seems likely that the redeployment of police forces to Sfax which now occurred was a response to knowledge about the looming general strike relayed to the authorities by regime loyalists present at the 10 January UGTT committee meeting.

Indeed, on 12 January, the people of Sfax woke up to an intense police presence across the city. Regardless, an unexpected number of people heeded the call for strike and gathered in front of the UGTT building, France 24 reported 30,000 (France 24, 2011a). While the first

---

[41] The statement of the national UGTT issued on 11 January reads as follows: '[The UGTT] : 1- Condemns the use of live ammunition fired at demonstrators, shots which killed many citizens in a number of interior regions, more precisely in Tala, Kasserine and Regueb, and denounces the blockade of the Regional Labor Union of Kasserine as well as the ransacking of its goods and documents; 2- Requests the setting up of a commission of inquiry with a view to elucidating the conditions under which live rounds were fired on the demonstrators in the regions mentioned and to determine those responsible; 3- Urges the withdrawal of the army contingents from the cities and their main arteries and the lifting of the siege of certain interior regions by the forces of order.' (quoted in Allal and Geisser 2011, p. 68).

mass mobilization outside the interior did occur under the hegemonic vector of UGTT, it nevertheless tapped into mobilizing dynamics which went beyond its intentions. This is clear in Mohamed Chaabane's attempt to diffuse the situation by telling protesters that the strike had succeeded, and that they should return to their homes by midday (Le Temps, 2011a). But as Ghassen, the trade unionist and lawyer from Sfax, told me, the dynamics set in motion had gone beyond the ability of the union leaders to control. He began to fidget on his seat and gestured expressively as he described the developments on that historic day:

It even exceeded the mobilizing capacity of the Sfax UGTT […] There were people from all walks of life, sectors, and ideologies […] There was a huge feeling of mourning after the events of Thala and Kasserine, there was bitterness but also an enormous hostility […] The general indifference was replaced by anger towards this regime. 12 January was the first time that the slogan "The people want to overthrow the regime!" was raised in Sfax [...] The leadership [of UGTT] tried to control the crowd and keep them satisfied with this gathering. But things far exceeded their attempts and the crowd pushed towards a demonstration [...] Suddenly we found ourselves facing tear gas and we heard shouts about a martyr [...] And there, the youth of the popular quarters went mad and did not take any precautions. Because there were still women and children in the demonstration. […] The young men were determined, they made metal shields and obstacles and set police cars ablaze.

What had been intended as an orderly general strike in the form of a rally in front the UGTT premises quickly transformed into revolutionary mass mobilization. The bloodshed of the previous days, Ghassen implies, pushed far more numerous and diverse protesters into the streets than the union would have had the capacity to mobilize. Here, dynamics akin to the popular mobilization which had formed in the interior of the country were surging to the surface. Just like in Kasserine, Thala, and Regueb a few days earlier, there were not just large numbers, but a unity in a collective will as protesters repeated the new revolutionary slogan: "The people want to overthrow the regime!". A people expressing fundamental hostility to the regime was clearly manifesting itself on the streets of Sfax this day.

When police attacked the protesters, young men from popular quarters were at the front lines of the battle once again. Ghassen suggests that they felt compelled to act as the

defenders of their community, notably of the women and children present in the demonstration. Unlike in the communities of the interior, however, the young men who fought the police in Sfax were lacking the experience of several days of struggle that had hardened their peers when they got to that juncture. Meanwhile, the unification across class and ideological divides and around revolutionary demands that had coalesced over several weeks in the localities of the interior appears to have occurred much more rapidly in Sfax. This hints at the possibility that people recognized themselves in the organic revolutionary conception and collective will which had been articulated from forms of popular consciousness, adopting them as a language that gave expression to and pointed a way out of the contradictions which they similarly experienced.[42]

The developments in Sfax brought about two important and related changes in the revolutionary process. On the one hand, 12 January marked the first appearance of mass mobilization in a major coastal city,[43] and so in regions and among populations that were part of the regime's historical bloc. On the other hand, and unlike in the interior of the country, the mobilization in Sfax occurred principally through UGTT, even though its dynamics escaped union control. This suggests that UGTT as a hegemonic vector of mobilization began to play a more important role precisely at the juncture when the center of the revolutionary process shifted from the periphery to the core of the hegemonic formation. However, subaltern and popular self-activity remained important, notably in terms of contributing radicalization and revolutionary demands. As the discussion in the following sections argues, this pattern was even more pronounced in the development of mobilization in the capital.

---

[42] Chalcraft (2017) makes the case that this was suggested by the rapid adoption of a "Tunisian model" for popular mass action and slogans such as ASYIAN in countries across the region.

[43] The only prior instances of mass mobilization were confrontations in the Hay Ettadhamen neighborhood of Tunis the night before, discussed below. Larger daytime protests of students had also occurred for the first time in several localities on 6,7, and 10 January, including in Tunis (Al-Chourouk, 2011a; "Al-Jazeera TV 07.01.", 2011). However, that latter development was effectively countered by the regime which closed all educational institutions in the country on Monday, 10 January (Salmon, 2016).

Contained Activism in the Capital

The streets of Tunis had remained largely calm until the night of 11 January, when residents in its popular quarters began to mobilize. Prior protest events organized by Tunis-based activists have received more than their fair share of scholarly attention (see chapter two) and will be discussed in what follows in order to bring out the interactions between them and the hegemonic mobilizing vector of UGTT as well as with subaltern self-activity. The very first demonstration in the capital took place on 25 December 2010. It was held in front of the national headquarters of UGTT on Place Mohamed Ali in the central Lafayette neighborhood, and drew several hundred protesters ("Al-Jazeera TV 25.12.", 2010). Preparations for the event involved opposition party activists and grassroots trade unionists, as well as bloggers who helped spread information about it online (Salmon, 2016). Organizing activities were carried out in great secrecy, as two of my interlocutors in Tunis told me. Wissem Sghaier, aged 28, was a student activist with the legal opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), whose *Al-Mawquif* publication he co-edited. Cherif Khraifi, three years older than Wissem, was a history student, a member of the banned communist party, and involved in unemployed activism. They described the activities of their parties in the following manner:

On 21 December, we decided to hold a meeting in a closed corner of the medina [old city]. We thought of bringing the mobilizations from Bouzid to other regions […] We said that we need to do a rally in front of the UGTT [building…] On the 25th, we were surprised by the number. We did not think that so many people would participate. (Wissem Sghraier)

The party asked us to struggle discreetly, because there were many arrests and therefore, we did not want to lose more activists […] So, we tried to lead a small demonstration without being exposed to the arrests and to withdraw quickly afterwards […] We do not have enough potential to lead large-scale mobilizations. (Cherif Khraifi)

Two patterns already observed in other localities come through in these comments. First, the limited mobilizing capacity of opposition parties – discussed in chapter four for the interior of the country – was apparently true in the capital as well. This is suggested by the fact that,

even though Tunis was the center of their activities, a joint effort of activists from various backgrounds resulted in no more than several hundred protesters heading their call for mobilization. Indeed, activists were aware of their limited capacities and they considered even this small number of protesters a success. As Cherif's comment conveys, the overarching concern at this stage was not to achieve broader mobilization at all costs but to protect activists from being arrested.[44] The second pattern is that demonstrations organized by activists remained centered on UGTT, both spatially as well as in terms of the intention to put pressure on the union leadership to adopt a more supportive position.

As Ghassen Besbes had put it for the case of Sfax, this focus on UGTT as the *sine qua non* for achieving popular mobilization apparently came at the expense of mobilizing efforts among the broader population. This indicates how strongly the hegemonic formation limited the imaginary for oppositional politics in the capital, including for the relatively new and supposedly more radical cyber-activists. Indeed, one of the tactics for mobilization was to circulate a call for protest online that included a fake UGTT logo. This was what Lina Ben Mhenni, one of the most prominent bloggers in the country, told me. An energetic woman in her mid-thirties, I met her at the office of a Tunis-based human rights NGO where she is now in charge of media and communications:

After 25 December, there was a fake press release from UGTT [calling for a demonstration on the 27th…] It was cyber-activists who falsified this document to convince people to come. And there were trade unionists who came, believing that it was an UGTT event [...On the 27th,] the majority were activists whom I knew […] We weren't many, but all the media talked about this mobilization […] Regarding UGTT, they put on music through loudspeakers so that our voices were not heard too much.

On 27 December, the second demonstration which activists organized in front of the Tunis UGTT headquarters was attended by somewhere between 500 (France 24, 2010) and 1,000

[44] This is not to suggest that opposition parties and activists in Tunis did not engage in other activities such as holding meetings, issuing communiques, talking to the media, and otherwise sharing and spreading information. However, those activities, extensively discussed in the literature, appear not to have impacted directly on the genealogy of revolutionary mass mobilization.

(The Guardian, 2010) people. As Lina suggests, those that assembled were by and large activists who knew each other. Emphasizing its close allegiance with the regime, she recounts that the union leadership did its best to silence the voices of the protesters. But media attention around this second protest, including reporting in Tunisian print media, as well as the large police presence, meant that many people took note of the event. The following day, UGTT issued a press statement distancing itself from the demonstration (Le Temps, 2010a). With their attempts at getting mobilization off the ground by winning the support of UGTT checked, as well as protests in the interior of the country calming down around the new year, activists in the capital did not embark on any major actions until events in Thala produced a new momentum. After that, students first protested in Tunis on 6 January, although their actions were largely confined to campuses. This was relayed to me by Ahmed Sassi, a 33-year-old philosophy graduate and former member of the communist party. Having been at university during the revolution, he was actively involved in the mobilizations on campus, but said that the most significant action of Tunis-based activists in terms of reaching out to the broader population in the capital was a flash mob in *Passage*, the main metro interchange of central Tunis, on 7 January:

Mohamed Ali Square [in front of UGTT headquarters] was something like a safe space where activists could meet. So, the *Passage* [action] was something else. It meant going beyond the classic frameworks of trade unionism and the university [for organizing demonstrations]. We went a lot closer to the citizens. It meant going where you can reach people.

Ahmed implies here that "going where you can reach people" was a radical and daring move for the Tunis-based activist community whose activities were heavily policed. The action on 7 January, he suggested, marked their first attempt to step outside the established pattern of seeking out UGTT support and staying close to its localities as well as on university campuses which, although offering a measure of protection, also limited their outreach. There was, then, an awareness building among the Tunis activists regarding the limited effectiveness of their actions in working towards broadening the mobilization in the country.

Yet, the *Passage* action remained the only one of its kind, and no significant progress was made in mobilizing broader segments of the population in the capital. The degree to which activist communities were able to support the unfolding mobilization in the interior of the country by organizing demonstrations in the capital was thus clearly limited. Operating as they were in the center of the hegemonic formation, they confronted a staunch opposition by central UGTT structures loyal to the regime, and their principal role in the development of the revolutionary process was the creation of media attention.

As the previous chapter suggested, one notable intersection between dynamics in the capital and the interior occurred through the national Bar Association. Scholars have argued that legal professionals managed to safeguard and even slightly expand their political independence under Ben Ali, and were the only organized sector to call for demonstrations in Tunis prior to 14 January (Gobe, 2013, 2016; Salmon, 2016). On 28 December, leading lawyers in the capital held a protest in solidarity with the people of Sidi Bouzid that was attended by no less than 300 people (Le Temps, 2010b). As a group that had historically been protected from state violence, the arrests which occurred at that protest were denounced by the Bar Association in a press conference the following day (Al-Chourouk, 2010). Its president, Abderrazek Kilani, recalled that their next demonstration resulted in open confrontations with the police:

On 31 December 2010, the lawyers decided to organize a day of support in solidarity with the disadvantaged regions. Ben Ali sent the police, and there were confrontations between lawyers and police […] We planned a general strike on 6 January to denounce the violence suffered by the lawyers.

In the international media, Abderrazek found even clearer words on 31 December when he said: 'We cannot keep silent. This [violence against lawyers] has never happened before in Tunisia' ("Al-Jazeera TV 31.12.", 2010). These developments, as well as the subsequent national-level general strike of the lawyers on 6 January, likely contributed to Abderrazek's intervention on behalf of the people in Kasserine on 10 January. Beyond this, the lawyers

would also become a highly visible group in the 14 January Tunis demonstration, as well as

an important actor to intervene in the subsequent occupation of the Kasbah and in the post-

Ben Ali political developments more broadly. Still, as with the political activists, the Bar

Association did not have significant mobilizing capacity. While the efforts of Tunis-based

activist communities doubtlessly contributed to an overall atmosphere of mounting pressure

on the regime, their agency in the development of the revolutionary process is over-

represented in the literature compared to that of subaltern social groups. As this section

showed, they were unable to mount larger demonstrations in the streets of the capital.

Instead, mass mobilization occurred here through the intersection of those vectors which

had enabled it in the interior of the country. Subsequent to the massacres in Kasserine, Thala,

and Regueb, residents of Tunis' popular quarters began to engage in self-activity and, under

pressure from the general strike in Sfax, UGTT structures in the capital finally organized

demonstrations.[45]

The People Bring Down the Dictator

Members of subaltern groups in the capital began to mobilize in several popular quarters,

such as Le Kram, Hammamet-Lif, and Beb Jdid, in the days immediately preceding the 14th of

January (Allal, 2012b, 2013). The first instances of mass mobilization in the capital, however,

occurred in Hay Ettadhamen, the biggest popular quarter of Tunis with a total population of

above 180,000 (INST, 2015). Most of its inhabitants are migrants from Kasserine and Sidi

---

[45] The only exception to this, as footnoted above, were the demonstrations by university students on 6,7, and 10 January (8 and 9 January having been a weekend) which, at least partially, could be argued to have been mass demonstrations. However, these protests remained largely confined to the university campuses and stopped after the regime closed educational institutions across the country on 10 January.

Bouzid living in the capital for a generation or less (Lamloum and Ben Zina, 2015). It was here that mass protests first occurred during the night of 11 to 12 January (Reuters, 2011).

That the geographical origin of its residents played a role in the local mobilization was suggested by Yassine Hamzaoui, a music teacher and resident of Hay Ettadhamen in his mid-forties who had migrated from Kasserine at the age of 24 in search of employment. He said that: 'When they brought the wounded from Kasserine to hospitals in Tunis, the nurses came down here and started to scream: "Get moving, Kasserine, it's over, the country is over." Afterwards, the people here were ready, and it was that night that things exploded' (Yassine Hamzaoui). He states that the residents of Hay Ettadhamen were mobilized by the immediate confrontation with signs of violence in Kasserine. This news, as well as a relationship with the police that in many ways paralleled that of members of subaltern groups in the interior, was mentioned by Ahmed Riahi from Hay Ettadhamen as the motivation for the local young men to take to the streets. In his mid-thirties and now a public servant, Ahmed had been unemployed under Ben Ali. He was something of a local "strongman" and helped us make contacts among the people of the quarter. As we sat in a popular café, he recounted:

ACAB [All Cops Are Bastards], this was our slogan. We all hated the police. We can't love them. If you humiliate me, do you want me to love you? In short, we were ready for a fight. [...] In addition, people fired each other up with stories about what was happening in Kasserine and elsewhere.

Hatred of the police was as strong an initial reason for mobilization in the popular quarters of the capital as it had been in the interior, suggesting important structural parallels in the living conditions of subalterns throughout the country. Moreover, Ahmed suggests that subaltern youth in Hay Ettadhamen felt inspired by the mobilization of their peers in the popular quarters and towns in the interior. Mobilizing dynamics among subalterns in the capital resembled those discussed in the previous chapters on other levels as well. This was suggested by Rami Cherif, an unemployed resident of the quarter in his late twenties, and Anis, an older man who preferred to remain anonymous. Called up by Ahmed, they joined us

at the café and described to me how the confrontations between police and the people of Hay Ettadhamen developed. Rami recalled that: 'The first night, the youth threw Molotov [cocktails...] The next day there was a curfew [...] A taxi driver named Majdi, someone shot him [...] The next day, the people burned down the [police] station' (Rami Cherif). Anis added: 'It became a matter of life and death, a fight for survival [...] Your neighbor was shot dead, you had to fight. You had no choice [...] Our numbers tripled' (Anis). The regime imposed a curfew after the first night of confrontations on 11 January, for which it officially blamed "leftist and religious movements" who were allegedly "sowing disorder" (La Presse, 2011a). According to Rami, as the curfew came into effect, a taxi driver returning to his house close to the police station of Hay Ettadhamen was shot dead. The comments of both men suggest that the pattern observed in the previous chapters, whereby the deployment of lethal force led to an intensification of the mobilization, occurred in Hay Ettadhamen as well.

While none of my interlocutors from subaltern groups in the capital mentioned the development of radical political demands – indeed some said that there were no slogans at all – the dynamics of mobilization in Hay Ettadhamen otherwise appeared similar to those in the interior: they were principally motivated by experiences of police humiliation, drew on local structures of solidarity, and were intensified rather than dispersed by the regime's killing of protesters. And again, just like in the communities of the interior, trans-local solidarity would not in itself bring about significant degrees of mobilization. It was only in response to local events, particularly police violence, that protests escalated. Ezzedine Aloui, a factory worker in his fifties, opined that the latter constituted the most important factor in the local mobilization. He had migrated to the capital ten years earlier, settling in Hay Ettadhamen and quickly developing strong ties there, including to his neighbor Majdi, the taxi driver who was shot by the police:

There were things in Kasserine, Thala, Sidi Bouzid. But here – nothing [...] On the 12th [of January], two were killed, Majdi and someone else, and it started [...] Maybe if there had not been the death of these

two, none of this would have happened here […] On the 14th, they were buried. Then people went to the Ministry of the Interior [at Avenue Bourguiba] to protest.

In a development parallel to those in the popular quarters and provincial towns of the interior, funeral marches were turned into protest events by members of subaltern groups in the capital. As Ezzedine recounts, it was in this context that, despite ostensibly lacking political demands, the people of Hay Ettadhamen directed themselves on 14 January towards the institutional source of the violent repression which they experienced, the Ministry of Interior. Located on the central Avenue Bourguiba, it was there that their self-activity would merge with a broader cross-section of the capital's population who turned out in protest for the very first time that day. Until that point, most people in Tunis had stayed at home. And members of social groups forming part of the regime's historical bloc, notably the bourgeoisie of the capital, as well as key social forces of the hegemonic formation, such as the national UGTT leadership, that had previously shown no signs of defecting. Indeed, the latter was not to falter. UGTT Secretary General Abdessalem Jarred had visited the presidential palace on 13 January and spoke of a "constructive dialogue" with Ben Ali (Al-Chourouk, 2011b). But, as the blogger Lina Ben Mhenni told me, developments in the popular quarters of Tunis, the general strike in Sfax, and mobilizations in other coastal cities were creating the impression that the regime was finally losing control:

Before, there was the fear barrier in Tunis, it was the same activists who mobilized all the time. But now it was the popular quarters that were moving […] For me, that was the end of the regime. We are talking about more than a million inhabitants in [Hay] Ettadhamen. And people mobilized in Sfax and Sousse, where there had been nothing so far.

What experienced political activists in the capital had not been able to do, namely break the barrier of fear, was achieved by subaltern self-activity in the popular quarters as well as by the mobilizations in other coastal cities. However, this alone might not have sufficed to convince members of the bourgeoisie who were not already politically active to take to the streets. Pointing to its key role for achieving mass mobilization in the heart of the hegemonic

formation, it was only the call for a general strike on the 14ᵗʰ of January by the regional UGTT in Tunis[46] which broke these core social groups out of the regime's historical bloc. This was suggested to me by Zied Lakhdar, a member of Choukri Belaid's Democratic Patriots' Movement, and secretary general of the party subsequent to Belaid's assassination. Now an elected legislator, he received me in the buildings of the Tunisian parliament, and told me of the UGTT meeting that decided the strike and in which he participated:

On the 12th [of January], there was the administrative committee meeting of the regional union which took the decision of the general strike in Tunis, encouraged, of course, by the success of the general strike in Sfax. White-collar workers and the bourgeoisie were freed by this strike.

This comment suggests that the regional general strike of 14 January was instrumental in bringing the middle classes of Tunis onto the streets. Thus, the mobilizing vector of UGTT was particularly important in mobilizing those groups that formed the core of the regime's historical bloc. This was also suggested by what Hajer Dargouth told me. A close friend of mine who comes from an old bourgeois family in Tunis, she had been studying agricultural engineering in Sousse and returned to the capital only after the universities had been closed by the regime. She said that people like her had not been engaged in mobilizations before:

The only time we went out on the street [to protest] was on 14 January [...] On the evening of the 13ᵗʰ, my mother, who worked at a bank and was a union member, received a call from the UGTT. They told us that there was a general strike and that everyone should come to the UGTT headquarters […] We called our neighbors and friends to get the message out.

The first-time protesters that followed the call of UGTT, such as Hajer, congregated on Mohamed Ali Square in front of the UGTT headquarters on 14 January. As they moved out of the protective vicinity of the union premises and onto Avenue Bourguiba to confront the regime at its institutional manifestation of the Ministry of Interior, the middle classes were

---

[46] UGTT is structed into regional branches, including one for Greater Tunis, meaning that the capital not only houses the national union headquarters but also a regional one. It was the latter who called for the strike on 14 January. The national UGTT leadership stayed loyal to Ben Ali until the end.

joined by the people of the popular quarters. This was relayed to me by Henda Chennaoui, an activist from Tunis in her mid-thirties who was part of the blogger scene under Ben Ali and worked for a popular private radio station at the time of the revolution. Coming from a family of artists, she had studied journalism and got involved with opposition parties at university. After the revolution, she became a freelance journalist affiliated with the Tunisian blogger-network turned thinktank and e-zine *Nawaat*. As we spoke in the kitchen of her flat in downtown Tunis, she described the events of 14 January to me:

It was only on 14 January that we saw the *Boubous* [the bourgeoisie] of Tunis and La Marsa, not before. I had zero hope that the numbers would be like this. I think it was thanks to the bourgeoisie of Tunis. They strengthened the mobilization and gave it legitimacy, even abroad. […] And then, there was the moment when the youth of Hay Ettadhamen arrived who were carrying a coffin. All these moments were touching, it was a dream […] There were all the social classes from the poorest to the bourgeoisie. This transformed things, it became a popular revolution where everyone was represented.

Images of the protests in Tunis that day were mediatized throughout the world and, as Henda concludes, it was this mobilization that greatly aided in bestowing, at home and abroad, the legitimacy of bourgeois participation upon a process that had begun among the country's subaltern groups. Her example also highlights that there had been doubts among many until the day that Ben Ali would flee the country. Indeed, most of my interviewees voiced deep concerns that the final speech which he gave the day before, in which he made significant concessions, would calm down the protests. But when the crowd grew and people began to push out of the space which UGTT had designated for the protest that day onto Avenue Bourguiba, there was finally the convergence of the different social groups of the capital in one space. From subalterns living in the city's popular quarters to the residents of affluent neighborhoods like La Marsa, "the people" as a whole had come together. And as they now gathered in front of the once feared Ministry of Interior on the capital's main avenue, they defiantly shouted one clear message: "Ben Ali – get out!". In the afternoon hours of 14 January, and after street battles had raged for several hours again, the man who had ruled

Tunisia with an iron fist for 23 years secretly boarded a plane, never to return. On this historical day, then, a national-popular collective will of the people constituted itself and succeeded in bringing down this dictator.

The discussion in this section showed that this collective will coalesced in the capital and coastal cities at the intersection of two vectors of mobilization resembling those which had first created it in the interior of the country. On the one hand, there was independent subaltern mobilization in the popular quarters. On the other, local branches of UGTT issued calls for protest. However, a key difference stands out regarding the relative importance of and relationship between subaltern- and union-organized mobilization. Whether with the support of local trade unionists and UGTT structures (Thala and Regueb), or largely without them (Kasserine), subaltern youth had been the main motive force behind mass mobilization in the interior and created the conditions in which revolutionary demands were first articulated. In these cases, a largely independent vector of subaltern politics intersected with and drove the mobilization by activists and trade unionists in important ways. In Sfax and Tunis, however, that relationship was reversed. Here, the vector of formally organized politics provided the key impulses, as mass mobilization only ensued once UGTT issued calls for protests.[47] In other words, it was the official support by union structures which enabled the revolutionary process to reach the heart of the hegemonic formation, both spatially and in terms of social groups. While local processes of interaction between the two vectors were limited by the relatively short duration of the mobilization in Sfax and Tunis, UGTT still responded in important ways to the situation created by popular mobilization in the interior, and members of subaltern groups contributed radicalizing impulses on the level of demands.

---

[47] This was true for most cities along the coast where protests commenced, depending on the location, between 12 and 13 January 2011, by which point local UGTT branches had mostly issued mobilizing calls.

Thus, the defection by (parts of) the UGTT leadership was instrumental in creating a revolutionary situation on the national level, yes, but it responded to – and was in many ways influenced by – subaltern mobilization and demands. At the same time, however, the greater role of this hegemonic vector – and of the middle-class groups mobilized trough it – was associated with a moderation of demands. For the historical 14 January demonstration on Avenue Bourguiba articulated as its key aim the departure of Ben Ali, thus narrowing down the more comprehensive goal of bringing down the regime. Here, a national-popular collective will was both concretized and deradicalized in a context of increased involvement by social forces and groups that had been central in the old hegemonic formation. And indeed, as the next section discusses, such forces with more reformist inclinations as well as straight-out counterrevolutionary ones would move quickly to assert themselves in the aftermath of Ben Ali's departure. This, as well as an awareness that their demand for a fall of the regime had by no means been met, led many of my subaltern interlocutors to contemplate new ways of inserting themselves into political developments on the national level. The next section turns to the responses by different social forces in the country to the "crisis of authority" that the country had now entered.

Culmination of the Revolutionary Process

On 17 January, three days after the departure of Ben Ali, Prime Minister and RCD member Mohamed Ghannouchi formed an interim government that included several opposition parties, civil society activist and members of UGTT (The Economist, 2011).[48] Ghannouchi made it clear that 're-establishing public order' was 'the absolute priority' (France 24, 2011b), and the national UGTT leadership issued a similarly-worded call for people to go back to work

---

[48] Ghannouchi had initially assumed the presidency himself but was replaced within 24 hours by the speaker of parliament.

(La Presse, 2011b). Yet, protest continued throughout the country under the key demand for the government and the RCD to be dissolved (La Presse, 2011c). Under this pressure, UGTT members eventually withdrew from the government whose remaining members quit the RCD symbolically and dissolved its central committee (ibid; France 24, 2011c). As key developments of the revolutionary process were now occurring in the capital where forces of the old regime and members of its historical bloc were trying to manage a transition in their favor, many of my subaltern interlocutors felt that they were being side-lined. This section discusses how they and some members of the activist community in Tunis responded to this challenge by trying to reassert popular control over the revolutionary process.

With RCD figures still ruling from Tunis, some of those who, in the process of their struggle, had come to understand the whole regime as their enemy were reconsidering their options. The radical idea that some of them came up with, and which would gain traction among many of the subaltern youth in the interior of the country, evidenced the substantial transformation of political subjectivity over the preceding weeks. First articulated among youth from Menzel Bouzaiane (France 24, 2011d), Safuan Bouazizi, an unemployed graduate, and Ala Hidri, still in high school at the time, were present at the meeting where it was discussed and described the thought process in the following terms:

The idea came from a young man named Mounir Hamdi, he's my cousin. He said that we must do something new […] He said: "We are going to Tunis and we are seizing power!" We concretized the idea. We said that we are going to go to the Kasbah [central government square in Tunis], the seat of power. (Safuan Bouazizi)

We said: "We made the revolution, but they are next to the ministries and can speak. And we, because we are far away, we cannot express ourselves" […] We understood that, to matter, you really must go there, to the capital. (Ala Hidri)

These statements suggest that my interlocutors' understanding of what the regime was and where it was located had developed dramatically over preceding weeks. Whereas many young subaltern men had, at the beginning of the revolutionary process, seen the local police

as essentially identical with the regime, they now understood the latter as a whole system of government located far away in Tunis. Thus, they decided that, in order to "take power", or at least to "express themselves" – the significant difference being indicative of persistent equivocality regarding ultimate aims, or "under-articulation" – they would need to go to the seat of power. Here, vividly expressed, was the learning and new political subjectivities which had been achieved. That this was not an isolated development in the town of Menzel Bouzaiane was evident through how the idea of occupying the *Kasbah*, the central government square in downtown Tunis, caught on among the youth in the interior. Amine Abidi, a farm worker who had fought the police in Regueb, and Hamza Aloui, one of the unemployed young men who had done the same in Kasserine, described how they came to join *qawāfil al-ḥurriyya* (The Caravan of Liberation), as it was called (As-sabah, 2011):

The people from Meknessi, Regueb and such, we got together and talked. Everyone gave their opinion and the majority wanted to go close to the power: the Kasbah, where all ministries are and everything. (Amine Abidi)

There were Facebook pages that discussed the program for the sit-in at the Kasbah […] We went [to the Kasbah] to correct the process of the revolution. A revolution against the RCD must remain against the RCD. We went from all the governorates. (Hamza Aloui)

These comments point to the rich processes of learning, making new connections, exchanging opinions, and exercises in democratic decision-making which took place among subaltern youth in the interior. The informal political discussions, in person and online, through which Amine and Hamza made their decision to partake in the occupation of the Kasbah were a novelty in the lives of these two young men and, as Hamza's statement implies, allowed participants to concretize their own ideas and goals. For him, this was to reassert control over the revolutionary process and to bring down the RCD. These goals were shared by many who took part in the Kasbah occupation. On 23 January, the convoy that had set out from the Sidi Bouzid governorate was the first to arrive in Tunis, with groups from other governorates joining over the next two days. When the people from the interior

arrived, they tore down the barbed wire in front of the Prime Minister's office, overwhelming the security forces stationed there, and occupied the central government square (Al-Jazeera, 2011a). They chanted *"ash-shaʿb yurīd isqāt al-ḥukūma"* (the people want to bring down the government) and called for the dissolution of the RCD (As-sabah, 2011).

For several days, the momentum was on the side of the (mostly young) revolutionaries. Likeminded people from Tunis joined, locals donated food and mattresses to sustain the occupation, and the army felt compelled to make its first public announcement in support of the revolution, thus barring police forces from attacking the sit-in (France 24, 2011e; NYT, 2011). Over the week-long occupation of the Kasbah, important achievements were made, not the smallest of which was the creation of unity between Tunisians from different regions and social groups. Indeed, it appears that "the people", whose collective will had been articulated as wanting to overthrow the regime, "self-constituted" (Tripp, 2014) during the Kasbah sit-in as a collective subject on the national level for the first time. This new encounter and process of unification among Tunisians from different class and regional backgrounds was described by Amine from Regueb and Lina, the cyber-activist from Tunis:

In the beginning, we were organized by governorate. But then we made representative assemblies. Someone from Regueb, someone from Kasserine, someone from the student union […] We were no longer governorates. We were united. […] And we saw strange things that we never experienced before. Like a girl sleeping right next to you on the street. (Amine Abidi)

People who did not know each other became a family. Little by little, we started to have rituals, to greet the flag at 7 am, to do cleaning together, the sit-in kitchen […] And we spent the nights debating, discussing, it was a bit festive. (Lina Ben Mhenni)

These statements bring out how the occupiers constructed a sense of unity by developing organizational structures and rituals. Some of these drew on overtly nationalist registers. Others suggested experimentation with new cultural codes emphasizing a greater degree of equality, not just along class but also gender lines, such as regarding the joint responsibility for "domestic tasks" of caring and food preparation that had been strongly gendered during

the mobilization in the interior. This also brought experiences that, as Amine suggests, were clearly confusing to the young men from the interior, like sleeping in one space with women whom they did not know. Beyond the opening-up of cultural norms, the Kasbah occupiers also experimented with a new popular politics akin to forms of direct democracy and assembly-style decision-making. Here, we can clearly spot the unfolding, within a context of popular mobilization, of 'activities of mutual learning and development of self-understanding' through which people were creating 'conceptions that resonate across difference' (Cox and Nilsen, 2014, p. 79).

Amid the joy and festive atmosphere that Lina relays, then, people demonstrated a willingness to question received values, a desire to learn and get to know one another, and of finding 'new ways of constructing what was held in common' (Chalcraft, 2017, p. 53), as they turned the occupied square into a "mini republic". The processes of communal learning were strongly emphasized by my young, male interlocutors from subaltern groups. This was expressed by Mohamed Kadri, for example, a 30-year-old from Regueb without a university degree who had been unemployed under Ben Ali and did not engage in any kind of political activity before the revolution. A talented football player, he was known among the youth of his town as a tough guy and a bully. He wore a tracksuit and spoke in an engaged tone as we sat in a small corner café in his neighborhood and described how, during the Kasbah, he and others developed a thirst for knowledge that he had not known before:

It helped to build consciousness. At the Kasbah, people started to make speeches and people started to understand. In the morning, you have newspapers coming and you read La Presse, etc. […] At the Kasbah, I started to read. (Mohamed Lazher Kadri)

Mohamed vividly expresses the intensity of political learning experiences, as many of the occupiers for the first time started to engage with formal political discourses and tried to get informed by reading newspapers. And yet, Mohamed's comment implies that the collective learning experiences which unfolded on the Kasbah square were not free of power

differentials, especially when it came to developing the political content of their occupation. He states that others delivered the speeches that people like him listened to and wrote the articles that he would read. Here, those with higher degrees of formal education and other forms of cultural or symbolic capital were better able to make their voices heard. Their contributions weighed disproportionately on the demands which were articulated in the nominally direct-democratic assemblies that the occupiers of the Kasbah had formed.

In other words, the mini republic of the Kasbah did not correspond to a Habermasian ideal speech situation. Lawyers, for example, had an influential presence. Amine hinted at this when he said: 'The Bar Association was there too. They talk to us. There was one representative from each governorate, from each region. Then, there was the idea of the constituent assembly' (Amine Abidi). Amine states that a key demand, namely for the election of a constituent assembly, was developed in discussions of the representative assembly of the Kasbah to which lawyers contributed. The extent of their involvement was expressed by the president of the National Bar Association, Abderrazek Kilani:

There were groups of lawyers who went to educate the protesters on the Kasbah, particularly on the question of objectives. Because, when we talked about the constituent assembly, people did not understand […] There was a problem at the institutional level, there was a certain vacuum and therefore it was necessary to open a dialogue on the objectives […] Afterwards, there was the "Council of the Revolution" which took the first steps to pass to the elections of the constituent assembly.

The imperfections and power differentials of the occupation aside, Amine and Abderrazek's account show that the process of deliberation on the Kasbah *did* result in the articulation of the most concrete and consequential demand to come out of the Tunisian revolutionary process. Finding this common ground through popular deliberation was certainly no small achievement considering the diversity of "the people" constituting itself in the occupation and the previous "under-articulation" of the national-popular collective will. Indeed, as the comment by Abderrazek suggests, this was achieved through something akin to a "systematic educational activity" (Gramsci, 1971), or a more formal setting of "popular education" (Cox,

227

2019; Cox and Nilsen, 2014), in which lawyers played a leading role. Their specialist knowledge on questions of political transition was instrumental in articulating this key demand – as well as implementing it later which, as Abderrazek adds, became the task of a formal Council of the Revolution.[49]

However, the strong role of the lawyers, and thus of traditional rather than organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 5-23), clearly resulted in "reformist" demands that were not necessarily adequate to the radical ideas latently developed in the subaltern and popular politics of the revolutionary process. Moreover, this was the most visible instance of intellectual labor inserting itself into these politics – thereby highlighting once more the degree to which its organic forms had remained underdeveloped. Still, the process of popular education in the Kasbah occupation resulted in a degree of specification of demands that had not been achieved before. This was suggested by the comments of Ghassan Aljane, a media and communications student in his early thirties who had come from Gabes, far in the south, to join the Kasbah occupation, and Walid Abidi, the history graduate and UDC co-founder from Regueb:

We had discussions with a lot of interesting people and gained knowledge. You met activists, citizens who do not have the same social position or mentality, but with whom you can discuss. And we managed to develop a common objective. […] The demand became: "The people want a constituent assembly". (Ghassen Aljane)

Thus, people started to understand what they wanted: We demanded the constituent assembly and the resignation of Ghannouchi's government. (Walid Abidi)

Ghassan emphasizes that the discussions on the Kasbah were a novel experience for subaltern youth like him, which brought them into contact with new ideas and people from diverse social groups. Learning from and with each other and overcoming their differences,

---

[49] This was a body comprising opposition parties, civil society groups, and UGTT that was formed after the dissolution of the Ghannouchi government, charged with organizing the elections for the constituent assembly (Le Monde, 2011).

the people who assembled on the Kasbah were able to articulate their common demand for a new constitution. And Walid said that this goal reflected a process of learning through which the people had come to understand what they wanted, as did the second core demand which would come out of the Kasbah, namely the dismissal of the Prime Minister and his government. A significant achievement, "the people" on the Kasbah went through a process not only of unification that constituted them as such, but also of learning and articulation that concretized their goals. In other words, this constituted a process in which, through a collective will, 'a subject, a will immediate to itself and acting for itself, is forged [...thus marking] the transition to transformative politics [...as] subaltern social groups, in a process of transformation, discover [...] what they want' (Chalcraft, forthcoming).

And yet, once the will of the people had emerged with such greater clarity, it had also moved away from the vague and under-specified notions of "seizing power" or "bringing down the regime" that had been articulated before the Kasbah. On the one hand, then, the process of learning and development on the Kasbah set in motion a formal process of transformative politics that put the country on a path towards electoral democracy. On the other, and for the first time involving more noticeably contributions by (mostly traditional and, thus, reformist) intellectuals, it also led to a distancing from those demands and goals open to more radical interpretations. Here, a potential for popular politics to articulate a more revolutionary collective will may have been cut short. Indeed, some of the occupiers felt that the mini republic of the Kasbah was being exposed to countervailing forces intent on ensuring that the looming danger of popular counterhegemony would not last. This was expressed by Henda, who during the revolution grew disillusioned with established leftist politics and became one of the few journalists in the country devoted to covering the situation of subaltern youth in the interior:

What we did not see coming was that the counterrevolution organized itself with its old methods - media, army, police. And they were much more effective than us. Thus, they managed to isolate the

229

occupation from its environment, from popular support, with a discourse around stability being important, etc. [...] Then, they infiltrated the occupation itself. An infiltration led by the reformist UGTT and the political parties, which expected to have their share of power and to have new political weight after 14 January. And the others, who should normally and politically support and protect the youth from the interior, they withdrew.

In her assessment, counterrevolutionary forces succeeded in undermining popular support for the continuing occupation of the Kasbah – and for the revolutionary process more broadly. Indeed, the national media, while initially enthusiastic, began carrying a string of negative commentary on the disruptive effects of continued street actions and demonstrations on the country's political and economic future at least from 25 January onwards. Aside from these public pressures, Henda suggests that many of the country's formal political structures, including the "reformist UGTT", viz. the union leadership (Yousfi, 2015a), worked to secure their share of power in the post-Ben Ali order by pushing for an electoral transition process which they could more readily control. Finally, she points out that the forces of the radical left abandoned or at least offered insufficient support to the subaltern youth who had been driving the revolutionary process. In all these regards, this description of the situation in Tunisia subsequent to the flight of Ben Ali recalls Gramsci's understanding of the dangers that arise in a "crisis of authority". He wrote that:

The various strata of the population are not all capable of orienting themselves equally swiftly, or of reorganizing with the same rhythm. The traditional ruling class, which has numerous trained cadres, changes men and programmes and, with greater speed than is achieved by the subordinate classes, reabsorbs the control that was slipping from its grasp. Perhaps it may make sacrifices, and expose itself to an uncertain future by demagogic promises; but it retains power, reinforces it for the time being, and uses it to crush its adversary (1971, pp. 210–11).

Indeed, counterrevolutionary forces organized more quickly and were able to prevent the experiment with popular politics on the Kasbah from developing into a more coherent force by ending the occupation. On 28 January, after the lawyers had tried in vain to convince protesters to leave peacefully, the army stepped to the side and allowed police forces to forcefully clear out the sit-in (La Presse, 2011d; Le Temps, 2011b). Partial concessions were

also offered, and the square had gone up in a cheer of success when, the day before, a government reshuffle was announced that excluded RCD party members and the Prime Minister promised to resign after elections had been held (Al-Jazeera, 2011b; France 24, 2011f). Ongoing street protest and a second occupation of the Kasbah in February would succeed in pressing for the demands articulated on the Kasbah: between late February and early March 2011, the Ghannouchi government stepped down, the RCD was dissolved, and elections for a Constituent Assembly were announced that would eventually be held on 23 October that year (Hmed, 2016; Nawaat, 2015).

While these developments set Tunisia onto a path of transition towards electoral democracy, and thus constituted real gains from and concessions won through revolutionary struggle, we can also read them with Gramsci's above words as constituting a counterrevolutionary success whereby old elites largely secured power for themselves. Indeed, scholars have argued that the dynamics of national politics from here on can be understood as a formal "democratic consensus" (Murphy, 2013b), rather than driven by the disruptive impulses of subaltern politics and revolutionary mobilization that concern this thesis. While episodes of popular mobilization continued to play into national politics, notably during the 2013 impasse in the constitution-drafting process (Zemni, 2015b), Tunisian governments since the first parliamentary and presidential elections in 2014 were led by *Nidaa Tounes*, a party representing Ben Ali-era business elites, and the Islamist *Ennahda*. These have been described by critical scholars as the "two forces of the old regime" (Boubekeur, 2016; Krichen, 2015), and their rule is argued to have reduced popular mobilization (Antonakis-Nashif, 2016), negatively affecting for instance feminist movements and struggles for socio-economic rights (Debuysere, 2016, 2018; Fortier, 2015; Merone, 2015). The following section concludes this chapter by discussing my interlocutors' reflections on the achievements and shortcomings of the Tunisian revolutionary process.

Subaltern Incorporation and Radical Impulses

The achievements of the revolutionary process were evaluated differentially by my interlocutors from subaltern groups. As this final section discusses, many of them perceived that their situation improved in important ways under the new political order. Others, notably those who had developed more radical political aspirations, felt that the revolutionary process had been cut short. Their differing assessments suggest that participation in the revolutionary struggle that brought down Ben Ali did not constitute a unidirectional process of learning and transformation of political subjectivity. And, just as with processes of hegemonic contraction before, dynamics of incorporation through new or restructured hegemonic processes apparently went a long way in structuring subaltern experience of post-revolutionary society. As such, some found that their position in the new hegemonic formation had improved and offered their consent to the reformed political system. This was the case, for instance, for many holding (moderate) Islamist beliefs who were being included in the political process for the first time, as was suggested by Hajer Assoudi, the young woman from Kasserine who now teaches Islamic education. Before the revolution, she had experienced strong discrimination for wearing the *ḥijāb* and gave an overall positive assessment of current conditions:

The opposition parties came to life and got together, and elections were held. Everyone guarded the democratic process, and the revolution succeeded more or less. It is true that, in Kasserine, not much happened in terms of what we wanted to achieve, but we organized ourselves in civil society, we did higher education, and things are all right.

From Hajer's perspective, the electoral democratic process brought real political inclusion, especially for the Islamist *Ennahda* party of which she became a member. And while she states that local conditions did not improve much in terms of economic development, she felt content with other achievements, such as her ability to pursue higher education and organize through civil society – which, under Ben Ali, would have been almost impossible for

someone of her convictions. Though not necessarily in the form of systematically addressing regional inequalities, subaltern incorporation also selectively occurred in the economic field. Spending from the National Employment Fund (*Fonds National de l'Emploi*), one of the Ben Ali years' key mechanisms for hegemonic incorporation through job-allocation, was redirected to benefit subalterns in the interior, rather than middle-class youth as had been the case before (Weipert-Fenner and Hamdi, 2017). Indeed, post-Ben Ali governments specifically brought into public sector employment those who had been wounded during the revolution, identifying them as a particularly restive population (Tsourapas, 2013; Weipert-Fenner and Hamdi, 2017). In fact, almost all my interviewees from that category were in some form of public employment at the time I spoke to them. In addition, the government decided to pay one-off compensations of roughly $2,000 to those who had been wounded in the revolution (Andrieu, 2016; Lachenal, 2019). That these measures remained not without effect was suggested by Haythem Gharsalli, a man without tertiary education in his early thirties from one of Kasserine's popular quarters. Unemployed under Ben Ali, he had received a gunshot wound when attacking a police station. As someone who benefitted from compensation and incorporation through employment, he expressed satisfaction with his current situation when he spoke to us in a popular café of his neighborhood:

I had nothing. Suddenly, I have a house, I have a job. I have a salary and I have been able to take many privileges from the state. So, things are going very well. […] I got my right […] If there is another revolution, I will not participate in it. What for, to have a second job? The "revolution of dignity", we already did it.

This suggests that, even for some of those who had participated in the frontlines of the struggle, the aims of the revolution remained socio-economic in nature, and that dynamics of learning and development of political subjectivities among members of subaltern groups were far from uniform. Haythem's overall assessment was that the revolution had achieved its most important goal of bringing a dignified life – to him at least. This key grievance, which had been related by many of my interlocuters to the oppressive policing of their everyday

lives under Ben Ali, was mentioned as one regarding which the revolution had brought palpable gains. Indeed, there appears to have been a marked change in policing strategy: in many communities where police stations had been burned down during the revolution, including towns like Thala or Menzel Bouzaiane and popular quarters like Hay Ennour in Kasserine, there was no police presence when I conducted my fieldwork. According to my interlocutors, this brought feelings of local autonomy and freedom. Even more important was that the inevitable encounters with the police were playing out very differently. This was suggested by Helmi, one of the young men from Kasserine who had been targeting their local RCD office before the revolution:

Now, you are on an equal footing with the police. If he insults you, you insult him. Before, he insulted your mother and you could do nothing. Afterwards, he couldn't do it anymore. […] Now, when you burn a tire you don't run away. The police come to talk to you, they take you to negotiate with the governor, etc. [*laughs*]

Being treated with a greater degree of respect by the police and having easier access to officials certainly changed the lives of those young men who were experiencing a "social death" under Ben Ali. Given how strongly determinate those experiences had been for their engagement in the revolutionary process, Helmi's statement expresses a significant improvement regarding some of the most important grievances of subaltern youth in the interior. As such, partial extension of economic and political incorporation as well as changes in policing went some way towards winning the new political order a measure of consent among members of subaltern groups. However, this was not true for those who had come to desire more profound transformations of Tunisian society. This was the case notably for those who had participated in the Kasbah occupation. My interlocutors who experienced the forms of popular politics that developed there, as well as their limitations, reflected more critically upon their own role in the revolutionary process. Such was the case for Ala Hidri, the youth from Menzel Bouzaiane who had joined the Kasbah as a high school student, and his co-occupier Abderraouf Abidi, the architect and civil society activist from Regueb in his

late thirties. They expressed disappointment with what had been achieved and a desire for a more radical transformation of society:

We don't know how to do politics; we are not politicians. After the change of government, we returned. It was an abandonment. (Ala Hidri)

There were six soldiers in front of the government door [Prime Minister's office]. So, the people were there, and the seat of power was empty. We could have taken power! […] There could have been a radical change […] We could have said that we were the national council of the revolution. But it was the lack of political experience. It could have been a very different scenario. (Abderraouf Abidi)

From these statements, we get a clear impression that some of the subaltern youth felt they did not follow through with the possibilities for revolutionary change which they had helped to create in bringing down Ben Ali and occupying the Kasbah. Neither of the two young men expressed concrete ideas regarding what these potentialities might have come to; at least not beyond the notion of seizing power and declaring a people's council of the revolution as an alternative government. However, they agree in their diagnosis regarding the source of what they saw as their strategic blunder, as both relate it to a lack of political experience. Here, we can see a recognition of the limitations incurred by a subaltern-driven revolutionary process that was lacking significant organic organizational and intellectual resources – and that, hence, took a reformist trajectory as other organizations and traditional intellectuals got involved. These pertained to the articulation of more developed conceptions for political, economic, and social transformation, as well as to revolutionary strategies and tactics to achieve them. Lack of formal political knowledge and strategy was also mentioned by several of my interlocutors, particularly the absence of leadership by more experienced political forces. Amine, the farm worker from Regueb, related this to his experiences at the Kasbah, and Choukri Slougui, an unemployed graduate from Kasserine with an experience in activism at university, spoke about the revolutionary process more broadly:

We rejected all the politicians. [Opposition leaders] Moncef Marzouki and Hamma Hammemi were slapped [at the Kasbah]. For us, there was no real opposition in Tunisia. But maybe it was a mistake.

We did not create a leader to take power. There was no substitution in power. […] We have not overturned the regime, and we are still paying the price. (Amine Abidi)

The political parties in power have betrayed the mobilizations and the youth. I would have wanted there to be people who offered leadership. […] The lack of leadership meant that we chose elections. We did not continue the revolutionary process until the end. (Choukri Slougui)

In their evaluations, Amine and Choukri relate the shortcomings of the revolutionary forces in terms of strategy and a capacity to take control of political developments in the country to a lack of (organic) leadership. They mistrusted the organized opposition parties and felt that they had not been capable to offer the kind of guidance which would have been required in this situation. But Amine also said that the rejection of these leaders might have been a mistake given that subalterns did not manage – and, we may add: did not have enough time – to organize sufficiently and develop their own organic forms of leadership. They both hold that this meant the revolutionary process was cut short and the broader structures of the regime remained in place. This suggests that a revolutionary process in which radical impulses had developed rapidly out of subaltern self-activity, while sufficient for creating a force and historical protagonism that led to the downfall of Ben Ali, reached its limitations when it came to developing more constructive ideas for a post-revolutionary society. As such, the political subject which it was able to give rise to remained largely at the level of antagonism, of "power against", rather than "power for" (Modonesi, 2015). That a lack in revolutionary leadership prevented a deeper transformation of society was also suggested by some of my interlocutors from the organized left, who engaged in auto-critique considering this failure. This was articulated, for example, by Ghassen Besbes, the lawyer and grassroots trade unionist from Sfax, as well as by Zied Lakhdar, the member of parliament and leader of a radical leftist party:

All activists of the time were surprised by the result of the revolutionary movement. There were no answers, no structures, no plans. That's why they were secondary contributors to the March 2011 process, which was a purely political process that marginalized economic and social transformation. (Ghassen Besbes)

The radical left was not ready. If you are not ready on the organizational level, you cannot lead the movement, you cannot provide for its needs. […] We did not find the tactical means necessary to accomplish the revolutionary process. (Zied Lakhdar)

According to Ghassen, activists like him had missed their moment to influence the revolutionary process, which in March 2011 resulted in the Council of the Revolution under the auspices of UGTT and the main opposition parties. Lack of preparation and of capacity on both organizational and ideational levels was a key problem faced by political tendencies which saw themselves as the natural allies of revolutionary mobilization and resulted in their inability to provide it with outside support and leadership. Ghassen and Zied opine that this was the principal reason why revolutionary forces did not manage to develop a project for deeper cultural, social, and economic transformation of society. As such, a process of auto-critique appeared to take place among (some) leftists and activists in Tunisia. More importantly, some of my young subaltern interlocutors developed a sense of historical agency and an even stronger capacity for self-activity based on their learning in the revolutionary process. Mohamed Kadri, who had previously confined his life to the popular quarter in Regueb, and Choukri Slougui, the young graduate from Kasserine, articulated this transformed sense of agency:

We demand at least that history does us justice, that people say: "Thank you, sons of Kasserine. Thank you, sons of Thala, of Hay Ennour, of Hay Ezzouhour." The least of things, thanksgivings. Because we liberated you. We ended your exile. We allowed you to live freely in your country. (Choukri Slougui)

Ben Ali fled thanks to us. The first and second government [of Ghannouchi] fell thanks to us. But then we left power to others. We did something, and then we gave up […] We had no political thought before the revolution. Afterwards, perhaps we won that, the possibility of participating in politics, with an idea, a debate, a party. There are dominant parties. But the youth, we are not going to vote for them in municipal elections. We can't find someone who represents us. Thus, some of us started to create independent lists. (Mohamed Kadri)

Here, powerfully articulated, is the degree to which some of the young subaltern men overcame their subordination which, as Gramsci tells us, is marked by a condition in which 'it never occurs to them that their history might have some possible importance' (1971, p.

196). As these two state, they considered themselves as having accomplished a "historical act" for which they were owed gratitude, especially from those who benefitted more from it than them. And Mohamed gives us an impression that those who had seen their sense of agency transformed in this way were continuously reflecting on their role in the revolutionary process and its shortcomings, learning from their mistakes, and developing new forms of self-activity in response to it. This refers us back to the "molecular processes" which transform society beneath the surface.

Indeed, as Mohamed states, some of the young revolutionaries were beginning to partake more directly in the democratic politics which their struggles had helped bring about. Over the period when I carried out my fieldwork in 2018, several of my young subaltern interlocutors were standing as independent candidates in the municipal elections of May that year. With independent candidates making up more than a third of all electoral lists, winning more seats in many regions of the interior than *Ennahda* and *Nidaa Tounes* combined, a record of 37% of those elected under the age of 35, and almost half the new delegates women, the 2018 municipal elections point to the continuing potential for political change in the country (Carnegie, 2018). Indeed, the 2019 national elections seem to point in a similar direction, as the presidency was won by an independent lawyer. While the future of revolutionary struggle in Tunisia remains uncertain, these developments show, at the very least, that remnants of the old regime can be voted out of office and that even members of subaltern groups are inserting themselves into formal politics in unprecedented ways. The freedoms which these possibilities are built on, Choukri reminds his compatriots above, were won through a struggle in which young subaltern men from the interior played a key role. It is my modest hope that this thesis contributes to the historical acknowledgement of their agency which he demands.

Conclusion

Over the final three days of Ben Ali's rule, the revolutionary situation created in the interior of the country developed at the national level. What had begun as a struggle driven by the self-activity of subaltern youth in the periphery finally reached the core of the hegemonic formation. The organic conceptions articulated through this struggle, and around which a collective will coalesced, constituted the main social force behind the new form of historical protagonism of a people wanting to overthrow the regime. However, the development of a national-popular collective will capable of bringing down Ben Ali was only possible because formally organized agencies came to play a larger role. Revolutionary mass mobilization in large cities along the coast was precipitated through calls for general strike by UGTT rather than subaltern self-activity, although decisions for the former were in part motivated by the latter. Still, the relative importance of the two main vectors of mobilization identified in this thesis had been reversed compared with the development of the revolutionary process in the interior. While subaltern self-activity continued to provide important impulses and increased numbers in the streets, the mobilizing force of central union structures alone proved capable of breaking out of the regime's historical bloc those groups upon which its hegemonic processes had been focused, notably the coastal middle classes. In the determining last stages of the revolutionary process, it was thus UGTT which brought about a crisis of authority on the national level.

This did not suddenly turn an organization that had been integrated into the hegemonic formation since the end of colonial rule into a revolutionary force. This chapter has shown that the greater role of UGTT, alongside political opposition parties and social groups defecting from the regime' historical bloc, was concomitant to a moderation in popular demands. Indeed, most of the formally organized agencies, as well as remnants of the old regime, quickly engaged in concerted efforts to limit revolutionary changes to the very top

of the political system. Against this, a new form of popular mobilization, driven again by the agency of subaltern groups, developed on the Kasbah and articulated important specifications of revolutionary demands. This initiative evidenced the degree to which processes of learning and development in struggle had changed political subjectivities but also showed the limitations of a revolutionary process in which radical impulses had mainly come from subaltern self-activity. For, while the Kasbah entailed experiments with direct democratic processes, a lack of organic leadership and organizational resources – and of the time necessary to develop them – meant that popular forces remained unable to devise a comprehensive counter-hegemonic project and push for deeper revolutionary transformation. Nevertheless, they managed to wrest important concessions from political elites, including the beginning of a constitution-drafting process which would eventually set Tunisia on the path to becoming a democracy. Thus, it was not so much the absence of revolutionaries (Bayat, 2017), clearly present among members of subaltern social groups, but the wider constellation of forces in the country that produced an outcome largely understandable in terms of reform rather than revolution. This chapter has shown, too, that many who had engaged in the struggle developed aspirations of a more radical nature – even if these, in lieu of processes of organic intellectual labor and popular education, remained under-articulated.

VIII. Conclusion

The discussion in the previous chapters developed two key contributions of the thesis, one empirical and one theoretical, that constitute its main conclusions. The empirical contribution pertains to the scholarship on the Tunisian revolution. The thesis showed that the self-activity of subalterns, especially young men from the interior, was instrumental in creating a revolutionary situation. It thus complements and partially corrects the existing scholarship which has focused on an alleged leadership role of activist communities, middle-class agencies, and UGTT. Subalterns figured in the Tunisian revolution not just as masses to be led or in images of regime violence that spurred more elevated social classes into action. Rather, their agency produced crucial transformations all along the revolutionary process.

The theoretical contribution of the thesis relates to our understanding of how subalterns were able to do so. It emphasizes dynamics of learning and development in struggle as well as the possibilities and limitations for subaltern self-emancipation in the contexts of a contemporary hegemonic formation. Here, the thesis showed that a Gramscian theoretical optic can make sense of many developments in the Tunisian revolutionary process. This importantly includes the limitations regarding resilience and emancipatory depth of a national-popular collective will that developed largely from spontaneous and defensive forms of subaltern self-activity. Its "under-articulation" regarding systemic structures of subordination, its lack of formal organization and organic leadership, and the presence of powerful counter-revolutionary forces contributed to a reformist outcome of the revolutionary process. However, the degree of learning, articulation, and will-formation which subaltern agency produced without significant organizational and organic intellectual resources also points to a third set of more speculative conclusions. These pertain to our historical understanding of the Arab Uprisings and the degree to which they can inform

conceptions of revolutionary politics. This concluding chapter elaborates the three contributions in this order.

Subaltern Politics in the Tunisian Revolution

The first, empirical conclusion of the thesis is that subaltern agency, and especially the mobilization of young, unemployed men in the interior of the country, played a crucial role in the development of the revolutionary process in Tunisia. Indeed, their spontaneous – in the profound, Gramscian sense – self-activity was the main social force that led to the creation of revolutionary mass mobilization. Developing from an insurgent into a transgressive vector of mobilization, driving as well as finally coalescing with other social groups and more formally organized agencies, it contributed decisively to the transformations which gave rise to a revolutionary situation. Through this, the thesis showed that there is an important and understudied subaltern politics of the Tunisian revolution. Here, it contributes to rescuing 'from the enormous condescension of posterity' (Thompson, 1963, pp. 12–3) the agency of subaltern social groups in the Tunisian revolution, making a modest effort in this direction in the form of a partial history focused on young men in the interior. Signaled throughout the thesis was the fact that this focus came at the expense of studying the self-activity of other subaltern groups, most notably women. The thesis, then, only scratches the surface of what is clearly a rich subaltern history and politics in the context of the Tunisian revolution. Despite its limited reach, the thesis contributes important insights. Building on a perspective on hegemony "from below", it adds a largely under-researched account which showed that the self-activity by members of subaltern social groups mattered decisively along the entire revolutionary process. This section first recalls and sharpens the main empirical findings and then spells out their contribution to the literature on the Tunisian revolution.

Well before the events of December 2010, an active subaltern politics contributed to the accumulation of struggles that laid the ground for the revolution. It signaled an increasing withdrawal of consent to a regime beset by a slow-burning crisis of hegemony. This crisis was felt particularly acutely by subalterns in the interior of the country who bore the brunt of hegemonic contractions regarding not just their economic, but political and cultural, integration. Among them, young men, largely excluded from the strongly suppressed formal political organizations and civil society activism centered on the capital, engaged in various forms of self-activity to confront this disincorporation. The unemployed experimented with new ways of making their grievances heard, interacting but also circumventing an UGTT increasingly unable to deliver economic inclusion for them. Other youth in the popular quarters and provincial towns mounted less visible forms of resistance against an oppressive police presence in their daily lives with which the Ben Ali regime sought to control the populations left behind by its promises of a neoliberal economic miracle. Seeing their economic conditions deteriorating and having their sense of dignity violated by the securitization and exclusion of their lifeworld from a modernist national identity, subalterns were, thus, far from acquiescent and passive. With these findings, the thesis adds to a developing scholarship showing a rich history of politics and resistance in Tunisia before the revolution. This importantly diversifies earlier accounts on society's "political death" (Camau and Geisser, 2003) and "voluntary servitude" (Hibou, 2006) under Ben Ali. It shows that, while Tunisia may not have seen a "decade of struggle in civil society" heralding the revolution comparable to that of Egypt, the final years of Ben Ali were certainly politically eventful. By adding that this included important subaltern struggles, the thesis points to under-researched pre-histories of the revolution which call for further research.

The thesis' most important empirical contribution is to the scholarship on the Tunisian revolution more narrowly speaking. Here, the conclusion is that subaltern self-activity interacted with and influenced other agencies in important ways and originated dynamics

243

that were instrumental for creating a revolutionary situation. This entailed the transformation of relatively isolated, sectorized, and defensive struggles into mass mobilization for regime change which first emerged between 9 and 11 January in communities of the interior that were then centers of subaltern self-activity. The struggle had, by that time, developed into a mobilization, mostly by young men, for the defense of residential neighborhoods that took the shape of nocturnal confrontations with the police. Amid differences and over a period of limited mutual reinforcement, these struggles expanded local solidarities, forged new ones in struggle, and eroded the barrier of fear by successfully fighting back the police, thus building resilience and determination. Parallel to this, trade unionists, lawyers, and other activists organized largely peaceful daytime demonstrations in various localities of the interior and the capital. While interacting in many ways, the two vectors of mobilization remained largely separate in terms of coordination and participants, with those who joined during the day being mainly members of the middle classes, women, and children. On the local level, the latter vector also entailed negotiations with the authorities and articulating demands on behalf of the entire community. These demands remained decidedly defensive, ranging from regional economic development and end of police violence to the release of prisoners.

The joining of the two struggles on the local level and their transformation into community-wide mobilization for revolutionary goals occurred only after regime forces shot dead up to 50 protesters in Kasserine, Thala, and Regueb between 8 and 9 January. Through the killing of the young men defending their residential quarters, and as bullets started to rain down indiscriminately, it was made palpable to the whole of the local communities that seeking inclusion no longer made sense as the regime clearly had nothing to offer them but death. This realization finally led to the collapse of an affeebled hegemony, and thus to a crisis of authority on the local level. With their spirits hardened by the preceding clashes, the young subaltern men fought on and the people of their communities were forced to reinterpret the

244

situation and the goals of their struggle. In this context, and drawing on popular culture including local memories of revolt and conceptions of legitimate opposition to an unjust political order, they articulated and united around demands for the fall of the Ben Ali regime. Revolutionary transformation of the struggle, then, first occurred on the local level and was crucially driven by spontaneous subaltern self-activity and processes of popular learning. More formally organized agencies, including trade unionists, interacted with, supported, and formed part of local struggles, but they did not produce a dynamic which led to community-wide mobilization to bring down the regime.

However, the rebelling communities might have been wiped out by the regime, had it not been for important interactions between these local developments and trans-local activist agencies that spread information and organized their own demonstrations. This built pressure not only on the regime but on the national leaderships of organizations like the Bar Association and, most importantly, UGTT as the second power center in the country. In the wake of the killings in Kasserine, Thala, and Regueb, these powerful national forces moved towards increasing defiance of the regime. The National Bar Association intervened directly with the presidency, contributing to the withdrawal of the police from Kasserine and other localities, and the Sfax UGTT, the union's most influential regional branch, called a general strike. Within days of its decision to deploy lethal force against the centers of subaltern self-activity, the regime's tactics backfired. Instead of subduing the rebellious communities of the interior, the massacres contributed to pushing the entire country into a revolutionary situation when mass mobilization, from 12 January onwards, engulfed the previously largely quiet coastal cities.

While a vector of subaltern self-activity drove mobilizations up until this point, it now became superseded by trade unionist and activist organizing, and especially by formal interventions of UGTT. Popular currents kept articulating radical demands for the fall of the regime in Sfax

and elsewhere, but the demand which ultimately came from the UGTT-mobilized and more middle-class crowd that protested on the capital's avenue Bourguiba was the narrower *Ben Ali, dégage*! As this goal was accomplished, counter-revolutionary forces quickly deployed their far superior resources to take control of a post Ben-Ali politics. Members of subaltern social groups, having only just made their first forceful and highly consequential move 'into the realm of rulership over their own destiny' (Trotsky, 2008, p. ii), were quickly outmaneuvered. Evidencing how rapidly political subjectivities had been transformed, however, many among them did not relent so easily. In a bit to assert themselves on the national level, subaltern youth from the interior and their supporters mounted two occupations of the Kasbah. The occupations managed to articulate and press for concrete demands including the dismissal of the transition government, the dissolution of the RCD, and the election of a constituent assembly. And yet, with the end of the Kasbah occupations, this would be the extent to which the goal of "overthrowing the regime" was specified and achieved by subalterns against counter-revolutionary and reformist forces, including the national UGTT leadership.

This subaltern perspective on the Tunisian revolution complements, corrects, and questions existing scholarship in several ways. Demonstrating that subalterns were neither the playthings of structural forces nor pushed forward by the leadership of activist networks and transformative events, the findings of the thesis complicate and pluralize our understanding of the agencies and developments that created a revolutionary situation in Tunisia. Far from being "other-directed", members of subaltern social groups engaged in self-activity that mattered all along the revolutionary process. Their struggles contributed to an accumulation which laid the ground for the revolution and their self-activity puts into question accounts which hold that the initial events in Sidi Bouzid radiated outwards as they were organized, gradually intensified, and radicalized primarily by trans-local activist networks and agencies (e.g. Hmed, 2012; Lim, 2013; Yousfi, 2015a; Zemni, 2015a). While subaltern self-activity alone

would not have been able to create a revolutionary situation on the national level, neither were these other agencies. Rather, the thesis found that two vectors of mobilization: one driven by the actions of subaltern youth, and the other by some of the activist agencies mentioned in the scholarship. These two vectors interacted continuously, but subaltern self-activity contributed decisively to the transformation of localized, sectorized, and defensive struggles into revolutionary mass mobilization.

Here, the thesis also showed that transformative dynamics were not brought about by faceless events and regime actions (e.g. della Porta, 2016; Volpi, 2016). Rather, they were produced by "constellations of forces" in which subaltern agency – including momentous courage and sacrifice – featured prominently. Emphasizing this complex interaction of historical processes and conditionings as well as creative agency in the Tunisian revolution, the thesis draws attention away from "the revolutionary event" (Badiou, 2012; Sewell, 2005). Instead, it showed that subaltern agency contributed to a drawn-out process of transformations that cumulatively led to the downfall of Ben Ali. Supplying a partial history of subaltern politics in the Tunisian revolution that focused on the self-activity of young, marginalized men from the country's interior, the thesis only scratched the surface of these historical developments. It thus serves as an invitation for future scholarship to continue research along these lines. This includes studying the role of women in the (formal and informal) politics of provincial towns and popular quarters, exploring in greater detail how developments in the interior affected subaltern self-activity in the coastal cities, and the interactions between subaltern politics and political parties in the aftermath of Ben Ali's departure. This would yield further insights on the achievements and limitations of subaltern politics in the revolutionary process that will be discussed next.

Potentials and Limits of Subaltern Self-Emancipation

The second main conclusion of this thesis is that a subaltern politics framework emphasizing hegemony as well as learning and development in struggle allows us to understand achievements and limitations of subaltern self-emancipation in the Tunisian revolution. This also pertains to a debate on limitations of the revolutionary process regarding outcomes of political, economic, and social transformation. The vital insight here is that, through processes of learning in struggle, subaltern self-activity was capable of moving beyond defensive mobilization, create new conceptions around which a national-popular collective will for the end of the Ben Ali regime coalesced, and thus contributed centrally to developing a new historical protagonism of "the people". However, the collective will which thus took shape did not develop significantly beyond a project against the status quo as the process of popular education which was emerging on the Kasbah was cut short and no vision for the transformation of broader political, social, and economic structures of domination was articulated. As such, the collective will which had rudimentarily been formed was not carried over into a sustained project but fractured quickly. The forces of subaltern self-emancipation, then, had been strong enough to break the existing hegemony and remove parts of the dominant group, but had neither the time nor the intellectual and organizational resources to work out the goals and strategies necessary to form a historical bloc capable of pushing for deeper revolutionary transformations. From this it is concluded that subaltern self-emancipation as a process of learning in struggle achieved much but was also crucially limited.

The achievements of subaltern self-emancipation in the Tunisian revolution can be understood in terms of a process of popular learning in struggle. It was based on defensive mobilizations against the hegemonic contractions that took place under the Ben Ali regime. Subaltern youth engaged in self-activity in response to growing contradictions between, on

the one hand, common sense discourses of economic and social progress as well as popular notions of a dignified life and, on the other, an experience of increasing marginalization and coercion. Engagement in these struggles created new knowledge for dealing with these contradictions, drawing on and furthering good sense, such as by acting outside of hegemonic sites like UGTT and developing capacities to resist oppressive policing. This furnished local rationalities of resistance which informed self-activity of the youth in response to acts of aggression directed against their communities that marked the beginning of transgressive mobilization in different localities. A shift towards revolt occurred in several localities when young men who had made different experiences of struggle mobilized collectively to defend their residential neighborhoods. Here was a development of militant particularisms which expanded collectivities from circles of friends to the level of quarters and towns, developed defensive techniques, and led to new experiences of open confrontation with authorities. These developments, signaling the withdrawal of consent, also began to weaken common sense and built resilience. Fissures of hegemony were exploited as good sense notions of legitimate resistance, notably in the form of local histories of revolt and references to the Palestinian struggle, gained traction and the barrier of fear was eroded by successes in pushing back the police.

However, popular learning in struggle also went beyond these cumulative developments and produced a qualitative shift from defensive to revolutionary struggle. Here, the attacks on the funeral marches made a significant difference as they meant that not just the young men but the entirety of the local communities experienced indiscriminate, lethal violence. This experience of dominance without hegemony meant that contradictions between common sense and experience became irreconcilable. For the people of Kasserine, Thala, and Regueb, hegemony, long undermined by contractions and subaltern struggles, finally collapsed when the legitimacy of the regime was demonstrably reversed. Thus, the situation could only be made sense of with qualitatively new conceptions. Critical self-reflection now made legible

good sense notions of legitimate resistance as interpretive foils for present experience. Drawing together new and old good sense, or current experience and popular culture, resulted in the articulation of a new conception that was deeply organic: "The people want to bring down the regime". This novel conception articulated the relevant collectivities in qualitatively different terms, recasting the rebelling communities and their adversary as "the people" and "the regime". It also formulated a way forward – bringing down the regime – around which a revolutionary collective will could coalesce.

The revolutionary struggle that was thus created was adopted by subaltern social groups across the country, including in Sfax and Tunis, as it pointed to a way out of contradictions which they, too, were experiencing. It also laid the ground for a wider collapse of the hegemonic formation as UGTT, one of the most important sites of hegemonic inclusion, partially adopted the struggle and succeeded inbreaking the coastal middle-classes out of the regime's historical bloc. These developments converged in a national-popular collective will that would bring about the fall of Ben Ali. In a process of self-emancipation, subaltern struggles had created a conception, will, and the main force in the historical protagonism wanting to bring down the regime – developments which provided a powerful new model of popular politics that inspired people across the region and beyond.

Notwithstanding achievements of historical proportions, the fact that revolutionary developments in Tunisia were driven largely by dynamics of subaltern self-emancipation that unfolded rapidly and without significant organizational and organic intellectual resources also helps us understand important shortcomings in terms of transformative change. As cross-class mobilization reached the core of the hegemonic formation, the goal to "bring down the regime" was notably diluted into a much less radical demand for the departure of Ben Ali. This signaled a shift from a revolutionary trajectory to one which Bayat (2017) described as "refo-lution", revolutionary mobilization leading to reform rather than

overcoming of existing power relations. In a Gramscian optic, the problem was that a collective will which had formed spontaneously, viz. without 'systematic educational activity on the part of an already conscious leading group' (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 198–9), rather than through a "long labor" (ibid, p. 194), remained under-articulated. It did not include any conception for how existing structures of domination would be overcome, social, political, and economic relations transformed, or even specifications of who "the regime" and "the people" were. Regarding the latter, the fact that subaltern self-activity in the interior of the country was rooted in conceptions of masculinity meant that this protagonism was not aimed at female emancipation. Emerging out of quests for economic inclusion through the state, neither was transforming a capitalist economic system in any straightforward way part of the revolutionary agenda. The "agora of the Kasbah" and the dynamics of popular education it entailed made some progress towards such issues and produced limited specifications of revolutionary goals. But even the collective will that slowly matured there did not develop a political (let alone cultural or economic) project but remained largely at the level of antagonism or "power against" (Modonesi, 2015). Thus, and while sufficient to destabilize and force reforms of the hegemonic formation, it did not lead to the formation of a new historical bloc of forces building an emancipatory project capable of overcoming the relations of domination enshrined by the old hegemony.

A Gramscian perspective points to two sets of reasons for the limitations which subaltern self-emancipation faced. First are the contextual constraints of the hegemonic formation, and second the limitations given through the pathway of revolutionary developments themselves. Regarding the first, the thesis found that subaltern self-emancipation was limited by counter-revolutionary forces. These worked tirelessly to put an end to popular mobilization, including defaming and eventually clearing the Kasbah sit-ins, and to set the country onto a path of "orderly transition" to electoral democracy. While this required sacrifices and new alliances on the part of the dominant groups, such as with the Islamist

Ennahda party, it did not fundamentally challenge their hold on power, most notably of the coastal business elites. With UGTT in a leading capacity, a "quartet" of civil society organizations mediated the transition phase. Far from a postcolonial regime ruling through "dominance without hegemony" (Guha, 1997), the political context was clearly one of a developed hegemonic formation in which power relations operated through and were protected by "fortresses and earthworks" in civil society (Gramsci, 1971, p. 238). The situation after the departure of Ben Ali can indeed be likened to what Gramsci called a "crisis of authority" in which the superior capacities of a hegemonic ruling class precisely become visible as it 'changes men and programmes and, with greater speed than is achieved by the subordinate classes, reabsorbs the control that was slipping from its grasp. Perhaps it may make sacrifices […] but it retains power […and] uses it to crush its adversary and disperse his leading cadres, who cannot be very numerous or highly trained' (ibid, pp. 210-11). Thus, an outcome in terms of reform rather than revolution (Bayat, 2017) becomes understandable less through the absence of revolutionaries but the wider constellation of forces. However, Gramsci also points to possible challenges faced by those struggling against hegemony not only in the form of counter-revolutionary forces but through their own weaknesses of organization and leadership.

This second set of reasons for the limitation of subaltern self-emancipation was clearly at play in the Tunisian revolution. Organic leadership and forms of organization among the revolutionary forces spearheaded by subalterns never had the time to develop beyond the "rudimentary elements" characteristic of spontaneous mobilization (Gramsci, 1971, p. 197). This internal weakness – recognized by some among the subaltern youth – had profound consequences for the durability and depth of the revolutionary process as it imposed constraints on developing a collective will, and thus of a project for of social, political, and economic transformation. This point is made by Gramsci in the context of arguing against "spontaneist" strategies of the general strike. He suggestively remarks that such mass

mobilization constituted 'a collective will, but [only] in its practical action' and that it was 'an activity which does not envisage an "active and constructive" phase of its own' (ibid., p. 127). The question, Gramsci tells us, then becomes: 'Will not that collective will, with so rudimentary a formation, at once cease to exist, scattering into an infinity of individual wills which in the positive phase then follow separate and conflicting paths?' (ibid., pp. 128-9).

Gramsci here expresses the limitation of a spontaneously created collective will to a "power against" – the very limitation that also characterized the Tunisian revolutionary process. What this process lacked, then, was a constructive or "positive" phase: the development of a project for revolutionary transformation entailing cultural critique, conceptions for future society, strategies for how to achieve it, and the formation of a new historical bloc of social forces willing and capable of bringing it about. These are exactly the achievements which, for Gramsci, require organic organizational and intellectual labor which he understood in terms of the "modern prince" and the philosophy of praxis. Thus, limitations for subaltern self-emancipation present in the Tunisian revolutionary process included not just the counter-revolutionary forces of a developed hegemonic formation, but the fact that its primary force was subaltern self-activity that developed spontaneously – in the Gramscian sense – and thus had only very limited organic intellectual or organizational resources at its disposal.

Having applied a subaltern politics framework emphasizing hegemony as well as learning and development in struggle, the thesis was able to bring out important achievements and limitations of subaltern self-emancipation in the Tunisian revolution. The former entailed producing a constellation of forces that led to the fall of Ben Ali. Subaltern self-activity constituted the main vector that created revolutionary mass mobilization as dynamics of learning in struggle produced a break with common sense and a collective will to bring down the regime. Significantly, these achievements were attained by subalterns without much organic intellectual and organizational resources. For those same reasons, however, the

collective will which thus took shape remained rudimentary and did not develop to the level of a project for revolutionary transformation of society. This, as well as the cutting short of the revolutionary process by powerful counter-revolutionary forces, imposed limitations to the degree of self-emancipation which subalterns were able to attain. Rather than resulting in deeper social transformations, the Tunisian revolution thus ultimately took a reformist trajectory.

Revolution and the Arab Uprisings

To what extent, then, do the contributions of this thesis inform our understanding of the Arab Uprisings and the question of revolution in the contemporary world? Many of the above conclusions broadly resonate with those reached by critical scholars regarding the uprisings in Egypt and across the region. Popular mobilization was rooted in subaltern experiences of hegemonic contractions, marginalization, and securitization, all unfolding in the context of neoliberal policies. It also featured strong degrees of spontaneity and creativity, little hierarchy, organizing that remained limited and informal, was full of situated leadership, and was ideologically "light" and uncommitted to more organized opposition groups. While these factors did not hamper – and in many cases facilitated – mobilization, the lack of formal organization, revolutionary strategy and organic leadership turned into a serious obstacle once dictators were pushed out and questions of transforming social relations arose (e.g. Abdelrahman, 2015; Bayat, 2017; Ismail, 2013). Because the forces which had produced mass mobilization proved insufficiently developed to implement a revolutionary politics, remnants of the old regime seized the day. In Egypt, this would lead to the reinstatement of dictatorship as a "Caesarist" force was present in the form of the army (Achcar, 2016; De Smet, 2016). Here, Tunisians were a lot luckier. For even if counter-revolutionary forces prevailed, they took the shape not of autocratic generals but of union leaders, Islamists, and

social elites, none of whom able to monopolize power, and all to various degrees committed at least to reform and to safeguarding political rights. However, the findings of this thesis point towards a third conclusion suggesting that the scholarship has insufficiently appreciated what was revolutionary about the Tunisian revolution.

Indeed, the main reason why it should be referred to as a revolution and not (just) an uprising is that it pushes against the limits of the theoretical optics used here. For where developments in Tunisia stand out is regarding the degree of self-emancipation that (some) members of subaltern social groups were able to achieve *despite* lacking organic leadership and formal organization. In the conceptual framework that this thesis draws on, these are prerequisites not just for revolutionary transformations, or outcomes, but for getting to the point of breaking with common sense and articulating a revolutionary conception in the first place. To accomplish these, Gramsci held that organic intellectuals and modes of organizing in civil society were of central importance. This emphasis is shared in perspectives on learning in struggle by thinking towards the formalization and abstraction of "grassroots knowledge" gained in struggle through various forms of popular education and pedagogy, organizational settings that enable exchange and the forging of new connections, and organic intellectual labor (Chalcraft, forthcoming; Cox, 2014; Cox and Nilsen, 2014; De Smet, 2015; Motta, 2017; Motta and Nilsen, 2011). In a similar vein, it has been argued that even the limited successes of the Egyptian uprising were enabled by modes of horizontalist organizing that facilitated the forging of new connections across divides of class or ideology (Abdelrahman, 2015; Chalcraft, 2012). By contrast, mobilizing subalterns in Tunisian were not able to draw on any significant organizational and organic intellectual resources of this kind.

While these absences posed important limitations, I submit that pointing only to them is to miss the key historical development of the Tunisian revolution: in the context of a relatively advanced hegemonic formation, members of subaltern social groups were capable to make

the shift from defensive to revolutionary mobilization through a process of learning in struggle *without* significant organic intellectual or organizational resources. Here, the key is in a shift of emphasis that runs counter to that proposed by Bayat (2017). In Tunisia, the key "anomaly" was not the lack of "revolution as outcome" – entirely understandable through the weaknesses discussed above – but the achievements made in the context of "revolution as movement". Thus, focusing on the formation of a collective will as an organizationally embedded "long labour" (Chalcraft, forthcoming), or to deficiencies in terms of ideology and well-developed projects for revolutionary transformations among activists (Bayat, 2017), draws scholarly attention away from trying to understand the degrees of self-emancipation reached by members of subaltern groups despite these shortcomings. Indeed, such a focus might lead exactly to the conclusion that, not only was this for lack of outcomes no revolution, but that the main reason for this was the "absence of revolutionaries" (ibid). Such assessments render historically insignificant the experience and agency of subaltern protagonists not exhibiting clear "revolutionary consciousness". In this, they run the risk of moving away from engaged understanding and into a mode of trans-historical judgement that confines to the dustbin of history the subaltern revolutionaries of whom this thesis gave testimony.

Emphasizing the achievements of subaltern self-emancipation, then, is of crucial importance not just for reasons of historical justice. In the wake of postmodernism, critical scholarship has sought to locate possibilities for revolutionary politics in new "multitudes of immaterial laborers" (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2005) or in a project for constructing a "populist antagonism" (Laclau, 2006; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). If, as this thesis argued, achieving a force comparable to the latter was possible in the context of the Tunisian revolution primarily through the self-activity of subaltern social groups, then our conceptions of revolutionary politics in the contemporary world stand to learn a great deal from these protagonists. It is here that too strong an analytical focus on organization and intellectual labor might not just

lead to historical injustice but can obstruct an important task of scholars committed to furthering emancipatory struggles: identifying the fissures and weaknesses in systems of domination and understanding how challenges to those systems can be developed. This is why the Gramscian imperative to seize on "every trace of subaltern initiative" is so vitally important. For, much more than our conceptions – enmeshed as they are in "traditional knowledge" – it is subaltern struggles that point out and manage to widen fissures of hegemony. This is not a call for historical forgetting. We are not to develop from the "scratch of subaltern struggles" entirely new theories. But, just as Marx and Gramsci in their time, we can only hope to advance subaltern struggles by staying as close to them as possible, learning from their every surprise, and informing our conceptions through them. Here, the thesis points out a "theoretical surprise" of the Tunisian revolution that inspires hope for emancipatory politics and "deserves to be made more coherent": the self-activity of subalterns groups far removed from the developmental frontiers of contemporary capitalist society, and drawing on little more than their good sense, created the historical protagonism of a revolutionary mobilization that inspired struggles around the globe.

References

Abdelrahman, M. (2004), "The leftists and Islamists in Egypt", *ISIM Newsletter*, Vol. 14, pp. 26–27.

Abdelrahman, M. (2009), "'With the Islamists?—Sometimes. With the State?—Never!' Cooperation between the Left and Islamists in Egypt", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 36 No. 1, pp. 37–54.

Abdelrahman, M. (2012), "A hierarchy of struggles? The 'economic' and the 'political' in Egypt's revolution", *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 39 No. 134, pp. 614–628.

Abdelrahman, M. (2013), "In Praise of Organization: Egypt between Activism and Revolution", *Development and Change*, Vol. 44 No. 3, pp. 569–585.

Abdelrahman, M. (2015), *Egypt's Long Revolution: Protest Movements and Uprisings*, Routledge, London; New York.

Abrams, L. (2010), *Oral History Theory*, 1 edition., Routledge, London ; New York, NY.

Achcar, G. (2013), *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, Saqi Books, London.

Achcar, G. (2016), *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.

Achy, L. (2011), *Tunisia's Economic Challenges*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC.

Achy, L. (2015), "Breakdown of the Authoritarian 'Social Contract' and Emergence of New Social Actors: An Ongoing Process?", in Sadiki, L. (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization*, Routledge, New York, NY, pp. 303–318.

AI, Amnesty International. (2008), *In the Name of Security: Routine Abuses in Tunisia*, Amnesty International, available at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/document/?indexNumber=mde30%2f007%2f2008&language=en (accessed 25 February 2020).

Al-Chourouk. (2010), "عميد المحامين في اجتماع اخباري :همّنا الدفاع عن الحريات والوقوف ضد الظلم" , *Al-Chourouk*, Tunis, 30 December, available at: https://www.turess.com/alchourouk/178612 (accessed 20 March 2020).

Al-Chourouk. (2011a), "مظاهرات وأحداث أليمة في عديد المدن", *Al-Chourouk*, Tunis, 11 January, available at: https://www.turess.com/alchourouk/179322 (accessed 19 March 2020).

Al-Chourouk. (2011b), "الاتحاد يرفض شتى أشكال: بن علي يستقبل الأمين العام للاتحاد العام التونسي للشغل العنف والمساس بالممتلكات العامة والخاصة وبمكاسب البلاد", *Al-Chourouk*, Tunis, 14 January, available at: https://www.turess.com/alchourouk/179574 (accessed 20 March 2020).

Alexander, C. (2011), "Tunisia's protest wave: where it comes from and what it means", *Foreign Policy*, 3 January, available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/01/03/tunisias-protest-wave-where-it-comes-from-and-what-it-means/ (accessed 27 September 2016).

Alexander, C. (2016), *Tunisia: From Stability to Revolution in the Maghreb*, Routledge, New York, NY.

Aleya-Sghaier, A. (2012), "The Tunisian Revolution: The Revolution of Dignity", *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, Vol. 3 No. 1, pp. 18–45.

Al-Jazeera. (2011a), "'Liberation caravan' reaches Tunis", *Al-Jazeera English*, 23 January, available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2011/01/2011123124352723753.html (accessed 22 March 2020).

Al-Jazeera. (2011b), "Tunisia may purge Ben Ali loyalists", *Al-Jazeera English*, 27 January, available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2011/01/201112743835333954.html (accessed 26 March 2020).

"Al-Jazeera TV 07.01." (2011), *Al-Jazeera News Hour*, Al-Jazeera TV, 7 January.

"Al-Jazeera TV 25.12." (2010), *Al-Jazeera News Hour*, Al-Jazeera TV, 25 December.

"Al-Jazeera TV 29.12." (2010), *Al-Jazeera News Hour*, Al-Jazeera TV, 29 December.

"Al-Jazeera TV 31.12." (2010), *Al-Jazeera News Hour*, Al-Jazeera TV, 31 December.

Allal, A. (2010), "Réformes néolibérales, clientélismes et protestations en situation autoritaire - Les mouvements contestataires dans le bassin minier de Gafsa en Tunisie (2008)", *Politique africaine*, No. 117, pp. 107–125.

Allal, A. (2012a), "'Revolutionary' trajectories in Tunisia", *Revue Française de Science Politique*, Vol. 62 No. 5, pp. 55–77.

Allal, A. (2012b), "« Avant on tenait le mur, maintenant on tient le quartier ! » - Germes d'un passage au politique de jeunes hommes de quartiers populaires lors du moment révolutionnaire à Tunis", *Politique africaine*, No. 121, pp. 53–67.

Allal, A. (2013), "Becoming revolutionary in Tunisia, 2007-2011", in Beinin, J. and Vairel, F. (Eds.), *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, 2nd ed., Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, pp. 185–204.

Allal, A. and Bennafla, K. (2011), "Les mouvements protestataires de Gafsa (Tunisie) et Sidi Ifni (Maroc) de 2005 à 2009", *Revue Tiers Monde*, Vol. Hors Série No. 5, pp. 27–45.

Allal, A. and Geisser, V. (2011a), "La Tunisie de l'après-Ben Ali: Les partis politiques à la recherche du « peuple introuvable »", *Cultures & conflits*, No. 83, pp. 118–125.

Allal, A. and Geisser, V. (2011b), "Tunisie : « Révolution de jasmin » ou Intifada ?", *Mouvements*, No. 66, pp. 62–68.

Allal, A. and Pierret, T. (Eds.). (2013), *Au coeur des révoltes arabes: Devenir révolutionnaires*, Armand Colin, Paris.

Allinson, J. (2015), "Class forces, transition and the Arab uprisings: a comparison of Tunisia, Egypt and Syria", *Democratization*, Vol. 22 No. 2, pp. 294–314.

Allinson, J. (2019), "A fifth generation of revolution theory?", *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol. 32 No. 1, pp. 142–151.

Aloui, M. (2012), "Kasserine and January", *Boundary 2*, Vol. 39 No. 1, pp. 55–67.

Anderson, L. (1991), "Political Pacts, Liberalism, and Democracy: The Tunisian National Pact of 1988", *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 26 No. 2, pp. 244–260.

Andrieu, K. (2016), "Confronting the Dictatorial Past in Tunisia: Human Rights and the Politics of Victimhood in Transitional Justice Discourses Since 2011", *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 38 No. 2, pp. 261–293.

Antonakis-Nashif, A. (2016), "Contested transformation: mobilized publics in Tunisia between compliance and protest", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 128–149.

As-sabah. (2011), "قوافل الحرية تجوب البلاد لإسقاط بقايا الدكتاتورية", *Assabah*, Tunis, 24 January, available at: https://www.turess.com/assabah/48795 (accessed 22 March 2020).

Attia, H. (1984), "Réflexions à propos du développementrégional de la Tunisie intérietire et méridionale", *Le développement rural en questions : paysages, espaces ruraux, systèmes agraires : Maghreb-Afrique noire-Mélanésie*, Vol. 106, presented at the Congrès International de Géographie, ORSTOM, Paris, pp. 205–223.

Axford, B. (2011), "Talk About a Revolution: Social Media and the MENA Uprisings", *Globalizations*, Vol. 8 No. 5, pp. 681–686.

Ayadi, M., Boulila, G., Lahouel, M. and Montigny, P. (2005), *Pro-Poor Grwoth in Tunisia*, International Development& Strategies, Paris.

Ayari, M.B. (2011), "Des maux de la misère auxmots de la « dignité »", *Revue Tiers Monde*, Vol. Hors Série No. 5, pp. 209–217.

Ayari, M.B., Geisser, V. and Krefa, A. (2011), "Chronique d'une révolution [presque] annoncée", *L'Année du Maghreb*, No. VII, pp. 359–387.

Ayeb, H. (2011), "Social and political geography of the Tunisian revolution: the alfa grass revolution", *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 38 No. 129, pp. 467–479.

Badimon, M.E. (2011), "Où sont les diplômés chômeurs ?", *Confluences Méditerranée*, No. 78, pp. 77–91.

Badiou, A. (2012), *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, Verso Books, London.

Barany, Z. (2011), "Comparing the Arab Revolts: The Role of the Military", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 22 No. 4, pp. 24–35.

Bayat, A. (1996), "The coming of a post-Islamist Society", *Critique: Journal for Critical Studies of the Middle East*, Vol. 5 No. 9, pp. 43–52.

Bayat, A. (2007), *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.

Bayat, A. (2010), *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam.

Bayat, A. (2013a), "The Arab Spring and its Surprises", *Development & Change*, Vol. 44 No. 3, pp. 587–601.

Bayat, A. (2013b), "Revolution in Bad Times", *New Left Review*, No. 80, pp. 47–60.

Bayat, A. (2015), "Plebeians of the Arab Spring", *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 56 No. S11, pp. S33–S43.

Bayat, A. (2017), *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.

Beinin, J. (2014), "Arab Workers and the Popular Uprisings of 2011", presented at the Social Movements and Popular Mobilization in the MENA Seminar Series, The London School of Economics and Political Sciences Middle East Centre, London.

Beinin, J. (2015), *Workers and Thieves: Labor Movements and Popular Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.

Beinin, J. (2016), "Political economy and social movement theory perspectives on the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings of 2011", *Social Movements and Popular Mobilization in the MENA Seminar Series*, The London School of Economics and Political Sciences Middle East Centre, London.

Beinin, J. and Vairel, F. (Eds.). (2013), *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, 2nd ed., Stanford Univ. Press, Stanford, CA.

Beissinger, M.R., Jamal, A.A. and Mazur, K. (2015), "Explaining divergent revolutionary coalitions: Regime strategies and the structuring of participation in the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions", *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 48 No. 1, pp. 1–24.

Bellin, E. (2012), "Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring", *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 44 No. 2, pp. 127–149.

Bellin, E.R. (2002), *Stalled Democracy: Capital, Labor, and the Paradox of State-Sponsored Development*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.

Ben Amor, R. (2015), "Le rapport au quartier entre attachement et ouverture sur l'espace urbain", in Lamloum, O. and Ben Zina, A.M. (Eds.), *Les jeunes de Douar Hicher et d'Ettadhamen. Une enquête sociologiquede*, International Alert, Tunis, pp. 21–43.

Ben Rabah, I. (2012), *Indicateur Dedéveloppement Régional*, Ministère du Développement Régional et de la Planification, Tunis, available at: http://cgdr.nat.tn/upload/files/13.pdf (accessed 10 February 2020).

Bennani-Chraïbi, M. and Fillieule, O. (2012), "Towards a sociology of revolutionary situations: Reflections on the Arab uprisings", *Revue française de science politique (English)*, Vol. 62 No. 5, pp. 1–29.

Berry-Chikhaoui, I. (2011), "Les comités de quartier en Tunisie : une illusion démocratique", *Mouvements*, No. 66, pp. 30–39.

Black, I. (2010), "Amnesty International censures Tunisia over human rights", *The Guardian*, 13 July, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jul/13/amnesty-criticises-tunisia-human-rights (accessed 29 September 2016).

Blavier, P. (2016), "Sociogenèse de la révolution tunisienne : expansion scolaire, chômage et inégalités régionales", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, No. 211–212, pp. 55–71.

Boubekeur, A. (2016), "Islamists, Secularists and Old Regime Elites in Tunisia: bargained Competition", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 107–127.

Bourguiba, H. (1964), *Kasserine Paper Pulp Factory: A Nucleus for Regional Development*, Secretariat of State for Cultural Affairs and Orientation, Tunis.

Bouzouita, K. (2013), "Music of dissent and revolution", *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 22 No. 3, pp. 281–292.

Breuer, A., Landman, T. and Farquhar, D. (2015), "Social media and protest mobilization: Evidence from the Tunisian revolution", *Democratization*, Vol. 22 No. 4, pp. 764–792.

Brooks, R. (2013), "Abandoned at the palace: Why the Tunisian military defected from the Ben Ali regime in January 2011", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 36 No. 2, pp. 205–220.

Brown, N.J. (1990), *Peasant Politics in Modern Egypt: The Struggle Against the State*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.

Brownlee, J., Masoud, T. and Reynolds, A. (2013), "Why the Modest Harvest?", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 24 No. 4, pp. 29–44.

Brownlee, J., Masoud, T. and Reynolds, A. (2015), *The Arab Spring: Pathways of Repression and Reform*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Burawoy, M. (1998), "The extended case method", *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 4–33.

Burns, S. (2018), *Revolts and the Military in the Arab Spring: Popular Uprisings and the Politics of Repression*, I.B.Tauris, London ; New York.

Camau, M. and Geisser, V. (2003), *Le Syndrome Autoritaire: Politique En Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali*, Presses de Sciences po, Paris.

Campante, F.R. and Chor, D. (2012), "Why was the Arab World Poised for Revolution? Schooling, Economic Opportunities, and the Arab Spring", *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 26 No. 2, pp. 167–188.

Camps, G. and Martel, A. (1998), "Fraichich", in Camps, G. (Ed.), *Encyclopédie berbère*, Vol. 19, Gastel, Aix-en-Provence, available at: http://encyclopedieberbere.revues.org/1966 (accessed 1 February 2017).

Camus, A. (1996), *The First Man*, Reprint edition., Vintage, New York.

Carnegie. (2018), "Results From Tunisia's 2018 Municipal Elections", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 15 August, available at:

https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/08/15/results-from-tunisia-s-2018-municipal-elections-pub-77044 (accessed 27 March 2020).

Chalcraft, J. (forthcoming), "Middle East Popular Politics in Gramscian Perspective".

Chalcraft, J. (2005), *The Striking Cabbies of Cairo and Other Stories: Crafts and Guilds in Egypt, 1863-1914*, SUNY Press, Albany, NY.

Chalcraft, J. (2009), *The Invisible Cage: Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.

Chalcraft, J. (2012), "Horizontalism in the Egyptian Revolutionary Process", *Middle East Report*, Vol. 262, pp. 6–11.

Chalcraft, J. (2014), "Egypt's 25 January Uprising, Hegemonic Contestation, and the Explosion of the Poor", in Gerges, F.A. (Ed.), *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 155–79.

Chalcraft, J. (2015), "The Arab Uprisings of 2011 in Historical Perspective", in Ghazal, A. and Hanssen, J. (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Middle-Eastern and North African History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Chalcraft, J. (2016), *Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Chalcraft, J. (2017), "The Social Life of Contentious Ideas: Piracy and Unruly, Translocal Appropriation in the Arab Uprisings and Beyond", in Jasper, J.M. and Volpi, F. (Eds.), *Microfoundations of the Arab Uprisings: Mapping Interactions between Regimes and Protesters*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, pp. 41–66.

Chalcraft, J. and Noorani, Y. (Eds.). (2007), *Counterhegemony in the Colony and Postcolony*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

Chomiak, L. (2011), "The making of a Revolution in Tunisia", *Middle East Law and Governance*, Vol. 3 No. 1–2, pp. 68–83.

Chomiak, L. and Entelis, J.P. (2011), "The Making of North Africa's Intifadas", *Middle East Report*, No. 259, pp. 8–15.

Chouikha, L. and Geisser, V. (2010), "Retour sur la révolte du bassin minier. Les cinq leçons politiques d'un conflit social inédit", *L'Année du Maghreb*, No. VI, pp. 415–426.

Chouikha, L. and Gobe, E. (2009), "La Tunisie entre la «révolte du bassin minier de Gafsa» et l'échéance électorale de 2009", *L'Année Du Maghreb*, No. V, pp. 387–420.

Chouikha, L. and Gobe, É. (2011), "La force de la désobéissance : retour sur la chute du régime de Ben Ali", *Revue Tiers Monde*, Vol. Hors Série No. 5, pp. 219–226.

Clancy-Smith, J. (2014), *Tunisian Revolutions: Reflections on Seas, Coasts, and Interiors*, Georgetown University Press, Washington, DC.

Clark, J.A. (2006), "Field Research Methods in the Middle East", *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Vol. 39 No. 3, pp. 417–424.

Clarke, K. (2011), "Saying 'Enough': Authoritarianism and Egypt's Kefaya Movement", *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, Vol. 16 No. 4, pp. 397–416.

Colla, E. (2012), "The People Want", *Middle East Report*, Vol. 263, pp. 8–13.

Cox, L. (2014), "Movements Making Knowledge: A New Wave of Inspiration for Sociology?", *Sociology*, Vol. 48 No. 5, pp. 954–971.

Cox, L. (2019), "Pedagogy from and for Social Movements: A Conversation Between Theory and Practice", *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, Vol. 30 No. 1, pp. 70–88.

Cox, L. and Nilsen, A.G. (2014), *We Make Our Own History: Marxism and Social Movements in the Twilight of Neoliberalism*, Pluto Press, London.

Cronin, S. (Ed.). (2008a), *Subalterns and Social Protest: History from Below in the Middle East and North Africa*, Routledge, New York, NY.

Cronin, S. (2008b), "Introduction", in Cronin, S. (Ed.), *Subalterns and Social Protest: History from Below in the Middle East and North Africa*, Routledge, New York, NY, pp. 1–22.

De Smet, B. (2012), "Egyptian Workers and 'Their' Intellectuals: The Dialectical Pedagogy of the Mahalla Strike Movement", *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, Vol. 19 No. 2, pp. 139–155.

De Smet, B. (2014), "Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Egypt", *Science & Society*, Vol. 78 No. 1, pp. 11–40.

De Smet, B. (2015), *A Dialectical Pedagogy of Revolt: Gramsci, Vygotsky, and the Egyptian Revolution*, Haymarket Books, Chicago, IL.

De Smet, B. (2016), *Gramsci on Tahrir: Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Egypt*, Pluto Press, London.

Debuysere, L. (2016), "Tunisian Women at the Crossroads: Antagonism and Agonism between Secular and Islamist Women's Rights Movements in Tunisia", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 21 No. 2, pp. 226–245.

Debuysere, L. (2018), "Between feminism and unionism: the struggle for socio-economic dignity of working-class women in pre- and post-uprising Tunisia", *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 45 No. 155, pp. 25–43.

Dobry, M. (1983), "Mobilisations multisectorielles et dynamique des crises politiques", *Revue Française de Sociologie*, Vol. 24 No. 3, pp. 395–419.

Dobry, M. (1986), *Sociologie Des Crises Politiques*, Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, Paris.

Dorsey, J. (2012), "Pitched Battles: The Role of Ultra Soccer Fans in the Arab Spring", *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, Vol. 17 No. 4, pp. 411–418.

Elbousty, M.Y. (2013), "Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi's 'The Will to Live': galvanising the Tunisian revolution", *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 159–163.

El-Ghobashy, M. (2012), "Unsettling the Authorities: Constitutional Reform in Egypt", in Sowers, J.L. and Toensing, C.J. (Eds.), *The Journey to Tahrir: Revolution, Protest, and Social Change in Egypt*, Verso, London ; New York, pp. 121–31.

Engels, F. (2017), *Anti-Dühring*, Wellred, London.

Erdle, S. (2010), *Ben Ali's "New Tunisia" (1987-2009): A Case Study of Authoritarian Modernization in the Arab World*, Klaus Schwarz, Berlin.

Fanon, F. (1963), *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, New York, NY.

Fantasia, R. (1989), *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action, and Contemporary American Workers*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Farha, M. (2014), "The Arab Revolts: Local, Regional, and Global Catalysts and Consequences", in Al-Sumait, F., Lenze, N. and Hudson, M.C. (Eds.), *The Arab Uprisings: Catalysts, Dynamics, and Trajectories*, Vols. 1-felt, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, MD, pp. 47–68.

Feltrin, L. (2018a), *Between the Hammer and the Anvil: The Trade Unions and the 2011 Arab Uprisings in Morocco and Tunisia*, unpublished thesis, University of Warwick.

Feltrin, L. (2018b), "Labour and democracy in the Maghreb: The Moroccan and Tunisian trade unions in the 2011 Arab Uprisings", *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, p. 23.

Femia, J.V. (1981), *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Fligstein, N. and McAdam, D. (2011), "Toward a General Theory of Strategic Action Fields", *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 29 No. 1, pp. 1–26.

Fortier, E.A. (2015), "Transition and Marginalization: Locating Spaces for Discursive Contestation in Post-Revolution Tunisia", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 20 No. 2, pp. 142–160.

France 24. (2010), "Le vent de la contestation souffle sur Tunis", *Les Observateurs de France 24*, 27 December, available at: https://observers.france24.com/fr/20101227-vent-contestation-arrive-tunis (accessed 19 March 2020).

France 24. (2011a), "Témoignages et images de nos Observateurs sur les manifestations à Djerba, Sfax, Sousse et Tunis", *Les Observateurs de France 24*, 13 January, available at: https://observers.france24.com/fr/20110113-villes-tunisie-temoignage-manifestations-revolte-armee-sousse-djerba-tunis-sfax (accessed 19 March 2020).

France 24. (2011b), "'Journée test' en Tunisie après le départ du président déchu Ben Ali", *France 24*, 15 January, available at: https://www.france24.com/fr/20110115-ex-president-ben-ali-a-fui-arabie-saoudite-famille-tunisie-revolte-chomage-pression-rue-interim-presidence (accessed 22 March 2020).

France 24. (2011c), "Les Tunisiens rendent un hommage national aux victimes de la révolution", *France 24*, 21 January, available at: https://www.france24.com/fr/20110121-tunisie-porte-deuil-victimes-revolution-ben-ali-exil-gouvernement-transition-amnistie-generale (accessed 22 March 2020).

France 24. (2011d), "Une 'Caravane de la libération' en route pour Tunis", *France 24*, 22 January, available at: https://www.france24.com/fr/20110122-manifestation-caravane-liberation-tunis-ghannouchi-opposant-ben-ali (accessed 22 March 2020).

France 24. (2011e), "Le ton monte encore d'un cran entre la rue et le gouvernement", *France 24*, 24 January, available at: https://www.france24.com/fr/20110124-tunisie-manifestation-caravane-liberte-siege-palais-premier-ministre-ghannouchi-affrontements-demission-ben-ali (accessed 22 March 2020).

France 24. (2011f), "La rue tunisienne suspendue à l'annonce du remaniement ministériel", *France 24*, 27 January, available at: https://www.france24.com/fr/20110127-tunisie-revolution-rue-annonce-remaniement-ministres-ben-ali-sidi-bouzid-syndicat-ghannouchi (accessed 26 March 2020).

Galastri, L. (2018), "Social classes and subaltern groups: Theoretical distinction and political application", *Capital & Class*, Vol. 42 No. 1, pp. 43–62.

Gallopin, J.-B. (2019), "Dilemma and Cascades in the Armed Forces-The Tunisian Revolution", *Democracy and Security*, Vol. 15 No. 4, pp. 328–360.

Gana, A. (2012), "The rural and agricultural roots of the Tunisian revolution: When food security matters", *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food*, Vol. 19 No. 2, pp. 201–213.

Gana, A. (2013a), "Aux origines rurales et agricoles de la Révolution tunisienne", *Maghreb - Machrek*, No. 215, pp. 57–80.

Gana, N. (2013b), "Introduction: Collaborative Revolutionism", in Gana, N. (Ed.), *Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, pp. 1–31.

Gana, N. (2014), "Dissident Tunisia: Culture and Revolt", in Al-Sumait, F., Lenze, N. and Hudson, M.C. (Eds.), *The Arab Uprisings: Catalysts, Dynamics, and Trajectories*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, MD, pp. 93–114.

Geisser, V. and Gobe, É. (2007), "Des fissures dans la « Maison Tunisie » ? Le régime de Ben Ali face aux mobilisations protestataires", *L'Année du Maghreb*, No. II, pp. 353–414.

Gerges, F.A. (Ed.). (2015), *Contentious Politics in the Middle East: Popular Resistance and Marginalized Activism beyond the Arab Uprisings*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, NY.

Gherib, B. (2012), "Économie politique de la révolution tunisienne", *Revue Tiers Monde*, Vol. 212 No. 4, pp. 19–36.

Gilsenan, M. (1996), *Lords of the Lebanese Marches: Violence and Narrative in an Arab Society*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

GIZ, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit. (2015), *Plan régional de développement durable (PREDD) du Gouvernorat de Kasserine*, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, available at: https://docplayer.fr/8709973-Plan-regional-de-developpement-durable-predd-du-gouvernorat-de-kasserine.html (accessed 21 February 2020).

Gobe, E. (2010), "The Gafsa Mining Basin between Riots and a Social Movement: meaning and significance of a protest movement in Ben Ali's Tunisia", available at: https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00557826/ (accessed 22 September 2016).

Gobe, E. (2013), *Les avocats en Tunisie de la colonisation à la révolution (1883-2011)*, Karthala, Paris.

Gobe, É. (2016), "Les mobilisations professionnelles comme mobilisations politiques : les avocats tunisiens de la « révolution » à la « transition »", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, No. 211–212, pp. 92–107.

Goldstone, J.A. (1991), *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Goldstone, J.A. (2001), "Toward a fourth generation of revolutionary theory", *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 4 No. 1, pp. 139–187.

Goldstone, J.A. (2009), "Rethinking Revolutions: Integrating Origins, Processes, and Outcomes", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 29 No. 1, pp. 18–32.

Goldstone, J.A. (2011), "Understanding the Revolutions of 2011", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90 No. 3, pp. 8–16.

Goldstone, J.A. (2013), *Revolutions: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Goodwin, J. (2001), *No Other Way out: States and Revolutionary Movements, 1945-1991*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Goodwin, J. and Jasper, J.M. (2004), "Caught in a Winding, Snarling Vine: The Structural Bias of Political Process Theory", in Goodwin, J. and Jasper, J. (Eds.), *Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning, and Emotion*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, pp. 3–30.

Gordner, M.J. (2017), "Union for Unemployed Graduates (UDC) - Tunisia | Participedia", 9 August, available at: http://participedia.net/en/organizations/union-unemployed-graduates-udc-tunisia (accessed 10 October 2017).

Gramsci, A. (1971), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Lawrence & Wishart, London.

Guellouz, A., Smida, M., Masmoudi, A. and Saʿdāwī, A. (2010), *Histoire générale de la Tunisie - Tome III: Les Temps Modernes*, Vol. 3, Sud éditions, Tunis.

Guessoumi, M. (2012), "The Grammars of the Tunisian Revolution", *Boundary 2*, Vol. 39 No. 1, pp. 17–42.

Guha, R. (1997), *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Gunning, J. and Baron, I.Z. (2014), *Why Occupy a Square?: People, Protests and Movements in the Egyptian Revolution*, C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, London.

Gurr, T.R. (1970), *Why Men Rebel*, Vol. har, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

Hall, S. (2006), "Encoding/Decoding", in Durham, M.G. and Kellner, D.M. (Eds.), *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, pp. 163–173.

Hardt, M. and Negri, A. (2000), *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Hardt, P.M. and Negri, A. (2005), *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Penguin Books, New York, NY.

Hibou, B. (2006), *La Force de l'obéissance: Économie Politique de La Répression En Tunisie*, La Découverte, Paris.

Hibou, B. (2011a), *The Force of Obedience: The Political Economy of Repression in Tunisia*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Hibou, B. (2011b), "Tunisie. Économie politique et morale d'un mouvement social", *Politique africaine*, No. 121, pp. 5–22.

Hibou, B. and Khiari, S. (2011), "« La Révolution tunisienne ne vient pas de nulle part »", *Politique africaine*, No. 121, pp. 23–34.

Hinnebusch, R. (2006), "Authoritarian persistence, democratization theory and the Middle East: An overview and critique", *Democratization*, Vol. 13 No. 3, pp. 373–395.

Hinnebusch, R. (2015), "Towards a Historical Sociology of the Arab Uprising Beyond Democratization and Post-Democratization", in Sadiki, L. (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization*, Routledge, New York, NY, pp. 39–50.

Hmed, C. (2011), "«Si le peuple un jour aspire à vivre, le destin se doit de répondre». Apprendre à devenir révolutionnaire en Tunisie", *Les Temps Modernes*, No. 664, pp. 4–20.

Hmed, C. (2012), "Abeyance networks, contingency and structures", *Revue Française de Science Politique*, Vol. 62 No. 5, pp. 31–53.

Hmed, C. (2015), "Répression d'État et situation révolutionnaire en Tunisie (2010-2011)", in Blanchard, E. and Droit, E. (Eds.), *Dossier: Polices et événements politiques au 20e siècle*, Presses de Sciences Po, Paris, pp. 77–90.

Hmed, C. (2016), "« Le peuple veut la chute du régime »: Situations et issues révolutionnaires lors des occupations de la place de la Kasbah à Tunis, 2011", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, No. 211–212, pp. 72–91.

Honwana, A. (2011), "Youth and the Tunisian revolution", *Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum Policy Paper*, Social Science Research Council.

Honwana, A. (2013), *Youth and Revolution in Tunisia*, Zed Books, London.

HRW, Human Rights Watch. (2011), *Tunisia's Repressive Laws - The Reform Agenda*, Human Rights Watch, available at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/12/16/tunisias-repressive-laws/reform-agenda (accessed 25 February 2020).

Hudáková, Z. (2019), "Civil society in Tunisia: from islands of resistance to tides of political change", *The Journal of North African Studies*, pp. 1–29.

IBRD, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. (1974), *The Economic Development of Tunisia*, No. 274a-TUN, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, New York, NY.

ICG, International Crisis Group. (2011), *Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East (IV): Tunisia's Way*, No. 106, International Crisis Group, available at: https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/popular-protests-north-africa-and-middle-east-iv-tunisia-s-way (accessed 29 January 2020).

INST, Institut National de la Statistique Tunisie. (2012), *Mesure de La Pauvreté Des Inégalités et de La Polarisation En Tunisie 2000-2010*, Institut National de la Statistique Tunisie, Tunis, available at: http://www.ins.tn/sites/default/files/publication/pdf/Mesure_de_la_pauvrete.pdf (accessed 20 January 2020).

INST, Institut National de la Statistique Tunisie. (2015), *Recensement Général de La Population et de l'Habitat 2014*, Institut National de la Statistique Tunisie, Tunis, available at: http://www.ins.tn/sites/default/files/publication/pdf/rgph-chiffres-web_0.pdf (accessed 12 January 2020).

Ismail, S. (2003), *Rethinking Islamist Politics: Culture, the State and Islamism*, Tauris, London.

Ismail, S. (2006), *Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters Encountering the Everyday State*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN.

Ismail, S. (2011), "Civilities, Subjectivities and Collective Action: preliminary reflections in light of the Egyptian Revolution", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 32 No. 5, pp. 989–995.

Ismail, S. (2012), "The Egyptian Revolution against the Police", *Social Research*, Vol. 79 No. 2, pp. 435–462.

Ismail, S. (2013), "Urban Subalterns in the Arab Revolutions: Cairo and Damascus in Comparative Perspective", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 55 No. 04, pp. 865–894.

Jasper, J.M. (2010), "Social Movement Theory Today: Toward a Theory of Action?: Social Movement Theory Today", *Sociology Compass*, Vol. 4 No. 11, pp. 965–976.

Jasper, J.M. and Duyvendak, J.W. (Eds.). (2015), *Players and Arenas: The Interactive Dynamics of Protest*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam.

Jasper, J.M. and Volpi, F. (2017a), "Introduction: Rethinking Mobilization after the Arab Uprisings", in Jasper, J.M. and Volpi, F. (Eds.), *Microfoundations of the Arab Uprisings: Mapping Interactions between Regimes and Protesters*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, pp. 11–40.

Jasper, J.M. and Volpi, F. (Eds.). (2017b), *Microfoundations of the Arab Uprisings: Mapping Interactions between Regimes and Protesters*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam.

Jebnoun. (2012), "Tunisia's Glorious Revolution and its Implications", in Haddad, B., Bsheer, R. and Abu-Rish, Z. (Eds.), *The Dawn of the Arab Uprisings : End of an Old Order?*, Pluto Press, London, pp. 59–65.

Kassab, A., Ounaïes, A., Ben Achour-Abdelkéfi, R., Louati, A., Mosbah, C. and Sakli, M. (2010), *Histoire générale de la Tunisie. Tome IV: L'époque contemporaine*, Vol. 4, Sud éditions, Tunis.

Khosrokhavar, F. (2017), "Violence, Social Actors, and Subjectivation in the Egyptian Revolution", in Jasper, J.M. and Volpi, F. (Eds.), *Microfoundations of the Arab Uprisings: Mapping Interactions between Regimes and Protesters*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, pp. 159–181.

Kirkpatrick, D.D. (2011), "Tunisia Leader Flees and Prime Minister Claims Power", *The New York Times*, 14 January, available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/15/world/africa/15tunis.html (accessed 3 April 2020).

Krichen, A. (2015), "Nidaa Tounès et Ennahda, l'alliance entre « deux forces d'ancien régime » en Tunisie. Retour sur l'histoire de la révolution avec Aziz Krichen", *Jadaliyya*, 1 June, available at: http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/21748/nidaa-tounès-et-ennahda-l'alliance-entre-«-deux-fo (accessed 22 September 2016).

Kurzman, C. (2004a), *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Kurzman, C. (2004b), "Can Understanding Undermine Explanation? The Confused Experience of Revolution", *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 34 No. 3, pp. 328–351.

Kurzman, C. (2012), "The Arab Spring Uncoiled", *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, Vol. 17 No. 4, pp. 377–390.

La Presse. (2011a), "Oui à toutes les formes d'expression, non à la violence", *La Presse de Tunisie*, Tunis, 12 January, available at: https://www.turess.com/fr/lapresse/20545 (accessed 20 March 2020).

La Presse. (2011b), "Le bureau exécutif de l'Ugtt Appel à la reprise du travail", *La Presse de Tunisie*, 18 January, available at: https://www.turess.com/fr/lapresse/20774 (accessed 22 March 2020).

La Presse. (2011c), "Marches pacifiques contre la présence des symboles de l'ancien régime au gouvernement d'union nationale", *La Presse de Tunisie*, 21 January, available at: https://www.turess.com/fr/lapresse/20975 (accessed 22 March 2020).

La Presse. (2011d), "Ça proteste toujours !", *La Presse de Tunisie*, Tunis, 29 January, available at: https://www.turess.com/fr/lapresse/21471 (accessed 26 March 2020).

Lachenal, P. (2019), "Fake Martyrs and True Heroes. Competitive Narratives and Hierarchized Masculinities in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia", *Men and Masculinities*, pp. 1–19.

Laclau, E. (2006), "Why constructing a people is the main task of radical politics", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 32 No. 4, pp. 646–680.

Laclau, E. and Mouffe, Chantal. (1985), *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, London.

Lamloum, O. and Ben Zina, A.M. (Eds.). (2015), *Les jeunes de Douar Hicher et d'Ettadhamen. Une enquête sociologiquede*, International Alert, Tunis.

Lawson, G. (2015), "Revolution, Nonviolence, and the Arab Uprisings", *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, Vol. 20 No. 4, pp. 453–470.

Lawson, G. (2016), "Within and Beyond the 'Fourth Generation' of Revolutionary Theory", *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 34 No. 2, pp. 106–127.

Le Monde. (2011), "La Tunisie va connaître de vraies élections libres", *Le Monde*, 20 April, available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/tunisie/article/2011/04/20/la-tunisie-va-connaitre-de-vraies-elections-libres_1510254_1466522.html (accessed 26 March 2020).

Le Temps. (2010a), "Rassemblement de syndicalistes, à Tunis, en l'absence des cadres de l'UGTT", *Le Temps*, Tunis, 28 December, available at: https://www.turess.com/fr/letemps/51392 (accessed 19 March 2020).

Le Temps. (2010b), "Des avocats appellent à résorber le chômage des jeunes", *Le Temps*, Tunis, 29 December, available at: https://www.turess.com/fr/letemps/51447 (accessed 20 March 2020).

Le Temps. (2011a), "Grève générale, hier à Sfax", *Le Temps*, Tunis, 13 January, available at: https://www.turess.com/fr/letemps/52008 (accessed 19 March 2020).

Le Temps. (2011b), "La police est intervenue; l'armée s'est abstenue", *Le Temps*, Tunis, 29 January, available at: https://www.turess.com/fr/letemps/52465 (accessed 26 March 2020).

Lenin, V.I. (1970), *What Is to Be Done?*, Panther, London.

Lim, M. (2013), "Framing Bouazizi: 'White lies', hybrid network, and collective/connective action in the 2010–11 Tunisian uprising", *Journalism*, Vol. 14 No. 7, pp. 921–941.

Linebaugh, P. and Rediker, M. (2002), *The Many-Headed Hydra Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA.

Lutterbeck, D. (2015), "Tool of rule: the Tunisian police under Ben Ali", *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 20 No. 5, pp. 813–831.

Ly Netterstrøm, K. (2016), "The Tunisian general labor union and the advent of democracy", *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 70 No. 3, pp. 383–398.

Mahmood, S. (2012), "The Architects of the Egyptian Uprising and the Challenges Ahead", in Haddad, B., Bsheer, R. and Abu-Rish, Z. (Eds.), *The Dawn of the Arab Uprisings : End of an Old Order?*, Pluto Press, London, pp. 104–12.

McAdam, D. (1982), *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

McAdam, D., Tarrow, S. and Tilly, C. (2001), *Dynamics of Contention*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

McNally, M. (2015), "Gramsci, the United Front Comintern and Democratic Strategy", in McNally, M. (Ed.), *Antonio Gramsci*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp. 11–33.

Merone, F. (2015), "Enduring Class Struggle in Tunisia: The Fight for Identity beyond Political Islam", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42 No. 1, pp. 74–87.

Modonesi, M. (2015), *Subalternity, Antagonism, Autonomy: Constructing the Political Subject*, Pluto Press, London.

Moore, B. (1966), *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA.

Motta, S.C. (2017), "Emancipation in Latin America: On the Pedagogical Turn", *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol. 36 No. 1, pp. 5–20.

Motta, S.C. and Nilsen, A.G. (Eds.). (2011), *Social Movements in the Global South: Dispossession, Development and Resistance*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

Murphy, E. (1999), *Economic and Political Change in Tunisia: From Bourguiba to Ben Ali*, Vol. na, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

Murphy, E. (2013a), "Under the Emperor's Neoliberal Clothes! Why the International Financial Institutions Got it Wrong in Tunisia", in Gana, N. (Ed.), *Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, pp. 35–57.

Murphy, E.C. (2013b), "The Tunisian elections of October 2011: a democratic consensus", *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 18 No. 2, pp. 231–247.

Nassif, H.B. (2015), "A Military Besieged: The Armed Forces, the Police, and the Party in Bin (ali's Tunisia, 1987-2011", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 47 No. 1, pp. 65–87.

Nawaat. (2015), "Kasbah 1 et 2 : Quatre ans après, retour sur une occupation révolutionnaire confisquée", *Nawaat*, 30 January, available at: https://nawaat.org/portail/2015/01/30/kasbah-1-et-2-quatre-ans-apres-retour-sur-une-occupation-revolutionnaire-confisquee/ (accessed 20 September 2016).

Ncube, M., Anyanwu, J.C. and Hausken, K. (2014), "Inequality, Economic Growth and Poverty in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)", *African Development Review*, Vol. 26 No. 3, pp. 435–453.

Nilsen, A.G. and Roy, S. (Eds.). (2015a), *New Subaltern Politics: Reconceptualizing Hegemony and Resistance in Contemporary India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Nilsen, A.G. and Roy, S. (2015b), "Introduction: Reconceptualizing Subaltern Politics in Contemporary India", in Nilsen, A.G. and Roy, S. (Eds.), *New Subaltern Politics: Reconceptualizing Hegemony and Resistance in Contemporary India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

NYT, New York Times. (2011), "Chief of Tunisian Army Pledges His Support for 'the Revolution'", *The New York Times*, 24 January, available at:

https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/25/world/africa/25tunis.html (accessed 22 March 2020).

O'Brien, T. (2015), "The primacy of political security: contentious politics and insecurity in the Tunisian revolution", *Democratization*, Vol. 22 No. 7, pp. 1209–1229.

Omri, M.-S. (2012), "A Revolution of Dignity and Poetry", *Boundary 2*, Vol. 39 No. 1, pp. 137–165.

Opp, K.-D. (2009), *Theories of Political Protest and Social Movements: A Multidisciplinary Introduction, Critique, and Synthesis*, Routledge, London.

Ovshieva, I. (2013), "Stomping for Tunisia: Liberation, Identity and Dignity in Tunisian Rap Music", *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, Vol. 6 No. 1, pp. 36–54.

Owen, R. (2014), "Egypt and Tunisia: From the Revolutionary Overthrow of Dictatorships the the Struggle to Establish a New Consitutional Order", in Gerges, F.A. (Ed.), *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 257–72.

del Panta, G. (2019), "Cross-Class and Cross-Ideological Convergences over Time: Insights from the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutionary Uprisings", *Government and Opposition*, pp. 1–19.

Penner-Angrist, M. (2013), "Understanding the Success of Mass Civic Protest in Tunisia", *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 67 No. 4, pp. 547–564.

Perks, R. and Thomson, A. (1998), *The Oral History Reader*, Routledge, London; New York.

Peters, I. (2014), *Too Abstract to Be Feasible? Applying the Grounded Theory Method in Social Movement Research*, No. 247, German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Hamburg.

della Porta, D. (2014a), *Mobilizing for Democracy: Comparing 1989 and 2011*, Oxford Unitversity Press, Oxford.

della Porta, D. (2014b), *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*, Oxford Unitversity Press, Oxford.

della Porta, D. (2016), *Where Did the Revolution Go?*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

della Porta, D. and Keating, M. (2008), *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences a Pluralist Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

della Porta, D. and Reiter, H. (2006), "The Policing of Transnational Protest: A Conclusion", in della Porta, D., Peterson, A. and Reiter, H. (Eds.), *The Policing of Transnational Protest*, Ashgate, Aldershot, pp. 175–189.

Portelli, A. (1981), "The Peculiarities of Oral History", *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 12 No. 1, pp. 96–107.

Randeree, B. (2011), "Tunisian leader promises new jobs", 10 January, available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2011/01/201111016239214548.html (accessed 3 April 2020).

Rane, H. and Salem, S. (2012), "Social Media, Social Movements and the Diffusion of Ideas in the Arab Uprisings", *Journal of International Communication*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 97–111.

Reguillo, R. (2012), "Memories of the Future: The Mara-Contingency and Affiliation with Excess", *YOUNG*, Vol. 20 No. 4, pp. 345–355.

Reuters. (2011), "Unrest Reaches Tunis", *The New York Times*, 11 January, available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/12/world/africa/12tunisia.html (accessed 20 March 2020).

Rice, L. and Hamdy, K. (2016), "Folk poetry, local knowledge, and resistance in Tunisia", *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 21 No. 2, pp. 283–300.

Ritter, D.P. (2015), *The Iron Cage of Liberalism: International Politics and Unarmed Revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Rivetti, P. (2015), "Continuity and Change before and after the Uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco: Regime Reconfiguration and Policymaking in North Africa", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42 No. 1, pp. 1–11.

Ryan, Y. (2011), "Tunisia arrests bloggers and rapper", 7 January, available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2011/01/20111718360234492.html (accessed 3 April 2020).

Sadiki, L. (2002), "Bin Ali's Tunisia: Democracy by Non-Democratic Means", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 29 No. 1, pp. 57–78.

Salem, S. (2018), "Critical interventions in debates on the Arab revolutions: centring class", *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 45 No. 155, pp. 125–134.

Salmon, J. (2016), *29 jours de révolution - Histoire du soulèvement tunisien, 17 septembre 2010 - 14 janvier 2011*, Les petits matins, Paris.

Scott, J.C. (1985), *Weapons of the Weak Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.

Sewell, W.H. (1992), "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 98 No. 1, pp. 1–29.

Sewell, W.H. (2005), *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Shehata, D. (2012), "Youth Movements and the 25 January Revolution", in Korany, B. and El-Mahdi, R. (Eds.), *Arab Spring in Egypt: Revolution and Beyond*, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo; New York.

Shorbagy, M. (2007), "The Egyptian Movement for Change--Kefaya: Redefining Politics in Egypt", *Public Culture*, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 175–196.

Singerman, D. (2013), "Youth, Gender, and Dignity in the Egyptian Uprising", *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, Vol. 9 No. 3, pp. 1–27.

Skocpol, T. (1979), *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Snow, D.A. and Benford, R.D. (1988), "Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization", *International Social Movement Research*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 197–217.

Snow, D.A. and Moss, D.M. (2014), "Protest on the Fly Toward a Theory of Spontaneity in the Dynamics of Protest and Social Movements", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 79 No. 6, pp. 1122–1143.

Stepan, A. and Linz, J.J. (2013), "Democratization Theory and the" Arab Spring"", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 24 No. 2, pp. 15–30.

Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1994), "Grounded theory methodology", in Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 273–285.

Swedenburg, T. (2003), *Memories of Revolt: The 1936-1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past*, University of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville, NC.

Swedenburg, T. (2012), "Egypt's Music of Protest", *Middle East Report*, Vol. 265, pp. 39–42.

Tarrow, S. (1994), *Power in Movement: Collective Action, Social Movements and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Tavory, I. and Timmermans, S. (2009), "Two cases of ethnography: Grounded theory and the extended case method", *Ethnography*, Vol. 10 No. 3, pp. 243–263.

The Economist. (2011), "Out with the old? A new government for Tunisia", *The Economist*, 19 January, available at: https://www.economist.com/newsbook/2011/01/19/out-with-the-old (accessed 22 March 2020).

The Guardian. (2010), "Tunisian president vows to punish rioters after worst unrest in a decade", *The Guardian*, 29 December, available at: http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/29/tunisian-president-vows-punish-rioters (accessed 19 March 2020).

Thomas, P.D. (2018), "Refiguring the Subaltern", *Political Theory*, Vol. 46 No. 6, pp. 861–884.

Thompson, E.P. (1963), *The Making of the English Working Class*, Victor Gollancz Ltd, London.

Thompson, E.P. (1978), *Poverty of Theory*, Monthly Review Press, New York.

Thompson, E.P. (1993), *Customs in Common*, Penguin Books, London.

Tilly, C. (1978), *From Mobilization to Revolution*, Random House, New York.

Tilly, C. (2002), "Event Catalogs as Theories", *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 20 No. 2, pp. 248–254.

Tilly, C. (2008), *Contentious Performances*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Tripp, C. (2013), *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Tripp, C. (2014), "The Politics of Resistance and the Arab Uprisings", in Gerges, F.A. (Ed.), *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 135–54.

Tripp, C. (2015), "Battlefields of the Republic: the struggle for public space in Tunisia", presented at the Social Movements and Popular Mobilization in the MENA Seminar Series, The London School of Economics and Political Sciences Middle East Centre, London.

Trotsky, L. (2008), *History of the Russian Revolution*, Haymarket Books, Chicago, IL.

Tsourapas, G. (2013), "The Other Side of a Neoliberal Miracle: Economic Reform and Political De-Liberalization in Ben Ali's Tunisia", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 23–41.

Volpi, F. (2016), *Revolution and Authoritarianism in North Africa*, C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, London.

Warkotsch, J. (2015), *Bread, Freedom, Human Dignity: The Political Economy of Protest Mobilization in Egypt and Tunisia*, PhD thesis, European University Institute, Florence, available at: https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/35864 (accessed 3 February 2020).

Wedeen, L. (1999), *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Weipert-Fenner, I. and Hamdi, S. (2017), "Mobilization of the Marginalized: Unemployed Activism in Tunisia", *Issam Fares Institute Working Paper*, Vol. 43, available at: https://www.academia.edu/34973739/Mobilization_of_the_Marginalized_Unempl oyed_Activism_in_Tunisia (accessed 7 November 2017).

Whyte, W.F. (1943), *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure Of An Italian Slum*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Willis, M.J. (2012), *Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring*, C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, London.

Wulf, V., Misaki, K., Atam, M., Randall, D. and Rohde, M. (2013), "'On the ground'in Sidi Bouzid: investigating social media use during the tunisian revolution", *Proceedings of the 2013 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work*, ACM, pp. 1409–1418.

Yousfi, H. (2015a), *L'UGTT, une passion tunisienne. Enquête sur les syndicalistes en révolution*, Karthala, Paris.

Yousfi, H. (2015b), "The Tunisian Revolution: Narratives of the Tunisian General Labour Union", in Sadiki, L. (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization*, Routledge, New York, NY, pp. 319–330.

Yousfi, H. (2018), *Trade Unions and Arab Revolutions: The Tunisian Case of UGTT*, Routledge, New York, NY.

Zemni, S. (2015a), "The roots of the Tunisian revolution: elements of a political sociology", *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization*, Routledge, New York, NY, pp. 77–88.

Zemni, S. (2015b), "The extraordinary politics of the Tunisian revolution: the process of constitution making", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 20 No. 1, pp. 1–17.

Zemni, S., De Smet, B. and Bogaert, K. (2013), "Luxemburg on Tahrir Square: Reading the Arab Revolutions with Rosa Luxemburg's The Mass Strike", *Antipode*, Vol. 45 No. 4, pp. 888–907.

List of interviews

The below lists my interlocutors with name, age at the time of the interview, professional status or group association most relevant to their participation in the revolution, as well as place and date of interview.

Abdelwahed Homri, 63, high school teacher and UGTT member, Kasserine, 23.03.2018

Abderraouf Abidi, 37, architect and PDP activist, Regueb, 10.05.2018

Abderrazek Kilani, 58, lawyer, Tunis, 16.07.2018

Achref Sloughi, 34, worker, Thala, 19.06.2018

Ahmed Riahi, 34, unemployed youth, Tunis, 05.11.2018

Ahmed Sassi, 33, POCT activist, Tunis, 20.07.2018

Ala Hidri, 26, high school student, Menzel Bouzaiane, 13.05.2018

Ali Rebah, 37, media activist, Kasserine, 25.02.2018

Amine Boubaker Abidi, 30, farm worker, Regueb, 12.05.2018

Anis, 47, unemployed youth, Tunis, 07.11.2018

Anwar Jouidi, 37, unemployed youth, Sidi Bouzid, 04.07.2018

Arbi Kadri, 42, UDC co-founder, unemployed youth, Regueb, 09.05.2018

Badreddine Masoudi, 58, UGTT member, Regueb, 08.05.2018

Bassem Hajji, 28, unemployed youth, Thala, 14.04.2018

Bilel Rebai, 33, seasonal worker, Sidi Bouzid, 05.07.2018

Bouderbala Nsiri, 62, medical doctor, LTDH activist, Sidi Bouzid, 04.07.2018

Cherif Khraifi, 38, POCT activist, UDC co-founder, Tunis, 18.07.2018

Choukri Hayouni, 56, high school teacher and UGTT member, Kasserine, 05.04.2018

Choukri Slougui, 34, unemployed youth, Kasserine, 16.03.2018

Ezzeddine Aloui, 55, worker, Tunis, 07.11.2018

Ezzeddine Negrichi, 62, UGTT local secretary general, Thala, 16.04.2018

Fadhel Bouzidi, 58, worker, Kasserine, 23.03.2018

Fathi, 48, worker, Thala, 14.04.2018

Ghassen, 37, unemployed youth, Kasserine, 24.02.2018

Ghassen Aljane, 32, university student, Tunis, 13.02.2018

Ghassen Besbes, 39, lawyer and UGTT member, Sfax, 14.02.2018

Hachem Maaidi, 32, UDC co-founder, unemployed youth, Regueb, 09.05.2018

Hajer Assoudi, 26, high school student, Kasserine, 26.02.2018

Hajer Dargouth, 31, university student, Tunis, 30.01.2018

Hamza Aloui, 29, unemployed youth, Kasserine, 23.03.2018

Hamza Seyhi, 29, unemployed youth, Thala, 15.04.2018

Hassan Nasri, 45, worker, Kasserine, 22.03.2018

Haythem El-Mekki, 35, blogger, Tunis, 15.02.2018

Haythem Gharsalli, 30, unemployed youth, Kasserine, 06.04.2018

Haythem Hasni, 31, unemployed youth, Kasserine, 05.04.2018

Helmi, 25, high school student, Kasserine, 08.03.2018

Helmi Cheniti, 43, worker, Thala, 17.04.2018

Henda Chennaoui, 35, journalist, blogger, Tunis, 12.07.2018

Hmed, 30, unemployed youth, Kasserine, 06.04.2018

Houssem Allali, 34, unemployed youth, Kasserine, 08.03.2018

Hsan Jamli, 53, worker, Thala, 16.04.2018

Imed Mourali, 34, worker, Kasserine, 16.03.2018

Inel Tarfa, 31, media activist, Tunis, 27.01.2018

Jaafer Bouzidi, 41, lawyer, Kasserine, 06.04.2018

Jamel Boulaabi, 42, high school teacher and UGTT member, Thala, 17.04.2018

Jamel Hammedi, 53, medical doctor, Kasserine, 13.04.2018

Kais Buoazizi, 38, unemployed youth, Sidi Bouzid, 05.07.2018

Karim Bouzidi, 45, worker, Kasserine, 15.03.2018

Karim Delhoumi, 25, unemployed youth, Kasserine, 15.03.2018

Lazher Gharbi, 65, UGTT member, Sidi Bouzid, 04.07.2018

Lina Ben Mhenni, 35, blogger, Tunis, 20.02.2018

Maher Bouazzi, 43, lawyer, Kasserine, 27.02.2018

Maher Khadhraoui, 26, high school student, Kasserine, 13.04.2018

Majdi Gharsalli, 35, lawyer, Kasserine, 15.03.2018

Majed Azzouz Banneni, 42, lawyer, Kasserine, 24.03.2018

Mohamed Alahmady, 31, unemployed youth, Regueb, 16.02.2018

Mohamed Chaabane, 71, UGTT regional secretary general, Sfax, 06.07.2018

Mohamed El-Arby Ennaguezi, 58, worker, Tunis, 05.11.2018

Mohamed Fahem Arbaoui, 48, high school teacher and UGTT member, Thala, 07.04.2018

Mohamed Gharsalli, 43, lawyer, Kasserine, 16.03.2018

Mohamed Habib Belhaj, 56, POCT activist and UGTT member, Tunis, 19.07.2018

Mohamed Kadri, 39, PDP activist, LTDH member, Regueb, 11.05.2018

Mohamed Lazher Gammoudi, 60, UGTT regional secretary general, Sidi Bouzid, 04.07.2018

Mohamed Lazher Kadri, 30, unemployed youth, Regueb, 11.05.2018

Mohamed Nasri, 32, unemployed youth, Kasserine, 23.02.2018

Mohamed Nejii Gharsalli, 62, lawyer, Kasserine, 27.02.2018

Mohamed Rehimi, 64, lawyer, Kasserine, 22.03.2018

Mohamed Sayahi, 64, LTDH activist, Regueb, 11.05.2018

Mohamed Taher Khadraoui, 50, PDP activist, Kasserine, 07.03.2018

Moncef Guebsi, 54, university professor and UGTT member, Sfax, 06.07.2018

Mongi Zorbi, 63, worker, Kasserine, 22.03.2018

Mustafa Aloui, 56, high school teacher, Kasserine, 08.03.2018

Naoufel Abbassi, 38, unemployed youth, Menzel Bouzaiane, 14.05.2018

Nasser Zribi, 62, UGTT local secretary general, Regueb, 08.05.2018

Nizar, 34, unemployed youth, Kasserine, 05.04.2018

Nouredine Hayyoumi, 69, retired high school teacher, Thala, 17.04.2018

Omar Mokhtar Saidi, 26, high school student, Thala, 18.06.2018

Rami Cherif, 27, unemployed youth, Tunis, 02.11.2018

Rebh Briki, 58, mother of martyr Slah Mtir, Kasserine, 09.03.2018

Ridha Bazine, 58, UGTT member, Sfax, 07.07.2018

Safuan Bouazizi, 35, unemployed youth, Menzel Bouzaiane, 14.05.2018

Saif Seyhi, 24, high school student, Thala, 17.04.2018

Salam Shini, 38, worker, Tunis, 07.11.2018

Sariha Hayouni, 43, high school teacher, Kasserine, 13.04.2018

Sassi Bouallagui, 62, POCT local leader, Kasserine, 26.02.2018

Sayeh Abdelsalem, 33, unemployed youth, Regueb, 08.05.2018

Seif Abadi, 38, unemployed youth, Regueb, 11.05.2018

Seif Eddine Abadi, 24, high school student, Kasserine, 12.04.2018

Seif Hamdi, 28, unemployed youth, Thala, 19.06.2018

Shady Rebhy, 27, unemployed youth, Kasserine, 24.02.2018

Souhaiel Aidoudi, 33, unemployed youth, Tunis, 17.07.2018

Taha Zorgui, 26, high school student, Kasserine, 12.04.2018

Tarik Aidoudi, 27, high school student, Kasserine, 04.04.2018

Tounsi Ben Taieb Nasri, 33, worker, Kasserine, 13.04.2018

Wael, 25, high school student, Tunis, 02.11.2018

Wael Karrafi, 26, high school student, Kasserine, 09.03.2018

Wajdi Khadhraoui, 38, unemployed youth, Kasserine, 25.02.2018

Walid Abidi, 40, unemployed youth, Regueb, 10.05.2018

Wissem Sghraier, 35, PDP activist, Tunis, 15.02.2018

Yassine Hamzaoui, 44, artist, Tunis, 05.11.2018

Yesser Mabrouki, 25, high school student, Thala, 18.06.2018

Youssef Torjmen, 33, university student, Tunis, 12.12.2017

Zied Lakhdar, 56, activist, Tunis, 17.07.2018