Today's Tunisia political subjectivities. The emergence of new local movements and actors.

Las subjetividades políticas de hoy en Túnez. La aparición de nuevos movimientos y actores locales.

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Abstract

In this paper, I would like to relate on Tunisian local political movements and actors that have grown up after 2011. Their main characteristics are the rootedness in local contexts such as specific quarters or municipalities, and the claim for active citizenship.

The recent empowerment of Tunisian civil society goes together with the emergence of local committees and various associations in several quarters and municipalities. This innovative dimension constitutes a multi-sited democracy lab, locally based, breeding ground for a new political subjectivity, which has to be intended as a complex of perceptions, actions, thoughts, fears regarding politics and society. Tunisian youths are the main actors engaged in this panorama. They are looking for new original political languages provided with social and cultural legitimacy, with which they try to involve ordinary people.

From the partial results of an ongoing ethnography sited in the urban area of the Grand Tunis, attention will be paid to the individual experience of new young activists. The germination of their political engagement, the perception of continuity and transformation of their "Self", affinities and fractures within the peer group and the family, their adherence to shared norms and values will be all subjects of reflexion.

Keywords: Tunisia/ civil society/ local movements/ youth/ subjectivity.

Resumen

En este artículo, trataré de los movimientos políticos y actores tunecinos en el ámbito local que han surgido después de 2011. Las características principales de estos son el arraigo en unos contextos locales específicos, como determinados barrios o municipios, y la reivindicación de la ciudadanía activa. El reciente empoderamiento de la sociedad civil tunecina está acompañado del surgimiento de comités locales y asociaciones en varios sectores y municipios. Esta dimensión innovadora constituye un laboratorio de democracia multi-situado, con base local, en el que se crean las condiciones para una nueva subjetividad política, que debe entenderse como un conjunto de percepciones, acciones, pensamientos, temores relacionados con la política y la sociedad. Los jóvenes tunecinos son los principales actores involucrados en esta dinámica. Buscan nuevos lenguajes políticos que sean originales, dotados de legitimidad social y cultural, con los que intentan involucrar a la gente común. A partir de los resultados parciales de una etnografía aún en curso, situada en el área urbana del Gran Túnez, se prestará especial atención a la experiencia individual de estos nuevos jóvenes activistas. La germinación de su compromiso político, la percepción de continuidad y transformación de su "ser", como sujeto, las afinidades y las fracturas dentro del grupo de iguales y la familia, su adhesión a las normas y valores compartidos serán todos temas de reflexión en este estudio.

Palabras clave: Túnez/ sociedad civil/ movimientos locales/ juventud/ subjetividad.

Introduction

In this article, I would like to talk about Tunisian local political movements and actors that have grown since 2011. Their main characteristics are the rootedness in the local context in specific quarters or municipalities, and the claim for active citizenship. The aim is to understand if the (post)revolutionary season could be conceived as a discourse (Foucault, 1971) which informs, shapes and reflects a certain kind of subjectivity.

By making use of ethnographic stuff consisting of interviews and field notes , attention will be paid to two specific cases which refer to the urban context of the Grand Tunis. They both constitute a clear example of the topic we are discussing and may allow us to deepen the exploration of the social actors' subjectivity (Moore, 2007; Biehl, Good & Kleinman, 2007).

As Bridget Byrne (2003:30) claims, «approaching processes of subject construction through narrative analysis has the advantage of acknowledging the constructed, flexible and fictionalized nature of the process of accounting for the self. The subject is understood as in process ».

Furthermore, making use of biographies allows us to place particular emphasis on social actors facing political change given that, in many analysis concerning democratic transitions as well as uprisings and their aftermath, attention is exclusively focused on 'structural' factors – such as economic or demographic issues or social grievances. The complex processes that have led ordinary people to join rebellions and imagine an alternative order of things are often treated as secondary.

A complex post-revolutionary transition: the prism of citizenship and civil society

When it comes to contemporary Tunisia, it is practically impossible not to mention the progress – or the regression – of the transitional post-revolutionary process.

It is difficult to evaluate the complex political transition that Tunisia is currently experiencing. Whilst it's undeniable that several transformations have impacted the public space (Kerrou, 2018; Sebastiani & Turki, 2016), in order to avoid any easy enthusiasm as well as apologetic analysis of the so-called Revolution, it should be verified if the supposed innovative grammar of social

interactions between institutions and citizens has generated a new kind of political subjectivity (Smith, 2010) among people, especially ordinary people, currently involved in political and social issues.

Since 2011, Tunisian democratic transition has been passing through continuity and ruptures compared to the old regime of Ben Ali (Cavatorta, 2015). The principal claim of the revolutionary movement, whose roots may have been seen already over the past decades, consisted in demanding a new kind of citizenship, inspired by ideals of justice and equality, so making a switch inside the classic paradigm of citizenship, *muwatana*, which refers mainly to the religious and national(ist) concepts of *umma* and *watan* (Longuenesse, 2017).

This new kind of citizenship is intimately related to practices of re-appropriation of the public space and political participation that go beyond the strict parameters of the subjection to the nation and his leaders. Maybe we are assisting the emergence of a new kind of citizen (*muwatin*) as Mohamed Kerrou (2018) and Abdelhamid Hénia (2015) argue. The status of the individual subjected to a State-formation – *Makhzen*, *beylik*, *dawla*, colonial dynastic State or Nation-State – gives way to one of the citizen who calls for justice and equality. Even though this call is addressed to the State, it emerges from interstitial spaces in which the political and cultural hegemony of the State is not extensive at all. Therefore, if classic approaches consider citizenship as a social statute defined by the State, it is also necessary to consider how people – the citizens – make their own social representations about their rights and the legitimacy concerning their claims (Neveu, 2004). Not for nothing James Holston (1999) defined insurgent citizenship as «insurgent forms of the social that [...] empower, parody, derail or subvert state agendas», as well as «the struggles over what it means to be a member of the modern state – which is why I refer to them with the term *citizenship*» (1999: 167).

However, the role and the consolidation of the civil society has been fundamental to the progress of the revolutionary demands.

Even if the role and the importance of civil society in post-revolutionary Tunisia has been stressed by a wide field of transnational institutions and organisations, the current usages of the concept itself should be problematized.

First: which are the legitimate boundaries of today's civil society? Second: which are the pressures and the negotiations between power and civil actors (Allal et Geisser, 2018)?

Today's international agency programmes and rhetoric, but also political and specialist discourses, assign the status of civil society organisations to the entities whose cultural and socio-political configuration links targets and strategies of transnational institutions and actors currently engaged in exercising pressure, directing or even influencing local political actors, in the framework of the neoliberal democratic governance.

Obviously, this perspective is reductionist, given that it does not perceive the effervescence of other forces rooted in the civil society. However, is it possible to include in the civil society every opposition political movement, incorporating even those who did not joined the alleged liberal spirit of the concept, as it was in Tunisia in the seventies (Zghal, 1989)? That is why a preliminary operation should consist of the evaluation of the possibility to extend the application of the concept of civil society – as has been developing in cultural and intellectual European history – to other societies, whose historical and political processes have been quite different. If many

observers and scholars maintain that actors who are not inspired by democratic and universal values couldn't be included in the civil society field (Kerrou, 2018), many others retain that an intermediate level between the State and the private sphere may be found everywhere, even if it may assume peculiar forms and manifestations (Hann & Dunn, 1997).

In other words, if the 'hegemonic' perspective on civil society runs the risk of being short-sighted due to the exclusive recognition of certain kind of actors, it should shed light on those social structures equally engaged in processes of mediation with or against the State. For example, different type of groups or corporations (familiar, economical, etc.), even in the delocalised and fragmented urban forms, still represent political and identity markers. Alternatively, let us also consider the Islamic option, that has been very attractive in the Tunisian post-revolutionary season and which is well covered in the institutional sphere as well as in the public space, as the hard debate and the political initiatives related to the revision of the heritage juridical system demonstrate. Even this dimension, that operates to transform cultural values in political structures, as Marie-Àngels Roque (2018) argues, should be understood by a look at the civil society, as well as every force that maintains a dialectic relation to the State and its apparatus.

The internal variability of Tunisian civil society – within which nowadays we have to include also the Sub-Saharan actors and community groups, just to underline its complexity (Pouessel, 2012) – compels us to reconsider its supposed submission to the State, especially in the neoliberal governance era, and in the light of the transnational level at which many agencies and organisations work, more than under the umbrella of semi-authoritarian States. The 'authoritarian syndrome' (Camau et Geisser, 2003), shared by many North African and Middle East States, cannot let us take for granted the cannibalisation of the civil society by the political one. Furthermore, it cannot lead us to not consider how, every social group tries to achieve portions of power and moral assertion, contributing to the establishment of a plural civil society.

The importance of considering civil society is justified, in my opinion, by the fact that, as Jean-François Bayart (1985) writes, the calling into question of an authoritarian regime is achieved when there is an institutionalisation of the cultural capital of the uprising into a true and solid civil society.

Inside new local organisations and subjects

The recent development of Tunisian civil society goes together with the emergence of local committees and various associations in several quarters and municipalities. In 2018, the Tunisian Parliament approved the Code of Local Authorities, whose aim is to provide concrete tools for regions and municipalities in order to get greater autonomy and administrative efficiency. The 'Decentralisation' is part of the processes of transformation that Maghreb's international funding organisations have promoted in order to streamline the State's extensive central administrations and open the local political level within the democratisation of the region. Nevertheless, political decentralisation is also the result of popular involvement in the production of new territorial orders. This is something worth delving deeper into, because "Arab Springs" can be understood both as a demand for local autonomy and for "more State" involvement (Bras et Signoles, 2017).

Decentralisation is seen as

> "an element contributing to the democratisation of governance, promoting greater proximity between the citizens and political decision-makers, as a means for establishing and reinforcing the rule of law and a guarantee for the exercise of local liberties (*ibidem*)".

Issues of socio-spatial justice were placed at the heart of popular mobilisations in 2011 (Gana, 2013), and remain central today in public debate (Brésillon, 2018), given that territorialised disparities provided support for social discontent and led in turn to a break with the status quo and eventually to political reform. Not for nothing it is in territories whose people perceive a social and moral fracture with regard to the urban space represented as developed and much more liveable, it is in these territories that several actors, especially among young Tunisians, are experiencing new forms of participation in the public sphere (Kilani, 2014; Saidi 2017).

In many cases, these youths are now entering, for the first time, the public scene and they are trying to elaborate new declinations of the common good.

The forthcoming pages draw on an ongoing research about young Tunisians and the formation of a new political subjectivity but not necessarily formally constituted and organised. In this respect, following Sherry Ortner (2005), I refer to 'subjectivity' to mean the ensemble of modes of perceptions, affect, thought, desire, fear and so forth that animate acting subjects. I also mean the cultural and social formation that shape, organise and provoke those modes of affect, thought, and so on. Thus, the subjectivity dimension could be referred, I think, both to real people acting in specific contexts and in concrete spaces and the germination of a political subjectivity, the latter to be intended less in terms of a formal political group than as 'world view' or, better yet, as a moral economy in the process of forming, crossing old and inedited systems of values and judgements.

The focus on subjectivity is present even in the fundamental work of Beatrice Hibou (2011; 2006) who has analysed the political economy of domination under Ben Ali in terms of the processes of subjectification producing the subject and the subjected as well as the understanding and the signification given to the political and moral patterns of society.

Edward Thompson had similar interests when he developed his knowledge on the English working class, giving propriety to the working class' processes of subjectification rather than adopting the materialistic approach of the working class' objectification (Fassin, 2009).

Now I will refer principally to two organisations, acting in the urban area of the Grand Tunis, which include four governorates (Tunis, Ben Arous, Manouba, Ariana), and then I will focus on the young social actors who are highly engaged within their activities.

I will begin with *GAM*, 'Generation Against Marginalisation', an association based in Kabaria. This delegation, about ten kilometres far from Tunis, resulted from the State housing policies in the fifties, when the State tried to manage rural internal migration through the creation of quartiers, districts in cheap tracts of land – the so-called *Gourbi*[1]-Operation (Sebag, 1998). Generally recognised for its high crime rate, poverty and religious radicalisation just after the 2011 Revolution, in recent years Kabaria has also been experiencing a certain degree of dynamism, whose tangible expression resides in the foundation of associative organisations and groups. As many youths living there told me, there is now an increasing number of young inhabitants of the district who want to improve their material and cultural conditions.

GAM was created thanks to the synergy between local institutions and the principal political parties, which have intervened in order to make available to the association the facilities to realise several activities, even free courses in languages. Many students succeeded in passing the

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[1] The Gourbis are the Northern Africa rural huts and dwellings.

Baccalaureate exam (an exam which guarantees the access to higher education) thanks to the intervention of the association. One other kind of activity on which the association focuses consists of the regeneration of local public degraded spaces that are in neglected conditions. These kind of interventions refers to the concept of common good, usually associated to State-property and so to a no-man's-land, given that no one identifies with the State.

Nevertheless, in a short time, financial and logistic difficulties have arisen, and the building where activities were organised had to close. Even if outdoor activities may be organised (for example, popular cine-forum) it is difficult to pursue local transformations without resources or without the 'protection' of politicians or 'big men', as many of the young activists I met told me. This point is shared by many young Tunisians involved in several local organisations' activities and should be examined further, since it questions the actual autonomy of civil society.

The president of *GAM* is Talel, a 31-year old temporary teacher of philosophy[2]. His interests in politics have quite 'classical' roots: as he was attending high school, he took part in demonstrations against the American military intervention in Iraq as well as in demonstrations supporting the Palestinian cause. In the political climate of the time, schools and universities were social spaces of confrontation between leftist organisations and students and the Islamists (even if the latter were not very well organised, due to the regime's repression). His former anti-imperialist political thought became more oriented to the left when he moved to the high school campus, where he had the chance to speak about the political situation and the formation of an alternative to other students. He was very impressed by the strong organisation of the students' movement. Even if it was at that time that he started to have political ideals, a greater boost derived from his social environment. As he told me in an interview,

> "The base [of political engagement] is not necessarily cognitive. The base is linked to your life's experiences. For young people it's the discrimination, the inequalities, the oppression of police in the quartiers, the arrests, the relation between the power and citizens… Every time conflicts and society thinks that everything is normal… No, nothing is normal… […] My engagement was also determined by the experience of my father, of my mother, my family…My father has been forced to early retirement in 1994, because the firm where he was employed was privatised…We had a few bad years… My mother too, she worked in an offshore textile factory in Bir el Kassa and she was sent home because the owner reduced the production… So injustices and inequalities in society have been the major driving forces that led me…"

These few words evoke feelings and social situations recurrent in many young Tunisians' biographies, situations engendering frustration, perceptions of social injustice, and have not changed even since the end of the regime.

The next level, the passage to the concrete political engagement occurred during the hunger strike by the so-called '18 October movement', including different personalities, lawyers, members of the *Tunisian League of Human Rights*, whose slogan was 'Hunger, not Submission' and that foreshadowed the union of the oppositions against the Ben Ali's regime[3]. He visited the place

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[2] In order to preserve people's privacy, their names in the text are altered.
[3] The 18th October 2005 a group of eight public figures of the political scene and the civil society began a hunger strike to reclaim freedom of expression and association and amnesty for all political prisoners. The mobilization – lasted 32 days – started on the occasion of the 'World Summit on the Information Society', which took place in Tunis in November 2005.

where the strike was going on, encountering for the first time important people like Samir Dilou and Hamma Hammani[4].

Talel paid for his engagement with prison and several arrests. The first time he was imprisoned was during the first waves of protests in 2010, in the Grand Tunis. The last time was in the winter of 2017, a season generally characterised by riots throughout the country. He spent just two days in prison, because his quarter mobilised in order for him to get out of jail. He says that the quarter often rises up and there is a strong popular participation when the president of the governorate comes to visit the district. His family has not really supported his political engagement: his father, former militant of the Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens (UGTT) syndicate, had a bad experience in politics, and used to tell his son that he had wasted his life because of his political commitment. Talel told me his father was worried that his engagement would have several bad consequences on his life and his family, given that a corrupt accusation, for example, would affect the whole family and not just one person. By contrast, his mother helped him a lot. They had a secret code through which they used to communicate, even if the woman could figure out that police were going to do checks in the houses of the suspected activists, she promptly helped his son to hide or burn, for example, political newspapers or any sort of propaganda material.

Even avoiding social determinism, we cannot underestimate that, as in many other cases, the choice to be an activist is not totally apart from the family story. This is true for leftist or social movement activists as well as for Islamist political party militants, especially when fathers or grandfathers were imprisoned or tortured or even murdered, as it was in Tunisia during the Bourguiba and Ben Ali's regimes. These considerations may lead us to rethink the relation between 'structure' and 'agency', conceiving it less as a dichotomy rather than being fluid and multi-causal.

The last point concerning Talel's profile I would like to focus on is central in the understanding of the intimate relationship between individual and political subjectification.

Talel has also been part of the *Union of the Unemployed Graduated* (UDC), an organisation that tries to represent a social category that has increasingly grown, marking the end of the projects or dreams of social climbing propagated by Ben Ali. According to Talel, every time ideology characterises a political organisation too much, there is the danger of transformation into a sect, whose main defence weapon is identity.

He said that since 2008, he had been criticizing the UDC approach that sacrificed diversity among young people, students, territories and regions in the name of the organisational unit and centralisation. According to him, it was necessary instead to adopt decentralisation and horizontality inside the organisation. That is not just a methodological matter, but it is even more substantial, as the UDC focused its efforts in opposing the system, without preparing or trying to create the conditions for the emergence of a political or social alternative. Even if he broke from UDC in 2018, it was already in 2011, just after the Revolution, that he became interested in local politics. He wanted to inform young people that during the Regime could not do anything. He was

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[4] Samir Dilou member of the Executive Committee of the *Ennahda Movement*. He is one of the founders of the International Organisation to Defend Political Prisoners. On 20 December 2011, he joined the Jebali Cabinet as Minister of Human Rights and Transitional Justice and Spokesperson of the Government. Hamma Hammami, implacable opponent of Ben Ali, has been the leader of the Popular Front, as well as spokesman of the Tunisian Workers' Party.

among the founders of the *Committee for the protection of the Revolution* in Kabaria, where he met students, young unemployed and other *wouled houma*, 'sons of the quarter', that later would enter *GAM*.

According to him, local politics aims to make small, specific, detailed interventions that may produce tangible change. While the national dimension has no rootedness, the local one has. Even if it is easier to question general issues, it is more necessary to get inside the cultural, social, economic insight of a community. It is possible to persuade young people if you speak to them daily.

«I rely greatly on the power of the community, on the power of the youth groups, on the youths who are oppressed and live the same life I live», he told me.

The strong relationship with the community, starting from the peer group, influences Talel ideological references. He said he's *men'arfchist*, (from the Tunisian Arabic *me n'arfch*, 'I don't know'), that is to say, doubt about all things. A sort of agnosticism but constructive, based on ignorance.

> "That's how we call it at Kabaria, in the common language. We don't' know. We have to doubt about everything we know. I have no stable references, only the engagement for justice and freedom, which is the vertebral column of society […]. I extract from ideologies something that could be interesting for me. I have been Marxist, communist, socialist, anarchist, environmentalist, naturalist…. I believe in the class struggle, in the individuality, in freedom, in the art, in the responsibility… Many things… The world is huge, the knowledge so great, things to say, to do so much… […] This is the problem: when you are engaged in politics, you think you have come to the absolute truth."

These statements reflect a complex relationship to those ideologies that were so important during the early phases of Talel political education and whose validation is now called into question, due to the need to understand better, maybe from a Gramscian perspective, the complexity and even the contradictions of the subaltern groups[5].

So, in short, the maturation of Talel personality and, I would say, his *world view* is deeply tied to the development of a political subjectivity, rooted in the local district of Kabaria and in the life experiences of ordinary people involved in such projects.

Talel thinks that Tunisian leftist movements have often been elitist, chic. This is a position shared by many young activists disappointed by left political parties and organisations (Hmed, 2018). He used to tell me that to get inside the common feeling, the mainstream sentiments of the people, it's necessary to understand religion, for example. In recent years, he has been continuously coming and going from religion, spirituality to atheism. Even though he is not a believer, he tries to understand – both morally and cognitively – who believes in God, in order to include himself in the constitution of a popular formation. His aim is to organize a group that takes territories. He wants to create a local unity of action and feelings, including religious people, atheists and socialists. He perfectly understands that religious subjectification affects cultural and individual practices and that many social matters are expressed through religious language (Dupret, Pierret, Pinto & Spellman-Poots, 2012).

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[5] Antonio Gramsci was interested in exploring the cultural worlds of the subaltern groups. According to him, these ever-changing world-views are intrinsically fragmented, incoherent and contradictory (Creahn, 2002). Being engaged in politics within a local level requires an effort to understand subalterns' world-views and 'common sense', rather than dismiss them hastily.

His attachment to the 'local' and popular dimension consists of a double track: individual and political. I have taken part in his ordinary day, and I have seen how he tries to stay and talk to nearly every person wherever he goes in Kabaria. In many cases, he borrows books – concerning poetry, politics or philosophy – to people, both young and adults. Even though this attitude may be defined as 'educative' or pedagogic, he doesn't call into question the dignity and respect towards people, whatever their convictions. This is a quite different approach compared to other political organisations whose members, as I have seen in several cases, do not recognise dignity to many expressions of 'popular culture', like religion, especially in its popular piety form.

I think this innovative dimension constitutes a multi-sited democracy lab, locally based, a breeding ground for a new political subjectivity.

In short, what I would like to underline is the quest for legitimacy by local organisations born after Revolution and new actors. The term 'new' does not necessarily imply an age connotation, but a new type of political sensibility and a new subjectivity in politics as in the political activists' life. Legitimacy means a strategic and moral effort to share the sense of community. Talel and friends have not cut their ties from the youth who have been influenced by the Salafi tendency, for example (Torelli, Merone & Cavatorta, 2012). They have decided not to reject or deny the phenomenon. Similarly, they have decided not to consider it just as a problem, making rather efforts to understand people's deep beliefs, and the reason for their religious and political change. The chosen method consisted of speaking at length to them, in the *café*, without trying to persuade or convince them they were wrong, treating them as equals. In this way, the local association tried to go through the cultural and political storm that pounded post-revolutionary Tunisia. Today many people have abandoned the Salafism after embracing it, being reintegrated without too much trouble into the social networks of friends and neighbourhood. This testifies to the temporary character of the Salafist 'turn' common to many stories of young Tunisians. Some even take part in the activities of the association, having responsible roles.

Nevertheless, the attention given to the local and the search for legitimacy does not imply the absence of conflicts about values or the passive reception of tradition. Let us consider two examples.

Talel told me that during the occasion of the *Eid el-Adha*[6], also known as the Feast of the Sacrifice, he had a little fight with his father, who decided to expend the whole capital of their commercial kiosk, where they works, to buy a mutton. After the *Eid*, they had no more money to buy new merchandise but the father justified his decision by saying that the *Eid* is a very important feast. Talel claimed that even the Islamic religion requires sacrificing mutton according to the possibilities. He said that religion doesn't require you to sacrifice yourself. Otherwise, it would be in direct contrast to reality.

One other, less personal, example is one that Talel and friends recounted to me regarding the hostility of some aged conservative people in Kabaria. They were engaged in a negative campaign against the association, whose members were not easily malleable and controllable. This picture may help us to understand that the stress on the 'local' dimension is not the same as asserting a utopian agreement inside the community. Conflicts and negotiations are instead quite common.

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[6] The Feast celebrates the willingness of Ibrahim to sacrifice his son Ismail as an act of submission to God, before an angel stopped him. For a psychoanalytical interpretation of this sacred episode, see Benslama, 2002.

A Spring of Personal Commitment

One other actor that deserves our attention is Imed, the 26-year-old president of the association *Ro2ya* (vision) in Mohammedia, a municipality in the governorate of Ben Arous, generally known as the first Tunisian context of illegal migration (*harqa*) towards Italy in the 90s. He studies English at the 'Manouba University', and he gives on-line English lessons in order to earn some money.

Like Talel, he used to move in the politicised circles of University, where the two opposing students' syndicates (the UGET, leftist-oriented, and UGTE, with religious connotations) compete for consensus[7]. Students' political life in university is closely related to general political life; in fact, political parties finance the electoral campaign of young candidates in universities and many students engaged in politics at university, later join political parties. This is useful to underline continuities and not extreme fractures between the 'political society' viewed as opposed to the 'civil' one, even if there are surely many differences, especially at local levels and although targets and aims are different. In fact, civil society organizations focus more on policy rather than on politics, that is to say, on transparent governance and participatory management of municipalities for example.

According to Imed's statements, many young current activists form their political subjectivity in an environment teeming with references to Trotsky, Marx, Saddam Hussein and the Ba'th Party, just to name a few, as well as to political tools like general strikes, election campaigns and speeches.

This fact underlines the porousness of the borders between old and new forms of political participation.

However, we cannot fail to notice discrepancies between a world impregnated with political references and the general disaffection with politics that characterizes the large majority of Tunisian youth. According to Imed, this is due to the fact that when you attend university, you still have your whole life ahead of you and you have a positive aptitude to the future. Two to three years later, facing youth unemployment, things change radically. Furthermore, at University you personally know people engaged in politics, you meet them at the *café* and it's easier to trust them because you have more or less direct relations with them. In ordinary politics, instead, the social tie to the politician is weaker, abstract, intangible, and confidence decreases.

That environment influenced Talel, whose maternal uncle of Algerian origins took part in the Algerian war of liberation. When he was 17-18 year-old he started reading Trotsky. He also appreciated the figure of the Iranian Ali Shariati. At university, he appreciated the nationalist groups who still referred to the Nasser experience and to the Ba'athist ideology.

However, there are many differences between the moral careers of Talel and Imed. Imed is younger than Talel, and he had become aware of politics just before the Arab Springs. The spread of the social networks, Facebook primarily, played an enormous role in his growth. He and his friends had the chance to confront people from other countries, dealing with concepts like freedom, democracy, and political representation. This on-line debate also involved activists and people in exile from Tunisia. He decided to study English, a language that could let him open his individual trajectory to a wider dimension.

Nevertheless, despite this international openness, his political engagement is purely locally based. During the revolutionary movement, he was active in Mohammedia. During that period, he took part in protests in the municipality, isolated from Tunis by the police control of the connecting routes to the capital city.

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[7] The University of Manouba is generally considered a left-wing university, as is the 'Neuf Avril' one, to such an extent that the former is unofficially named the 'Baghdad' of Tunisian universities, the latter the 'Vietnam'.

He entered the civil society field in 2014 in Mohammedia and he explains his choice by saying that, through local action he can set an example for other people, for other towns, concretely inspiring youths with no hope for change. Through his work in Mohammedia Imed and his friends face 'desperation', as he told me. According to him, his organisation's legitimacy resides in the firmness by which he and the other young people refuse money from international donors or organisations that want to rely upon local associations to pursue several projects.

> "We don't sell ourselves. I don't accept money to take part in projects I don't like or whose leading organisations have no transparent links to governments and power agencies".

Imed is very critical about what he defines the 'brief-case' organisations, suspected not to possess real values, projects, aims nor internal organisation, and which tried to get money from international donors during the golden age of ONG in Tunisia, just after Revolution to 2015[8].

What also characterises the association *Ro2ya* is its internal variety. Western fashion boys as well as girls wearing *niqāb* are equally members of the group. As Hichem used to tell me, they all represent a certain worldview, a certain kind of thought rooted in a local, familiar, cultural dimension (Appadurai, 1996)[9]. But this reference to the 'local' is not to be intended as a passive anchoring to something static and unchangeable. 'Local', for Imed, is the ability to speak to everyone, across the cultural backgrounds, to strengthen active citizenship and to let Mohammedia be a part of the quest for a 'deep democracy' (*Idem*, 2013)

The recognition of internal cultural variety is the starting point to achieve a 'bottom up cosmopolitism'. The openness to democratisation, pluralism and individual rights that associations like *Ro2ya* seek, doesn't dilute or weaken the 'local' and his memory. Individual memory, on the one hand, as Imed remembers his childhood, when he could eat meat just once a week. And the social memory of the community, on the other hand, as he points out that his house is built, as every Mohammedia's house, upon land suitable for agriculture, main economic activity in the past, given that digging through the floor you can easily find water.

However, once again the focus on the 'local' is not an uncritical acceptance of the routine. The unemployment experienced by the greatest number of youths in neighbourhoods and quartiers is seen by Imed as dangerous, because it tends to legitimise personal failure among the greatest number of young men sitting at the *café* who share the same history. Such accounts recall the intuition of Hamza Meddeb (2015) who considers the social experience of 'waiting' as a governmental tool.

According to Imed, to understand contemporary Tunisian society it is necessary to abandon classic political ideologies, because everything is extremely fluid, and to find new cultural and political markers. Thus, it is necessary to find new languages to communicate with ordinary people.

This point view has to be framed within a competition for hegemony and consensus between several actors in local arenas. Groups like the *Ro2ya* have to compete with the strong and well-rooted pious networks of the Islamic charity circuits, for example. It is also the point of view of a

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[8] See http://euro-mediterranee.blogspot.com/2015/01/la-ruee-des-ong-etrangeres-en-tunisie.html (accessed: 28 february 2019).
[9] Following Appadurai (1996), I intend 'local' as a socially constructed structure of feeling.

young boy, who thinks that an intergenerational fracture is taking place between the elder components of a patriarchal society – as he told me – and youths that love theatres, rap music, mixed cafés and want to change society. Anyway, "the old ones are going to die", and pressure from families is increasingly weakened by new media technologies, which produce a new perception of social reality.

However, there is no break in continuity from the search for new languages (to make organisations understood) to personal biographic trajectories that alternate different stages of individual growth.

Let us have a brief look at Imed's spiritual experience, for example. A few years before he was a practitioner. Today he is uncomfortable due to the spread of a religious climate perceived as exogenous. Religiousness should be inspired by the search for good, and not by punishment. He observes the fast during Ramadan, he prays sometimes and he reads the Quran a lot. Religion inspires his personal behaviour. He doesn't smoke or drink, and he doesn't like the idea of having sexual relations before marriage.

Even though he doesn't want to impose his principles of personal conduct, religion has not only shaped his subjectivity but it has also impacted the way he thinks social and political engagement must connect to the meanings and the selves of other people. That is how legitimacy and the pursuit of consensus are intended by organisations active in current Tunisian civil society.

Conclusions

In this article, I suggest that we may consider 'local' as a key feature in the production of new subjectivities, intended as both young activists' feelings and political efforts to change society.

In *The Future as Cultural Fact*, Arjun Appadurai writes a lot on the relationship and not the opposition between the concepts of 'local' and 'cosmopolitism', intending the latter as the extension of the local cultural horizons, not for dissolving or denying the familiarity of the local, but in order to fight its exclusions and indignities.

However, the implications of the 'local' for the Tunisian political scene are far from being easily predictable. The emergence of the local political paradigm and the tool of the territorial participation in public processes reflect a trend that could be found elsewhere in the Maghreb already in the 90s, not without relations with regional and international neoliberal spread. In the local associative action, mobilisation is achieved by reference to the smaller common denominator – territory – (Bennani-Chraïbi, 2007) apart from ideological considerations. Is it an abdication of and from politics?

In any case, for young activists like Talel or Imed, 'local' means recognising and even exploiting ordinary people's beliefs and moral economies. Also in the in-depth interviews, which are intentional representations of their Self (Chanfrault-Duchet, 1991), they do not hide the role of religion in shaping their subjectivity, even if they are not full-fledged practitioners and religion is not a key issue in their political action.

I think this represents a new sensibility that reflects a subjectivity pattern at work in politics as much as in the lives of youths engaged in the advancement of the new Tunisia. However, this conclusion remains open and would need to be checked in the future with other young people and in other local contexts.

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