

# Shaping the future(s) Civil society and itineraries of personal commitment in Tunisian democratic transition

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**Abstract.** The Arab Spring has forced observers to associate the southern shore of the Mediterranean with social and political dynamism, even though a great deal of uncertainty surrounds the whole area. The present contribution is dedicated to processes of civic and political participation occurring in Tunisia. These processes of political subjectivation present an evident reference to the speculative imagination of the future. By considering the biographies of social actors, I will focus on itineraries of personal commitment, which take shape within the framework of the heterogeneous Tunisian civil society.

**Keywords:** Tunisia, civil society, political subjectivation, future, ethnography.

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## ***1. Introduction. The crisis and the future***

The Arab Spring has forced observers and researchers to associate the southern shores of the Mediterranean with social dynamism and the emergence of original ideas of the future [El Houssi 2013; Haugbølle, Cavatorta 2012], even though a great deal of uncertainty hovers over the whole area. Ten years later, the uprisings that inflamed North Africa and the Middle East, also triggering social movements and political mobilisation around the world [Werbner, Webb, Spellman-Poots 2014], seem not to have brought the desired results. These uprisings have, rather, rarefied into oppressive forms of life marked by persistent political repression and economic slumps, crushed in a present apparently devoid of a prospective outlook on the future.

This contribution is based on ethnographic research in post-revolutionary Tunisia. The research took place during my PhD course and involved

fieldwork in the Grand Tunis area between 2016 and 2018. The ethnography focused particularly on the suburban belt of Tunis, where the interlocutors I met live, and with whom I have established solid ethnographic relationships. The research aimed to investigate, by combining observant participation [Piasere 2002; Moeran 2007] and more formalised moments such as semi-structured interviews, the ordinary worlds of young Tunisians of the middle and popular classes, stratified forms of life in whose riverbed complex cultural meanings and political imagination take shape.

A relevant part of the ethnographic work was also dedicated to recent parties and association experiences that mark the entry into the Tunisian organised public sphere [Habermas 1988] of groups and individuals whose political subjectivation – their *passage au politique* [Bayart 2008] – took place or significantly changed in the context of the revolutionary process. This is the main theme of the article, which will stress how social actors's political subjectivation is intimately linked to «futural orientations» [Bryant, Knight 2019, 16] that are moving themselves and communities toward an imagined future not yet realised.

Centrality – albeit in limited spaces – will be attributed to the biographies of social actors in an attempt to glimpse the complexity of their subjectivities against the background of recent great political transformation. With the expression “political subjectivation”, I define a process in which an ethical reorientation of the Self of social actors matures, inspired by shared ideas and views of the future. It is also the harbinger of a rephrasing of social relations and the assumption of agency and political responsibility [Vacchiano, Afaïal 2019].

The following pages deal with images of the future that the social actors – especially youth, but not exclusively – have formulated, originating from a permanent condition of crisis and high uncertainty. In Tunisia, current processes of civic and political participation present an evident reference to the temporal dimension of the future. Although different from each other, the practices and representations underlying the experiences that I will recount in the following pages can be considered as «forms of social anticipation [that] often press toward the future in ways that imply crossing into another space of time and a radical reorientation of the present» [Bryant, Knight 2019, 36].

The notion of civil society, on the other hand, deserves a careful problematisation beyond its celebratory usages. In fact, civil society's most common usages «have been too narrowly circumscribed by modern western models of liberal-individualism» [Hann 1996, 3]. Following the classic division between civil and political society would make it difficult to identify

intersections between networks of trust and solidarity and political-oriented participation<sup>1</sup>.

The case of the Islamic public sphere is emblematic since it fuels the display of morally sanctioned virtues and the assumption of collective responsibility in the articulation of the relationship between individual salvation and social order, transversally crossing civil and political society [Salvatore 2011]<sup>2</sup>. Islamic solidarity and charitable associations offer a wide network of services (from education to health) that feeds social capital, which can be mobilised by religiously-inspired parties.

Tunisian associative and political groups, which I had the opportunity to follow in the first person during my field research, are attempting to redefine social community bonds. They have chosen this route despite the difficulties that the post-revolutionary course is encountering, starting from a speculative imagining of the future, and attempting to determine it by actively intervening in the present. This intervention, as I have previously noted, matures in a context that is anything but rosy. Ten years after 2011, Tunisia is an economic, social and political “black hole” (comprised of inflation, unemployment, indebtedness, etc.), which no one knows how to get out of [Brésillon 2018].

The disintegration of the middle class, the yardstick of the possibilities of social ascension, finds its most painful expression in the unemployment faced by young holders of higher education qualifications. The social elevator is stuck, and the gap between economic elites and groups now reduced to subsistence is widening.

It should be specified that this condition is certainly not new – and not limited only to Tunisia – and could be traced back to well before the 2011 Revolution, across the whole Arab world. Much earlier, in the seventies, Tunisian President Bourguiba began the neoliberal economic season of “openness” (*infitah*) to free-market logic after a decade of leaning towards socialist state planning in the economy [Manduchi 2019]. And it was during the nineties – in parallel with the dismantling of the Welfare State [Gherib 2017] – that graduate unemployment increased, testifying to the disconnection between the educational system and the labour market, in Tunisia as in the entire Maghreb region [Bennani-Chraïbi 2007].

As well as increasing economic and social inequalities [Pontiggia 2017], the consequences of neoliberal policies undertaken in the last decades have

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<sup>1</sup> Annika Rabo [1996] urges us to look at the interdependencies between State and society [Sharma, Gupta 2006]. For a critical perspective on civil society in the Middle East and North Africa, cf. Hårdig [2015], not to mention the more general rethinking of secularism in civil society made by Jürgen Habermas [2010].

<sup>2</sup> See also Copertino [2017], who examines how in contemporary Tunisia the Islamic political and religious activisms are related to original and innovative interpretations of Islamic political-philosophical thought.

had a profound impact, especially on youths' everyday lives. These youths can only partially access any expectation of social autonomy and political significance; their images recur in mass media consumption and dreams of reaching adulthood.

This is a condition of “waithood” [Singerman 2007; Honwana 2012], a time of suspension in which the transition to adulthood is not carried out according to the usual modes and expected times. It is not only based on economic deprivation but on the inability to or impossibility of taking part in goods and services exchange networks and mutual aid relations<sup>3</sup>. In the various testimonies of social actors I spoke to during the fieldwork, they referred to the agonising fear of social anomy. This was centred around a feeling of “being no-one” after all the years of training (professional or university), a herald not only of a chronic absence of work but also the impossibility of accessing a defined status as a person, with its load of prescribed obligations and recognised social meanings<sup>4</sup>.

This state of crisis gives shape to a collective sense of living, an affective time [Schatzki 2010; Bryant, Knight 2019] that shapes the understanding of the present and which can become the generating principle of dispositions, practices, and representations [Bourdieu 2003]. A time of uncertainty, whose liminal transience, certified by the expression “democratic transition” with which the post-revolution years are classified, extends without promoting the expected social improvement, generating disorientation in its place. Furthermore, this state of crisis seems to undermine the construction of social ties oriented to the assumption of collective responsibility, civic commitment, and reciprocity [Kerrou 2018].

However, an ethnographic gaze on minute but significant processes of political subjectivation in progress cannot fail to grasp the sedimentation of networks of trust and solidarity emerging from practices and representations of individuals and communities, mostly defined on a local basis.

In the following pages, I will select two very different examples of civic and political engagement in contemporary Tunisia that seem to me to recall very clearly the processes of future-oriented political subjectivation underway. Despite their diversity, the experiences and testimonies I will give an account of draw on the evocation of a future whose potential is outlined and channelled into collective projects aimed at realising the «other than-actual» [Bryant, Knight 2019, 107).

<sup>3</sup> Delay in contracting marriage (a social mark of adulthood, like employment and economic subsistence) is a clear example. Among young men aged between 25 and 30 years old, more than the 82% are unmarried, (the percentage drops to 50% for young women).

<sup>4</sup> Navtej Dhillon and Djavad Salehi-Isfahani [2008] identified “stalled youth transitions” to adulthood in North Africa and the Middle East well before the Arab Spring.

I believe that this falls within the temporality that the 2011 Revolution triggered, net of its failures and its difficulties. The liberating and emancipatory act of the Arab Spring has encouraged multitudes of men and women to glimpse and pursue those possibilities that are not yet fulfilled in all respects but which already exist alongside the actual<sup>5</sup>.

## **2. Citizens' associations**

New Tunisian citizens' associations fight the desertification of social spaces and the desocialisation of city dwellers. They offer a wide range of services (literacy and after-school education; theatre courses and film screenings; assistance to the poor, etc.) and experiment with creative uses of public space (like cleaning and regeneration of gardens and play areas). They also organise assemblies on topics of collective relevance and provide a space to think critically about problems that afflict young people. They, therefore, recreate institutional proximity in the forms of representation and decision making on which urban democracy is based [Sebastiani 2014]. This dimension of solidarity, represented by associations, must be related to the privatisation of the State [Hibou 2000] and its progressive economic and social disengagement in the context of the changes in neoliberal governance that are also affecting Tunisian political institutions [Ben Amor 2011].

An example of these post-revolutionary political subjectivities that I would like to focus on is the *Association des Habitants d'El Mourouj II* (El Mourouj II Inhabitants' Association). El Mourouj is a municipality bordering Tunis. It rises close to the southern basin of the Sabkha salt lake. Along the edges of the lake, the migration from the hinterland after the Second World War has given rise to informal settlements, which have characterised the history of the peri-urban substratum of Tunis.

The president of the association is Adel Azabi, who worked in a tobacco manufacturing plant in Tunis before retiring, and who I met thanks to a mutual acquaintance in the UGTT (*Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail*/Tunisian General Labour Union) trade union, wherein Adel militated until a few years ago. The headquarters of the association is beside Adel's home and hosts the meetings of the local section of the UGTT trade union centre. The association was not founded with the Arab Spring since it has been active already from the 1980s. However, since the liberalisation of public space following the Revolution, it has changed its practices and methods of action. Before, the association was almost exclusively engaged in the search for international

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<sup>5</sup> Potentiality for Bryant and Knight is a «shared way of understanding the future» whose stakes are largely political, given that «potentiality [...] is a discursive device that can be used to formulate, activate or resist particular imagined futures [2019, 121-126]».

partnerships to receive funding for regional redevelopment projects. Today, activities are much more rooted in the local context.

You can come to understand this by walking in the central districts of the municipality, whose walls are strewn with posters, banners and stickers with the association's logo and a reminder of the activities they carry out. The solidarity economy is the association's preferential sphere of action. On Saturdays and Sundays, a supportive *suq* was set up. Notable features included the reliability of the producers and the traceability of the products. Collaboration was established with a chicken farm in Tunis, where a set of electronic scales and a large freezer were purchased in which to store the meat. The goal of this investment, in Adel's words, was to establish a relationship with the local people, who can now know in detail exactly what they are buying. Despite the rather secular nature of the association, an *iftar* dinner is prepared on Fridays during the month of Ramadan, in which food is offered to the poor of the municipality.

Adel is known and loved by many people in the municipality. When we walk together, there is no one who passes by who does not greet him and does not stop to point out some issue. Adel called my attention to several small neglected green spaces. He informed me that the association had sent a request to the municipality to be entitled to manage these green spaces with the intention of returning them to collective use.

Old Adel's leadership is combined with the fundamental work of young volunteers, mostly women. A look at how associative action is embodied in the work and stories of these young female participants in the contemporary Tunisian public scene will offer us an interesting perspective on the processes of constitution of political subjectivities in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

A trait I have also found in other Tunisian associations [Cordova 2020] is the ability of the organisation to comprehensively understand cultural codes and different interpretative registers, by which their heterogeneous figure is enhanced. This is reflected in the internal variety of volunteer profiles. The association's coordinator is Shaima, a 25-year-old woman who recently returned to Tunisia from France, where she studied psychology. Shaima has chosen to return because she wants to collaborate on the new Tunisian course, motivated by her own experiences of the difficulties and the setbacks faced by the post-revolutionary season. The images of the riots that periodically inflame Tunisia in various regions, certifying the still-unfinished character of the revolutionary enterprise, prompted her to plan her return to a place where, as she told me, cousins apart, many still don't recognise her and do not greet her on the street. Aware of the delicacy of the stakes in a country struggling with a fragile democratic transition, Shaima felt "obliged" to participate in a process in which everyone must do their part, because «it represents the

possibility of affecting the future of our lives, of our country»<sup>6</sup>. Once in Tunis, she went to live with her mother's cousins in the municipality of Mourouj. There, she immediately noticed the presence of the association through posters hanging on the neighbourhood walls and contacted the organisation's Facebook page just four days after arriving in Tunisia.

Returning was not easy since she had to overcome the resistance of her father, a worker in Marseille, and her mother, for whom returning to Tunis represented a senseless and extremely risky choice. However, the pain caused by the separation from her parents was compensated for by her conviction that she was making an important decision: to work towards what Tunisia is not yet, but still has the potential to become. She repeated that she saw the seething telluric potential in turmoil and at risk of not being realised in the hoped-for future if things do not go the right way. In my opinion, Shaima's example testifies how the political and ethical reorientation of the Self can heavily affect the circularity of movements between the shores of the Mediterranean and determine the reversibility of transnational mobility routes. Later, Shaima would like to create an organisation dedicated to autistic children, «if I can find a place in this still undefined Tunisia». Personal future and collective future are linked in a subjective plot in which the fear of not being able to find one's place in the world and the anxiety of non-belonging [Middleton 2013] do not affect the associative commitment imbued with images of the future.

Another young woman, Monia, a veiled twenty-three-year-old computer science student based in Tunis and a member of the Association des Habitants d'El Mourouj II, is also part of an association very close to the circles of the Islamic charity, with which she organises events and assistance paths for those most in need. Monia explicitly outlined the popular character of the association of the inhabitants of El Mourouj II, to be understood here in the meaning of socio-cultural transversality.

According to her, the strength of the association lies precisely in the ability to speak to the whole population without disdaining those who have a religious sensitivity. Urban regeneration and promotion of moments of collective reacquisition from below of social spaces are coupled with the organisation of *iftar* dinners and moments of conviviality on the occasion of traditional religious festivals. The involvement of the strata of the population seemingly furthest from the ideals of emancipation and "secular" participation in the public sphere is recognised as a condition for building relationships of reliability and mutual recognition, necessary for undertaking paths of social transformation. The volunteers of the inhabitants' association are motivated

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<sup>6</sup> From an interview with the author, El Mourouj II, 18-10-2017. The conversations quoted in this article were held partly in Tunisian Arabic and partly in French, according to my limits in mastering the first.

by the belief that the ability to transform their own and others' living conditions is not innate. Rather, it is a skill that must be gradually constructed.

To reinforce this perspective, the testimony given to me by Monia focused on some women active in the popular devotional cults of a nearby *zâwiya*<sup>7</sup>. These women met at an *iftar* dinner set up by the association during Ramadan, who then came to the appointment for the cleaning and reorganisation of a garden in a state of neglect. Despite the initial mutual distrust, an occasion for festive sharing has turned into the signing of a common commitment, maturing into a personal contribution to the improvement of a collective social space. The capacity to aspire is, like protest, a social and collective capacity [Appadurai 2013], which draws its strength from local systems of value, meaning, communication and dissent. Its form is universally recognisable, but its strength is distinctly local and cannot be separated from language, social values, histories and institutional norms, which tend to be highly specific. Monia herself said that she approached the association of the inhabitants of El Mourouj with great caution, given that her conservative family was not favourable to acquaintance with Adel, known in the municipality for having been a union activist of the Tunisian left. Monia had never been a part of a formal organisation before but wanted to try a new experience to put into practice her ideas and desires for change. Although fearing that this simple approach to that reality would expose her to criticism and slander, her first contacts with the other members of the association, however, showed her the absence of prejudices in them.

«This country needs us. The results will be seen over time»<sup>8</sup>, Monia said. It is no coincidence that these desires for change mature and take shape in a historical and political context marked by a great upheaval – the Revolution and the end of the Ben Ali regime – whose continuation is in the making.

The correlation between individual and collective (or communitarian) futural orientations, even if inspired by global spheres of values and imaginaries, is rooted in local, familiar and cultural contexts, reflecting the link between existential trajectories – imbued with feelings, modes of perception, affectivity, fear, desire – and social formations that shape and organise those ways of feeling [Ortner 2005]. The passage to the assumption of personal responsibility in one's own moral and political community is accomplished through the incorporation of broader social processes, witnessing how subjective existence is inscribed – without being totally determined – in concrete historical possibilities and temporal structures that shape the collective sense of living.

<sup>7</sup> The *zâwiya*, in the Maghreb, is a polysemic term that indicates a place of worship, the seat of a brotherhood, a school. It is a complex of social and religious life from which religious and profane uses and practices of sociality unfold.

<sup>8</sup> From an interview with the author, El Mourouj II, 19-10-2018.



In my ethnographic work, I also found inclinations, practices, and representations similar to those cited in the example of the El Mourouj II association in other urban progressive associations. Their local roots were evident (a neighbourhood, a municipality, a district). Both young and old activists were able to carry out projects and activities within multiple symbolic registers with the intention of not excluding anyone.

The combination of meanings, styles of collective action and of the same organisational methods of associations explicitly rooted in local contexts is not entirely new in Tunisia and the Maghreb. Equally, there is certainly no lack of analysis, which highlight the potential and the limits of this approach and, above all, the depoliticisation of social issues caused by the mobilisation of common local belongings [Bennani-Chraïbi 2007]. However, the now systemic extension of this configuration has become more evident than in the past, I believe, also thanks to the hegemonic celebration of civil society's virtues [Ghatak, Abel 2013] after the fall of the Ben Ali regime. According to many activists involved in associations that arose in the aftermath of the Spring of 2010–2011, the new civil society organisations tend to reproduce much less frequently the social, cultural and ideological fractures in militant action in the construction of consensus than the organisations of the Tunisian left. The reason for this posture is not (only) instrumental, aimed at creating consensus through the identification of metaphorical and public behaviour levers best suited to the cultural worlds of men and women [Appadurai 2013]. I believe it depends, above all, on the fluid existential trajectories of young activists who choose to commit to social change, experiencing first-hand the heterogeneity of cultural environments, the complementarity of practices and social interactions, and the variety of aspirations and expectations oriented towards the future.

### **3. Other activisms**

Groups and organisations that are accessing the public sphere of Maghreb societies elaborate in original grammars and forms the notions of citizenship and general interest (*al-'âma*) in States where, like in Tunisia, political authoritarianism has undermined forms of civic and collective participation, narrowing any space for mediation with the State to the development of clientelar networks [Chabbi 2016]. Citizenship (*muwâtana*) matures, changing its classic constitutive paradigm, which has historically been intimately linked to the religious and nationalist matrices of *Ummah* and *watan* [Longuenesse 2017]. It asserts rather a negotiation of the meanings, burdens and rights of what it means to be members of a political community [Holston 1999].

However, we would be wrong to elect this specific associative configuration, inspired by a quite progressive imaginary – although ready to hybridise in the multiple registers and cultural meanings that compose the subjectivities of their young and older members – as a homogenous figure of a civil society hypostatised in its membership of Western liberal models and canons. If civil society is an aggregate of social capital that promotes a culture of the public with potentially political outcomes, it would not be correct to exclude *a priori* from the legitimate civil society subjects and groups which rest their *raison d'être* on a moral and normative ground other than secularist rationalism [Persichetti 2006; Roque 2017]<sup>9</sup>.

This is even more important in Tunisia, commonly recognised as a peculiar Arab country, where relations between the “secular” and the “sacred” take unique and exemplary forms across the whole region. Behind these taken-for-granted assumptions, however, there are historical and political remarks that must be recalled, even if very briefly. In the process of formation of the post-colonial independent State, President Bourguiba paid great attention to removing every possible obstacle to the settling of the new modernist national narrative, starting with alternative community memberships (tribal, religious, etc.). Part of this strategy was the severe repression of Islamist activists and, most of all, the monopolisation of Islam and the dismantling of its main institutions – the *Zaytouna* university; the Quranic schools; *habous* properties and so on [Mabrouk 2011]. This operation did not lead to the disappearance of Islam in public life. On the contrary, Bourguiba actively intervened in the religious domain, proposing instrumental lectures and interpretations concerning the Quran and the Prophet's life. However, beyond political manipulation (to which we should include Ben Ali's control over religion), we should never overlook the complex stratification of Islam in Tunisia, strongly rooted in popular as well as in high traditions – just think of the great Islamic centres of Kairouan and Tunis; the large networks of confraternal Sufism; the importance of reform-minded scholars like Mohammed Tahar Ben Achour; the connections of militants with Pan-Arabism and global Islam's tendencies [Kerrou 2018].

In order to take into account this historical complexity, I would like to propose an itinerary of political subjectivation apparently irreducible to the experiences of associations such as that of El Mourouj II, and which concerns Mousab, a young militant of the Islamic-conservative *Ennahdha* party<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>9</sup>However, at a closer look, the ideal type of a rationalised secular public sphere could not be assumed apodictically even outside Muslim-majority countries. Cf. Muehlebach 2012; Ghatak, Abel 2013.

<sup>10</sup>Ennahdha is a religious conservative political party that has recently officially left political Islam, in which context it was founded in 1981. Winner of the 2011 National Constituent Assembly elections, it holds the largest representation in the current parliament, after the 2019 elections, with 52 seats. Cf. Ayari, Brésillon 2018; McCarthy 2018.

Talking about a political party in a contribution that examines the concept of civil society may seem out of place. However, parties such as *Ennahdha* base the coagulation of political consensus and hegemony on a network of social ties and connections based on trust – often consolidated in associations on a territorial basis – which, in addition to the provision of various services, also articulate political recognition and religious identification [Merone, Sigillò, De Facci 2018; Sigillò 2020]<sup>11</sup>. It is a civil society that crosses the political action of one of the most structured parties on the contemporary Tunisian scene, despite the recent evolution of *Ennahdha*. In order to dispel the shadow of suspicious ties with the Salafist galaxy, in 2016, the party established a formal separation between political and religious-charitable activities<sup>12</sup>, formally detaching itself from the Muslim Brotherhood and renouncing political Islam [Ounissi 2016]. The concise reference to Mousab's history requires us to broaden the conceptual and analytical grids with which we usually think of political commitment, evaluating the hybridisation between cultural matrices that are different, yet equally aimed at achieving personal and community emancipation, demonstrating how the trajectories of political activism seldom show predictable linearity [Bennani-Chraïbi 2007].

Mousab is a 24-year-old militant from Ennahdha and was a candidate in the 2019 legislative elections<sup>13</sup>. He was introduced to me thanks to a personal contact close to the party. His mother is Egyptian, while his father, who died a few years ago, was Tunisian. The latter was an Islamist and, as an opponent of Ben Ali (he also wrote in some clandestine newspapers against the regime), he fled the country to escape imprisonment and oppression by the regime. Mousab has vivid memories of those years on the run, in different parts of Africa, following his father: Madagascar, Sudan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia. He recalls how in these last two places, there was no freedom, especially in Saudi Arabia, where «it can be said that politics does not exist». For this reason, he attended Arabic-speaking schools in various parts of the world, but not in Tunisia. His father was active in Islamic charitable organisations in all those countries. Mousab recalled his father's proselytism work in Africa, which would also lead to the conversion of ministers of Madagascar and influential figures of the ruling class.

Mousab returned to Tunisia in 2010, but without his father, who remained in Germany with his brother. Suffering from an incurable disease, he died a few weeks before Ben Ali's escape. Back in Tunis, Mousab went to live with his

<sup>11</sup> See also the recent work by Domenico Copertino [2020] about the entanglements between Islamists' and Islamic Piety's activists.

<sup>12</sup> However, relations between Islamic associations and political parties – like Ennahdha – are not linear, since they may be fraught with tensions and fragmentation [Soli, Merone 2013; Sigillò 2020].

<sup>13</sup> The material shown here, including Mousab's quotes, refers to our meeting on 23/11/2018 in Tunis.

paternal grandparents in Zaarouni, a popular neighbourhood between Bardo and Manouba. The memory of his father's illness and the latter's inability to set foot in Tunisia marked his adolescence, representing a founding event in his personal history. He told me how, at the end of 2010, he reached by bicycle Avenue Bourguiba, the scene of the great demonstrations against the regime, without knowing what to expect and what to do. His only intention was to go and have a look, because he knew that in those days, the history of Tunisia would be written. He, too, shared the sensation, widespread among the Tunisian population, that the uncertain ongoing revolutionary moment was inscribing a temporal threshold within the present, which «implies both the imminence of the future and the idea of pressing forward into it» [Bryant, Knight 2019, 35].

He began to militate in Ennahdha in 2012, when Tunisia was shaken by the political murders of Chokri Belaïd and Mohamed Brahmi and started to work within the cultural sector of the party. He writes rap music songs with a social background set in the cultural milieu of the popular district of Zaarouni. His political activity is rooted in the neighbourhood and in Islamic charitable associations such as the Red Crescent. He organises and participates in debates and meetings with young people. In this, he embodies the heritage of his father's family, always active within the Islamic charity. «We Islamists [*islamiyyun*] do this», he argued. More than a transmission of precise political or ideological orientations, the subject of an intergenerational transmission is the perpetuation of ethical-religious norms or moral assumptions (inevitably reformulated) [Bennani-Chraïbi 2007].

I believe that the stories of the maturation of political commitment translate the link between politics and other dimensions of associated and individual life. In my opinion, a relevant point lies in the words with which Mousab defined *Ennahdha* as an intergenerational party. «Fathers pass on this experience to their children», he said. This is especially the case with those Islamist militants who suffered torture and imprisonment during the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes.

If the link between political society and civil society emerges from the formally controlled relationship between the party and charitable or educational associations, the role of the family in joining the political party must also be considered. The reference to the intergenerational transmission of political belonging marks the unavoidable relations between the private sphere par excellence – family – and the opening to the public world of politics and parties.

Mousab was the first Islamist delegate to the faculty of law in El Manar, coming first in the student elections. He gives me a very conflictual picture of university politics, with frequent clashes in the recent past between Salafists and leftist groups. He claims to have won the elections thanks to his open and

pragmatic lifestyle: he talked about programmes, not ideologies, extending communicative action beyond predefined affiliations. This pragmatism, reflected in the patterns of Islamists' political subjectivation, reveal their complex approach toward the future, being able to combine the emphasis on origins – every model of Islamic society relies upon the exemplary conduct and teachings of Prophet Muhammad and his Companions – and the ambition to evoke destiny through the anticipation of the future, addressing present concerns and anxieties [Schielke 2015]. Mousab was fascinated by Salafism after the Revolution, but now he claims that he is no longer attracted to it. Tunisia is, for him – unlike for the Salafis – a model: Islam here is open and plural; it is a universal principle and placed above the law, incorporating it.

My conversations with Mousab have confirmed my impression that patterns of political subjectivation are nearly always entangled in personal and collective imagines of the future. In his case, he had started engaging in politics just after the Revolution, when hope for futural change turned into tangible projects of action, practice, and mobilisation.

Mousab's political path is a dynamic and open picture in which religious identity and political affiliation are defined. Far from monolithic, it proves the need to review and expand civil society's conceptual horizons, testing the liberal postulate of the autonomous individual-agent [Seligman 1992] with the connections that link people, social memberships and categorical distinctions between public and private [Persichetti 2006].

#### **4. Conclusions**

Before the Arab Spring, many scholars and observers have underlined the chronic weakness of civic participation and political organisations in North African countries [Sharabi 1996; Hammoudi 2001]. From 2011 onwards, however, we cannot any longer take for granted the so-called authoritarian syndrome [Camaus, Geisser 2003] as well as the supposed cannibalisation of civil society by politics. Yet, an ethnographic examination of Tunisian civil society requires us to reconsider its supposed submission to the State [Yom 2015].

Beyond Tunisia, in the Maghreb and along the south-eastern shore of the Mediterranean, from Algeria to Lebanon, we are witnessing paths of political subjectivation which have opened unexpected spaces of non-governability and participation [Rivetti 2019] where before the microphysics of power annihilated any possibility of action, resistance and imagination. Tunisia, the country I have dealt with in these pages, is perhaps the best-known case and, despite its many limitations, the happiest instance of this process.

In this article, I have focused on patterns of social and political commitment of different kinds. Whether inspired by the ideals of civic participation

or religious values, they equally represent patterns of thought and action nourished by material needs and moral aspirations. Most of all, they are oriented towards the construction of the future in times of great uncertainty.

Ten years after the escape of Ben Ali, an enduring economic crisis, increasing social inequalities and political incertitude – aggravated by the current pandemics – have turned into a permanent state of crisis, which gives shape to a collective sense of living based on disorientation and disappointment in the current political season. Up to this day, the “post-revolutionary transition” has not fulfilled the expectations of radical social change promised by the Spring.

In the background of this scenario, the future becomes a powerful imaginative and political resource, thematised within many collective projects and actions which have been emerging in Tunisia over the last ten years. Mostly defined on a local basis, these organisations are evidently inspired by shared “futural orientations” as they intervene in the present by evoking and attempting to anticipate the not-yet-realised potential of the future [Bryant, Knight 2019]. We may suppose that future-oriented practices and poetics that may be found within the two experiences of activism I dealt with in these pages easily inform people’s way of thinking and behaving in the context of a political change that is still waiting to be fulfilled, as is the case in Tunisia.

The ethnographic examination of these processes allow us to grasp itineraries of political subjectivation among young and older activists, whose personal commitment matured or radically grew just after the Revolution. These processes are characterised by an ethical reorientation of the Self of social actors together with the assumption of political agency within their communities [Vacchiano, Afailal 2019]. I suggest that one of the specificities marking current itineraries of political subjectivation in Tunisia is that paths of mobilisation are anchored in the historical and territorial framework of local communities. This anchoring is emphasised and valued by activists. Their daily intersubjective experience in neighbourhoods and municipalities brings them in contact with people from different social, cultural and political sensibilities. This is reflected in the multiple symbolic registers through which political action and social activities are carried out.

As many studies and a great deal of research projects have highlighted, the political subjectivation of the multitudes [Kilani 2014] in Tunisia and other North African and Middle East countries started a decade ago has been nourished by transnational connections whose reverberation extends beyond the Mediterranean. Ideas and values mobilised within these plural trajectories of research of freedom become global signifiers, and settle in global ideoscapes [Appadurai 1996], the circulation of which is facilitated enormously by current communication technologies and human mobility. However, we would be wrong to perceive a global ecumene of homogeneity and uniformity. Future, like destiny, is a malleable resource [Guenzi 2012,

quoted in Bryant, Knight 2019], the subject of multiple, creative and always original treatments. The paths of political subjectivation outlined in this article in relation to Tunisia, combined in their apparent irreducibility since they present, on the one hand, the progressive face of secular associations and, on the other, the political activism in a conservative party with a religious reference, offer a framework of complementarity necessary in order to grasp the questioning of the present and the future in the Mediterranean of our day.

In both cases, emancipation is not a purely individualist goal, but is achieved within groups and communities towards which the sense of belonging is nurtured. This applies as much to the case of Mousab, whose political commitment originated from a background of family and religious identification codes, as well as the association of the inhabitants of El Mourouj II. The latter associative action takes shape and, indeed, would not be imaginable outside of shared images and ideas of the future on which social ties and processes of mutual recognition are grafted.

Yet, attention to the different symbolic matrices of the social bond and to the multiple ways of constructing political participation invites us to broaden the analytical and conceptual grids with which we think of the forms of collective action and the historical modes of intervention in the world, within the current panoramas of mobilisation, belonging, and revolt.

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