

**The 'Arab Spring' between Transformation and Capture:  
The Tunisian Case**

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**Declaration**

I hereby declare that the following work is my own:

SIGNATURE:

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DATE:

Bunicilor mei, cărora le mulțumesc pentru că mă călăuzesc neîncetat  
Gheorghe Pârvan (1926 - 2013)  
Maria Pârvan (1928 - 2017)

## Acknowledgements

The ideas in this work are the result of a very long series of fortunate encounters and dialogues that I am deeply grateful for.

Before I even started this experience, the support of Franco Berardi 'Bifo' was crucial in helping me imagine my research proposal and encouraging me to continue on the academic path. I also thank Doctor Federico Montanari for his initial support, and Doctor Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay for having taken interest in my research proposal.

I have been able to develop this work mainly thanks to the Arts and Humanities Research Council Grant Partnership award. Moreover, thanks to the Erasmus Plus programme I have benefitted from crucial interactions with scholars and artists at the Orientale University in Naples and the Humboldt University in Berlin. I particularly want to thank the Centre for Postcolonial and Gender Studies in Naples and Doctor Tiziana Terranova for all her stimulating feedback and for giving me the opportunity to be part of a research community of like-minded thinkers and practitioners. I extend my gratitude to the researchers who made Naples my second home: Doctor Nina Ferrante, Doctor Roberto Terracciano, Doctor Olga Solombrino and Doctor Brian D'Aquino.

I am especially grateful to my supervisors, Doctor Luciana Parisi and Doctor Shela Sheikh, for their illuminating and patient guidance, for teaching me so much more than just how to write a Ph.D. thesis.

These years have been blessed by the constant support and affection I have received from my colleagues and sisters, Mijke van Drift and Gitanjali Pyndiah. They have meant the world to my emotional and intellectual growth.

I thank my 'Tunisian' hosts, Liu' Fornara and Debora Del Pistoia, for their generosity and the stories they've shared.

I am grateful to have come in contact with the films of Ridha Tlili, Walid Fellah, with the art practice of Mohamed Dali Ltaief and the research and documentaries of Habib Ayeb. Their work has provided the most valuable contribution towards my interaction with the event of the Tunisian revolution.

My special thanks go to Martina Tazzioli for her friendship and daily discussions. Our debates, her work, and advice have significantly informed and improved my writing. I also thank Isabel for her affectionate patience and support.

Un grazie infinito alle mie 'sorelle bolognesi,' Sarah, Fernanda e Francesca, che, anche da lontano, mi hanno trasmesso tanto amore e dalle quali non smetterò mai di imparare.

Nici măcar un rând din aceasta lucrare n-aş fi scris fără neîncetata susţinere şi dragoste a părinţilor mei, Ely si Ştefan, care m-au învăţat de când eram mica să pun întrebări şi să nu-mi fie frică de răspunsuri, şi care, cu atata răbdare, mi-au dat putere ori de câte ori - şi n-au fost puţine - m-am simţit descurajată.

## Abstract

This research goes beyond the debate over the 'success' or 'failure' of the 2011 Arab Spring, seeking instead to develop a critical framing of one particular episode of those mobilisations, namely of the Tunisian revolution, by taking into account the often overlooked instances of local struggles, migration and Islamic militancy in the region, in order to reveal the specificity of contemporary political action.

The Tunisian revolution raises important questions regarding the articulation of *resistance* and *political subjectivity* in the context of global governmentality. By drawing from political theory, philosophy, ethnography and readings of local street art, I attempt to restore the radical significance of the *event* as an instance of possible collective action by engaging with the concept of 'political event' (here drawing critically from Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Alain Badiou) as both rupture and creation of the new.

I reflect on different technologies of containment of dissent, aimed at reducing the virtual dimension of collective action. This containment can regard the discursive level and be enacted through hegemonic narratives or it can regard the non-discursive level of affects and be enacted by intensifying and/or speculating on accumulated affects (such as discontent). Yet, alongside these technologies, I theorize the existence of circuits of *mediation* concerned with the movement of tactical counter-knowledges and practices of resistance across wide (spaces such as the Mediterranean Sea after 2011, for example).

I integrate theories around contagion and virality of protest with the concept of *resonance* (Clover, 2016) based on the commonality of dispossession and the 'structural similarities' (Manji and Sokari, 2012) of mobile categories of people produced as *surplus population* (Clover, 2016). Furthermore, I mobilise Edouard Glissant's notion of Relation (Glissant, 1997), to engage with the Tunisian example of cross-class alliances, while showing their centrality for the revolutionary transformation.

**Keywords: Arab Spring, revolution, Tunisia, minor art, minor politics**

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## **Preface**

I have been asked many times to justify my research interest in the Tunisian revolution, given that I hold no apparent autobiographical connection to the area. I am Romanian (by birth), Italian (by emigration), a knowledge practitioner in a British institution and a rather poor Arabic speaker.

Power relations also inform the distribution of expected research interests, since non-Western thinkers in social and human sciences are often expected to become 'native informants' of their (supposed) cultures of belonging, whereas researchers coming from the global North are readily encouraged to *explore* foreign 'cultures' (especially the ones belonging to the global South) without having to provide extensive justifications or deep autobiographical connections with their areas of interest.

There are two reasons why I look at these events with a sense of proximity and belonging. Firstly, because I also come from what Antonio Gramsci would have called a 'subaltern' nation, namely post-socialist Romania, where change has often been depicted with scepticism or fascination by the dominant regime of signification, suggesting the exceptionality of political agency.

Like the Tunisians, my life has also been marked by a revolutionary transformation, that of the anti-Communist revolution of 1989. Since I belong to the post-revolutionary generation, I have personally experienced the consequences of one's recent history being shaped by hegemonic narratives, determined by either local or global dominant interests, each with their

correspondent discourses. Therefore I feel a responsibility to reveal and question such narratives when I encounter them.

Secondly, I believe Tunisia to be one of the symbols and examples of a contemporary political practice many – both in the West and elsewhere – unfortunately, choose to ignore or dismiss, even when they hold the best intentions. It is necessary to overthrow the most common Western analytical standpoint and learn from rather than teach or judge the ‘Arabs’ or the ‘mob’, while realizing that their political courage and creativity touches upon the Tunisian Kasbah as well as upon the disenfranchised Western suburbs, and that these spaces can become a fertile ground for the politics of the future, only when and if one accepts to engage with them.

## **Introduction**

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of December 2010, an event shook the city of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia, instigating a domino effect that would alter the lives of millions of North African citizens. Sidi Bouzid is a city of 400,000 inhabitants in the Centre-West of Tunisia. Like many other Tunisian cities, most of its local youth, which make up almost half of the population, are unemployed, and are even more likely to be if they are holding degrees.

Mohamed Bouazizi was a 29-year-old unemployed graduate getting by as a fruit vendor on the streets. When a local policewoman requisitioned Mohamed's fruit cart and merchandise and met his complaints with a public slap in the face, he decided to express his outrage and desperation in an extreme way. He reached the headquarters of the Sidi Bouzid Governorate, demanding his cart and merchandise back. He then poured gasoline on his body and set himself on fire. He died on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2011.

However, from that very afternoon, his gesture sparked a long series of protests, which, despite violent repression, evolved into the Tunisian revolution. Against all odds, the Tunisian revolution managed to topple the Western-backed dictatorship of Al Zibidine Ben Ali after 23 years of undisputed authoritarian rule. At least 338 people lost their lives and 2147 were injured during a month of generalized mobilization (Mandraud, 2011).

After the Tunisian 'spark,' other countries of the region were also shaken by expressions of mass dissent. Vast protests occurred in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Jordan, and Morocco. Tunisia and Egypt alone managed to put an end to their oppressive regimes with their revolutions. Western observers chose to gather all the mobilizations of 2011 in the North African and Middle Eastern (MENA) region under the umbrella-term of 'Arab Spring'.

The 'Arab Spring' and similar contemporaneous movements which arose in different countries (such as the Spanish *Indignados*, the Syntagma Square movement in Greece, the American Occupy Wall Street, and the Turkish Gezi Park movement) were seen as instances of the revitalization of contemporary politics. This is increasingly relevant in an age marked by a post-ideological belief in the 'eternal present' of neoliberalism and the 'end of history' (Scott, 2014).

Moreover, the 'Arab Spring' held an additional point of political relevance since it temporarily interrupted the signification regime imposed after 9/11, devoted to representing 'Arab' peoples as 'terrorist' threats to the West and incompatible with the Western idea of liberal democracy. On the contrary, what the protesters of the 'Arab Spring' pursued (at least according to the Western and regional media discourse) was precisely democracy. Most importantly, 'Arab' peoples were able to reach democratic achievements by themselves, with no need for Western interventions (unlike what the 'War on Terror' paradigm would suggest).

The literature on the 'Arab Spring'<sup>1</sup> is vast. In my view, however, and as I will be arguing, it fails to account for the political relevance of the event beyond the borders of the MENA region.<sup>2</sup> An important reason why Western knowledge production somehow isolated the Arab Spring politically is connected to the fact that few observers were actually concerned to engage with the Orientalist, Euro-Centric construction of the event itself (for this argument, I will mostly draw from the critiques developed by Ahl Al Kahf, 2013; Al-Ali, 2012; El-Mahdi, 2011; and Rizk, 2014). Only once the inherent articulations of the Arab Spring narrative are revealed as profoundly reductive and biased distortions, is the field open for

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<sup>1</sup> This term should always be intended as contested in this thesis, yet on some occasions, I will not use scare quotes in order to render the reading more fluid.

<sup>2</sup> Some selected references include Achcar, 2013; Al-Zubaidi et al., 2013; Amin, 2012; Beinin, Vairel, 2013; Castells, 2012; Dabashi, 2008; Garelli et al., 2013; Gerbaudo, 2012; Gerges (Ed.), 2014; Ghonim, 2012; Haddad et al., 2012; Hahieh, 2013; Kilani, 2014; Lynch, 2012; Macchi, 2012; Mason, 2012; Massarelli, 2012; Noueihed, Warren, 2012; Ramadan, 2012; Zizek, 2012.

considering the originality of the political event as such. Precisely because I disagree with a collective representation of the phenomenon and the subtended generalizations implied by the Arab Spring formula – which tends to lump together different events and support the idea of an ‘Arab’ specificity - I will focus mainly on the case of the Tunisian revolution.

By looking at the Tunisian revolution, I hope to shed light on non-hegemonic patterns of reception of and interaction with instances of non-Western resistance (outside and inside the global North). My claim is that a suspension of the hegemonic, stereotypical assumptions around the event makes visible different narrative layers. These layers offer valuable hints regarding contemporary political subjectivity, its strategies and resistance practices able to challenge global governmentality.

My position of enquiry is embedded into a Western knowledge production institution, but my standpoint is somehow intermediary. What I mean is that there is a borderline between Western and ‘Arab’ thinkers who engage with the Arab Spring topic, no matter the reading each of them chooses to privilege. This epistemic borderline confirms a very strong (and, I argue, problematic) distinction between a Western and a non-Western imaginary of politics. As a consequence, in their analyses, many Western observers tacitly claim a certain distance from the phenomenon (of the ‘Arab’ revolutions), whereas ‘Arab’ observers often claim their proximity to it (whether they’re writing from the region or not). As a Western-based knowledge practitioner, I will attempt to write by practicing proximity towards some aspects that make this event distant from my history and political sensibility. Mostly because I am convinced that its most innovative features should contaminate the Western political imaginary and help foster future alliances.

The intention of this research is that of revealing and deconstructing the hegemonic narratives, which have influenced the shape of knowledge around the ‘Arab’ mobilizations. I have critiqued both the Arab Spring formula as well as the label of ‘revolution’ itself and tried to explore more productive conceptual tools such as ‘resistance’ and political ‘event’.

In so doing, I adopted a heterogeneous methodology and encountered at least two main debates. As far as the methodology is concerned, I worked on Western

literature on the ‘Arab’ revolutions, according to the directions of critique indicated to me by the production of local thinkers, both scholars and journalists, but mostly artists and activists, who have provided me with inspirational readings of the events (such as Ahl Al Kahf, 2013; Rizk, 2014; and Tlili, 2011; Tlili, 2014).

Unlike the most common debate regarding the ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of the Arab Spring/Tunisian revolution, the accounts of artists and activists drew attention to the exceptionality and social (as opposed to the political) nature of the phenomenon, which are the aspects I, therefore, chose to focus upon.

Moreover, instead of working with the category of ‘revolution’, and thus supporting its Western genealogy, I turned to philosophical work around the notion of ‘resistance’ by Howard Caygill but also occasionally by Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. I chose these thinkers for many reasons, which will be discussed in each chapter, but most importantly because they have provided valuable examples of how to productively *think theory through* different contemporary *events* of resistance. In addition, the theories of the ‘event’ (although apparently incompatible with the articulation of the notion of ‘resistance’), as discussed by Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou (in the reading of contemporary researchers such as Simon O’Sullivan, Claudia Aradau, Rodrigo Nunes and Maurizio Lazzarato) helped me substitute the idea of ‘revolution’ with that of a ‘network of events of resistance’. Unlike the Deleuzian interpretation of the ‘event’, considered as a (non political) common, infinitesimal variation, or the Badiouan reading of it as an extraordinarily rare and definitive cut, my proposition follows Claudia Aradau’s definition of the ‘event of resistance’ as a ‘rupture in the situation from a specific sub-set/category which [...] interrupts the power/knowledge relations’ (Aradau, 2004: 4). I have thus proceeded by giving an account of this network of events of resistance, and by developing diagrams informed by the flows of struggle that have crossed the Tunisian territory and culminated in 2011.

One of the main difficulties in my research was that of working simultaneously with different orders of (multi-lingual) knowledge production, from the journalistic to the artistic and theoretical ones, while keeping in mind the intuitions of my brief periods of ethnographic research in Tunisia (in 2013 and 2014). I found that the production of Tunisian artists (whether local or diasporic)

provided me with the most valuable indications as to the direction research should take, and I tried to follow these indications in the development of my argument and propositions.

### **Chapters Outline**

Each of the five chapters will be preceded by an introductory section, which will function both as an abstract and as an opportunity to introduce the argument of the chapter while connecting it to the other chapters. Each of these initial introductions will be titled in accordance with the chapter's focus.

**Chapter 1:** In the first chapter, titled 'Exploring the Arab Spring', I reflect on the impact of the Orientalist paradigm of Arab Exceptionalism (Stark, 2011) on narratives such as those of the 'Arab Spring' or the 'Jasmine revolution'. Drawing from the observations of 'Arab' thinkers (such as Dahkli, 2013; El Mahdi, 2011; Haddad et al., 2012; Hibou, 2011 or Rizk, 2014), I claim that these narratives are part of a hegemonic 'discursive configuration', which implies many reductive assumptions. I thus argue against the hypothesis of an unexpected and completed revolution, mainly promoted by young, Internet-savvy, non-violent male citizens, whose struggle is read according to the secular/religious binary as aiming at a Western-like liberal democracy. I chose some examples from the vast literature on the topic in order to point out how ideology and religion can be framed by a non-Western observer (Dabashi, 2011); how important the spatial takeover becomes as a political strategy of existence (Garelli et al., 2013) and how some Leftist theorists (such as Badiou, 2012; Hardt and Negri, 2011 and 2012; and Zizek, 2012) often downplayed the political originality of the events in the Middle East, unable to decree the victory of emancipation in countries where armies and religion play such important roles.

Furthermore, in order to resist the Eurocentric representations of instances of non-Western resistance, Michel Foucault and Félix Guattari's accounts of the Iranian and Brazilian (molecular) revolution suggest the importance of an 'anti-strategic' approach; one concerned to be 'respectful when a singularity revolts, [and] intransigent when power violates the universal' (Foucault, 1979) when dealing with the people's urgency to rise up. In this sense, when interacting with

such events, it becomes crucial to suspend one's expectations and rather embrace the 'unconscious that protests' (Guattari and Rolnik, 1986).

**Chapter 2:** In the second chapter, titled 'The Event of Resistance and Its Capture', I argue that the notion of 'revolution' is not able to account for the specificity of the Tunisian events, nor acknowledge their difference and thus facilitate the futurity of similar practices. Instead, I propose the notion of a 'network of events of resistance' based on theories of resistance (Caygill, 2013) and of the event (Badiou, 1988, 2006, 2012; Deleuze, 1992). Moreover, drawing from Spinozian reflections (read by Nunes, 2013) through Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980) on knowledge based on recognition as opposed to the one based on the 'nomadic thought', my intention is that of building a category that can help me account for the virtual dimension of the event (of the Tunisian revolution) instead of reducing its dimension of the real to the actual one.<sup>3</sup> I, therefore, seek to account for the event's *singularity* in terms of it being a trace of subjectivation (Guattari and Rolnik, 1986), as one holding an experimental originality that is irreducible to Western political categories. My understanding of singularity is drawn from Guattari's work, *The Molecular Revolution in Brazil* (Guattari, 2008). I intend singularity as a trace of a process of singularisation. I use this term because I want to stress that the singular specificity of this event is not to be framed with the help of Western political categories, but rather reflected upon as part of a historical lineage of resistance. Seeing the event in these terms also allows a reflection on what the Tunisian revolution brings as an original contribution to the contemporary struggles against neoliberalism and police states all over the world. This term will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

Comparing the ideas of the event developed by Gilles Deleuze and by Alain Badiou, I conclude that features inspired by both philosophers define a notion of event able to embrace the Tunisian revolution. Following the reflections of Rodrigo Nunes (Nunes, 2010) and Claudia Aradau (Aradau, 2004), this research

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<sup>3</sup> Deleuze draws the concept of virtual from Henri Bergson's understanding of duration. The 'virtual' is not opposed to the 'real', but to the 'actual', whereas the real is opposed to the 'possible' (Deleuze, 1966: 96-98). The virtual is constituted by a multiplicity of potentials and it is 'inseparable from the movement of its actualization' (Deleuze, 1966: 42-43, 81; Deleuze, 2002: 44).

identifies some important aspects of the event of resistance. First of all, these types of events require an interruption of the power/knowledge regime. In some cases, the mobilisation becomes contagious and similar protest gestures are emulated making the interruption spread and solidify.<sup>4</sup> These powerful gestures of resistance and interruption are constantly articulated in a myriad of places, beyond the square gatherings that usually receive the most media attention. Finally, a crucial aspect of the events of resistance is the fact that, before they are re-absorbed by the regime of dominant signification, they can lead to important examples of transversality or cross-class alliances (I shall discuss them in Chapter Five).

In this sense, the definition of 'resistance' is both based on Howard Caygill's philosophy of defiance (Caygill, 2013), and Maurizio Lazzarato's understanding of it in terms of subjectivation (Lazzarato, 2014). I argue that resistance has both a reactive and negative nature, and a productive or creative nature, rooted in the dimension of the virtual. Instead of being essentialised, resistance is viewed dynamically (in its ever-changing relationship with its counter-force) and as projecting the possibility of future resistance (Caygill, 2013: 12). Moreover, resistance can be profoundly connective, either unintentionally (when defiance or contestation become contagious) or by building intentional political alliances or transversalities.

These gestures of resistance disturb the established order; therefore, they are met with attempts of capture. In the Tunisian case, the protests were first heavily repressed, then acknowledged and/or credited as Facebook-led, and then finally, after the toppling of the president, the revolution was eulogised although its demands remain unheard. These are just some examples of how an event of resistance undergoes capture. In fact, this can occur at a discursive level, where signification is produced in order to actively dominate the field of possibility, for instance focusing on the protagonism of Western social media rather than on the courage of the impoverished Tunisians challenging a police state (Lazzarato, 2003; 2004). Alternatively, the power apparatus can also intervene by bypassing

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<sup>4</sup> My initial discussion of contagion will mainly draw from Nunes's work on the 2011 protests, *The Organisation of the Organisationless* (Nunes, 2013) in which he reflects on how 'affective charges' become contagious in the context of political mobilization, leading to mass movements in absence of mass organization.

speech and cognition, and by valorising the flow of affects towards its own agenda. This occurs, for example, in those cases in which accumulated dissent is re-directed elsewhere, such as in the case of underprivileged Tunisians who engage in Islamic militancy and end up attacking their even poorer fellow citizens.<sup>5</sup> This way a certain contagion of dissent can also lead to forms of conflict which benefit constituted power, which in this case was not only the Tunisian government, but also Islamic militant organisations. I discuss this point precisely because I want to underline some examples in which contagion of dissent carries a transformative and affirmative political validity (these examples will mainly be described in Chapter Three and Five).

**Chapter 3:** In the third chapter, titled 'Microhistory of the Tunisian Revolution. The Struggle of the Disenfranchised', I materialize my diagrammatic transposition of the event. Drawing from Maurizio Lazzarato (Lazzarato, 2014) and Simon O'Sullivan's (O'Sullivan, 2014) understanding of the diagram as a non-discursive intervention, and inspired by the counter-mapping of the Tunisian revolution operated by Garelli et al. in 'Spaces of Migration' (Garelli et al., 2013), I develop my own diagrams. Since I understand the revolutionary process as a 'network of events of resistance' (which have mainly been pointed out to me by some participants to the revolution), I follow the direction of such events and claim that the Tunisian territory is a true crossroad of flows of struggle, thanks to its position between Europe and the rest of the African continent. In order to fully account for the genealogy and the development of the resistance connected to the Tunisian territory, I have extended the time frame to the period 2008-2015.

By employing the works of North African thinkers (such as Dahkli, 2013; Hibou, 2011; and Kilani, 2014), I point to the specificity of the Tunisian setting as one marked by a historically unequal development between the rich coast and capital, and an eternally abandoned western, central and southern region (that same region the revolution started from), also partially inhabited by the indigenous

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<sup>5</sup> I am here specifically referring to the episode occurred on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November 2015, when the 16 years old shepherd Mabrouk Soltani was beheaded by Islamic militants who were training close to his village, allegedly because he refused to hand his sheep to them (Marzouk, 2015). Two years later, his brother, who had returned to his village leaving his job on a construction site in Sfax to support his mother, was also kidnapped and beheaded by the militants of the Islamic State as a punishment for his lack of allegiance towards the organization (AFP, 2017).

population of *Amazighs* ('Berbers'). It also becomes clear how the majority of the unemployed turn to the informal economy, illegal emigration, and even Islamic militancy in order to achieve dignified living conditions. My microhistory of the event is mostly concerned with the articulations of this great majority of disenfranchised Tunisian citizens (who I first call 'underclass', then 'mob'). By using diagrams I draw one possible chronology and geography of the event, following the directions indicated by the single moments of rupture. In other words, I follow the actions of the rioters, of the illegalised migrants, of the refugees and see where they take me, while also reflecting on where they come from and how their practices relate to the past and the future.

I, therefore, hypothesize the existence of four flows of struggle around the Tunisian revolution. The first flow is animated by the Tunisian underclass, mostly young under- or unemployed inhabitants of the poor cities or of the capital's suburbs. They brought about the revolution and reached Tunis from the peripheries of the country, occupying the capital's administrative centre, the Kasbah, with their demands for political and social change.

The second flow took shape once the 'revolutionaries' had the possibility to cross the border to Europe, thus becoming what Europeans call 'undocumented migrants' or *harraga* (literally 'those who burn') as they are called by their fellow citizens from the Maghreb. At least 20,000 crossed the Mediterranean and many have perished in shipwrecks. Those who have reached Europe have propelled a significant and still ongoing wave of migrant struggles.

The third flow is represented by the struggle of the refugees. With the destabilization of the neighbouring country of Libya, 200,000 refugees entered the Tunisian territory. Many of them had been hosted by the Tunisians themselves, who nevertheless discriminated against those refugees they identified as 'African,' mostly citizens holding Sub-Saharan African nationalities. Among the refugees escaping Libya, many crossed the sea, while others chose to stay in Tunisia and fight for their right to asylum and relocation in Europe. They are the protagonists of the flow of struggle of the refugees.

I also consider the flow of Islamic militants, thousands of young disenfranchised Tunisians who have chosen to devote their life to the Islam-oriented militancy in their country but mostly abroad.

By taking this snapshot of a territory (of which Tunisia is the epicentre) in a particular period (2008-2015), and by reflecting on its flows of struggle, I underline the protagonism of the underclass and of these groups' capacity to challenge both local and global governmentality. My intention is to draw attention to this fundamental yet criminalized political agent, which I initially define as 'underclass' or 'Lumpenproletariat' (Rizk, 2014). These terms account for the Tunisian social stratification and for the importance of informalisation of labour in the context of the revolution. Furthermore, these same categories can be read in relation to the reworked notion of 'mob' (as reframed by Aradau, Huysmans, 2009), which precisely refers to the way vulnerabilised groups enact a 'rejection of the price of being subject' (Tazzioli, 2016) and consequently expand the notion of the political from a profoundly marginal position.

**Chapter 4:** In the fourth chapter, titled 'Histories of Dispossession and Contemporary Vanguard,' I start by investigating the absences within the Tunisian revolution. Thanks to the work of the critical geographer Habib Ayeb (Ayeb, 2011; 2013), I am able to trace the genealogy of dispossession that has targeted the rural environment, from the colonial settlement until the revolution. In addition to the importance of the rural regions and history, I also acknowledge the 'inaudible' presence of Tunisia's indigenous population, the Imazighen, in the threads of the revolution.

There seems to be a direct connection between the impoverishment of the countryside and the increasing urban segregation, especially in terms of internal migration towards the Northern cities and their suburbs, the *hwem*. The *houma* (plural *hwem*), in fact, appears as the new terrain of identity formation and political organisation from below, as characterised in the work of the sociologist Olfa Lamloum (Lamloum, 2016). This aspect is particularly important, as the *hwem* are crucial spatial dimensions of the revolution.

Furthermore, this chapter counterposes instances of minor art and minor politics. I engage with the work of the street art collective Ahl Al Kahf,<sup>6</sup> showing

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<sup>6</sup> Ahl Al Kahf, literally 'the people underground,' are a prolific collective of artists who have operated from Tunis between 2011 and 2013, producing a lot of street art that would promote the messages of the revolution and who have engaged in a tireless social critique in the post-revolution

how their practice has grown out of the revolutionary event and how they carried the legacy of this opening up of possibilities around and beyond the country.

The protests initiated by Ridha Yahyaoui's suicide in January 2016<sup>7</sup> in Kasserine further demonstrated that the issues raised by the revolution had been disregarded by the government; they also showed that the impoverished Tunisian youth would not entirely be attracted by the Islamic militancy proposal, which had involved many Tunisians after 2013. I address these aspects with the notion of 'vanguard', showing the affirmative vocation of many of Tunisia's poorest citizens. Moreover, by employing the concept of 'war machine' created by Deleuze and Guattari, this chapter discusses how the subscription to the Islamic militancy project can be viewed in terms of the appropriation of a war machine. Finally, thanks to Banu Bargu's work on the Turkish socialist struggle of the 1990s, I describe the tactics of the struggle of the Tunisians in terms of 'necroresistance', reflecting on the ways in which 'bare life' can become a political tool for emancipation (Bargu, 2014; 2015).

**Chapter 5:** In the fifth chapter, titled 'Mediation of An Event. Circulation of Cultures and Practices of Resistance,' I challenge the attitude of technofetishism in relation to the 'Arab Spring,' and investigate what lies beyond and alongside its social media presence. In doing this, I don't take for granted the role of technology, in general, and of connectivity, in particular. Based on a media studies approach and on the work of Terranova (Terranova, 2004; 2007; 2016), I advance the notion of mediation as a form of creation, organisation and transmission of meaning and affect, able to go against the technologies of containment of dissent, such as representation and modulation of affects. This framework is also intended to account for the way cultures and practices of resistance circulate across borders, such as in the case of the struggle of the porters in Italy in 2013, which employed the language of the Tunisian revolution.

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period. Their work has been of crucial inspiration for this research and I will discuss their practice in Chapter Four.

<sup>7</sup> On the 16<sup>th</sup> of January 2016, 28 years old Ridha Yahyaoui committed suicide on a light pillar protesting in front of the Kasserine governorate against the practice of blacklisting former activists from the public employment lists. His gesture originated extensive protests all over Tunisia (Alba Rico, 2016b; Sana, 2016).

This chapter also addresses the question of the propagation of protests. It hypothesizes that resonance, rather than contagion, is what explains how riots spread across different communities, and that resonance depends on the commonality of the experience of dispossession and state violence (Clover, 2016). A focus on contagion, contamination or virality as the modality by which protests spread might occlude the political fact that certain risky forms of mobilisation are enacted by particular communities. I read this resonance as informed by the commonality of the embodied experience of injustice, declined through space (as an inhabitant of a poor suburban reality), time (as individuals hopelessly waiting for an opportunity to earn money, to work, to travel etc.) and mobility (as subjects whose movement is constantly contained and criminalised).

Moreover, Glissant's concept of Relation<sup>8</sup>, in which 'all cultures are equal within relation' and 'altogether they could be considered as its prime elements' is how I will address the union of different political cultures, in terms of the cross-class alliance that has enacted the revolution (Glissant, 1997: 163). In this final chapter, I also deal with the question of political invention, which I lay out in terms of practices of minor politics operated from within 'cramped spaces,' thanks to political gestures that work as mediators and aggregators of solidarity (Thoburn, 2016). Finally, thanks to Sylvia Wynter's reflection on the epistemic breaks in conceptions of being (and non being), I will reflect upon how this notion of political invention is linked to the idea of the human, in terms of thinking beyond the liberal mono-humanism, and in the light of the praxis of being human (Wynter, 2015).

Eventually, what I argue is that the Tunisian revolution was born to denounce and fight a form of internal colonialism - of the richer North and coastal areas on the rest of the country - and its expression in terms of state violence, also employed to extract value from the informal survival economy of the country's poorest areas. Moreover, it is crucial to stress that the country's pre-revolutionary economic inequality is strongly tied to neoliberal policies that the Ben Ali regime chose to promote, receiving, in exchange, a positive evaluation from his Western

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<sup>8</sup> While Glissant uses Relation with a capital letter in his work (Glissant, 1997), I will draw from his reflection, yet use 'relation,' with commas and without a capital letter.

allies, who were in 2011 compelled to reconsider their attitude under the pressure of the popular uprising.

In this sense, my research hopes to indicate some conditions of possibility for politics of emancipation in the postcolonial and post-socialist setting of the contemporary age, marked by the practices of global techno-governance, enforced and justified by the discourses of the 'War on Terror' and austerity. In this situation, instead of de-politicizing and criminalizing the intervention of the 'rioter', the 'revolutionary', the 'unemployed', the 'migrant', the 'refugee' and the 'terrorist', what is necessary is to reflect on the political relevance of these subjectivities, when they are made visible, and on how at least some of them can foster the alliances among political formations in the future.

## 1. The 'Arab Spring': The Projection of a 'Familiar' Revolution

“That’s why they put you away, my friend. You were dangerous. You challenged this God of theirs, went in search of this heaven that you had been offered in exchange for your malnutrition, disease, ignorance, and poverty. You wanted to feel this Heaven in your hand, see it with your eyes, not later in the by and by, but right here, right now!”

Sylvia Wynter, *The Hills of Hebron*, 1962

### Looking *at* or Interacting *with* the Arab Spring?

In the context of the explosive manifestations of dissent that have marked recent history, the representation of the Arab Spring, which occurred in 2011, has a particular significance because it carries a double potentiality. There is the potential of representing it as yet another ‘revolution of the Other’ (Levin, 2014), in the struggle for recognition of the same that the West engaged in with the Orientalist readings of these events. Yet, on the other side, the Arab Spring also offers the opportunity of opening up towards an interaction with the Arab collective resistance practices enacted in the Middle East. This type of interaction would require acknowledging that these events’ singularity might, in fact, represent a highly productive and inspiring way of opposing contemporary articulations of domination. This could be the first step towards imagining a possible global consciousness (Kaldor, 2003). And ‘imagination must be nourished’ (Boltanski, 1999: 51-4).

This reflection has started from a joined discovery of critical discussions around the politics of representation of the event, such as Rabab El Mahdi’s article, *Orientalising the Egyptian Uprising* (El Mahdi, 2011), alongside the valuable political practice of art collectives, such as Ahl Al Kahf<sup>9</sup> based in Tunisia.

The uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt (which culminated on the 14th and the 25th of January 2011), and the wave of protest that followed in the region, have challenged the analytical categories employed for the understanding of the Middle

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<sup>9</sup> Ahl Al Kahf, literally ‘the People Underground,’ are an art collective born in 2011 in Tunis, who have been engaged in street art practices until 2013, and whose works I will be drawing from throughout my thesis. I will specifically focus on their practice in section 4.2. *The Ahl Al Kahf Collective. The Exiled Believers and the Seeds of Revolution.*

East. Thinkers across disciplines have underlined, in different ways, the innovative nature of these events, as well as their impact on framing the interaction between the West and the East, in the aftermath of the 'War on Terror'.

The main question raised by this chapter regards the patterns of reception of the event enacted by non-Western actors ('Arabs')<sup>10</sup> and led by social categories whose actions are often de-politicized, misread or ignored, as is the case with the instances of collective action promoted by the urban poor. How can the political relevance of this event be read in the context of global governmentality, going beyond the common interpretative frames originating both from the West and the local post-revolutionary states?

My claim is that the Arab Spring paradigm itself constitutes an instance of hegemonic 'discursive configuration' that needs to be deconstructed and challenged in all its implicit assumptions. Especially the ones regarding aspects such as the duration, the class and gender composition of the revolution and the way a certain representation of the event is focused on the opposition between religious and secular sensibility.

This chapter represents a first approach to the critique of the narrative of the 'Arab Spring.' My intention is to underline the performativity of contemporary orientalisating discursive formations, by pointing out some stereotypic features that the 2011 protests in the Middle East have been read through. In this chapter I also introduce some of the critical reflections (El Mahdi, 2011; Amin, 2012; Rizk, 2014; Garelli et al., 2013; and Hanieh, 2013) and practices (of collectives such as Ahl Al Kahf in Tunisia and Mosireen in Egypt, and of filmmakers like Ridha Tlili, 2010; 2011; 2012; 2014) that have inspired me. Moreover, I discuss the contributions of some Leftist European philosophers in relation to the 'Arab Spring' (Zizek, 2012; Badiou, 2012; Hardt and Negri, 2011; 2012). Finally, I seek examples of anti-hegemonic engagements with political moments of rupture in the works of

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<sup>10</sup> I am here using brackets for two main reasons. First of all, because there are colonial reasons behind the delimitation of the 'Arab' space from the African continent. Therefore choosing to call the 2011 wave of unrest 'Arab,' carries certain implications, while erasing the propagation of protests beyond the Suez Canal or the Sahara desert. Second, a focus on the 'Arab' identity levels out the diversity of peoples that inhabit countries such as Tunisia. Most significantly, a focus on the 'Arab' specificity does not account for the historically determinant discrimination and Arabisation of the Amazigh peoples (also known as Berbers).

Foucault (on the 1979 Iranian revolution) and of Guattari (on the post-1984 Brazilian 'molecular revolution').

Considering the work of Michel Foucault and Félix Guattari on instances of non-Western revolutions - namely the Iranian and the Brazilian 'molecular' revolution - will provide some useful suggestions towards how to approach such intense and still ongoing events, with an awareness of the inherent bias of the Western standpoint and an active engagement with the singularity of the mobilizations. Moreover, I will also show how the work of the Martinican psychiatrist and anticolonial fighter Frantz Fanon has proven a crucial inspiration source for this analysis.

The expected result of this research is a broader understanding of practices of resistance and of their interaction with power and representation, which is not an Arab specific question, but concerns all of us. What is at stake is our status as spectators, (dis)connected (from) to that of the Tunisian revolutionaries and the transformative potentiality of these events, silenced through a complex mechanism of 'otherisation' and intermittent visibility.

This sheds light on the contemporary interaction between domination and resistance, on the conditions of possibility of collective struggle, on the global recomposition of the underclass and on the way in which what I will be calling the 'media mask' interacts with all of this.

This initial chapter contains the 'seeds' for each of the following chapters. In fact, once I will reflect on the discursive formation of the 'Arab Spring' in this chapter, I will then suggest possible ways to engage with the event: by reflecting on what philosophical paradigm of the event can account for such moments of interruption of the power/knowledge relations (Chapter Two); by building a chrono-geography of the events in accordance with their flows of struggle (Chapter Three); by unearthing the practices of minor art and minor politics connected to the Tunisian revolution (Chapter Four); and finally by hypothesizing how cultures and practices of resistance circulate and how alliances can lead to revolutionary transformation (Chapter Five).

### **1.1. On the Mask of the 'Arab Spring'**

This research will mainly and intentionally focus on the Tunisian uprising that toppled the government of Al Zibidine Ben Ali on the 14th of January 2011. Firstly, however, it is necessary to engage with the development of one term that has and still is influencing our perception of the series of political unrests that have shaken the region of the Middle East starting from 18 December 2010, the date when the Tunisian protests escalated as a reaction to Mohammed Bouazizi's immolation in Sidi Bouzid, a city located in the Centre-South of Tunisia. That term is Arab Spring.

I have chosen to call this term a 'discursive configuration' drawing on 'discourse' as a 'socially produced group of ideas or ways of thinking that can be tracked in individual texts or groups of texts, but that also demand to be located within wider historical and social structures of relations' (Turner, 1996). My understanding is that this discursive configuration is fed by particular hegemonic assumptions and that it produces a set of narratives able to self-replicate and automatically reproduces hegemonic meaning configurations when confronted with moments of rupture and discontinuity. This is the way in which the dominant signification regime operates the re-incorporation of moments of disruption. This is also why the stereotypical features of the media discourse around the Arab revolutions have been referred to in terms of 'domination narrative' (Rizk, 2014).

In my case study, the Tunisian revolution, the discursive configuration is articulated on two levels. At a global level, the event is re-signified thanks to the Arab Spring narrative, while at the local level, the Tunisian authorities focus on a broad institutionalization of the '14th of January' revolution, by emphasizing its completion. Moreover, there are (at least) three moments to be identified in both the global and the local discursive configuration (see Fig.1.) regarding Tunisia: the pre-revolutionary moment, the revolutionary climax and the post-revolutionary moment. Before 2011, the West would consider Tunisia its partner (both commercial and political), while the government would promote the myth of the Tunisian 'economic miracle' (Hibou, 2011: 9). During the revolution, the West saluted the Arab Spring, while the Tunisian governments celebrated the glorious achievements of the '14th of January' revolution. In the aftermath of the revolution, the West went back to its concerns about 'terrorist' threats (after the electoral

victory of the Islamists of Ennahda on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October 2011) and ‘illegal’ migration, while the Tunisian authorities were also considering the revolution completed and preferred to shift the attention towards the fight against terrorism.

	<b>Ben Ali’s period</b>	<b>Revolutionary Period January - Autumn 2011</b>	<b>Post-Revolutionary Period</b>
<b>Global Narrative</b>	Tunisia as a commercial partner	‘Arab Spring’	‘Islamic winter’ and terrorist threat
<b>Local Narrative</b>	Tunisian miracle’	‘Revolution of the 14 <sup>th</sup> of January’ (victorious and completed)	Achieved democracy and focus on anti-terrorism fight

*Fig. 1. My attempt to visually systematize the global and local state narratives regarding Tunisia before, during, and after the revolutionary climax.*

Throughout this research I will develop a thorough critique of the term ‘revolution.’ First by pointing out the stereotypes inherent in the paradigm of the Arab Spring (in this chapter), and later (in Chapter Two) moving away from the revolution framework in order to privilege the analytical lens of the ‘network of events of resistance,’ which I consider more useful to account for the micro levels of resistance that the 2011 revolution was a result of. I will acknowledge the importance of these moments of rupture by employing reflections derived from Post-structuralist theories of the event.

However, this research does not intend to label conceptions of revolution as being always Orientalist, neither am I suggesting that theories of the event can be the solution to Orientalist narratives on Tunisia. In this sense, the critique of the term and the framework of ‘revolution’ – as it will be developed in this and the following chapters – uniquely regards the way this term has been weaponised to their own interests by states and dominant groups (which the revolution was a challenge to). My critique does not regard the way the term ‘revolution’ may be employed by all social groups or political actors. In fact, I will often use the term

in the text as and when it is employed by the protagonists of the Tunisian revolution.

In the following section, more focus will be granted to the Arab Spring as a discursive configuration and its stereotypical assumptions. What is immediately liable for critique is that the media has homogenized a series of extremely different political events under the generic umbrella term of Arab Spring. If one was to give a unitary definition to such heterogeneous events, one should at least differentiate between so-called 'successful revolutions' (Tunisia, Egypt), revolutions transformed into civil wars (Libya, Syria) and all the other attempted revolutions forgotten by Western and Arab media (Yemen, Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco) (Valeriani, 2012).

At the same time, the political stakes of the protests are caught in between the conflicting gestures of naming and self-naming. On the one side, the events are formatted and evaluated by external actors, such as some Western observers with their own agenda; on the other side, the active participants in the protests choose to name the events they've contributed to in their own different ways, as shall be discussed later.

The political implications of the 'Arab Spring' term become even clearer once the genealogy of its coinage is explicit. The self-declared inventor of the term is Marc Lynch, a Middle East scholar writing for the American journal *Foreign Policy* on 6 January 2011 an article titled *Obama's Arab Spring?* (Lynch, 2011). The term alludes to different Western historical transformations (especially the European 1848 'Spring of the Peoples' and the anti-Soviet 1968 'Prague Spring'). As a consequence, the term has been recognized to be intentionally carrying liberal meanings, as 'part of a US strategy of controlling (the movement's) aims and goals' and labelling the events in North Africa as uprisings inspired by an America-style liberal democracy (Massad, in Haddad et al., 2012).

But more significantly, the Arab Spring contains a stereotypically Western understanding of the Arab dimension – one particularly proliferated against the backdrop of the War on Terror – and distinguished by the projection of the so-called *Arab Exceptionalism*, as dubbed by the Samuel Huntington. This frame is intended to convey the generic Arab/Islamic world's resistance to representative

democracy (Stark, 2011) as well as its inclination towards authoritarianism and inter-religious conflictuality.

Furthermore, it has to be noted that the exceptionalism animated by anti-‘Arab’/Islam racism is a paradigm that has been initially promoted by the US in the geopolitical setting of the ‘oil crisis’ of the 1970s under the form of neo-Orientalism (Said, 2008; Terranova, 2007). From an Arab perspective, a common word game shows the impact of the geopolitical rise of the fossil on the long lineage of Arab resistance. In fact, it is commonly accepted that ‘from 1973 onwards, the oil manna (*al fawra*) has taken the place of revolution (*al thawra*)’ (Amin, 2012: 151). Recently, the neo-Orientalism paradigm of the 1970s was been ‘updated’ through the lens of the post-9/11 Islamophobia.

As Rabab El Mahdi notices, in the immediate aftermath of 2011, the ‘Arab Awakening’ substituted the ‘Arab Exceptionalism’ narrative, while subtending the total political ‘sleepiness’ or absence of democracy of the countries included in the Arab Spring scheme (El-Mahdi, 2011). In this way, the ‘Arab Awakening’ perspective overlooked a broad tradition of anti-colonial struggles, pan-Arab awareness and political theory and practice, many of which had historically challenged the West’s striving of domination in the area. In this sense, more than being aligned with the Western values of liberalism, the Tunisian uprising revealed the possibility of evading the classical and liberal framing of revolutions, because it pierced through ‘that neoliberal present as time stalled, without hope for emancipatory futures’ with ‘far-reaching effects on how we think about the nature of political action and justice’ (Scott, 2014).

Furthermore, it is important to stress how the series of protests in Tunisia and Egypt, at least starting from 2007, have all been articulated in opposition to ‘neoliberalism as a state-led project’ (Hanieh, 2012) or to the ‘state-led monopoly capitalism’ (Amin, 2012). Most precisely, these protests had repeatedly been a response to a certain model of redistribution, focused around a massive operation of polarization: immiseration, on the one side, and accumulation, on the other side, both of which fostered by Western-compliant autocratic systems (Hanieh, 2012).

This being said, the Tunisian upheavals can be called ‘revolution,’ *al thawra* in Arabic, insofar as it’s the direct participants who have chosen to call it so, and bearing in mind the Arabic term’s genealogy, as will be illustrated later. In this

sense, 'revolution' becomes a viable term to name these events only as long as this 'terminology (is) chosen by active agents themselves to name their own actions rather than seeking to categorize a political process through the use of standard terminology' (El-Houri, 2016).

However, I would suggest a definition yet to come since, as Anthony Alessandrini explains, 'revolutions change things, and among the things that they change, or should change, are the categories through which we view such changes. New subjectivities and new singularities demand new frameworks, both of understanding and of solidarity' (Alessandrini, 2014).

*Who names* the events and *what names are employed* becomes crucial in order to understand the power relations around the Tunisian revolution. In this sense, beyond the Arab Spring umbrella-term, there are specific names that have been connected to the Tunisian revolution and have also been broadly critiqued by the Tunisians. Each and every one of them contains one specific assumption, which will be deconstructed in the following section.

The 'Jasmine revolution,' for example, stresses the non-violent aspect of the upheaval, but, more significantly, it forecloses the protagonism of the internal areas of the country, by using the symbol of a flower only growing in the touristic neighbourhood of the Tunisian capital (Sidi Bousaid). As a counterpart of the jasmine, and in order to restore the importance of the internal and Western rebellions, some have suggested names such as the *Hindi* revolution, referring to the flower of the cactus growing in the desert internal areas (Dakhli, 2013); the Fig revolution (Tlili, 2011); or the alfa grass revolution (Ayeb, 2014).

Moreover, the much-celebrated revolution of the '14<sup>th</sup> of January' (date when the president Ben Ali left the country) has been critiqued for its imposition of an end to the mobilization. It was ironically called the 'revolution under 5 minutes' (Tlili, 2011) as opposed to what activists perceive as a 'revolutionary becoming' (Ahl Al Kahf. 2013) and what more commonly Tunisians refer to as the *processus* when referring to the ongoing 'transition' process towards 'democracy'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This aspect of temporality and of the processual nature of political transformation will also be addressed in the following section, in which I will discuss the stereotypical features of the 'Arab Spring.' Furthermore, I will attempt to engage with the processual character of the events through a diagrammatic practice in Chapter Three.

Most Tunisians would employ the Arabic term to indicate their revolution as *al-thawra*, which holds a different historical lineage when compared to the Western 'revolution,' and its historical examples. In fact, the Latin term carries an inherent Orientalist gaze when applied to non-Western settings insofar as it implicitly sets Western historical precedents as the norm. In this same way, as Angela Giordani points out, the term *al-thawra* is irreducibly tied to the anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist struggles in the 'Arab' world, but is also intended as a concrete instance of rebellion which functions as a means to reach the more transcendent *inquilab*, translatable as 'institutional change',<sup>12</sup> that 'necessary to bring about the Arab nation's rebirth, or *ba'th*'.

So, while the popular anti-imperialist uprising of *thawra* was the expression of the *umma*'s (Islamic community) will-to-power, *inquilab* was what would give the *umma* its historical form as a "modern national entity" capable of re-entering the trajectory of self-realization and awakening (*nahda*) from which it had been supposedly deflected by Ottoman, imperialist and Zionist domination. (Giordani, 2013: 7)

From the generic Arabic term of *al-thawra*, largely employed in the post-colonial period for its reference to victorious struggles against different forms of domination, I'll return to the Arab Spring discursive configuration and explore the set of stereotypical assumptions it carries.

It is imperative to closely identify the latencies of this totalizing Arab Spring narrative, led by the way in which the Tunisian (and Egyptian) citizens have enacted their resistance against the exclusion or reduction mediated by this way of framing the event. Dismissing these stereotypes for Tunisia is the first step towards dismissing them for all the other countries.

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<sup>12</sup> In the contemporary Egyptian context that Giordani is looking at in her work *inquilab* has developed its original meaning and is used now to refer to instances of 'coup d'état' (Giordani, 2013).

One of the first scholars to have exposed the ‘revolution grand-narrative’ linked to the Arab Spring is Rabab El-Mahdi, who clearly pointed at a biased interpretation by both the international media, but also by ‘academics, politicians, and the local elite’, engaged in ‘orientalizing the Egyptian Uprising’,

constructed as a youth, non-violent revolution in which social media (especially Facebook and Twitter) are champions. The underlying message here is that these "middle-class" educated youth (read: modern) are not "terrorists," they hold the same values as "us" (the democratic West), and finally use the same tools (Facebook and Twitter) that "we" invented and use in our daily lives. They are just like "us" and hence they deserve celebration. (El-Mahdi, 2011)

Although El-Mahdi’s analysis concerns the Egyptian case, it is very relevant in the process of deconstructing the Arab Spring in general and can be applied to the Tunisian case, in particular. In this sense, thinkers like Magid Shihade have pointed out how the understanding of the Arab Spring had been permeated by Orientalism, Euro-Centrism and by the Western conception of ‘modernity’ (Shihade: 2012).

At this point, I want to introduce a crucial element that has guided me throughout my research and this thesis, namely the theorization and practice of the Tunisian street art collective *Ahl Al Kahf*, literally “The People Underground”. They are part of the post-revolutionary street art movement (alongside collectives such as Molotov or Zwewla) and convey some of the most radical political critiques through their art. It is important to stress that after 2011, the urban walls constituted a crucial aspect of the reclaiming of the public space on behalf of the Tunisian citizens. Therefore, using the walls for art and for political opinions became an important gesture of liberation. Ahl Al Kahf, whose members had a Communist and Fine Arts background, employed both the digital Facebook walls as well as the urban walls to share their artistic practice. Their works are extremely revealing since they speak volumes about the erasure of the social

aspect of the revolution and about how the event's temporality has been under attack. Their practice is articulated around at least three main points: 1) their constant warning that the revolution is still in progress and has not yet ended; 2) the assertion that the revolution has been pioneered by the poor - not by the artists, not by the bloggers - and that it will go on until social injustice comes is achieved to some degree; and 3) that artists such as themselves strongly reject the role of 'representatives of the revolution' assigned to them from outside the revolutionary body, mostly by Western observers.

The conceptual and artistic assemblages that Ahl Al Kahf created are one of the most sensitive contributions to the ongoing history of the Tunisian revolution. On their social media profile, they introduce themselves as a 'movement of young artists from Tunisia, anti-Globalization & anti-Orientalism, born inside the Revolutionary Process,' operating as a 'multitude of terrorist networks that fulfil and spread aesthetic terrorism' (Ahl Al Kahf, 2012).<sup>13</sup> It was them who invented the concept of 'revolution under 5 minutes', used to indicate the temporal ceiling imposed on the Tunisia revolution (Tlili, 2011). In terms of their art, I will only briefly signal three works of their early production, since their practice will be more extensively thought through in Chapter 4.

All of the following works have, most probably, been created throughout 2011. The exact dates of the production of these works are difficult to trace, as is their duration (given how ephemeral street art is). I will, in fact, be referring to the date in which the images of these works have been uploaded online, which may or may not coincide with the date of their production.

The first work (Fig. 2.) hints with irony at the usurpation of the claims of the revolution, by re-mastering a classic Banksy stencil, the one depicting a rat with a parachute. In this case, the artists choose to substitute the bull to the rat, in order to suggest a wordplay between 'bull' and 'revolution,' two similarly sounding words in Arabic: *al thawr* and *al thawra*. The stencil is sprayed upon highly accessible urban objects such as bins in the centre of Tunis, on the main high street, Avenue Bourghiba.

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<sup>13</sup> The collective often uses the provocative term of 'terrorism' - which carries particular Islamophobic undertones in the post-9/11 age - mainly to refer to the propagation of thought-provoking messages communicated through artistic practices.



*Fig. 2. The Lifted Bull as a metaphor for the stolen revolution (stencil). Avenue Bourghiba, Tunis. Uploaded in February 2011.*

*Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile*

Along the same line, the digital poster below (Fig. 3) expresses one of the group's main concerns in relation to the temporality of the revolution. Here Ahl Al Kahf felt the need to stress the incompleteness of the revolution with the sentence 'the Revolution continues' in both Arabic and French, grafted upon an image of a mass demonstration on Avenue Bourghiba.



*Fig. 3. 'The Revolution Goes On' (digital poster). Uploaded April 2011.*

*Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile*

Furthermore, one of the most inspirational artworks of the collective was assembled on the walls next to one of the city's main gate, Bab Sadoun, probably around April 2011 (Fig. 4). Part of this work depicted some of the group's intellectual references: the Moroccan novelist Mohamed Choukri, Antonio Negri, Edward Said and Gilles Deleuze. Each of the portraits is accompanied by a brief quote, which very significantly relates to the group's reflection on resistance.



Fig. 4. 'Bab Sadoun in Your Hearts' (stencils + collages).

Tunis, Bab Sadoun, next to the arts academy. Uploaded in April 2011.

Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile.

**Mohamed Choukri:** 'I write in order to be banned;'

**Antonio Negri:** 'Power can always be broken somewhere;'

**Edward Said:** 'The task of the intellectuals is to witness the bad uses of history;'

**Gilles Deleuze:** 'Creating is resisting.'

These artistic political interventions have significantly informed my reflection with regards to the modalities with which the revolutionary event was mediated. On the one hand, I will critique the way the event is *represented* in mainstream media, and how its conflictuality is being neutralized, by rendering it 'familiar' to the Western gaze. On the other hand, I will take this a step further, reflecting on how mediation<sup>14</sup> occurs, mostly looking at how cultures and practices of resistance are circulated across the internal and external borders – and I will challenge the attention granted to social media alone as a political tool. As a

<sup>14</sup> Mediation is a concept that I will further develop in relation to the struggles connected to the Tunisian revolution. In Chapter 5 I will frame mediation in terms of a particular production and propagation of signification and affects while indicating how meaning is recreated within and between different uprising communities and the mobility of their members.

consequence, in the last chapter I will be focusing on how mediation can be thought beyond the corporate and state media, as a process promoted from below and with liberation aims, both through minor art and through the protesters' mobile bodies.

Going back to the critique of the practice of representing political events – exposed in terms of 'Orientalising the Egyptian uprising' (El Mahdi, 2011) or the 'domination narrative' (Rizk, 2014) - it is important to challenge some of the aspects of the event, for the way in which they have been framed by the Arab Spring discursive configuration.

The first, most pervasive and complex aspect of this discursive configuration is the temporality of the event, in terms of how both its emergence and its duration are understood. According to the Arab Spring reading – and bearing in mind its more 'successful' examples, namely Tunisia and Egypt – the revolutions are implicitly considered as an unexpected and completed (either achieved or 'failed') outburst of democratic practices.

Privileging the sudden rebellion against the dictator facilitates at least two important erasures. First of all, the pre-2011 lineage of struggle, with its social demands, which goes beyond the mere goal of toppling the 'dictator.' And, secondly, the complicity of the West with its former ally, depicted globally as the only one accountable for the social inequality, which led to the revolution.

On the contrary, unlike what is being implied by the Arab Exceptionalism paradigm, Tunisia has an extensive tradition of political dissent, social movements and struggles in the period of Ben Ali's government, which were faced with a pervasive repressive state apparatus (as illustrated by Garelli et al., 2013; Massarelli, 2012; Hibou, 2011; Ben Mhenni, 2011; Dahkli, 2013; Beinin & Vairel, 2013). Some of the more recent examples are the collective protests organized by the main trade union, the UGTT, by the League of Human rights, by the union of the unemployed graduates, the UDC, and by the Yizzi Fok blogger network in 2007. Furthermore, the most significant pre-revolutionary mobilization is the one in 2008 in Gafsa (Del Pistoia and Duchemin, in Osservatorio Iraq, 2016: 19). In fact, 'while they seemed a "surprise" for numerous observers, the demonstrations of December 2010 and January 2011 *echoed* other strong and contentious social

movements, notably the revolts in the Gafsa mining basin in 2008' (Dahkli, 2013, my emphasis).

In an attempt to resist the reduction of the revolution's temporal horizon, many Tunisian participants have challenged the 'failure' narrative promoted by both liberal and radical Western observers (Francois; Sadik, 2013; New Internationalist, 2013), which is mostly based on the victory of Islam inspired parties such as Ennahda in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. This is because depicting the Tunisian revolution as 'failed' implies a limit to the revolutionary process, asserted by external observers, autonomously deciding on the beginning and the end of the revolutionary process. As El-Houri points out in this critique of the failed revolution paradigm, 'the idea of speaking about failure or success of an ongoing event, ends that event, it establishes a point of conclusion, a perceived suture' (El-Houri, 2016).

I'm not arguing here for a notion of 'permanent revolution;' but I am rather referring to the fact that Tunisians perceive themselves as part of an ongoing transformative process, despite the awareness of many post-revolutionary difficulties and setbacks (see Fig. 5.).



*Fig. 5. Tunis, 2012, post-revolutionary graffiti: 'The revolution goes on in Tunisia'.*

*Source: Flickr.com (July 2013).*

Leyla Dahkli is very eloquent in describing this collective perception: 'while protests were continuously undertaken in the country, a form of disappointment and discouragement manifested. The feeling of a betrayed revolution now visibly coexists with the understanding that the revolutionary process is still ongoing' (Dahkli, 2013).

Like in the case of the Arab exceptionalism paradigm, which influenced the Western perception of Tunisia before, during and after the 2011 revolution, the focus on gender has also been modulated in different ways.<sup>15</sup> As far as the revolution is concerned, the gender composition of the protestors has been either overlooked or saluted as rare, privileging the focus on the young male participants

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<sup>15</sup> Before the revolution, Tunisia was regarded as one of the 'good examples' of the 'Arab world' and gender discrimination was hardly debated in the Western public space. During the revolution, the mobilization of Tunisian women and girls didn't receive enough media attention, or was, on the contrary, thematised as exceptional. After the revolution and the electoral victory of the Islamists, increasing concerns about gender discrimination have become common in the Western discourse around gender in Tunisia. In this sense, there is an extensive literature, which explores the way gender has been strategic for the post-9/11 Orientalist paradigm (Delphy, 2015; Ghani & Fiske, 2016; Hasso & Salime, 2016; Hunt, 2006; Zayzafoon, 2005).

and their masculine-centred agency. Confirming the Orientalist view of the subjection of Arab women, initial media accounts ignored the women's participation in the revolution, or celebrated the gestures of individual women as exceptional, unexpected acts of courage (Al-Ali, 2012).<sup>16</sup> On the contrary,

For decades [women] had been active members in trade unions, political opposition parties and more informal networks and organizations that were all instrumental in the recent political developments. Women have been very much involved in the virtual communities of bloggers and Facebook users. And during the height of the actual protests to oust Ben Ali and Mubarak, women of all generations and social classes were on the streets in large numbers (Al-Ali, 2012: 27).

In this regard, my case study and further investigation will not specifically focus on examples of protagonism of women and girls in the political arena in Tunisia. I am aware that I will be privileging the collective actions centred around young poor urban men, engaged in extreme forms of protest and mobility, in their journeys from the countryside to the city, towards Europe and towards the Islamic militancy fronts in the East. Nevertheless, there are multiple forms of collective action, mainly led and enacted by girls and women across different social classes, that would deserve further attention, but that this work will not focus upon.<sup>17</sup>

This brings me to what might be the most delicate aspect of the Tunisian (and Egyptian) uprising, namely the class belonging of the people involved in the protests and the consequent nature of their demands. As El-Mahdi has pointed out, most of the Arab Spring narrative has concentrated on generic 'youth' being the

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<sup>16</sup> J. Cole and S. Cole have written "That the female element in the Arab Spring has drawn so little comment in the West suggests that our narratives of, and preoccupations with, the Arab world – religion, fundamentalism, oil and Israel – have blinded us to the big social forces that are altering the lives of 300 million people." 'An Arab Spring for Women', *The Nation*, 26 April 2011.

<sup>17</sup> I am here referring mainly to the importance of groups such as that of the Eleven Widows, active during the 2008 Gafsa Intifada, and to the enduring activism of the mothers of the Tunisian *desaparecidos* in the Mediterranean in 2011-12, to name just two significant examples.

promoters of the uprisings and 'middle-class young people' becoming its representatives, both in traditional media outlets and in social media.

In this construct, the media and academic analysts lump together the contradictory and often conflictual interests of "yuppies" (young, urban, professionals of (Western) connections and backgrounds) with those of the unemployed, who live under the poverty line in rural areas and slum-areas. Under this banner of "youth" and "yuppies", upper-middle-class young people are portrayed as the quintessential representative of this uprising (El-Mahdi, 2011).

In this regard, one of the Mosireen Egyptian video collective member, Philip Rizk, has published a thorough rejection of the 'representative' role assigned to the middle class young people (including himself) during the Egyptian revolution, depicted as mediators of what the liberal West wanted to perceive as a friendly, 'familiar revolution,' according to a narrative he called 'domination narrative' (Rizk, 2014). 'We became the translators of a collective uprising we were far from representative of. [...] This process drowned out the voices of the majority. No matter how hard we tried to argue otherwise, we fit the part – middle class, internet-savvy, youth, and thus revolutionary' (Idem).

This class aspect is directly linked to the violence with which these uprisings have managed to oust their dictators since the 'middle class, internet-savvy' youth is not expected to employ violence as a contestation tool. The Arab Spring's stereotypical peculiarity – similar to that of the 'Jasmine Revolution' narrative – lies in its alleged peaceful methods, mostly provided by the access to new media, especially social media, able to sustain the spreading of news and the organizing of gatherings. This is also the reason for the emergence of definitions such as 'Facebook revolution', 'Twitter revolution' or more generally 'Revolution 2.0' (Ghonim, 2012). The violence and the accentuated focus on social media are closely connected and cannot be separated. Social media is also often employed as an explanation to the implicit Orientalist question 'How did the 'Arabs' succeed to

topple their dictators?’ and is thematised as a magic tool of social change. On the contrary, as the series of precedent struggles in both Tunisia and Egypt prove, violence has, unfortunately, always been present. If we avoid considering struggles themselves as a reaction to structural violence - either direct or indirect, in terms of social exclusion or state violence - we definitely cannot ignore the violent response of the state, in both cases, without which the ‘martyrs’ of the revolution wouldn’t have existed. 338 people were killed and 2147 injured during the Tunisian revolutionary climax alone (Mandraud, 2011). This is to dismiss the possibility of a non-violent revolution, alluded to by the classic ‘Tahrir Square’ gathering frame. As Rizk and El-Mahdi suggest, the underclass’s struggle is far from the bucolic ‘Facebook revolution’:

*Did you hear the voices of the underclass? Did you see the family members of the martyrs clad in black mourning in their homes? Did you see images of unnamed civilians gunned down by snipers on the roofs of the police stations? Did you see police officers opening prison doors in order to undermine this revolutionary moment and wreak havoc on nearby communities? Did you see protesters storming police stations on January 28th, seeking vengeance for years of unaccounted for torture, violence, and psychological domination? Did you see the Molotov cocktails prepared by women and lowered from their balconies to avenge the maiming of their sons and neighbors? This is not non-violent. Only the fixation through the lens of a camera on Tahrir Square in daylight could appease you with that impression (Rizk, 2014, my emphasis).*

As Rizk points out, violence has been highly present in the protests. In fact following the trail of violence offers a significant view over the way the protests unfolded, as it links the violence of the authoritarian state and its massive police

apparatus to the resilience and determination of the protesters, which employed a vast range of means to resist and keep challenging the power of their governments.

In fact, a form of violence that hasn't been considered enough, with a deep political charge, concerns different degrees of self-harm. It was an action of this type, enacted by Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid that sparked the Tunisian revolution itself. Unfortunately, extreme cases of self-harm are still occurring both in Tunisia and in the territories crossed by the Tunisian migrants.

Therefore it can be concluded that the non-violent image of the uprisings is ignoring or misreading crucial and dramatic features of the upheavals. First of all, that of a large employment of lethal violence on behalf of the government; then that of the unarmed active defence on behalf of the protesters, alongside their practices of self-harm and suicidal violence.

As for the usage of social media before the toppling down of the dictators, in both Egypt and Tunisia the Internet was placed under severe censorship, which is why both countries saw the involvement in the protests of groups defending formerly persecuted bloggers. Furthermore, before 2010, corporate Western companies fully supported the authoritarian limitation of freedom of expression, like when Vodafone switched off the cell phone service at the request of the Egyptian régime (Mejias, 2012).

In this sense, the access of some of the protesters to the Internet was undoubtedly useful for both spreading the news and organizing the gatherings, but worked only once the governments no longer enforced the censorship.

My point is that 'it takes more than a social media platform to organize and sustain a grassroots protest movement' (Idem). Furthermore, the most common optimistic approach towards the democratizing impact of the use of social media, which some call 'liberation technology,' 'does not seem very interested in questioning the roles and structures of the institutions that own and control social media networks' (Idem). Moreover, social media was mostly accessible to the middle-class, urban, Internet-savvy youth, which is, as explained before, an important participant, yet a minority in the composition of the revolutionary body.

When considering another fundamental aspect, that of religion, it must be pointed out that the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions have been initially

regarded with suspicion, and then glorified for their total lack of religious claims.<sup>18</sup> How can the religious belief of the protesters be accounted for, without stigmatizing or romanticizing it? In the Western gaze, secularism is the only path to be taken towards 'democracy,' although the West has largely ignored the Tunisian radical Left, for instance, who has constantly advocated for the importance of secularism. Moreover, former rulers of the country, like Habib Bourghiba and Ben Ali, had politically weaponised secularism, as an exemplary move toward Western-style modernization and as a strategy to neutralise political opposition connected to political Islam right after independence.<sup>19</sup> In opposition to secularism, the West appears to fear fundamentalism and theocracy as the only possible alternatives to 'democracy'. Muslim countries are often represented as affected by intra-religious or sectarian conflicts, the most recent being the Shia-Sunni conflict currently enflaming Syria. In this way, sectarianism and the violence connected to it are 'naturalised' and associated with a religious community already extensively represented as 'pre-modern' and oppressive when compared to the West, even more so after 2001.<sup>20</sup> Despite the post-revolutionary conflicts, the uprisings have been an occasion of broad collaboration, enacted especially during the protest gatherings and the occupations, not only among secular and believers but also between different groups of Muslims, as Dabashi explains:

The challenges posed by these revolutions to divisions within Islam and among Muslims – racial (Arabs, Turks, Iranians etc.), ethnic (Kurds, Baluchs etc.) or sectarian (Sunni and Shi'a in particular) – has at once agitated and (*ipso facto*) discredited them. These revolutions are collective acts of overcoming.

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<sup>18</sup> This 'fear of Islamists', intended as a fertile soil for anti-Western terrorism is particularly strong when it regards countries which, unlike Turkey or Saudi Arabia, are not declaredly aligned to the American foreign policies or commercial interests (Haddad et al., 2012: 44).

<sup>19</sup> These brief historical observations are meant to only hint at the complexity of the history of Tunisian secularism, to suggest why the 2011 protests can't simply be read in terms of secularism vs. Islam unless one is willing to engage with the past manifestations of secularism.

<sup>20</sup> This stereotypical assumption sounds relevantly similar to other tropes of otherisation, which have contributed to naturalise the production of conflict in non-Western spaces. I am here referring to the assumptions of conflictuality linked to the so-called Balkans or the African 'tribal society', for example.

They are crafting new identities, forging new solidarities, both within and without the “Islam and the West binary” – overcoming once and for all the thick (material and moral) colonial divide (Dabashi, 2012a: 10).

Finally, as far as the political demands are concerned, the nature of the demands advanced by the underclass was a radically social one; focused on employment, equal territorial development, fighting corruption and police brutality, as exemplified by the most popular slogan, ‘Bread, Freedom, Dignity!’ However, the Arab Spring narrative prefers privileging the generic struggle against the national dictatorship previously sustained by the Western countries, represented not only as violently repressive but most of all, corrupt and unable to manage the country's economy adequately. Rizk hypothesizes the reason of such a narrative deviation in the sense that

These discourses silenced the structural dimensions of injustice and concealed the role of neo-liberal policies promoted by the likes of the International Monetary Fund, the European Union and the United States of America in deepening the stratification between poor and rich. They made you forget that it is out of these structures of injustice that the desire for social justice is born in the first place (Rizk, 2014).

What will emerge from the discussion of these assumptions is that the Tunisian revolution was the result of a broad alliance across the society, led by the country's disenfranchised categories.

Many Western readings, with their focus on religion-based conflict, as well as the state's ‘official story,’ which glorifies the fall of the dictator, therefore neutralize important political aspects of the mobilization and eventually silence the ongoing social conflict. As a consequence, the protagonism of the underclass

and the radicality of their demands, centred on redistribution of wealth and end of state violence, which challenge both the local power and their foreign supporters, are being overlooked.

It is possible, at this point, to reflect on the discursive configuration of the Arab Spring as a mask, following Peter Weibel's reflections. The point he makes is that:

While researching on the relationship between media and revolution, one must not interrogate the subject, but the object; not who speaks, but what is being shown and hidden. Because power reveals itself in what cannot be seen – in the media-as-a-mask -, even if we're not talking about a mask "beyond" which something is really hiding (my translation, Weibel, 1990).

Like any *medium*, the narrative of a revolution, or of a series of revolutions such as the 'Arab Spring,' can be seen as a mask containing numerous intentionally silenced aspects. The functionality of this media representation is that of taking possession of the depicted event, while capturing and neutralizing its subversive potentialities. The Arab Spring discursive configuration thus forged is difficult to overturn from its initial functionality. Its internal mechanics must be made visible, in order to expose its aims of domination. In other words, and as I will be further discussing in the next chapter, the representation of the event, in the case of narratives such as the Arab Spring holds a particular type of performativity, which finds itself often in conflict with the aims of the people who animated the revolutionary event.

These narratives are disempowering in at least two directions: towards the collective who has revolted and towards the spectators who must make an effort to recognize and relate to the instance of resistance, while being distracted by either the dismissal of it as a 'failure' or by its simplifying glorification. How can one start to frame these events and what would a more sensitive approach imply? More precisely, beyond the generalising aims of the Arab Spring narrative, how could one engage with the event of the Tunisian revolution without attempting to appropriate or weaponise it? Can an account of the Tunisian revolution, since the

Arab Spring is but a deceiving umbrella-term, foster and respect the resistance of its protagonists, rather than attempt to contain its potential? In the following section, I will provide a rough, and unavoidably incomplete, mapping of some of the different approaches scholars have so far adopted in looking at the events, while focusing on two significant examples.<sup>21</sup>

## **1.2. Reading the 'Arab Spring'**

The readings of the events connecting the 'Arab' uprisings have been numerous and diversified. It has to be noted that ever since the protests in Tunisia overcame the threshold of global visibility - with the massive demonstrations and riots following Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation act on 17 December 2010 - the majority of the Western media has employed few innovative categories or narrative frames. In the sense many readings provide stereotypical interpretations, drawing mostly on Foreign Policy expertise. Some unitary readings of the Arab Spring follow particular editorial lines; depending on the publication the author collaborates with, such as *Reuters* (Noueihed; Warren, 2012), *BBC* (Gerges, 2014), *The Financial Times* and *The Economist* (Osman, 2014).

A common feature of many of the interpretations of the events is the focus on the aspect of discontinuity. Regardless of the observer's political stance, the 'Arab' uprisings are generally considered the end and/or the beginning of some temporal, political and social unit, a clear border in contemporary history.

The second most frequent focus of the 'Arab' uprisings literature is on the communicational aspect, celebrating the democratizing role of Western social media, especially Facebook and Twitter (Castells, 2012; Mason, 2012), but also the importance of blogging and online 'citizen journalism' opposing the state censorship and contributing to the advent of what most indicate as the 'new Arab public sphere' (Lynch, 2012). Some authors have concentrated on gathering and systematizing testimonies coming from one specific or more of the countries affected by the uprisings (Al-Zubaidi; Cassel, 2013), interested in 'giving voice' to

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<sup>21</sup> The literature taken into consideration in this section can only be a partial selection, as the work around the 2010-11 events is constantly being updated and integrated by new inspiring lines of research.

local accounts and subjective recollections, from different angles, such as the migration experience (Garelli et al., 2013) or the activist practices (Massarelli, 2012).

An important *phylum* of literature is constituted by the interpretations of the so-called Leftist theorists (Zizek, 2012; Badiou, 2012; Hardt and Negri, 2011 and 2012), which I will illustrate later in this section. Alongside these orientations, numerous different scholars have engaged in shedding light on particular aspects of the uprisings from different perspectives. They have reflected on the construction of obedience in the pre-revolutionary period (Hibou, 2011); on how authoritarianism in the Middle East was a functional actor in the economic domination on behalf of the West (Hanieh, 2013); on how protesting bodies interacted with the performativity of space (Butler, 2011; Weizman, 2014) or on how these uprisings were a promise to overcome ‘the West and the rest’ paradigm (Dabashi, 2012). These heterogeneous approaches are useful in enriching the interdisciplinary mosaic of concepts and analyses needed for a better interaction with such recent and still unfolding events.

Eventually, a new orientation of literature emerged from thinkers critically questioning the dominant narrative of the Arab Spring, some of whom I have already quoted,<sup>22</sup> who come from an anti-Orientalist theoretical ground (cfr. Haddad et al., 2012) or from independent political and artistic collectives such as *Mosireen* in Egypt and *Ahl Al Kahf* in Tunisia, whose works I will be engaging with in Chapter 4. I will be thoroughly exploring only some of these works, depending on their utility in the establishment of a framework of alternative reflections and practices concerning the Tunisian revolutionary process.

One of the earliest analyses of the Arab uprisings belongs to the Iranian comparative literature scholar Hamid Dabashi, provocatively titled *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (2012). Dabashi greets the advent of a ‘renewed liberation geography’ inaugurated by the Arab uprisings. While opening up the possibility of building a new public space, based on the ongoing engagement of grassroots voluntary associations, such as trade unions, women’s associations and students’ groups, he refers to the ‘end of postcolonialism’. What he means is that

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<sup>22</sup> El Mahdi, 2011 but also Hosni, 2011 and Rizk, 2014.

‘the revolutions are simultaneously a rejection not just of the colonial oppression they have inherited but, *a fortiori*, of the postcolonial ideologies that had presented and exhausted themselves as its antithesis in Islamist, nationalist or socialist narratives’ (Dabashi, 2012: 9-10).

With their practices, the revolutionaries have thus emptied the binary West/East, while removing the West’s representative authority, connected to the traditional Orientalist ways of perceiving the East as a region in need of Western support and examples in order to ‘progress’. Dabashi indicates this with a literary metaphor, as a collective open-ended novel instead of an *epos* where the narrative development is monopolized by one character.

While Dabashi’s account is undoubtedly very useful and detailed, considering his scholarship regarding the Arab countries and social movements – and especially because of his sensitive understanding of the religious collaborative aspect of the uprisings – the dismissal of what he historically refers to in terms of ‘postcolonial ideologies’ (namely ‘Islamist, nationalist or socialist narratives’) indicates a possibly too abrupt rupture with historical political traditions. In fact, he operates a clear cut with what he sees as the anti-colonial ideologies of the past, namely with nationalism, socialism and Islamism, while privileging the protagonism of a highly collaborative civil society based on voluntary organizations. Although most of the participants in the protests, at least in Tunisia, belonged to an a-political category - united by a shared experience of severe poverty and existential precariousness, rather than by previous forms of organisation - ideologies shouldn’t go ignored. Leftist tradition strategies have informed the pre-revolutionary labour struggles in both Tunisia and Egypt (notably the Mahalla strike in Egypt and the Gafsa Intifada in Tunisia, both occurred in 2008<sup>23</sup>), while political Islam has flourished electorally after the fall of Ben Ali and Mubarak (Merone: 2013a; 2013b; 2015a). Despite the previous regimes’ commitment to depoliticizing their peoples (Amin, 2012), and the harsh repression of ideological claims during their rule, ideologies, whether connected to a religious or to a working-class sensibility, should not be imagined as interrupted, but rather as developed.

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<sup>23</sup> Mainly discussed in Gobe, 2010, but also in Achcar, 2013; Amin, 2012; Ayeb, 2011; Beinin & Vairel, 2013; Hanieh, 2013; Kilani, 2014; Missaoui & Khalfaoui, 2011.

An original and enlightening approach from a European perspective comes from *Spaces in Migration: Postcards of a Revolution* (Garelli et al., 2013). This research explores the relationship between the experience of the Tunisian revolutionaries (many of whom inhabitants of the poorer areas of the country) and their subsequent migration across the Mediterranean towards Europe. The authors depict the revolution as taking place in the reconfiguration enacted by the bodies permeated by the desire to take space back and mark it with the full presence of their existence.<sup>24</sup> Occupying the privatized spaces dominated by Ben Ali's dictatorship, such as Avenue Bourghiba and the governmental square of the Kasbah, and challenging the European anti-migration policies, put in place in order to immobilize and erase the existence of those same bodies, run on parallel lines. Tunisia and Europe share the counter-revolutionary drives symbolized by the urge to impose 'silence and imperceptibility,' challenged by the 'guerilla' of presence and insistence of the revolutionaries/migrants. The authors (Glenda Garelli, Federica Sossi and Martina Tazzioli) insist that 'this is also a revolution: this turning of space into one's own within a regime of invisibility, employing strategies of existence and insistence in order to locate *a political presence in the folds of silence and imperceptibility*' (Garelli et al., 2013: 4, my emphasis).

While reflecting on the different 'regimes of visibility' that harness the existence of revolutionaries, both as protesters and as illegal migrants, *Spaces in Migration* considers the interaction between these disruptive experiences and the dominant regime of speech and visibility, commonly concentrated on the 'politics of testimony' as the privileged method of engaging with the Other, either the 'Arab' protester or the illegal migrant. Within this collection of essays, Federica Sossi's critique of this approach, inspired by Jean-Francois Lyotard's notion of *différend* (Lyotard, 1989: 13), seems to resonate with Gayatri Spivak's notorious question 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (Spivak, 1980). In stepping away from speaking *for*, the gesture of speaking *with* is also charged with many challenges, as I have also tried to problematize in the *Preface* (Alcoff, 1991). Sossi warns us that

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<sup>24</sup> In Chapter 3 I will be discussing the relevance of the mobility of tens of thousands of Tunisians in the immediate aftermath of the revolutionary climax of the 14th of January, namely starting with the same night after Ben Ali's flight to Saudi Arabia.

We run the risk of not deeply interrogating ourselves on the absence of speech and of visibility from the part of those who let themselves be spoken about and be seen, that is those we bear witness for. Why don't they speak? Or why do they speak without being heard? Why are they in part invisible even when devising their strategies for insisting in space? Trying not to bear witness but to be 'together' alongside them, means letting the *différend* be itself, not thinking that it could be resolved, neither through testimony nor otherwise (Garelli et al., 2013: 162-3).

Many accounts of the Tunisian revolution (and even more so those regarding the Arab Spring) could easily be critiqued for their intentions to 'solve the *différend*', as Sossi explains. In other words, for forcing the application of Western categories on the political imaginary and practices of non-Western citizens, with no intention of addressing the inherent bias of the Western standpoint.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, rather than reflecting on the specificity and innovative nature of such mobilizations, most analysts chose to either depurate them of any radical political content - be it religious or socialist - while reducing them to an anti-dictatorship social media revolution. While this is generally the orientation of the supporters of the liberal reading of the events, based on the Western interests in the region, radical observers also operate a sort of 'dissolution of the *différend*', when they use or dismiss the upheavals according to their theoretical expectations. All of the ones I will give an overview of paradoxically suggest a sense of distrust in approaching a revolutionary practice perceived as dangerously close to religious sensibility, somehow declining something like a Leftist 'Arab Exceptionalism.'<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> In Chapter 5 I will be reflecting on how a notion of singularity can be thought beyond the representation that the event has received in mainstream global corporate and local state media. By singularity I seek to allow the space of reflection on the specificity of the Tunisian event, free from categories and expectations emitted by the West. Yet this line of thought has allowed me, at the same time, to identify similarities between the Tunisian struggle and that of groups elsewhere, all agents of what Nicholas Thoburn calls minor politics rooted in 'cramped spaces' (Thoburn, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> A similar previous example of this type of approach was the European Leftist *intelligentsia's* dismissal of the 1979 Iranian revolution. On that occasion, Michel Foucault engaged courageously

The Arab uprisings have aroused great interest and enthusiasm on behalf of many radical theorists, who have viewed the events as announcing a significant wave of political revitalization. I have chosen to work on the Leftist readings of the Arab Spring because of the expectation that these particular theorists could provide useful elements regarding the political potential of the event.<sup>27</sup> However, as I shall illustrate, even these more politically receptive observers are influenced by the mainstream narrative, which they rarely question, and by the distrust towards the Islamic world. Therefore, they often project Western standards on the events rather than embracing their political singularity.

Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, for instance, have attempted a unitary interpretation of different phenomena in the Arab and Western world, thus connecting the Arab uprisings to the anti-austerity movements in Europe and the US as well as the riots inflaming Paris and London's suburbs, while Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt have opted to explore the new politics of organization of the Arab protesters, later extended in their book, *Declaration*, which also analysed the Occupy movement (Hardt and Negri, 2012).

What all these authors have in common is a strong concentration on the rupture caused by the revolutionary event, sometimes perceived with euphoria - as the opening of a new revolutionary era - other times with nostalgia, since it is perceived as not possessing the necessary project or awareness able to enact the expected transformation. In this sense, radical thinkers often interact and interpret the mainstream media image of the Arab Spring and its different situations of rebellion, without addressing the inherent bias of the construction of the event as such.

In his *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (2011), Žižek makes a clear distinction between Tunisia and Egypt on the one hand, and Libya and Syria, on the other hand, in terms of a radical emancipatory struggle, definitely present in the first

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with the events in his 1979 *Le Monde* article 'Useless to Revolt?', fundamentally raising a crucial issue for this research, namely how does one relate to practices of politics that are not one's own (also discussed in Tazzioli, 2013a; and more recently in Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2016)?

<sup>27</sup> This line of research will be further developed in Chapter Two, *The Event of Resistance and Its Capture*, in which I will try to reflect on different philosophical conceptions around the notion of rupture, discontinuity, interruption symbolized by the concept of the event. While doing this, I will keep in mind the Tunisian revolution as a starting point of a series of research questions around temporalities of transformation.

two cases, but shadowed by civil war and foreign military interventions in the second cases. The political trajectory of the Arab uprising is depicted as a merely liberal one, like in the case of anti-Communist East European revolutions of 1989: 'the official circles and most of the Western media celebrate them as being essentially the same as "pro-democracy" revolutions in Eastern Europe: a desire for Western liberal revolutions in Eastern Europe: a *desire for Western liberal democracy*, a desire to become like the West' (Zizek, 2012: 74, my emphasis).

The author has an overall distrustful vision of the events, eventually decreeing the Egyptian summer of 2011 to 'be remembered as the end of the revolution', since Islamists and the army have gained the power and suppressed the emancipatory potential unchained by the January uprisings. On the other hand, the philosopher advocates for the future uprising of the poor who, he claims, have been 'largely absent in the Spring uprisings, which were dominated, initially at least, by educated middle-class youth' (Zizek, 2012: 75).

As opposed to Zizek, Badiou identifies a strong ideal, almost transcendent, dimension to the uprisings and the riots punctuating the contemporary age, in relation to their possibility of bringing about 'the Rebirth.' The rebirth is understood as the 'emergence of a capacity, at once destructive and creative, whose aim is to make a genuine exit from the established order, of History' (Badiou, 2012: 15), while also fostering the rebirth of the 'Idea', intended as 'the idea of Communism' (Badiou, 2012: 6). The transformation, the rebirth, is driven by the riots, seen by the author as true 'guardians of the history of emancipation', in the three forms of their potential development: the immediate, the latent and the historical riot. The latter is possibly followed by the revolution, which should possess within itself the resources for an immediate seizure of power (Badiou, 2012: 32).<sup>28</sup> When compared to the 1848 'revolution' in Europe, the 'Arab riots' are seen as not producing a new state and society situation, but rather as the beginning of a new historical sequence (Badiou, 2012: 47-48). The validity of the mobilization lies in the fact that it reawakens History: 'when History reawakens, it is the reawakening that matters. This is valid by itself. As for the results, we shall see' (Badiou, 2012: 99). The transformative 'event' (as will be further discussed in

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<sup>28</sup> Although, Badiou argues, the end of the revolutions was set by the Iranian one in 1979 (Badiou, 2012: 37).

the next chapter), marked by the riots and uprisings, is seen in terms of the eruption of the 'inexistent:' the underclass, the exploited, the repressed.

Badiou's systematization of the functioning of the political event contains relevant intuitions, mostly for its focus on the riots, as opposed to the dominant narratives which consider riots a mere non-political expression of self-destructive violence. Nevertheless, this would also be Badiou's critique of the first form of riot, the 'immediate' one. Although Badiou's reflection is very relevant in looking at the articulation of the political event, a possible limit could be the criteria for the 'Reawakening of History.' Although this moment of reawakening is described only in abstract terms - through its intensification, contraction, localization, organization system and political Truth - it holds a rigid predetermined form, which might overlook innovative examples of contemporary forms of resistance. On the other hand, the centrality of the abstract and solemn notion of Idea, still linked to the Communist system of beliefs, seems to be far removed from the ideological pragmatism of young revolutionaries in both Tunisia and Egypt. Rather than remaining faithful to the Communist Idea, both groups have, in fact, shown to be more focused on the search of the appropriate theoretical tools to deal with the contingencies of the struggle for radical social justice, against internally and externally-driven conservative setbacks. As Rizk observes in an interview, with some scepticism towards the application of Communism-inspired Ideas in Egypt, 'in order to break any logic of reform, of reformulation of the old, we don't need a socialist vision, we don't need a Marxist vision, we need to undo the old and see where this will take us' (Harb, 2013).

Furthermore, in their article in the *Guardian* titled 'Arab Democracy's new pioneers' (Hardt and Negri, 2011), Hardt and Negri broadly apply their theorizations of 'multitude' and 'the common' as reading tools of the uprisings. According to the authors, one of the most interesting aspects of the protests is their leaderless organizational structure, since 'the multitude is able to organize itself without centre'. As a consequence, the broad usage of new media is viewed as the symptom, rather than the cause, of this centre-less organisation, since 'these are the modes of expression of an intelligent population capable of using the instruments at hand to organize autonomously'. As opposed to Zizek's 'desire to become like the West,' which he uses to label the Arab uprisings, Negri and Hardt

see the Arab multitude going in a more radical direction: 'the insurrections of the Arab youth are certainly not aimed at a traditional liberal constitution that merely guarantees the division of powers and a regular electoral dynamic, but rather at a form of democracy adequate to the new forms of expression and needs of the multitude' (Hardt and Negri, 2011).

Dictated by the youth's 'general sense of frustrated productive and expressive capacities', the constitutional answer to these needs should enable the creation of a 'common plan to manage natural resources and social production', since this would be a way to challenge neoliberal capitalism. Nevertheless, the authors point out the fact that the Arab world has significant obstacles to overcome, before fulfilling the multitude's aspirations, since 'the Islamic rule is completely inadequate to meet these needs.' They thus identify the Muslim belief as a limit to the full expression of the revolution's potential. Although the thinkers' definition of 'Islamic rule' isn't clear, their concerns echo those of the liberal dismissals of the 'Islamic Winter', oversimplifying the relationship between religion and state, still highly debated and negotiated after the uprisings, in both Egypt and Tunisia.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Negri and Hardt chose to concentrate particularly on freedom of speech and the access to social production. These are undoubtedly part of the causes of the protests, but certainly not sufficiently impellent to determine a highly risky mobilization across the Tunisian and Egyptian society against fierce police states, in comparison to the pressure of unemployment, poverty and state abuse. In fact, the focus on social media and freedom of speech, also central in the Arab Spring narrative, sheds light only on the priorities of a minority of the participants of the revolution, not to say that it silences the demands for radical social justice, in terms of redistribution of wealth and labour as well as an end to state violence.

In conclusion, I believe that the work of scholars who have been reflecting on the economic dynamics of the MENA area for years holds some of the most useful readings of the 2010-2011 events. In this sense, Adam Hanieh's work from 2012, *Lineages of Revolt*, contains some truly valuable suggestions, sustained by years of critical research in the area.

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<sup>29</sup> This is not at all unproblematic in the Western world either.

What emerges very clearly from this work is that the protests framed under the Arab Spring label are far more than just rebellions against authoritarian governments, aiming at Western-type democracy. In fact, Hanieh argues, the 2011 revolutions are fundamentally the sign of an increasing opposition against the neoliberal project - promoted by the West and its interest groups - and its autocratic supporters. In this sense the region is a particular example of how neoliberalism and authoritarianism can collaborate, which is what happened at least from the late 1970s, in the interest of national and global capital, therefore 'ensuring the ongoing subordination of the region's political economy to the forms of accumulation in the core capitalist states of the world markets' (Hanieh, 2012: 46).

The uprising led by the urban poor of the central Tunisian cities - placed under a constant and increasing forceful dispossession process by their state - resonates with the wider picture illustrated by Hanieh: 'immiseration and accumulation are forcefully connected - neoliberalism has effectively acted to redistribute wealth from the region's poor to the wealthiest layers of society by subsuming every aspect of social life under the logic of capital' (Idem, 73).

In this sense, the Tunisian revolution emerges as a fundamental gesture of contestation of the neoliberal project and of the alliance between global and local capital - whose functioning is dependent on the police state, and which the protests managed to expose the fragility of.

### **1.3. How to resist Representation: French Theory and the non-Western Revolutions**

Eventually, what all the accounts of the Arab uprisings confront the observer with is the question of representation and its inherent power relations. In a broader context of reflection against the dominative agency of representation, thinkers of the French theory provide useful insights regarding potential lines of flight in terms of both thinking and acting against representation, intended here as the Arab Spring discursive formation. In this section, I will be reflecting on the way Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari discuss the alternative to a knowledge practice based on representation in their *Anti-Oedipus*. Furthermore, I will draw

from two examples of engagement with non-Western revolutions that are very relevant for this research: Michel Foucault's work on the 1979 Iranian revolution (Foucault, 1979) and Felix Guattari's practices around the Brazilian 'molecular revolution' (Guattari and Rolnik, [1986] 2008).

In the third chapter titled 'Savages, Barbarians, Civilized Men' of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972), the authors reflect on the different mechanisms of signification and the resulting orders of representation set to capture flows of desire. The French philosophers suggest avoiding the imperative of the unitary narrative, marked by a transcendent totalizing agent, and to tolerate contradictions and fragmentary accounts. Moreover, they encourage focusing on the *continuum* of flows that is the plane of contingency, while considering the disobedient signifieds that maintain their nature only provisionally, before they get integrated into the main narrative or 'axiomatic'. These are, hence, the hypothetical features of alternative narrative configurations able to question the hegemonic narrative: not unitary, nor totalizing, focused on the fluidity of contingency, disobedient and provisional. And these are the accounts and readings of the Tunisian revolution this research is interested in, as opposed to the monolithic and paralyzing Arab Spring or the state narratives around it.

Two scholars, in particular, provide relevant practical precedents in making sense of examples of rebellion set in non-Western environments. Both of them have analysed specific cases of political events in their researches, succeeding in sensitively framing transformation processes while they were still unfolding.

The first is Michel Foucault, of whom I will be looking at the 1979 journalistic work framing the Iranian revolution (Foucault, 1979). He was commenting on the event as part of a new concept of bringing intellectuals and journalists together in detailed investigations on the ground according to a programme of 'reporting ideas' with the philosopher acting as 'moderator of power' and philosophy 'on the side of counter-power' (Foucault, 2007: 374). 'On condition that philosophy stops thinking of itself as prophecy, pedagogy, or legislation, and that it gives itself the task of analysing, elucidating, making visible, and thereby intensifying the struggles that take place around power, the strategies of adversaries within

relations of power, the tactics employed, and the sources of resistance' (Foucault, 2001: 537).

The harsh Leftist critique to his opening up to the Iranian 'political spirituality' (Foucault, 2001: 708) forced him in the late 1970s to take a very radical stance regarding his understanding of what uprisings were about, of their relationship to religion and spirituality, with his electrifying final response article 'Useless to Revolt?' published in *Le Monde* on 11 May 1979. His approach in this article and in his reflection connected to the 1979 events provides an example of how one can engage with the unfolding resistance of somebody else, thereby respecting the other's specificity and approaching it in ways that preserve the event's futurity, rather than containing the events narratively with tropes of failure, as has been done in the case of the 'Arab Spring.'

Foucault is talking about how history is challenged by resistance, by the irreducible urgency of subjectivities to interrupt the chain of oppression, even at the cost of their own self-sacrifice, regardless of their number, and about how they expose the fragility of power:

The impulse by which a single individual, a group, a minority, or an entire people says, "I will no longer obey," and throws the risk of their life in the face of an authority they consider unjust seems to me to be something *irreducible*. Because no authority is capable of making it utterly impossible (Foucault, 1979, my emphasis).

To the Leftist thinkers - some of whom still maintain their scepticism today, such as Badiou, Negri and partially Zizek - who consider the religious nature of the uprising not dignified of being recognized for its emancipatory potential, Foucault answers with respect towards the Iranian people, and his words seem to sadly resonate even today, when the Arab world is still caged by the Arab Exceptionalism stereotype:

I am not in agreement with anyone who would say, “It is useless for you to revolt; it is always going to be the same thing.” *One does not dictate to those who risk their lives facing a power.* Is one right to revolt, or not? Let us leave the question open. People do revolt; that is a fact. And that is how subjectivity (not that of great men, but that of anyone) is brought into history, breathing life into it (Foucault, 1979, my emphasis).

To this regards, Foucault sums up the principles of what he calls ‘theoretical morality’ in approaching the uprisings. As opposed to the calculations of strategists, he chooses to be “antistrategic’: to be *respectful when a singularity revolts, intransigent when power violates the universal*’ (Foucault, 1979, my emphasis). Most surprisingly, in his unedited manuscripts of the *Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault establishes a close relationship between resistance and governmentality, as the interplay which generates the political, since ‘politics is no more and no less than that which is born with resistance to governmentality, the first uprising, the first confrontation’ (Senellart in Foucault, 2007: 390).

The passage to Guattari and to his exploration of the *Molecular Revolution in Brazil* (Guattari and Rolnik, 2008) is necessary because, in the heterogeneous material collected in this book, Guattari deals broadly with the question of productive resistance, referring to plenty of historical examples and contemporary situations. This approach, based on forms of political organization that was unfolding in Brazil after the end of the military dictatorship in 1984, provides a valuable practice-based and open-ended method of engaging with events set beyond the horizon of Eurocentric expectations and precedents. Most importantly, with events that challenge the cultural and economic domination of Eurocentric interests.

The book, originally published in Portuguese (translated in English in 2008) with the title *Cartographies of Desire*, documents Guattari’s travel across Brazil in 1984, after the end of the military dictatorship, when Luiz Inacio Lula’s Workers’ Party was part of the radical debates enflaming the country. In this work, revolution is intended as an unpredictable ‘*repetition* that changes something, a

repetition that brings about the irreversible' (Guattari and Rolnik, 2008: 258-9, my emphasis). Guattari focuses on the 'molecular' aspects, which indicate a deep transformation of the relationships on three distinct levels: both infrapersonal - at work, in dreaming; personal - in terms of self- domination; and interpersonal - in the invention of new forms of sociability in domestic, romantic and professional life (Guattari and Rolnik, 2008: 62-3).<sup>30</sup> The transformation occurs through processes of singularisation opposing the production of subjectivities driven by Integrated World Capitalism. Resistance, as will be discussed in the second chapter, is seen in its productive nature, as 'invention' of autonomy (Guattari and Rolnik, 2008: 16). It

Captures the elements of the situation, it constructs its own types of practical and theoretical references, without remaining dependent in relation to the global power [...]. Once groups acquire this freedom to live their processes, they acquire an ability to read their own situation and what is taking place around them. It is this ability that will give them at least some possibility of creation and make it possible to preserve this very important character of autonomy (Guattari and Rolnik, 2008: 62).

Surprisingly, in this work Guattari also comments on the 1979 Iranian revolution, underlining the subversive potentiality of religion and of the Muslim Arab world in general:

The appearance of a series of religious phenomena unites a whole nation against the oppressor. People went to their death in their thousands because there was an explosion because there was a *subjective*

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<sup>30</sup> Although I am aware how important this aspect of the mobilization is, this research won't specifically focus on the molecular transformations brought into being by the revolutionary process, except for the description of the importance of the Kasbah occupations, addressed in Chapter Three.

*revolution*. It all became institutionalized under Khomeini, and even so it hasn't ended. The whole Muslim Arab world rejects capitalist subjectivity (Guattari and Rolnik, 2008: 76, my emphasis).

Guattari's reflection contains a double empowering lesson. On the one hand it intensifies the 'unconscious that protests' because it recognizes desire struggling, in places like Brazil, Poland, Italy and even Iran in the 1980s; on the other hand, it also leaves total freedom to productive resistance, investigating it without attempting to dominate it, rather leaving it open-ended, with the exhortation to build it, rather than project it.

Following the work of Foucault in Iran, with his focus on respecting the uprising subjectivity no matter their religion; and that of Guattari in Brazil, with his focus on the molecular dimension of a social revolution, the claim of this research is that the Tunisian revolution must not be framed according to Western political categories and expectations, but rather embraced for its singular articulation, that cannot be reduced to Western standards. In this sense, its representation in mainstream narratives can be opposed by reflecting on the stratification of layers of visibility and invisibility. In this way, the intention is that of constructing a new level of meaning of this event's singularity, based not only on the 'unconscious that protests' but also on a process of re-signification of its hegemonic representation.

Before proceeding to the discussion of the notion of event of resistance in the next chapter, and since I have already made clear how Guattari and Foucault's approach have inspired my research, it is worth mentioning that the Martinican psychiatrist and anticolonial fighter Frantz Fanon has also been a constant reference point throughout this study. His humanist view has allowed me to imagine future political formations beyond Euro-centric horizons, which is one of the main lessons of the Tunisian revolution. I will list just some of the main reasons why the Fanonian theory and practice has largely supported my approach towards the event of the Tunisian revolution. First of all, Fanon has shown the importance of a situated knowledge production, unfolding from the 'zero point of our orientation' (Hudis, 2015: 4). In Peter Hudis' words, he stressed the fact that 'we can only know the world – and change it – from the vantage point of our

situated experience. But the fact that I am the zero point of my orientation does not mean I cannot reach out to, and know, others' (Ibidem). This focus on the 'situated knowledge production' is crucial to the specific methodology I have developed in this work, as I shall illustrate at the end of this section.

Thanks to the Fanonian inspiration, the relationship between a post-'89 migrant as myself and a revolution shaking the 'Arab' world became more apparent. In fact, I lived the encounter with the Tunisian revolution as an instance of intra-subaltern recognition, since both the Tunisian protesters and I are, to different degrees, fabricated as postcolonial subjects (Popovici, 2014; Tichindeleanu, 2010; Tlostanova, 2017). Furthermore, Fanon's humanist project of 'decolonization as the creation of new men' (Fanon, 2008: 2) was animated by many years spent on the barricades of the Algerian anti-colonial struggle.

Moreover, in addition to Fanon's privileged connection with Tunisia (where he continued his political activity after being exiled from Algeria), his biography traces an impressive geography of colonial pasts and resistance from the Caribbean to France, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa. In this sense, it can be argued that Fanon's work is an attempt to make the African continent, whole again. 'After carrying Algeria to the four corners of Africa, move up with all Africa toward African Algeria toward the North, the continental city. What I should like: great lines, great navigation channels through the desert. Subdue the desert, deny it, assemble Africa, create the continent' (Fanon, 1967: 180-1 in Hudis, 2015: 109).

In this sense, the challenge of the African/Arab divide, as well as Fanon's critical reflections on the dangers of neocolonialism and of the national bourgeoisie in the post-independence period, (Fanon, 1961) have all been vital suggestions in order to engage with the Tunisian event.

As I mentioned before the specific methodology that I adopted in this research is one significantly informed by my situated experience. In the following paragraphs I will briefly outline how this experience has influenced the development of my thesis: both content-wise and methodologically.

Prior to the beginning of my PhD in 2013, I was living and working in Bologna, Italy. Located in the Centre-North of the country, Bologna was an important passage point for a lot of Tunisians who had emigrated after the revolution. Between 2011 and 2013, this is how I first came in contact with people who had

been impacted by the revolution. At the time I was involved in an activist network for housing rights for squatters and completing an internship at the city's minors' penitentiary. In both environments, Tunisian citizens were well-represented. For example, in Rome, it was the Tunisians organising large-scale housing squats alongside the Italian networks. Moreover, after 2010 there were more informal workers on the Italian streets coming from Tunisia. At the time, the majority of the boys hosted by the penitentiary were Tunisians.

During those same years, I remember carrying a banner during an anti-eviction march with the main chant of the Tunisian revolution, written in Arabic by the fellow marchers from Arabic speaking countries: 'Bread, freedom, dignity!.'

In 2013 I attended the World Social Forum in Tunis and was telling two young men that there were many of their fellow Tunisians in Italy. They answered that all those 'people were not Tunisians, that they came from the South.'

I listed all these experiences and encounters to show where my main research questions derived from and why I was unsatisfied with the way this event was represented in mainstream media and foreign policy scholarship. In this sense, the sources that I started from were a lot of observations, personal interactions, informal discussions (all of which can be categorized as ethnographic material) and, later, the art practice of Ahl Al Kahf alongside critical theory.

My research questions emerged directly from the event, mediated by my experience of it: the three years of encounters with Tunisians in Italy (between 2010 and 2013) and my two trips to Tunis (in 2013 and 2014). Every chapter addresses one of the questions weaving together relevant theoretical approaches, ethnographic intuitions and, occasionally, media analyses (mainly focused on street art). My main initial questions regarded how could the event be interacted with in a non-Orientalist manner and who were the categories that led the revolution.

In order to address these questions, I will proceed unpacking different aspects in each chapter, as follows.

In the first chapter I have exposed the construction of the 'Arab Spring' paradigm drawing from critical theory (following a critique of ideology approach), as well as from political economy and migration studies.

In the second chapter, I will leave aside the framework of 'revolution' in order to focus on the micro-level of movements and ruptures that led to the revolution. Drawing from political theory, I will reflect on the notions of resistance and event, while employing affect theory to show how moments of resistance can be captured.

The third chapter will be my concrete proposal of how to interact with the event in a non-Orientalist manner, namely by preserving its specificity and futurity. The alternative chrono-geography of the event will be based on local historiographic accounts, diagrammatic and countermapping practices and critical security studies. This last field of analysis will provide the redefinition of the term 'mob' (Aradau & Huysmans, 2009), which will help further develop the reflection on the subject of the Tunisian revolution.

In the fourth chapter, I will identify this subject as the urban and sub-urban impoverished population or through the triad figure of the rioter/undocumented migrant/'terrorist.' Sociological and critical geography works will provide useful elements to define the genealogy of this category. Furthermore, a close media analysis of the production of the Ahl Al Kahf collective (between 2010 and 2013) will add crucial elements to understand the Tunisian political and social context.

Finally, in the fifth chapter I will address the idea of propagation and communication of dissent drawing from media theory, in order to reflect on the media that operate alongside the much-praised social media. Moreover, I will employ postcolonial scholarship, Caribbean philosophy and critical theory to look into the marginal condition of the Tunisian revolutionaries and into how they established crucial political alliances.

From the beginning, this research was an attempt to think *through* a specific event, to develop event-driven theory. Here's why the practice of Guattari, Foucault and Fanon were so valuable. In this sense, the biggest challenge was to bridge the gap between theory and event. This gap was at once historical (some of the political theory I used was developed in the '70s, for example) and geographical. Would it be relevant to apply theories developed elsewhere (in France, UK, US) to a context like postcolonial Tunisia?

One of the main intentions of this work is to dismantle the assumption of exceptionalism of the 'Arab' world, conceived by some as separate and in

opposition to the Western-like democratic paradigm. Rather than supporting the idea of exceptionalism, in Chapter Three and Four I will account for Tunisia's specificity, through the particular paths and genealogy of the groups that led the revolution. I am, in fact, interested to show how the so-called West and East are similar (in terms of dispossession and mobilisations of the impoverished) and inter-dependent (economically), rather than separable and different. This I will also try to achieve by discussing the relevance and applicability of each concept – be it 'revolution,' 'event,' 'resistance,' 'underclass' – to the contemporary Tunisian context.

### **Conclusion**

This research reflects on the political relevance of the Tunisian revolution and suggests critical patterns of reception, by drawing the attention to the event's specificity. The aim is that of looking at the event while preserving its difference and futurity, therefore revealing its political singularity.<sup>31</sup> In order to do so, many of the Western readings of it, such as the Arab Spring or the term of 'revolution', have been suspended in order to reflect on their implicit instrumentality. In this sense, I have theorized the existence of a complex 'discursive configuration' - articulated in both the global and in the local narratives of the event - engaged in re-integrating this moment of intense discontinuity in the regime of dominant signification, by representing it as an either 'achieved' or 'failed' liberal revolution. Unfortunately, even the most radical observers from the West have adopted interpretative positions informed by the mainstream narrative around the events, in some cases perpetuating the Arab exceptionalism paradigm, by depicting Islam as a limit to emancipation and privileging the participation of the middle-class. This is why I chose to draw attention to the multiple layers of visibility of the event,

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<sup>31</sup> I am arguing that the Tunisian revolution cannot be limited to being recognised by its Western observers. Instead, space must be made for its unfamiliarity to exist and be embraced. Throughout this research, recognition will be addressed in different capacities: 1) as above, in terms of processes of recognition imposed upon potentially unfamiliar events as a mechanism of containment (i.e. as in the 'Facebook revolution' narrative); 2) recognition in political terms, along the lines of the Hegelian theorisation; and 3) a form of recognition stemmed out of the critique of recognition politics, focusing on processes of recognition between different equally oppressed categories. Something like an inter-subaltern recognition (in lack of a better term), which I will refer to in terms of resonance in Chapter 5.

which have mostly overshadowed the crucial struggles of the urban poor while preferring to focus on the middle-class intellectuals and artists sharing a common and comforting political language with the West. As a result, it appears fundamental *where* one looks when speaking of the Tunisian revolution, what instances of struggle are included under this label. Spectators (like me and you), therefore, are all but passive witnesses of the events and possess, instead, a highly performative role in defining what are the practices of resistance one can be inspired by and a supporter of. In this sense, the words of Foucault ('be respectful when a singularity revolts') and Guattari ('the whole Muslim Arab world rejects capitalist subjectivity'), although dated, resonate as powerful intensifiers of the radical potential of the Tunisian revolution.

Is there any philosophical reflection able to account for this moment of discontinuity overcoming all the limits of the representation (of the Arab Spring or the 'revolution') that have been so far critiqued? What categories can help account for the impact of this uprising in the global world, if we are to reject the Arab Spring narrative?

In the next chapter, I will discuss theories of the event and go deeper into the analysis of what a rupture - which can eventually develop into a 'revolution' - is made of, as an event of resistance, and how power attempts to capture it. Alongside the critique of the narrative aspects of the mainstream reading of the events developed so far, the next chapter will reflect on the abstract level of the interplay between resistance and power, in order to provide useful categories to approach the Tunisian revolution from a different perspective, able to expose its overshadowed features and political relevance.

## 2. The Event of Resistance and Its Capture

What is important for philosophy, for politics, ultimately for every human, is what Bataille called experience. Namely, something that isn't the affirmation of the subject within the foundational continuity of the subject's project, but is rather in this rupture and in the risk through which the subject accepts its own transmutation, transformation, abolition, in its relation with things, with the others, with truth, with death, etc. That's the experience. It's risking to no longer be oneself.

Michel Foucault, Interviewed by *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 1979

### Thinking *through* the Event

In the previous chapter, this research outlined the reductive features surrounding the Arab Spring discourse, significantly connected to the 'Arab exceptionalism' paradigm. As an alternative, the focus was placed on thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Félix Guattari, who have provided examples of accounts of non-Western revolutions - specifically the Iranian and the Brazilian one - able to respect their irreducible nature and avoid framing them with Western-specific political categories. In fact, the mobilizations connected to the so-called Arab Spring and my case study, the Tunisian revolution, have often been read through Western lenses, both in terms of political standards and expectations. This approach has caused a reduction of the event's potentiality, since it wasn't able to account for the novelty of it, neither for the way Western actors could interact with it as supporters.

In this sense, my interest lies in developing a set of operative tools through which to analyse the event, and the responses to it, with the clear aim of preserving its irreducible specificity, which I will refer to as 'singularity'.<sup>32</sup> For this purpose, I will discuss philosophical paradigms able to relate to instances of rupture such as the Tunisian revolution. The first gesture in this direction will be to shift from the notion of revolution (and from its traditional historical references) towards concepts of 'event' and 'resistance,' which I find more versatile, less objectifying and more likely to embrace the virtual dimension of the

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<sup>32</sup> As I state in the Introduction, my understanding of singularity uses Guattari's work as a starting point (Guattari, 1986) in order to develop it as a concept that acknowledges an event's 1) irreducible originality and 2) its relevance as a trace of singularisation or subjectivation, as an example of transformative politics.

struggles that I am interested to engage with. Working on theories of the event developed by Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou, I will discuss the limits of their views in terms of 'proliferation politics' (Deleuze) vs. 'rarefied politics' (Badiou) (as thematised in Nunes, 2010; 2013), and attempt to read them in a 'productive differential' manner (Thoburn, 2003). I will put forward the concept of 'event of resistance' as an operative tool, intended as a 'rupture of the situation from the subset which makes a universalisable claim and enacts generic equality' (Aradau and Huysmans, 2009). Furthermore, I will define resistance taking Howard Caygill's work on defiance as a starting point (Caygill, 2013) to indicate its dynamic rather than essentialisable nature, but also its orientation towards the future. This reflection on the interruption represented by the event of resistance will then be put in relation with different features (that I draw from scholars who engage with the Deleuzian thought) such as the event read in terms of contagion of 'affective charges' (Nunes, 2014); the event as holding the mode of the problematic, 'raising questions that are an invitation to invent new answers' (Lazzarato, 2004) and the event intended in terms of breaking utilitarianism and habit, while facilitating enabling affects (O'Sullivan, 2008; 2014). Finally, I will address instances of capture of the event, not only at a discursive level but also at an affective level, in those cases in which accumulated or intensified affects (such as dissent) are speculated upon. In this chapter, I will frame these examples in terms of 'nano-modulation' of affects (Parisi and Goodman, 2005).

Throughout this chapter and the next one, I will attempt to craft a knowledge practice starting from the Tunisian revolution as an 'exemplary terrain' (Scott, 2014). I will look at it in terms of 'event' and 'resistance', while exploring its flows and drawing a diagrammatic understanding of them, based on the counter-mapping practices I will discuss in section 3.2. The intention is also that of respecting the futurity of the resistance and the alliances connected to the event, rather than submitting it to a flattening success/failure frame.

This is why I have chosen to contest the category of 'revolution' because of its inherent Western origin, since it appears as if solely employing this term, without critically reflecting on it, determines a dismissal in looking at contemporary non-Western revolutions, which are simply 'never good enough'. What would be an alternative category that could be employed in order to account for the Tunisian

revolution's singularity? Is it possible to emancipate the event from an epistemic approach based on its constant comparison to Western standards?

My hypothesis is that the Tunisian revolution can be viewed as a network of events of resistance since this approach allows to pay attention to an underground microlevel of the mass movement while suspending a knowledge practice based on recognizing and replicating Western categories or historical precedents.

As follows the notion of resistance will be further defined thanks to the work of Howard Caygill while looking at the political dimension of the event and combining the reflections of Alain Badiou and the Gilles Deleuze-Félix Guattari couple.

Eventually, the question of capture of resistance will be raised and discussed in a deeper understanding than the mere critique to mainstream representation instances, such as the Arab Spring. In fact, in this first approach to the research question 'What is Resistance?', I will be claiming that resistance is articulated as a bug or a germ. Thus, its potential contagion is hindered in an immunitary way<sup>33</sup> by the apparatus of capture, intended as the dominant power system, with both discursive and non-discursive modalities.<sup>34</sup>

This chapter's theorisation of the 'event of resistance' will provide the operative tool for my engagement with the Tunisian revolution in terms of flows of struggle in Chapter Three. Furthermore, the notion of capture of affects will be developed by applying Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'state apparatus' to the phenomenon of the post-2013 Tunisian Islamic militancy in Iraq and Syria (Chapter Four). Moreover, the understanding of resistance as contagion will be problematized and integrated with a reflection on the centrality of resonance in Chapter Five.

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<sup>33</sup> I choose to use the term 'immunitary' uniquely because of the centrality of the idea of 'germ' in Nunes (Nunes, 2013) and that of microbe in the work of Parisi and Goodman (Parisi and Goodman, 2005).

<sup>34</sup> While in this chapter I will develop the reflection around the notion of contagion, in connection to the event, later on, in Chapter Five, I will suggest how this frame can go beyond a mere focus on contagion, introducing the notion of resonance, as an explanation for the way forms of protest spread across different communities.

## 2.1. From Revolution to the Event of Resistance

The act of naming the Tunisian revolution goes beyond the mere representation or articulation of hegemonic discourse, as this enquiry has shown so far.<sup>35</sup> The goal of this chapter is that of taking the reflection on the Tunisian events beyond the paradigm of 'revolution' and seeing what productive insights this gesture can provide. This term will not only be considered for its classical meaning, as indicating an irruptive popular overthrow of a ruling establishment. What will mostly be under scrutiny is the way its employment can reduce the specificity of the events. In this sense, I will be proposing an alternative framing of the mobilization.

When applied to the Tunisian events, the term 'revolution' presents numerous limitations, mostly because of the way it is employed in hegemonic narratives, both by the Tunisian state and by the Western states. It is often overlooked that the historical references of the term in the 'Arab' world are mostly inspired by instances of anti-colonial struggle, as Angela Giordani shows in her discussion of the Arabic term *al-thawra*, illustrated in the previous chapter (Giordani, 2013).<sup>36</sup>

My intention is to take a step backward from the main revolutionary achievement, the toppling of Ben Ali on 14 January 2011, towards the preliminary episodes and other connected moments that have built up the historical event in the first place, starting with the massive struggles in the mining basin of Gafsa (Gobe, 2010), and paying attention to events unfolding from 2008 up to 2016, in this way shedding light on a few aspects of the Tunisian *processus*.

In this sense, my claim is that it would be more productive to frame the Tunisian mobilization not as a 'revolution' but as a constellation or *network of events of resistance*.<sup>37</sup> As preliminary instances of systemic rupture of the Tunisian *status*

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<sup>35</sup> The concept of hegemony theorized by the Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci generally refers to 'the ways in which a governing power wins consent to its rule from those it subjugates' (Eagleton, 1991).

<sup>36</sup> Despite problematizing the term 'revolution' I will still refer to the events as the 'Tunisian revolution.' As I have mentioned in the First Chapter, I critique the state use of the term, but respect its use when it comes from the participants to the events.

With this term, I refer not only to the more violent weeks of protests (between December 2010 and January 2011) but also to the significant events before and after that period, which have involved relevant moments of mobilization, as I shall illustrate in the following chapters.

<sup>37</sup> In this sense I use the term 'event' as an indication of the general situation that I am engaging with – as another way of referring to the Tunisian revolution – as opposed to the expression

*quo*, which have progressively accumulated and spread throughout the territory. This approach allows restoring a de-centralized image of the revolution, shifting the attention from the hyper-mediated gatherings of the capital to examples of conflict at the periphery of the country. Claudia Aradau has reflected on this notion of the 'event of resistance' and has defined it, drawing from Alain Badiou's work, as 'a rupture in the situation from the specific sub-set/category which makes an universalisable claim and enacts generic equality' (Aradau, 2004: 10). Moreover, Aradau draws from Jacques Rancière to describe the political nature and lifespan of the event of resistance, as an occurring, which 'interrupts the power/knowledge relations and becomes a non-event (non political) when it is incorporated into the existing relations of power/knowledge' (Aradau, 2004: 4).

'Resistance' as such is not supposed to make a declared political claim. Nor must it contain a recognizable consistency, in terms of discursive organization - a clear 'message -' linked to an articulated, alternative political project. On the contrary, the latter are features expected to characterize what is classically labelled as 'revolution'. For these reasons, the term 'resistance' is more versatile and is capable of accounting for, while not being reductive of, a wider spectrum of practices (not all of which are emancipatory, of course).

In this sense, as shall be further developed, resistance is animated by a 'desire of justice' and an 'extreme courage', while articulating both a gesture of reaction against oppression alongside the creative construction of an alternative to the *status quo*, possibly preserving the agents' capacity of future resistance (Caygill, 2013: 12).

While imagining, as this research tries to do, a framework that can create convergences between the Western and non-Western events of resistance, what must be overcome is the tendency, mostly of many Western observers, to enact recognition-based knowledge practices when approaching non-Western phenomena. In my case study, the recognition approach (drawing from Baruch Spinoza in Deleuze and Guattari, 1980; Nunes, 2013; 2014) is performed through an Euro-centric reading of the Tunisian revolution, on which different actors project Western-specific political categories, such as 'democracy', 'development',

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'network of events of resistance,' which I develop in order to account for a more complex level of the same phenomenon, as if it were a more detailed snapshot of the Tunisian revolution.

'liberal freedoms;' and historical precedents, such as the French revolution, the French May '68 or the Fall of the Berlin Wall. In this way, they reduce or totally ignore the specificity of the Tunisian context of struggle, marked by a post-independence, authoritarian and Western-backed political élite.

I draw this critique of a certain understanding of non-Western revolutions from Spinoza's reflection on the different kinds of knowledge (illustrated in Nunes, 2010) and on the way this same idea has been developed in Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari: 1980). In Nunes' words, Spinoza theorizes the existence of two senses of 'thought': one centred on 'recognition, identity and representation' which "reduces the real to the actual, separating the latter from the virtual conditions that make it differ from itself *in time*' (Nunes, 2010: 14, original emphasis). On the contrary, 'nomadic thought' 'sees in the actual object the singular expression of problematic, inconsistent virtual conditions' (Nunes, 2010: 14). The first approach is concerned with 'extracting constants', while the second simply 'engages in a continuous variation of variables' (Deleuze; Guattari, 1980: 433). In addition, adopting the mainstream position of the Western observer also implies a certain distance or dis-involvement from the object of recognition. In this case, those who reduce the Tunisian revolution to imitations of Western mobilizations, whether in terms of expectations or historical precedents, distance themselves from the event turned object, implicitly suggesting that they aren't part of it, despite the operativity of their readings of the event itself, which become part of its modalities of circulation. Drawing from Brian Massumi's reflection on the experience of eventfulness, it can be said that the recognition-based knowledge approaches the experience of struggle 'as if [it] were somehow outside it, looking in, like disembodied subjects handling an object' (Massumi, 2002: 219 in Nunes, 2013: 15).

So what could be a different epistemic approach towards events such as the Tunisian revolution? One that would avoid enacting a Euro-centric, objectifying reading of it? My claim is that the understanding of the event must be interactive and must seek to respect the event's *singularity* in order to acknowledge its exemplarity for how it invokes the futurity of political alliances between flows of resistance, across the West-East colonial divide.

In this thesis, 'singularity' refers to a series of phenomena. First of all, it is the trace of the singularization (drawing from Guattari), intended as subjectivation, thus actualization of the virtual, through examples of political resistance. Moreover, when I invoke the singularity of the Tunisian revolution, what I mean is that the event – in its capacity of creative disruption of the *status quo* – holds a charge of originality and experimental practices which are irreducible to the Western political paradigms. Therefore a consequent adjustment of the analysis categories is necessary in order to give an account of and approximate the specificity of the events, especially from a Western standpoint.

In this sense, a more receptive disposition towards the surrounding events might be desirable since, as Maurizio Lazzarato recalls, 'those who hold answers prepared in advance [...], miss the event' (Lazzarato, 2003).<sup>38</sup> The research will, thus, attempt to develop its operative tools towards accounting for contemporary historical events, such as the Tunisian revolution, and their singularity, by providing the necessary reflections able to answer to the different questions. In fact, in this and in the following chapters I will weave together philosophical readings, empirical work, and aesthetic analyses in order to reflect on the features of the event of resistance. Moreover, in this chapter, I will also initiate a reflection on how practices of resistance are met by the apparatuses of power, especially by drawing on examples of hegemonic representation and modulation of affects.

In this sense, I have chosen to consider different theories of the event as a starting point for developing an adequate analytical tool able to account for the singularity of the Tunisian revolution. I am interested in the significance of the concept of event in terms of rupture and discontinuity, and I want to link it to the political domain and the emergence of a particular political subjectivity in the broad context of the Tunisian revolution.<sup>39</sup>

The idea of the event in the critical field of philosophy has been central to many reflections from antiquity, from the Stoics, up until the contemporary age, in the work of thinkers such as Jacques Derrida. However, this discussion will delimit to

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<sup>38</sup> Caygill also underlines the necessary connection between the experience and the reflection around resistance, pointing out that 'while resistance has continuously to be reinvented, its history of inventions demands philosophical reflection' (Caygill, 2013: 6).

<sup>39</sup> I will be referring to this political subjectivity as 'underclass' or 'mob' in the following chapter, and carry on the reflection on the appropriate terminology until the Chapter Five.

engage with two specific articulations of this philosophical-political conception of the event, namely the ones developed in the work of Alain Badiou and that of the Gilles Deleuze-Félix Guattari couple.

Deleuze holds no interest in concepts such as ‘political subjectivity,’ unlike Badiou. However, the three thinkers share a significant political involvement, mostly marked by their different degrees of participation to the French ‘68 May (as discussed in Deleuze and Guattari’s double biography, Dosse, 2011). This means that they have long reflected (and conflicted) in philosophical terms on instances of collective action and their significance, which is what my research is also attempting to do.

Moreover, Badiou, Deleuze and Guattari’s combined reflection provides useful tools for framing non-Western events of resistance. In the following discussion, I will comment on the theories of event developed by them in different works, supported by the interpretation of three contemporary thinkers who have also been interested, from different angles, in the idea of resistance: Simon O’Sullivan, Claudia Aradau, and Rodrigo Nunes.

It can be said that Badiou and Deleuze are the opposite extreme terms of a scale ‘measuring’ the ‘occurrence’ of an event - intended, in this case, as the political event. For Deleuze, an event is common and indicates an infinitesimal structural variation, while Badiou describes it as an extraordinary and rare occurring, which determines a definitive cut. As Galloway metaphorically explains, it’s ‘the cells dividing versus the Storming of the Winter Palace’ (Galloway; Berry, 2015: 10). Where on this scale can the Tunisian revolution be positioned? My claim is that neither of the two approaches is fully viable in reading the event’s singularity, but a combination of the two, seen in terms of a ‘productive differential’ (Thoburn, 2003: 41), appears to provide the necessary analysis tools, especially thanks to the contemporary theorists re-working them. As a consequence, my methodological approach in order to account for the event will be a mosaic of Badiouan and Deleuzian/Guattarian intervention.

Deleuze begins reflecting on the event in his early works, inspired by the Stoics’ enquiry, such as *Difference and Repetition* (1968), *The Logic of sense* (1969); he continues to address the question of discontinuity in other terms in his work with Felix Guattari in *The Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), finally

returning to the term later on in *The Fold and the Baroque* (1988). Eventually, in his later essays (collected in Deleuze, 1995 and Deleuze, 2001), Deleuze applies the philosophy of the event to social circumstances. In *What is an Event?* (1988), the French thinker imagines the eventual discontinuity in a Parmenidean 'perpetual flux, with bits and pieces constantly entering and exiting' (Deleuze, 1992: 3). The event is the differential and infinitesimal result of the interaction between 'chaos' and a 'screen': 'chaos would be the sum of all possibles, that is, all individual essences insofar as each tends to existence on its own account; but the screen only allows compossibles – and only the best combination of compossibles – to be sifted through' (Deleuze, 1992). The most important feature of the Deleuzian event is that it is conceived as a reciprocal determination (O'Sullivan, 2014) between the actual and the virtual. Therefore, 'the actual acts upon the virtual, forcing continuous (virtual) multiplicities to differentiate into new individuals and new relationships among them' (Nunes, 2010: 12).

By applying the category of the Deleuzian event to the Tunisian revolution, there is no danger - unlike with the Badiouan event - of legitimizing triumphalist or dismissive readings of the revolution. Both Deleuze and Guattari are concerned with accounting for an event's virtual dimension. Commenting on May '68, they see the event as 'irreducible to social determinism, to causal series [...] in disconnection (*décrochage*) or rupture with causalities: [...] a bifurcation, a deviation from the laws, an unstable state that opens a new field of possibles' (Deleuze, Guattari, 1984: 215 cit. in Nunes, 2010: 13, original emphasis).

By exercising this type of gaze upon an event, be it May '68 or the Tunisian revolution, they don't reduce the real to the actual, but see the virtual in the actual (Nunes, 2010: 13). This approach enriches a knowledge practice aimed at revealing the singularity of an event, in the sense that it possesses an increased receptivity towards its irreducible difference, in terms of its virtual dimension. Relating to an event in terms of actual-virtual reciprocal determination allows a broader applicability than Badiou's idea of the relationship between the subject and the Truth or the Idea, as I shall discuss later in this section. Also, the Deleuzian event is able to account for the contagious nature of instances of defiance (which will be thematised later through Nunes' reflection), which is an important

dimension of the network of resistance events I have indicated as the Tunisian revolution.

The limits of Deleuze's approach regard its applicability in the political field. Since it intentionally lacks categories such as 'political subjectivity', the reflection of Deleuze and Guattari - and of the later Deleuze - draws the image of an event that is 'too natural', which 'does not subjectivize [...] prescribe, claim or resist anything', only as an 'ephemeral interruption of the situation' (Aradau, 2004: 9), unable to build up some sort of political consistency, in terms of the event's continuity and further efficiency in challenging the *status quo*.

On the contrary, Alain Badiou possesses a very specific understanding of the political event and its resulting subjectivity. Badiou's thought on the event has been central to many of his works, such as *Being and Event* (1988), *The Logics of Worlds* (2006), plenty of interventions (Badiou, 1992; 1998a; 1998b; 2001; 2003), and, of more relevance to this research, *The Rebirth of History* (2012), which specifically deals with the 'riots and uprisings' of 2011, that I've already briefly outlined in the previous chapter. For Badiou, the event is seen as the vehicle of Truth, working towards inclusion so that 'some elements that are presented but not represented in it (such as undocumented migrants) count as counted as one' (Nunes, 2010: 8). In Badiou's terms, the event is a gateway to a transcendent dimension animated by the Idea of Communism (Badiou, 2012: 6) and the pure truth of universal undifferentiated belonging (Nunes, 2010: 7). The event operates a temporary interruption of economy and the state, allowing the unbinding that the state itself is there to prevent, since the state is 'founded not on the social bond that it would express but on the unbinding, which it forbids' (Badiou, 1988: 126 cit. in Nunes, 2010:6). The unbinding moment that corresponds to the disruption, therefore, transforms itself in a claim for inclusion, as was pointed out before, an inclusion of the 'presented but not represented', or - as addressed in 2012 - of the 'inexistent'. In fact, in his 2012 reflection *The Rebirth of History*, Badiou sees the event as the eruption of the 'inexistent in the field of intensive existence' as opposed to the sheer extensive being, and the 'restitution of the inexistent possible', where the 'inexistent' refers to the 'underclass, the exploited, the repressed' (Badiou, 2012: 92). This is possible when certain conditions are fulfilled such as intensification ('the creation of an intense time' lived with 24/7

involvement by occupiers or protesters), contraction (around a multifaceted, active, thinking minority) and localization (identifying a site of unity and presence). The event also needs an organisation system (as a way of preserving its authority), a Subject (generally a political organisation, as a constant guardianship of an exception and mediating 'between the world and the changing world') and a political truth (the political product of the event, which preserves its intensification, contraction and localization as a real presentation of the generic power of the multiple) (Badiou, 2012: 81-92). The whole idea of 'Rebirth,' referred to in the title of the text, points to the capacity to exit the established order of History, propelled by 'the idea of Communism, revisited and nourished by what the spirited diversity of these riots, however fragile, teaches us' (Badiou, 2012: 6).

In the following discussion I will address four limitations to the Badiouan conception of the event, mostly based on how it is described in *The Rebirth of History*, and I will try to identify useful integrations to the theorist's thought, able to further define what notion of the event of resistance could be more suitable to analyse the Tunisian revolution.

Firstly, the understanding of what precedes the event, as being 'presented but not represented' or even 'inexistent,' which is the term that Badiou chooses to employ when referring to the 'the underclass, the exploited, the repressed', seems to legitimize the narrative of the unexpected, sudden revolution. According to this reading, the event is not only unexpected but comes out of the void, setting a relationship with the Truth and inaugurating the '*restitution* of the inexistent'. The image of the void preceding the event seems to be reductive of the complex series of acts of resistance and affective flows, which make an event, such as the Tunisian revolution, possible in the first place. In fact, looking at the breaking point while ignoring its historical development easily cancels many of its features and facilitates hegemonic interpretations, since they do not have to take into account the specificity of the preliminary steps towards the event they're looking at. But in Aradau's reading (of the more recent articles of Badiou, 1992; 1998a; 1998b; 2001; 2003), the notion of 'void' and 'inexistent' acquires a protagonist role in bringing about change and transformation. The relationship between void and plenitude is interpreted in terms of dominated versus dominating categories. To be more precise, in Badiou's examples, the proletariat functions as the void of the

capitalist system (Badiou, 2002: 73). Therefore negative entities such as the 'void' or 'the inexistent' actually hold the power over the creation of possibilities, 'like a point of exile where it is possible that something, finally, might happen' (Badiou, 2000: 85), driven by 'an element of the situation that manifests itself in the event as the anomaly that challenges the inegalitarian logic the situation is based upon' (Aradau, 2004: 11). This reading makes it clear that the 'inexistent' is never absent, but always virtually present, so in this way, it preserves the lineage of resistance struggles that the Tunisian revolution is the result of.

Secondly, Badiou has a somewhat rigid understanding of the organization of the consistency of the event, expected to build on intensification, contraction, and localization, while putting forward an organization system, a political Subject, and a political truth. This frame generates unavoidable dismissals of any 'event' not able to engage with these standards. As opposed to what appears as a rigid description, Aradau highlights a broader definition of the event as an irruption of the political, described by Badiou in his later works. He defines it as 'something that in the categories, slogans, the statements it puts forward is less the demand of a social group or community to be integrated into the existing order than something, which touches upon the *transformation* of that order as a whole' (Badiou, 2001: 101, my emphasis).

This definition is more likely to be applicable to instances of contemporary struggle. Moreover, in terms of the political organisation of mass movements, Nunes provides an original understanding of 2011 protests, which he sees as examples of 'networked politics', following 'the same form as the dominant models of economic and social production' (Nunes, 2013: 8). These instances are, therefore, based on 'distributed leadership' and they are activated by a 'germ of action', which 'spreads to nodes, and hubs that respond to it and amplify their reach', making 'large-scale effects such as the Arab Spring, 15M and Occupy - mass movements without mass organisation' - possible (Nunes, 2013: 17).

In addition, Nunes critiques Badiou's understanding of the political for its extraordinary rarity, 'which stems, precisely from the rarity of subjective breaks encapsulated in an "event"' (Nunes, 2013: 11). Comparing the Badiouan event with Deleuze's idea of it, Nunes interprets the debate in terms of rarefied politics (Badiou) versus proliferation politics (Deleuze). What Nunes sustains is that an

impasse is determined between the two thinkers in the way they depict the status of the event. For Badiou, the event holds an exceptional status, raising the question 'What are the conditions of an event for almost nothing to be an event?'. On the contrary, Deleuze (and Guattari) privilege the event as being common, so Nunes imagines Deleuze and Guattari asking 'What are the conditions of an event if everything is to be an event?' (Nunes, 2010: 6, 22). While the rarefied politics paradigm limits the political to very rare cases, the proliferation one presents the difficulty of fully distinguishing 'substantial structural change'. 'If politics is everywhere – if change is everywhere – how much change is enough? How can substantial structural change be woven out of the potential for infinitesimal structural variation, and what are even the terms by which we can determine 'substantial'?' (Nunes, 2010: 18).

In this regard, Nunes provides two fundamental hints as to the best way to approach instances of struggle, beyond the rarefied politics/proliferation politics impasse. Firstly, what he suggests is to de-centralize the focus on resistance from 'the most advanced sector of the class' to 'the myriad of places [in which] resistance manifests itself in (local responses, counter fire, active and sometimes preventive defensive measures),' reflecting on the way practices of resistance aim to create 'transversal connections between these discontinuous active points, from a country to another and inside the same country so as to make the 'revolutionary process' into a polycentric, but wide-scale, systemic challenge' (Nunes, 2013: 12 drawing from Foucault; Deleuze, 2001).

Secondly, unlike Badiou's idea of the event as a definitive cut, Nunes argues that 'movements of resistance do not constitute a system in exterior competition with capital, but are internal to it, and are not simply trying to adapt, but to change the system that is their environment' (Nunes, 2013: 8).

In his theorization of the event, based on the 2011 mass movements, when the virtual emerges in the actual world through practices of resistance, it becomes communicable (although not necessarily according to discursive patterns).<sup>40</sup> That

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<sup>40</sup> In the next chapters, I will reflect further on these practices of communication. In Chapter Four, I will bring to attention the work of the Ahl Al Kahf street art collective and show how it has facilitated the propagation of political messages in Tunisia and beyond its borders. In Chapter Five I will focus on the counter-hegemonic organization of meaning but also affects, to make sense of the circulation of cultures and practices of resistance across the Mediterranean after the revolution.

is to say that events communicate also according to non-discursive codes based on the geography of virtuals, on how different distant communities challenge the impossible conditions of existence. Their circulation doesn't only involve intentionality on behalf of the direct participants to the event.<sup>41</sup> This is why, when looking at the 2011 global protest waves, Nunes underlines the importance of the event in its dimension as a travelling, virtual vehicle of 'affective charges' (which can obviously also carry deadly lines of flight) as:

A process of contagion whereby a sensible change, first actualized in a relatively small number of bodies, words, actions (for example, the occupiers at Gezi Park in Istanbul), becomes, by virtue of those actualizations, communicable to ever larger numbers of people who come across it either by direct contact in the physical layer (people, places) or mediated contact through other layers (corporate media, social media). In this case, what spreads and replicates is at once information – words, images, narratives, actions etc. – and the *affective charges* that travel with it.' (Nunes, 2014: 21-22)

In this sense, the political event's main mode is that of the 'problematic,' because it expresses both the intolerable and the new possibilities of a certain age. The event doesn't represent 'the solution to a problem, but rather the opening up of possibilities that raise questions and are an invitation to invent new answers' (Lazzarato, 2004: 6). As such, it houses a double 'creation, individuation or becoming:'

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<sup>41</sup> To give an example of how contagion and transversal alliances can differ in terms of intentionality, one can consider the relationship between the American Black Lives Matter (which activity intensified in 2013) and the Palestinian resistance movements. The American movement can feel inspired and circulate or re-interpret images and symbols of the Palestinian resistance (which they easily relate to) but transversality is built when the movements intentionally meet (as has happened) and publicly declare their convergence. Precisely this aspect will be further discussed in Chapter Five.

The creation of a possibility and its effectuation, the later of which clashes against the dominant values. And that is where the conflict arises. [...]

These new possibilities, once they are created, they are real, but they don't exist beyond the signs, the languages and the gestures that express them. They need to be realised or effectuated in apparatuses, in institutions, in material concatenations. To effectuate or to realise means to develop that which the possible implies. (Lazzarato, 2004: 6; 9, my translation)

To briefly recapitulate, against the recognition-based approach of the category of 'revolution', the 'event of resistance' allows a broader applicability and a more sensitive proximity to the singularity of a mass movement. The event of resistance enacts a dynamic practice of defiant rejection that is both reactive, affirmative - as shall be further discussed in the following section - and reflexive of its own futurity. The event can be viewed as an instance of active discontinuity, not as a definitive cut or as an infinitesimal variation; and it bears lines of continuity with moments of resistance from the past and the future. In fact, I find it productive to overlap models that focus on how the event is a complete rupture with models that are centred around the complexity and connectedness of the micro unities (intended in terms of events of resistance) that constitute what emerges as a global event of revolutionary change.

Therefore, its virtual dimension is crucial, It manifest itself in a myriad of occasions (and locations) beyond the 'most advanced sectors of the class' (Nunes, 2013: 12), which have to be interconnected in order to amplify their impact. It bears a form of organisation that mirrors that of the dominant models of economic and social production, which the 'networked politics' is an example of. The aim of the event of resistance is that of radically transforming its environment rather than positioning itself outside it. Furthermore, the process of contagion alongside the transversal political alliances that it generates is a way of making sense of contemporary constellations of events of resistance (such as the ones I describe around the phenomenon of the Tunisian revolution).

Finally, Lazzarato's work – mainly inspired by the Seattle anti-globalization movement – adds important features to the notion of event. First of all, as stated, above, he argues that the event's mode is that of the problematic, engaged in pointing at questions rather than providing answers. Secondly, he sees the event as a double becoming, made of a moment of invention, in which possibles are created, and of a moment of repetition, in which those same possibles are implemented within the social field, through instances of repetition, effectuation, and propagation. Lazzarato's scholarship on the representation of the political event is a valuable contribution to the debate around theories of the event first because he reflects on how media interacts with contemporary political mobilisations and second because he complexifies his approach by working on practices that aren't monopolised by the discursive and its processes of signification. In the next section, I will draw from these ideas and questions with the intention to define resistance in relation to the event that is my case study.

## 2.2. What is Resistance?<sup>42</sup>

As mentioned above, Howard Caygill provides a significant understanding of the concept of 'resistance' in his work *Resistance. Philosophy of Defiance* (2013). I choose this theorisation of resistance particularly because Caygill relates his reflection to many and different historical events, and this approach, as well as his conclusions, engage productively with my case study. Caygill not only draws from the reflection of valuable thinkers (such as Clausewitz, Kant, Marx, Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foucault) but he also attempts to develop the philosophical implications of examples of historical resistance, which the Tunisian revolution can be assimilated to. In his view, 'resistance is motivated above all by a desire for justice, its acts are performed by subjectivities possessed of extreme courage and fortitude and its practice guided by prudence, all three contributing to the

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<sup>42</sup> I am aware and very inspired by the debate initiated by Deleuze on the comparison between his and Foucault's view over resistance, illustrated in the seminal article *Désir et plaisir* (Deleuze, 1994), in which he draws a parallel between his primacy of lines of flight and Foucault's primacy of resistance, as the only thing that goes against the *dispositifs* (systems of power) (as discussed in Thoburn, 2003: 41). Yet this section will engage with a different set of debates around the notion of resistance.

deliberate preservation and enhancement of the capacity to resist' (Caygill, 2013: 12).

Caygill's understanding of resistance has some significantly original features. Firstly, it is never considered as a pure moment, but rather in a dynamic manner, as a 'reciprocal play of resistances that form clusters of resistance and counter-resistance' (Caygill, 2013: 5). Secondly, resistance has an inherent necessity to 'preserve and enhance the capacity to resist' (Caygill, 2013: 4). Thirdly, resistance possesses two temporal and intentional dimensions. One regards a reactive response to instances of domination in the present (what Nietzsche critiques as *ressentiment* and Caygill thematised as 'sacrifice' when dealing with the Paris Commune); the other one regards an orientation towards the (ideal) future social organisation. The latter constitutes a constructive, affirmative resistance, engaged in 'creating a new democratic world beyond resisting the old,' by enacting what Caygill calls an 'expansive political form,' a notion which he draws from Karl Marx's *Addresses on the Paris Commune* (Caygill, 2013: 38).

In this sense, resistance is a line of flight; an unexpected occurring that transcends the actual world, while at the same time questioning it. It expresses an inherent drive towards transformation. This dimension of resistance is always informed by the virtual, all that which exists and all that is yearned for. Most importantly, this line of escape is determined by an actualized world that operates with oppressive modalities. It is as a response to a form of oppression that 'something happens – a molecular event, a point of indeterminacy – that knocks us off course and on to another vector, producing a mutant line of desire' (O'Sullivan, 2008: 96). That which oppresses the virtual capacities of a specific category fuels this desire of escape. As such, 'concrete political agents and objects break free from existing modes of political representation by creating a prefigurative alternative composition within and alongside older ones' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 177, 142 cit. in Nail, 2013). When escaping oppression, resistance thus can be thought to be drawing lines of flight within the same system it questions (as explained previously drawing from Nunes, 2013: 9), while determining a line of contact with some of its virtual parallels, as those 'affective-events and moments of non-sense that connect us with the virtual, with "our" outside' (O'Sullivan, 2008: 98). So far, I'm employing the work of Caygill, Nunes

and O'Sullivan in order to account for two important aspects, namely for the functioning of practices of the political that operate beyond paradigms of representation (such as the party or the trade union) and for the ways in which resistance can lead to the production of the new, as a way to acknowledge the creative nature of resistance.

In his later work, in dealing with capitalism and the production of subjectivity, Maurizio Lazzarato gives us useful insights regarding dynamics that can easily be connected to this aspect of resistance. Lazzarato's starting point is Guattari's reflection on the 'Integrated World Capitalism' and Michel Foucault's notion of 'subjectivation' and 'care of the self', by means of which he deviates the debate around politics away from the focus on language, the subject, and the economical production. In this sense, just like capitalism, the practices involving resistances to it or more precisely production of subjectivity opposed to the capitalist regime referred to as 'subjectivation' or 'subjective mutation' are explained as 'an existential affirmation and apprehension of the self, the others, and the world'. 'It is on the basis of this non-discursive, existential, and affective crystallization that new languages, new discourses, new knowledge, and a new politics can proliferate' (Lazzarato, 2014: 16). Instead of dismissing 'strikes, riots, revolts' as examples of immature political mobilization, Lazzarato points to them as indispensable 'moments of rupture with and suspension of chronological time, of the neutralization of subjections and dominant significations.' These events, he claims, don't determine the emergence of 'immaculate, virginal subjectivities' (Lazzarato, 2014: 19) but rather of *focal points* of proto-subjectivation and proto-enunciation, later to be made consistent by political 'experimentation, research, and intervention aimed first of all at the production of subjectivity rather than (only) at the economic, the social, the linguistic' (Lazzarato, 2014: 219). Inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin, Lazzarato ties resistance to the act of enunciation, intended as the 'power of self-positioning, self-production, and a capacity to secrete one's own referent' (Lazzarato, 2014: 18). Political enunciation implies 'taking risks, posing a challenge', being 'capable of governing (oneself) and of governing others within a situation of conflict' (Lazzarato, 2014: 230-1) and it is made possible by 'points of nonsense' (Lazzarato, 2014: 223). Resistance is thus untied from language or cognition and regarded as an act of 'self-positioning, of affirmation, showing itself

in a gesture of refusal without speech' (Lazzarato, 2014: 176), thus preceding both thought and speech. In dealing with resistance as an act, while drawing a parallel with the act in schizoanalysis, Lazzarato points to a fundamental feature of it as being *causa sui* and *non ex nihilo*. In other words, the act is not deterministic, but depends on a sort of contingent accumulation of conditions of possibility and can only take shape thanks to an active creative intervention. As Lazzarato explains, citing Guattari:

In schizoanalysis, there is no determinism because the act occurs only when there is a *surplus of possibilities* when there is a 'possibility of playing a completely new tune when there are relative fields of potential creativity established.' Potentialities and possibles that must be created. (Guattari, 1985 cit. in Lazzarato, 2014: 216, my emphasis)

Following this line of thought, Lazzarato rehabilitates revolt - symbolized by moments of discontinuity, or resistance, such as riots and strikes - as the 'emergence of focal points of subjectivation' and 'the sign of the capacity to interrupt, suspend the dominant significations' (Lazzarato, 2014: 186). In this sense, a revolution is framed by the Italian philosopher as an 'assemblage of discursive and non-discursive elements which function and circulate in a diagrammatic register' (Lazzarato, 2014: 267). For Lazzarato, diagrams are a different functioning system opposed to the representational one. They are 'a separated category (of images) whose functions are operational, rather than representational'. In this sense, 'diagrammatic signs, *by acting in place of things themselves*, produce machinic rather than significant redundancy' (Lazzarato, 2014: 86-7, my emphasis). This concept of the diagram, alongside a series of events of resistance, will be the starting point of the re-configuration of the Tunisian revolution in the next chapter. This diagrammatic approach will allow me to engage with the event without projecting a pre-determined narrative structure. Rather, I will draw from the stories of struggles that I have come in

contact with in Tunisia and attempt to give a snapshot of how I believe different groups relate to the territory as an epicentre or crossroad of flows of resistance.

Lazzarato's reflection frees resistance and even revolution from the burden of complying with precise standards of political expectations. In this respect, there is a curious resemblance between his definitions of 'revolution' (Lazzarato, 2014: 20) and that of 'desire' (Lazzarato, 2014: 255-256). Both terms are articulated around the 'impossibility [they] make real' (Lazzarato, 2014: 20). In this way, when 'following the rupture of previous equilibriums, relations appear that had otherwise been impossible' (Lazzarato, 2014: 255-256).<sup>43</sup> The 'impossible' mentioned by Lazzarato<sup>44</sup> is precisely related to that virtual dimension that the transformative aspect of resistance is informed by. Resistance first interrupts the common functioning of the relations of domination, to then open up previously unimaginable possibilities.<sup>45</sup>

The second aspect of the event of resistance is connected to its productive nature. In the process of opposing an oppressive drive, something new is created, whether it's a secret resistance practice helping the oppressed to bear the violence they're subjected to or an alternative social organization experimenting alternative social roles.

This productive building is not related to any transcendent dimension; rather, it remains immanent, in the sense that it is articulated as 'a recombination of the already existing elements in and for the world (a new dice throw as Deleuze might

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<sup>43</sup> Although, as many critiques to Deleuze have pointed out, desire doesn't necessarily involve the development of a politics of resistance, as such.

<sup>44</sup> Especially in his last book, *Signs and Machines* (2014), Lazzarato is very careful in distinguishing between the plane of signification and cognition and the asignifying one, which informs, in his vision, instances of proto-subjectivation on a political level, framed as an existential non-discursive affirmation. He explains that the moments of the interruption of dominant signification dynamics (such as strikes, riots, revolts) allow the articulation of political innovation. It can be argued that Lazzarato holds a significant suspicion towards the domain of the discursive, privileging the non-discursive one as the fertile ground for emancipation. I argue that both planes play a crucial role, starting with the moment defiance spreads like a virus, which I see in non-discursive terms, and ending up with the construction of narratives able to account for the development and outcomes of revolutionary ruptures, which is all about the way power relations interact with and produce discourses.

<sup>45</sup> I am aware that the notion of resistance (inherently positing a dialectic articulation) doesn't fit with Deleuze's understanding of the event (in non-dialectical terms), yet this enquiry is intended to expand both the definition of 'event' (as has been done in the previous section) and 'resistance', drawing from the theorists who help build a more sensitive approach towards the singularity of the event under scrutiny.

say)' or a repetition with a difference (O'Sullivan, 2008: 91). This moment follows that of the rupture of the chronological time and of the dominant signification and determines specific effects such as the suspension of habits and of the common utilitarian interest, substituted by new refrains and habits (O'Sullivan, 2008: 96). In this new context, particular encounters foster the development of enabling affects - joy as opposed to paralysis - and the unfolding of a different existential speed (O'Sullivan, 2008: 95).

Yet a simple interruption of habit or the acceleration of the tendencies of power is not sufficient to draw an emancipatory line. The new is produced through cohesiveness and consistency (O'Sullivan, 2008: 97) and it affects first of all the relationship with the self, followed by the relationship with the others and the world. As Lazzarato explains, self-affectation, which implies altering one's capacities to affect and be affected, is one of the main effects of political enunciation. By definition strikes, struggles, revolts, and riots - as well as the more recent 'occupy' practices - operate in the space left vacant by the dominant modalities of organisation, thus they imply a re-organisation of those same relations in a non pre-determined, experimental way.

Eventually, the space of construction can become the operative space of liberation, in that it implements splinters of the virtual through active practices of emancipation, whether we're talking about the best strategy to counter the governmental militias (as has happened in Tunis with the organisation of neighbourhood self-defence groups) or the way feminist activists have developed a debate with radically religious Tunisian citizens, while sharing time and building sociality during the occupation of the governmental square of the Kasbah in Tunis (Massarelli, 2012: 62).

The last aspect of the event of resistance concerns its connective dimension. Events of resistance can operate connections either in non-intentional modalities, as contagion, or with intentional modalities, as transversal alliances with other groups enacting resistance. Both contagion and transversal alliances are crucial for the achievement of a mass movement.<sup>46</sup> In the case of contagion, the spread of the 'affective charges' can occur regardless of the intention of who is directly

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<sup>46</sup> In Chapter Five, these same reflections will be developed more in-depth through the concepts of resonance and 'relation.'

involved in practicing specific resistance practices. On the contrary, resistance *qua* transversal alliances is intentional and sometimes the result of the recombination of matter and of the new encounters determined by the moment of rupture.

Resistance enhances its consistency and agency against oppression when lines of connection between different practices of resistance are drawn. This happens on both what could be called a vertical level, where a dialogue is established with events of resistance beyond one's contemporary time; as well as on a horizontal level, where connections are established between resistances cohabiting the same historical period. These alliances can occur either between categories which struggle and categories of support, such as the Tunisian disenfranchised supported by the more guaranteed workers, such as lawyers or teachers; or between equally struggling categories, such as the unemployed from Tunisia and from Egypt, for instance.

In fact, in Deleuze and Guattari's vision, an active line of flight is characterized by 'the *creation of transversal relations* that can mobilize the social body to an ever greater extent' (Nunes, 2010: 15, my emphasis), thus fostering processes of singularisation. In these instances, 'groups acquire the ability to read their own situation and what is taking place around them', and develop the 'ability that will give them at least some possibility of creation and make it possible to preserve this very important character of autonomy' (Guattari and Rolnik, 2008: 62).

Given this relationship between the connective dimension of transversality, the conjunction of flows and the process of singularisation leading to some form of autonomy, it is worth relating this to Brian Massumi's description of autonomy as being defined by '[ones's] connectedness, the way [one's] is connected and how intensely, rather than (...) the ability to separate off and decide by [one] self' (Massumi, Zournazi, 2009).

To summarize, the event of resistance holds at least three fundamental aspects that have been so far discussed. Firstly, resistance is a rupture or a glitch; a break in a dominant regime that itself holds the possibility of something new, the germ of a different world (Guattari, 1996: 189-199 cit. in O'Sullivan, 2008: 96).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> The concept of resistance as glitch, bug or germ will be further discussed since it offers the possibility of addressing the modalities of capture of resistance. I have privileged this interpretation in biological terms because later on, I will be looking at the strategies of capture of resistance in terms of immunitary response of the dominant regime.

Secondly, resistance as rupture has its roots in the realm of the virtual and makes the impossible become real, bringing about a suspension of the dominant signification machine. It implements new forms of life, which question habits and the utilitarian logic, and which occasionally also leave more space for the pursuit of enabling affects, such as joy, and for the alteration of the speed of everyday life. Thirdly, resistance has the potential to produce alliances with other instances of resistance, which increase its force through transversality and connectedness.<sup>48</sup> In the next section, I will focus on how the different ways through which the potential of resistance is challenged by apparatuses of power, both at the discursive and at the non-discursive level.

### 2.3. Apparatuses of Capture

The following section will be concerned with the way power articulates the resistance that has been so far described. One of the claims of this research is that the capture of resistance is operated through both discursive and non-discursive modalities, or signifying and asignifying modalities, to follow Lazzarato's terms. In this sense, the power systems that are challenged by moments of rupture such as a revolution generate representations alongside instances of affect modulation, as tools of countering the disorder determined by resistance. In Tunisia this has been visible, for example, with the state promoting a eulogised narrative of the revolution (at a discursive level), and in the phenomenon of the Islamic militancy, for what pertains to the way accumulation of affects – in this case dissent – can lead to 'deadly lines of flight' (as shall be discussed in Chapter Four).

Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's reflection, both Lazzarato and Nunes share a specific orientation regarding the modality of organization of resistance and emancipation politics. Although their approaches are different, they seem to agree with the claim (inaugurated by the *Anti-Oedipus* in its understanding of capitalism and schizophrenia) that resistance to systems of power can only take on the same modality of power itself (Nunes, 2013: 9). As if power and the resistance to it

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<sup>48</sup> This particular aspect will be further developed in Chapter Five, especially when I will write about cross-class alliances in terms of the Glissantian 'relation' (Glissant, 1997).

would mirror each other except for their divergent goals: one aims at appropriation, the other at the emancipatory transformation. This explains Lazzarato's focus on asignifying semiotics, which he considers a privileged modality employed by power in shaping the production of subjectivity, but also the preliminary ground of resistance formation. Furthermore, this also explains Nunes' interest in the organizational model of the networked politics animating the mass movements of 2011 (Nunes, 2014).

This aspect has been pointed out to prepare the presentation of what appear to be two important approaches of capture of resistance, namely representation and modulation. Representation is crucial for the Arab Spring and, specifically for the Tunisian revolution. These events have been largely covered and thematised by corporate and state media, and have catalysed the production of images and narrative, which have largely influenced the perception of politics in 2011 and afterwards. In this research, representation is analysed critically as a strategy of capture intended to neutralize the radical demands of the Tunisian revolutionaries, by normalizing and transforming them through the mainstream narrative scrutinized in the previous chapter.

Representation is a partially useful starting point to reflect on the media dimension of the event of resistance, and the way it is circulated thanks to discourse, narratives, and images. In his 2003 article, 'Struggle, Event, Media', Lazzarato (Lazzarato, 2003) deconstructs the idea of representation of the event as an expressive double of it. Instead, he points out that the event 'doesn't exist outside that which is supposed to express it': the chants, the images taken by cameras, the newspapers, the net, the phones, which allows it to circulate like a viral contagion across the planet. 'Images, signs and statements are thus possibilities, possible worlds, which affect souls (brains) and must be realized in bodies' (Lazzarato, 2003: 7). That is also why the Arab Spring works as a device, which limits the domain of the possible.

This claim is important in the case of the Tunisian revolution for at least two reasons. First of all, because it indicates that the mainstream narratives do not refer to an event's genuine 'content,' but rather that they interact with the event of resistance as such. Second, because acknowledging the operativity and interest of representation reveals how alternative, critical accounts of the event are

resisting possible attempts of capture and neutralization. The way the responses to mainstream representation can be articulated will be exemplified in chapter three, with the development of a different framing of the event and in chapter four, with the description of the artistic production around the Tunisian revolution. Whether Lazzarato is dealing with the representation of struggles or the advertisement event, he contests the traditional claim according to which representation expresses content. With its prompts (language, signs, and images) he depicts representation as able to affect and stimulate thought and action, rather than just presenting content (or a signified, as it would be called in Structuralist terms).

In *Signs and Machines*, eleven years after the article discussed above, Lazzarato once again analyses the dynamics of the signification politics around resistance, developing deeper insights into the functioning of representation. The latter is seen as part of an encoding modality based on semiology of signification (Lazzarato, 2014: 67), concerned with establishing a bi-univocal relationship between the sign and its referent. The process of producing signification is inseparable from the act of taking power since it deliberately operates a selection and imposes a referential regime which, by virtue of 'neutralizing all polyvocality and multidimensionality of expression' (Lazzarato, 2014: 73), prevents 'becomings, heterogeneous processes of subjectivation' and 'imposes "exclusive disjunctions" (you are man, you are woman)', recognizing only the identities defined by these significations (Lazzarato, 2014: 78). Thanks to this encoding activity, 'meaning becomes 'automatic'' (Lazzarato, 2014: 73).<sup>49</sup>

In the case of the communication industry, this production of signification is achieved thanks to a specific operation of isolation. When 'normalizing' an event, the 'media's first concern is to isolate the person speaking from the connections that make up his collective assemblage', eventually forcing the isolated spokesperson to 'express himself according to the media's codes, temporalities,

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<sup>49</sup> In the case of the Tunisian revolution, this was visible when the dominant discourse went from ignoring the unrests to glorifying them, once it became clear that no intervention could stop the process of transformation. What happened when the 'Arab' revolutions exploded was an extremely visible re-configuration of the signification regime. Mainstream Western media operated a shift in their discourse, suspending two crucial assumptions: that the Middle Eastern countries in general bred anti-Western 'terrorists' and that Ben Ali's Tunisia, in particular, was a Western-like modern economy (the World Bank being the leading promoter of the 'Tunisian miracle' narrative).

and syntactical and lexical constraints' (Lazzarato, 2014: 167). An example of this is the way media have identified middle-class technology savvy youth as representatives of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, despite them being a minority of the revolutionaries, chosen only for the familiarity of their pro-democracy language. What is left out, in this case, is the entire collective intersection of flows that might have fostered a specific event of resistance. Thus the event gets trivialized in the sense that no space for difference and becoming is ever allowed, while identities and discourses appear as the constant repetition of predictable patterns. In this sense, '*the two forms of representation in the system of signs and political institutions go hand in hand and any kind of political break with them demands that both one and the other are overcome*' (Lazzarato, 2014: 202-3, my emphasis).

Along this line of thought, if resistance is to be regarded as an instance of contagion, or a germ, a glitch – as I suggested above – the representation could be regarded as an immunitary type of response from the power apparatus. One by virtue of which the opening up of possibles articulated by the event of resistance and its rupture is possibly stitched back in its original form; obviously, it isn't possible to perfectly reverse the process started by the event. By normalising the event's singularity, both in terms of novelty as well as in terms of its radical demands, the germ of resistance is isolated and its movement across collective assemblages is restricted through reductive readings, which can include criminalization or the total suppression of the event as news.

I am aware that pointing to the coexistence of resistance and contagion is paradoxical since contagion operates like a two-way system or flow and as such can both affect and be affected by power. However, drawing from the Tunisian revolution (and the further and still ongoing ramifications of the event), I have concluded so far that one of the functioning modalities of resistance is contagion, which allows the spreading of dissent under shared conditions of oppression. In this sense, the rupture of the event of resistance, which I want to associate with instances of emancipatory defiance, circulates thanks to its 'affective charges,' rather than thanks to mass organization, as Nunes explains (Nunes, 2014).

In fact, while the representation strategy basically deals with a discursive articulation of the event of resistance, modulation regards the dimension of affects,

thus bypassing the discursive and cognition, with the same aim of limiting the impact of defiance.<sup>50</sup> This plane is by no means separated from the one of the discursive, signifying intervention. Yet it holds the potential of determining more profound and unexpected effects. Massumi defines affect in his Introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus* as ‘an ability to affect and be affected’, ‘a prepersonal intensity corresponding to a passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act’ (Massumi, 1987: xv). Affect refers to the set of virtuals, which emotions and identities are a reduction of. It is marked by a continuous movement and articulated around two poles represented by the coefficient of vital energy it is able to propel: whether positively (joy) or negatively (paralysis). Because it is a ‘pre-personal category, installed before the circumscription of identities’ (Lazarato, 2014: 99), affect is also a cognition free zone, and as such it is not centred on language. Since it is neither linguistic nor cognitive, it spreads according to a mimetic communication pattern. Its functioning is based on the fact that ‘conceiving a thing like ourselves to be affected with any emotion’ triggers the actual experience of a similar emotion (Lazarato, 2014: 98-99). In other words, affect spreads through contagion, rather than cognition.

As I will point in Chapter Five (in the section on Processuality and Topology) issues of resistance and revolution bring forward questions around how transformation unfolds at a micro in relation to the macro level, in the punctual and in the general. So far this relation between the micro and the macro has been

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<sup>50</sup> Modulation of affects has played a crucial role in the capture of the resistances unchained in the ‘Arab’ world in 2011. Here are some examples of how I understand this strategy of capture to be working (I realize some of them can be quite controversial). In terms of modulation of affects, Western corporate media has largely fostered collective media panic around the electoral victory of Islam-inspired parties (in both Egypt and Tunisia). In Egypt, for example, this previous campaign helped to ‘normalize’ the military coup in the summer of 2013 and the bloody repression connected to it. In terms of what I will later define as pre-emption, one can look at the case of the Libyan civil war and the way Western countries have legitimized their military intervention. Finally, at the end of this section, I argue (drawing from Luciana Parisi and Steve Goodman analysis of nanotechnologies) that contagious affect that can foster emancipatory resistance can also be hijacked by power in its interests. In my view, this is the case of highly organized and financed forms of global armed struggle, such as the Islamic State, which, partially, functions as an accumulation dispositive of the dissent and frustration of the underclass (of both the ‘Arab’ and the Western world). I claim that corporate terrorism captures and exploits dissent, thus cancelling its radically emancipatory potential, by reproducing it under the form of a ‘deadly, self-poisoning line of flight’. I will further discuss this phenomenon in the last subsection of Chapter Four, *The Asabiyyat of the Houma*.

addressed showing the difference between the network of events of resistance and the event perceived more globally (the Tunisian revolution). It is with the passage from the micro to the macro level, that resistance arguably acquires an increased representational character, in the sense of a more consolidated discursive identity alongside the composition of forms of political representation. Yet, as Lazzarato observes, this fundamental process in absence of which nobody would speak about a 'revolution', namely 'the passage from the micro to the macro, from the local to the global must not be done through abstraction, universalization or totalization, but rather through the capacity to keep together and progressively assemble networks and patchworks' (Lazzarato, 2004: 137).

As Nunes points out, the circulation of the event (in its emancipatory declination) is contagious. The constituted powers counter the spreading of emancipation through a narrative type of capture or by unleashing opposite affective charges, such as the fear around the 'threat of terrorism,' for example. Both resistance politics and dominant governance articulate their intervention on two levels: the discursive and the affective, thus mobilizing both cognition and contagion for their goals. As pointed out by Edward Said in his *Covering Islam* (1997), by the mid-'70s Orientalism developed into neo-Orientalism, influenced by new techniques of power, such as public relations, advertising, communication management and infotainment. The articulation between the West and the East, thus, moved to a new ground of information warfare, where hegemony stopped operating at a logico-discursive level in order to influence knowledge and started employing the modulation of affects in order to consolidate empirical facts. Rather than building a narration and appealing to the cognitive ability of the public, truths were now based on 'something that is taken for and functions as an empirical fact'. This is what Brian Massumi calls the 'affective fact', which grants an extra-logical empirical credibility to the affective impact, and consolidates that same credibility through repetition 'mainly by repeating the charge, rather than revealing the proof' since 'repetition of a warning, (or of a charge) or even its name, can be enough to effect the passage to empirical fact' (Massumi, 2005 cit. in Terranova, 2007).

This is how the valorisation of intensified affect occurs, not by simply imposing it, but rather by speculating on its very flow. In Massumi's words on the

relationship between capitalism and affect: 'Capitalism starts intensifying or diversifying affect, but only in order to extract surplus value. It hijacks affect in order to intensify profit potential. It literally valorises affect' (Massumi, 2009). In this way, the pre-individual subjectivity is also put to work, or more precisely speculated upon, by exploiting its 'affects, rhythms, movements, durations, intensities, and asignifying semiotics' (Lazzarato, 2014: 99).

The next step in the modulation of affects is that of altering a specific affective temporal dimension, by determining its infinite self-replication, and creating the scene of a legitimated intervention of the apparatus of capture, by producing conflict. In dealing with the post-9/11 age of terrorist threat, Massumi calls this type of set of practices pre-emption. With this term, he refers to 'when the futurity of unspecified threat is affectively held in the present in a perpetual state of potential emergence[y]' (Massumi, 2007: 23). I believe pre-emption is crucial when dealing with the way political action connected to the 'Arab' world has been presented in the West, against the backdrop of the Islam/anti-Western terrorism nexus. In fact, the Arab Spring has been praised for its non-religious claims, and dismissed once Islam connected parties, like Ennahda in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt had been democratically elected.

While pre-emption builds the ground for the intervention of the power apparatus, building up a legitimation based on the 'affective fact' and its hammering repetition, there is yet another behaviour that the power apparatus can foster, in its activity of capture of the flows of desire, which propel the germ of resistance. To illustrate this reaction, beyond the boundaries of the immunitary response, what is needed is a dive into the science of nanotechnologies, which points out to a different understanding of the viral dynamics. Whilst this is another level of discussion, it suggests how contagion of affects can become productive for the apparatus of capture. I am here referring to examples such as the Islamic State organisation, which harvest and build accumulation on the dissent of the disenfranchised youth throughout the West and the 'Arab' world.

In this sense, nanotechnology has been reflecting on alternative interactions with viral agents, in which their existence and communication is no longer hindered for immunitary reasons. On the contrary, this type of nano modulation 'will stimulate microbes to communicate and will no longer prevent such

propagation but anticipate the emergence of such patterns in the first place, [it] would use *the bugs' own communication language to sabotage their organization*' (Parisi and Goodman, 2005: 6, my emphasis).

In this case, the apparatus no longer attempts an immunitary isolation of the germ but rather stimulates its development to promote its own negentropic agenda. The parallelism that I have in mind here is when dissent is not repressed or neutralised through narratives of an 'achieved revolution,' but rather intensified and extracted value from, in an attempt to appropriate the potential of such phenomena of collective dissent. These are the terms in which in Chapter Four (section 4.3.) I will be reading the way Islamic militancy developed in Tunisia after 2013. This type of modulation is not to be intended as a determination of the germ's activity but rather as a predisposition of the conditions of possibility for it to develop in a certain direction (which will never be fully predictable, anyway).

The biological approach and the concepts of *preemption* and *modulation*, as well as *nano-modulation*, provided a constructive way to make sense of how certain resistance movements - such as the ones surrounding the Tunisian revolution involving both the unemployed, the migrants as well as the refugees, that will be discussed later - develop contagious dissent, by transforming possibly emancipatory drives in what Deleuze and Guattari would call 'deadly, self-poisoning lines of flight', such as 'terrorism'. This way of reasoning is also informed by the observation of the Spanish philosopher Santiago Alba Rico, who pointed out that 'the post-revolutionary Jihadism cannot be defined as a radicalization of Islam, but on the contrary, as an Islamisation of radicality' (Alba Rico, 2015). This line of thought will be further developed in Chapter Three (in the section on *The Flow of the Islamic Militants*).

For the sake of clarity, this research is not interested in contributing to the debate around Islamist armed struggle as a form of fascism. Rather, the interest is that of trying to address the transformation of the explosive emancipatory flow, triggered by the accumulation of dissent, into an almost fully captured and profitable violence flow.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, the intention was to construct an analytical tool able to account for the singularity of the Tunisian revolution, which – as other instances of non-Western revolutions – has been normalized and reduced by an attempt to assimilate it to Western political and historical references.

What does the hypothesis of the Tunisian revolution as a *network of events of resistance* make visible as opposed to its hegemonic reading? First of all this approach indicates that resistance cannot be essentialised, but must be regarded in the dynamic interplay of resistance and counter-resistance that characterizes it, alongside its contagious dimension. Moreover, resistance is articulated as a gesture of negation, interruption of oppression, but also holds an affirmative, productive dimension, which is oriented towards the future and brings about experimental re-organizations of the actual, while embracing the virtual that unlocks the potential of the actual.

By analysing the event of resistance through Badiou and Deleuze's thought what becomes clear is the paradox of connecting a dialectic/opposition-based idea - Caygill's resistance, Badiou's event - with the Deleuzian event, marked by a total absence of the idea of interruption/discontinuity as opposition. Drawing from the Tunisian case study, my understanding of the micro and macro unfolding of resistance towards what ends up being a revolutionary transformation is the following. The process starts from any one instant of unmanageability that propagates through a network and makes possible a progressive accumulation of practices of interruption until the mutations generated can no longer be re-absorbed by the governing machine and end up shifting the very modality of the functioning of that same system. My claim is that event and resistance can be considered together, as an instance of local and active discontinuity, which is able to amplify its impact, possibly reaching revolutionary possibilities, if it operates a connection with similar instances. I will refer to this aspect partially in Chapter Three (in the section on *The Flow of Struggle of the Underclass*) and in Chapter Five (in the section on *Relation*), showing how the revolution was a result of a coalisation between the riots of the unemployed and protests promoted by the unionised labourers.

As such, the event of resistance is de-centralized, contagious, and operates within its systemic environment, rather than outside it. The highly contagious potential of resistance explains both how it manages to develop mass movements without mass organization, but also the way power responds to it. The attempts of capture are thus framed as immunitary strategies of limiting the contagion, through a combination of discursive and non-discursive methods, involving representation and modulation of affects, which both help to 'normalize' that type of dissent which has unchained resistance throughout the 'Arab' world in 2011.

The concepts that I've discussed so far – the event of resistance, the different features of resistance and the reflection on how affect can be hegemonically valorised through modulation – are the starting point of one alternative manner of interacting with the event of the Tunisian revolution.

After this theoretical approach, the next chapter will be concerned with the practical way of framing the Tunisian revolution as a network of events of resistance. When and where are these instances to be located? What consistency can the event acquire if one is supposed to follow a different logic from the representational one?

### **3. A Microhistory of the Tunisian Revolution. The Struggle of the Disenfranchised**

If you light our fire/  
Our revolution  
will be like the wings  
of a butterfly.

Poem read in Ridha Tlili's *Revolution Under 5 Minutes*, 2012

We made the democratic revolution [...] we are here to help you do the same.

*Collective of the Tunisians of Lampedusa in Paris*, 2011

#### **One Possible Recomposition of the Event?**

In the previous chapter, I challenged and expanded some conceptions of 'resistance' and 'event', building the hypothesis that framing the Tunisian mass mobilization of 2011 as a network of events rather than a 'revolution' would help account for the microlevels of its political specificities, which the mainstream narratives have foreclosed. In this sense, this chapter is intended to empirically explore the consequences of this shift in framing the events by attempting a diagrammatic reading, intended as a 'short-circuit of the discursive' (O'Sullivan, 2014: 9), a visual illustration of the ongoing flows of rebellious practices. The intention is that of revealing and preserving the futurity of the event's resistance, as opposed to declaring it exhausted. In this way the 'network of events of resistance' will be imagined in terms of flows, drawing lines of struggle across the Mediterranean territory (between 2008 and 2015).

This chapter is the most historiographically dense one, as it attempts to engage with the Tunisian revolution applying the previously developed notion of 'event of resistance.' This is my suggestion of a way to listen to the event and draw attention to some of its roots, consequent articulations, and contingent intersections. In order to avoid applying Eurocentric standards and projections, I will seek this event's specificity and show how the Tunisians' cry for 'Bread, freedom, dignity!' in 2011 was caused by the uneven regional development of the 'two Tunisias,' exacerbated by the government's neoliberal policies and its

aggressive policing apparatus. By adopting an approach inspired by ‘counter-mapping’ intended as a ‘challenge to hegemonic visibility, in the attempt to post a counter-visibility’ (Garelli et al., 2013: 168), I will suggest a diagrammatic engagement with the event, based on a series of events of resistance that I will reorganize visually in four different flows of struggle. Bearing in mind to account for the processual temporality (and spatiality) traced by these events, I will recompose one possible chrono-geography of the event, which stretches from 2008 to 2015 and from Paris to Syria. According to these diagrams, the Tunisian territory will appear as a crossroad of flows of struggle for four categories, which can occasionally overlap. The Tunisian underclass - the under- and unemployed population of urban and suburban communities - represents the first category. The second category is the one of the Tunisian illegalized migrants towards Europe, called *harraga* (literally ‘those who burn,’ referred to the burning of their IDs or their lives in the process of crossing the Mediterranean Sea). The third category focuses on the struggle of the refugees fleeing from Libya after the break of the civil war. Finally, I will look into the diagram drawn by some of the significant actions of the Tunisian Islamic militants after 2011.

Since I am interested in what kind of political subjectivity is to be connected to this event, I will underline the importance of the triad figure of the Tunisian ‘rioter/illegal migrant/militant,’ relating it to a reworked notion of ‘mob,’ centred around the way mobility practices of stigmatized groups (such as illegalized migrants), allow ‘excluded social groups to enter the political process and accede to equality’ (Aradau and Huysmans, 2009: 592).

This experiment aims at contributing methodologically towards the constitution of different patterns of reception of and interaction with instances of resistance, enacted by subjectivities who are often misrecognized in terms of their political validity, whether because of their distance from the Western standpoint (*qua* ‘Arabs’) or because of their class identity (*qua* ‘mob’). This is why I have so far framed the events as an example of the ‘revolution<sup>51</sup> of the other,’ in order to draw attention to the otherisation processes inherent to the Arab Spring paradigm.

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<sup>51</sup> I still employ the term ‘revolution’ because this is the translation of what Tunisians have called the transformative event that happened in 2011, the English translation of *al-thawra*. I don’t share the Western gaze based on the essentialisation of the idea of ‘revolution’, but I respect the will to employ the ‘Arab’ term coming from the participants to the Tunisian ‘revolution’.

In this sense, the Tunisian context must be considered for its irreducible historical characteristics, mostly with regard to the categories that have been the protagonists of the revolution, such as the unemployed. Moreover, reading the revolution in terms of flows will reveal that Tunisia is, in fact, a *crossroad* of struggles, many of which have been directly triggered by the fall of the Tunisian president or by other events connected to the Arab Spring. I have thus decided to expand the gaze to all these struggles and follow the unfolding of some of them.

As opposed to the common focus on the Internet-savvy youth (which I've critiqued in Chapter One, in section 1.1.), this thesis claims that the Tunisian revolution was propelled by the underclass, which in this chapter will be provisionally re-defined as the 'mob,' drawing from Claudia Aradau and Jeff Huysmans's reflection.<sup>52</sup> The 'mob' will refer to the group that defies both local and global instances of governance with its resistance practices. Hopefully, this approach to the events will help reveal the recent political sensibility born out of the poor internal areas of the country. I am also interested to reflect on how the 'mob' confronted local colonialism and neoliberalism, both in their national declination as well as in their global articulation (in terms of anti-immigration policies, for example).

With its focus on mobility practices, this chapter will be the starting point for the future reflection on the political relevance of the 'vanguard' (Chapter Four) and of the 'minor politics from cramped spaces' (Thoburn, 2016) (Chapter Five).

### **3.1. The Specificity of the Tunisian Revolution: Between Bread Riots and Bread Race**

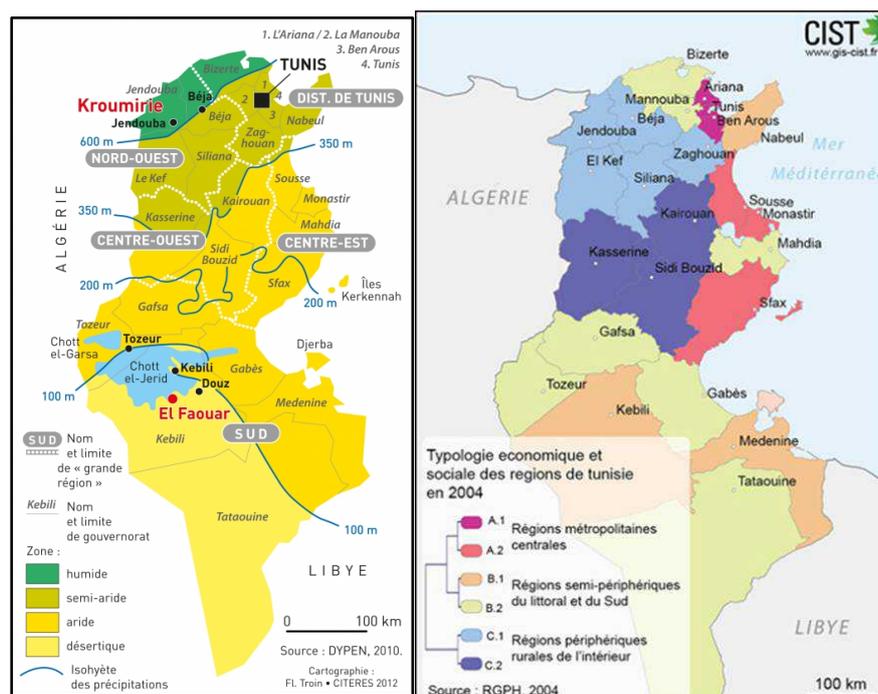
In order to better comprehend the nature of the Tunisian *al-thawra* ('revolution' in Arabic) what is needed is a brief focus on the country's specificity, which will reveal some of the historical mechanisms that have led to the mass mobilization and the fall of the Ben Ali's regime.

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<sup>52</sup> In fact, in the first two sections of Chapter Five, I will be discussing how the resistance connected to the Tunisian revolution and to the struggles that followed, was propagated not only by technological communication but mainly by the mediation of a socio-political assemblage, for which the practices of the 'mob' were crucial.

First of all, it is relevant to point out that Ben Ali's government promoted the idea of the Tunisian 'economic miracle'. As Beatrice Hibou clarifies, the economic system mainly based on the textile industry and tourism had been 'running out of steam since the end of the 90s' (Hibou, 2011: xxi). Therefore, the rhetoric of the miracle 'was the result of the spin put on economic data [and] it comprised a fundamental mechanism of the exercise of domination, especially since it depicted in no way the reality of millions of Tunisian citizens (Hibou, 2011: xxi). This fiction was all the more oppressive since it foreclosed the alarming increase in unemployment throughout the internal and Western areas of the country, which made access to the labour market literally impossible for a growing number of Tunisian young citizens, as shall be further illustrated. The revolts up to the 14<sup>th</sup> of January and 'the first and the second occupation of the Kasbah resoundingly showed [...] that the representation of Tunisia as a modern, Western country constructed around its capital and its big cities, was for a long time, disconnected from the rest of the country' (Garelli et al., 2013: 13).

In fact, Tunisia has historically been a divided country. I will here include two maps that will be reposed in the discussion around rural dispossession in Chapter Four (section 4.1. *Looking at the Revolution from the 'Blind' Spot: The Peasants and the Imazighen*). They show the parallel between the distribution of climate conditions and the main urban settlements.



*Fig. 6. These maps show the current, yet changing distribution of the climate areas in Tunisia and how important climate is to the establishment of the main urban centres, as opposed to the rest of the country, mostly rural.*

*Source: DYPEN, CIST (France).*

The main specificity of the Tunisian territory is its inherent development disparity between the North and coastal area (the so-called Sahel region) - where the richest cities are located: Tunis, Sfax, Sousse and Gabès - and the internal and Western areas (where the main rebel cities are located such as Sidi Bouzid, Gafsa, Kasserine), alongside the Southern cities (like Ben Guardane) at the border with Libya. Most of these areas also hold a particularly arid and increasingly desert-like climate, making everyday life even more challenging. This unequal development has marked Tunisia ever since its independence as a nation in 1956, and is arguably, as shall be discussed in the Chapter Four, a colonial trend.

The poorer areas outside the Sahel region, such as Gafsa (in the centre-West of the country), engaged in the exploitation of phosphate in the last 100 years, have been traditionally rebellious. Gafsa exploded during the 2008 riots and strikes against the nepotistic hiring process in the mines but is also famous for having been heavily repressed by Bourghiba during the 1984 bread riots and, further back in time, in 1952 by the French colonizers. 'In the collective memory of the

inhabitants of the Gafsa oasis' these instances of resistance 'convey [...] their exclusion from power after having massively taken part to the national liberation as well as the fact of not being masters of their own destiny' (Kilani, 2014: 200, my translation).

In addition, the internal poor areas – where the revolution started – are also populated by citizens of *Imazighen* (also known as 'Berber')<sup>53</sup> origins, a nomadic indigenous people who inhabited the region before the conquest of the Arabs. The Imazighen have animated some of the most important resistance movements, such as the anti-colonial struggle and victory against the French colonizers, partially led by the Amazigh fighter Lazhar Chraïti (Tlili, 2013).

Maybe the best data to express this regional gap are currently the ones regarding unemployment and poverty, although the previous régime has been systematically altering them. The richest regions also hold the added value industries: tourism, textile production and make up most of the jobs of the country. On the other hand, the West mainly deals with agriculture, which - given the harsh climate - pushes many inhabitants to migrate towards the richer cities (Missaoui; Khalfaoui, 2011: 136). In fact, the urban population of Tunis and the main cities is constantly growing due to internal migration.

In 2008, for example 'everyone knew that the region of Sidi Bouzid [in the West] had 10 and a half times more poor people than Monastir (on the coast): 1,2% against 12,8%' (Idem: 41). Among the unemployed, the young graduates, politically organized in the Unemployed Graduates Union since 2007, are a major category. Statistically, unemployed and poor people mainly live in the West of the country. In terms of data, the unemployment in the West for young people is almost three times higher than the one on the coast. For instance, in 2009, 60% were looking for a job in Kasserine (in the centre-West) as opposed to 20% in Nabeul (part of Grand Tunis). Data from 2005 show that poverty as well is unequally distributed, with 12,5% in the Centre-West and 5,5% in the South-West as opposed to a national average of 3,8% (Idem: 135).

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<sup>53</sup> The term shares the etymologic origin of the English 'barbarous', a term that ancient Greeks employed to refer to all those peoples who didn't use their language, Greek. Bar-bar is, in fact, the onomatopoeic restitution of an incomprehensible language.

Yet data hardly or only partially captures the sense of desperation and emergency that the Tunisian events were triggered by. However, it gives some hints as to the degree of poverty and frustration felt by the majority of the unemployed youth of the Western regions. And this somehow contributes to explaining why and with what expectations that same group defied Ben Ali's rule and taken its demands to the capital, in the course of the march that took hundreds of Tunisians from the South of the country to Tunis. Moreover, the uneven development provides some hints regarding the gap between the two components of the Tunisian revolution: the fight against dictatorship opposed to the fight for bread and dignity, united in the revolution's most popular slogan, *Bread, freedom, dignity!* After January 2011, this 'divided society' paradigm was transposed in the debate around the so-called 'political vs. social' character of the revolution. Therefore a distinction was perceived between the demands of Sidi Bouzid's inhabitants - survival, work - who had inaugurated the protest, and the demands of the revolutionaries from Tunis, which were centred on freedom (Garelli et al., 2013: 33).

However, this picture wouldn't be complete if we didn't look into the pragmatic resources and solutions that the population had developed to counter this endemic poverty. The most important ones are the networks of the informal economy, migration and, lately, the involvement in the Islamic social movement and occasionally militancy, mostly abroad.

There is a very eloquent expression that indicates the centrality of informal economy for the survival tactics before 2011: the *course à ikhobza*, which is a colloquial expression in the Tunisian dialect translatable as 'the bread race' (Meddeb, 2011). It refers to all the practices young unemployed had to enact in order to provide for their livelihood, 'faced with an authoritarian, clientelist, corrupt power,' which they downplayed 'using creativity and inventiveness' (Garelli et al., 2013: 10).

There is always an important connection between the practices of 'bread race' and the unrests, which have announced and brought about the revolution. In fact, the three preliminary episodes most often cited as 'preparing' the revolution – the uprising in Gafsa (January-June 2008), the one in Ben Guardane (August 2010) and the one in Sidi Bouzid (December 2010) – were all triggered by the state

closing those margins of manoeuvrability necessary for the 'bread race'. In Gafsa in 2008, for example, people had been deceived into applying for jobs eventually granted to the establishment's clients; in Ben Guardane in 2010, the border with Libya, vital for the small local smugglers was closed; while in Sidi Bouzid, a policewoman dispossessed an illegal street vendor. 'Bread' thus becomes the vital and incontestable 'red line' of the Tunisian underclass, the symbol of their own survival and expression of

Their desire to satisfy their vital needs just like other sectors of the population. Bread is the pre-eminent example of normality that must be accessible to all, or which should legitimately be so. And this is especially true since official speeches for over a decade had been constantly vaunting the Tunisian 'economic miracle'. (Hibou, 2011: xv)



*Fig. 7. A protester on Avenue Bourghiba (central Tunis) holding a baguette.*

*Source: Getty (17 January 2011).*

A good example of 'bread race' strategies is provided by the account of Walid, an unemployed bricklayer from Kasserine, in the North-West, described to 'get by, selling scrap iron one day, fruits another day and then maybe oil smuggled from Algeria' (Missaoui; Khalfaoui, 2011: 111).

With the fall of the Ben Ali régime, the margins of the 'bread race' were dramatically altered. Police forces no longer controlled the borders – either because of the political uncertainty or maybe because migration was employed as a sort of relief valve for the social unrest. Therefore, almost 30,000 unemployed young Tunisians could set sail for Europe.

<b>Arrivals at sea of Tunisian national in Italy: 2001-2012</b>			
2001-2005	2006-2010	2011	2012 (1/1 – 20/09)
4,284	13,534	28,047	2,025

*Fig. 8. Tunisians who arrived by boat in Italy in the 2001-2012 period*

*Source: Italian Interior Ministry*

This way many of those who had previously taken part in the revolution were suddenly transformed into 'illegal migrants' for the Western public. Yet in the imaginary of the Maghreb, they had always been identified as *harraga*. 'Literally, *harga* means 'to burn' and *harraga* in the Maghreb indicated 'those who burn', meaning both young people who 'burn' frontiers as they migrate across the Mediterranean sea and those who are ready to burn their documents (but also their past and eventually their lives) in order to reach Europe' (Garelli et al., 2013: 14). The *harraga* are literally the other soul of the Tunisian revolution. They are the same unemployed young citizens from the internal areas, who have triggered the change in 2010 and who have taken with them the revolutionary practices of contestation, which have been animating the migrants' struggle in Europe in 2011 and 2012.

Eventually, another strategy of 'bread race' in the post-revolutionary setting had been the involvement in religiously inspired organizations. More than 1,700 associations were established between January and October 2011. Some of them were part of what Fabio Merone has called the 'Islamic social movement' which

focused on welfare and charity activities in the poorest areas of the country and of its cities, while finally being able to openly preach (Soli; Merone, 2013). Those same poor areas, such as the Western cities or the urban suburbs, have become the basin of recruitment for a massive number of young Tunisians travelling abroad for the armed struggle after 2012. American sources have stated that more than 7,000 Tunisian citizens have joined the army of the Islamic State (between 2013 and 2015), with 3,000 travelling to Syria and Iraq, and 4,000 to Libya (Zarocostas, 2015). Moreover, hundreds of young Tunisian women have reached these countries pursuing the *al jihad al nikah* or the 'marriage jihad', which allows the fighters to temporarily marry for one night and sexually engage with their wives without disrespecting the religious rules (Kilani, 2014: 305). Although the Islamic militancy might seem to have a weaker connection to the 'bread race', it partially indicates the frustration and poverty of many of its subscribers. In fact, most (but not all) of the fighters come from disenfranchised settings and are even willing to pay in order to take part in the armed struggle abroad (Merone, 2013b). Their expectations are not only to make a stand against the enemies but also to achieve recognition and prestige, as well as one's livelihood and the possibility to be temporarily married.

### **3.2. An Alternative Chrono-geography? Mapping the Four Flows of Struggle**

This section is intended to systematize some of the claims made so far. Namely, I have often referred to an intersection of flows of struggle on the Tunisian territory. I will frame who composed these flows and how they crossed the country, partially connected to the revolutionary events, as both a cause and their immediate effects. The flow is a productive term, which helps me to address a different chronology of the revolution. The analysis started with a series of personal accounts around the events, some of which I personally collected (in Italy and Tunisia) on informal occasions.<sup>54</sup> Others I have gained knowledge of thanks

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<sup>54</sup> I travelled to Tunis in March 2013, when I took part in the World Social Forum, and in July 2014. On these occasions, I had the chance to meet and discuss with many participants in the revolution about their experience and expectations. I met men and women of different ages, some of whom were long-time Leftist activists, journalists or contemporary artists. I was also able to meet some

to instances of Tunisian self-representation of the revolution on the part of local artists.<sup>55</sup> All these accounts shared the reference to a range of events connected to the popular upheaval: some regarded previous examples of resistance, like the Gafsa uprising or the clashes in Ben Guardane; others regarded instances of collective action in the immediate aftermath of Ben Ali's departure, like the two occupations of the Kasbah. A third type of events focused on connected experiences of resistance across the borders, pursued by the Tunisian 'undocumented migrants' or enacted by non-Tunisians, like the protests of the refugees of the Choucha camp (in the South of Tunisia, close to the border with Libya). Eventually, after the victory of Ennahda in October 2011, the so-called 'Islamists' also became an important component of the debate around the revolution and its subsequent emancipatory development. I decided to collect and rearrange all these events, so as to give them a different organisation opposed to the mainstream narrative, based on those happenings that many activists, participants, and critical observers found majorly significant. This experiment is in some way an attempt of re-building a minor history of the grand narrative of the so-called 'Jasmine Revolution' and will be carried out through visual diagrams of the flows. The flow is composed of the geography and direction drawn across the borders by the movement or striving of those who compose these very flows. The flow starts off as a list of significant events, which can later be assigned with a direction and a political content. The flow itself holds a highly fluid and provisional nature, so this analysis will be dealing with a snapshot of it. The snapshot gives an account of some highlights of the 2008-2015 period. These flows are constituted by the people who animate them and their object is always these people's struggle.

Initially, I simply followed the unfolding of these events and imagined them as *foci*, which I united in a provisionally unitary way. Their orientation was imagined based on the movement outlined by the network of events. What all these flows share is a constant pressure against the belated forms of power, whether national

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of the refugees coming from Libya, who decided to protest and remain in Tunisia. Moreover, throughout my research period, I also had the chance to meet some of the young and politicised participants to the revolution, during their stay or travel in Europe.

<sup>55</sup> This entire work has been inspired by the artists' claims. For example, they have informed my critique of the narrative of the Arab Spring (Chapter One) as well as my focus on the protagonism of the 'mob' (which I discuss and develop in Chapter Three, Chapter Four and Chapter Five).

or global such as the Tunisian government or the European enforcement bodies that police the borders. Their standpoint is that of a molecular, multi-polar force, incessantly on the move, able to build pragmatic cohesion when is needed or to dive into invisibility and recompose again if the situation requires it.

In order to follow the flows, it became clear right away that the temporal and spatial focus had to go beyond the generic frame of the revolution, set between 17 December 2010 and 14 January 2011 mainly in the cities of Sidi Bouzid (where Mohammed Bouazizi set himself aflame on 17 December) and Tunis (from where Ben Ali escaped on 14 January). In fact, the flows cover a time frame starting with January 2008 and ending in March 2015. In terms of space, the diagrams regard mobility practices involving numerous countries of the Middle East and Europe. The four flows of struggle I came to identify as clearly related to the Tunisian events are animated by four collective provisional groups: the underclass from the poor internal areas, the Tunisian migrants in Europe, the non-Libyan refugees escaping from the civil war in Libya and the Tunisian Islamists, some of whom have devoted to armed struggle inside and beyond the Tunisian borders. The idea of the flows does not imply a univocal relationship between the individuals or groups taking part in the struggles that make the flows and the flows themselves. In other words, one shouldn't exclude the possibility of the same individual taking part in more than one of these flows, first as a revolutionary, then as a struggling migrant in Europe and possibly also joining the Islamic militancy.

This understanding of the Tunisian events in terms of flows – drawing a new chronology and geography of struggles – wouldn't have been possible without the inspiration provided by the counter-mapping attempt put forward by Glenda Garelli, Federica Sossi and Martina Tazzioli in their collection, *Spaces in Migration, Postcards of a Revolution* (see Fig. 9.) (Garelli et al., 2013: 170-1). In the 'attempt to posit a counter-visibility' (Garelli et al., 2013: 168) the authors engage in a 'cartographic game' as opposed to the dominant representation regime. The result is not simply an overturned image of a de-bordered Euro-Africa, but one that tries to pierce 'in-between the folds of the upheaval', depicting the space of the events illustrated by the postcards mentioned in the title of the work. They focus on snapshots of practices that have been commonly disconnected from the revolutionary context, but constitute, indeed, significant invisible layers of it: not

only revolution, but also departures, shipwrecks, crossings, popular solidarity chains, confinements policies, struggles/resistances/escapes, border enforcements, expulsions, insistences on space, occupations/squats, returns and new states (Garelli et al., 2013: 168).

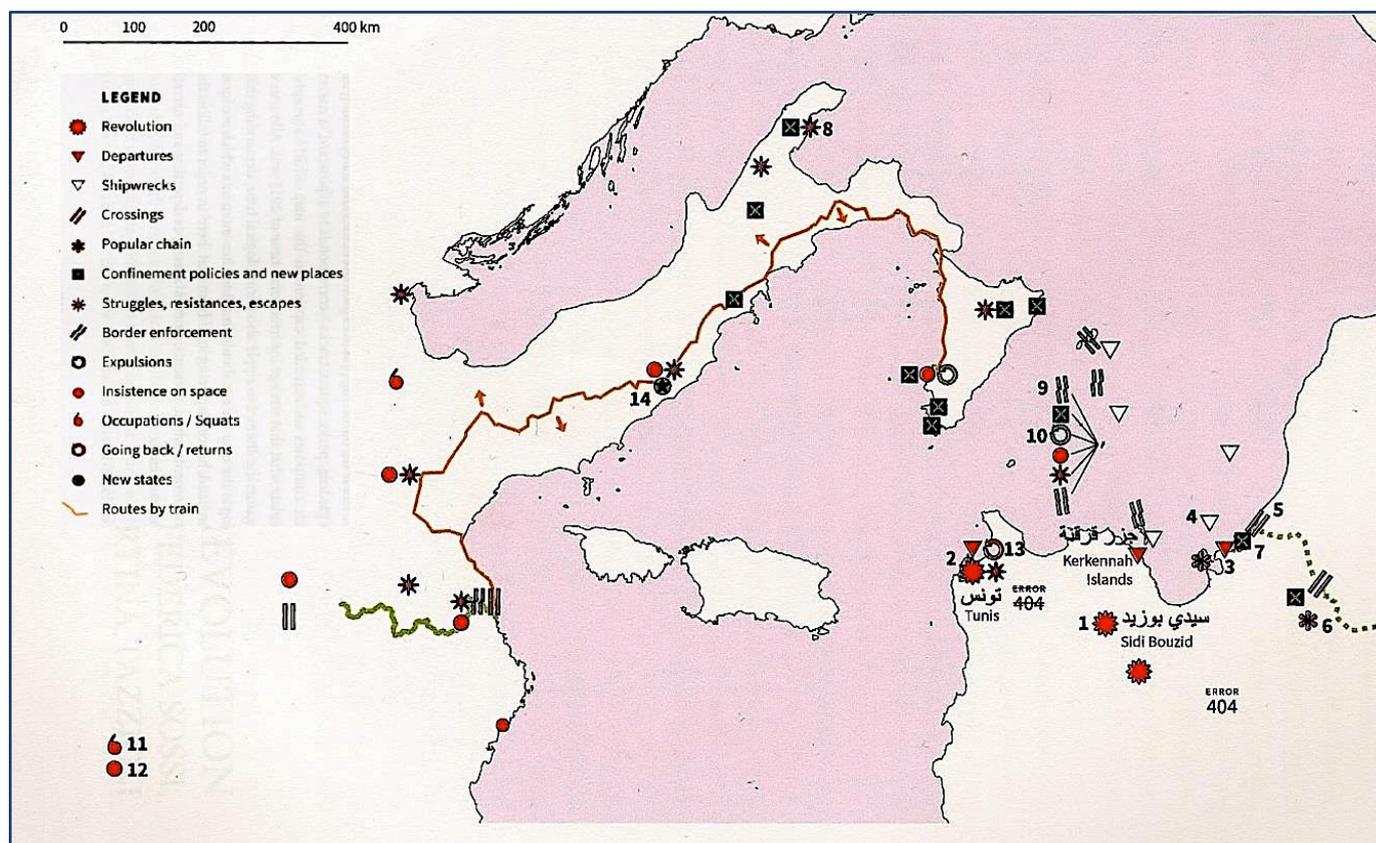


Fig. 9. 'Cartographic Games', a counter-mapping attempt to illustrate the moving spaces around the Tunisian revolution. (Garelli et al., 2013: 170-171)

### The Flow of the Underclass

The first flow is composed of what I provisionally called the 'underclass'. The term is employed in this thesis rather provocatively to draw attention to the fact that the revolution was animated neither by the middle class, as the 'Facebook revolution' paradigm would have it, nor by the working class, in the strictly industrial understanding of the term. On the contrary, the struggle was enacted by that large category of unemployed or underemployed Tunisians (graduates or

not), whom some have called the *Lumpenproletariat* (Rizk, 2014). In other words, by all those concerned with the daily 'bread race'.<sup>56</sup>

At this point it is important to briefly specify how 'underclass' and other connected terms will be employed throughout this work. When referring to class composition in relation to the Tunisian revolution (and the Arab Spring) it is crucial to keep in mind that the most common narratives depicted bloggers/social media activists/artists as the protagonists of the mobilisations. These people are associable to the middle class (El Mahdi, 2011). Therefore, it is in this sense that many observers – like the Egyptian activist Philip Rizk that I've drawn from – have stressed out the role of the impoverished underlining terms like 'underclass' or 'Lumpenproletariat' (Rizk, 2014).

These terms, in fact, describe common socio-economic conditions of urban and sub-urban inhabitants marked by precarious subsistence. In this sense, the use of the term 'underclass' here is in no way related to liberal theorisations of it, such as the ones promoted by scholars like Charles Murray (Murray, 1999). Rather, I use the term because Philip Rizk uses it, alongside Lumpenproletariat, in order to draw attention that the people who have sparked the revolution are not the middle class and that they appear to occupy a social space beneath that of the working class, if by working class one refers to all those who in Tunisia (and Egypt) hold a stable employment (mainly as public servants).

In this sense, and keeping in mind the Tunisian case, I will refer to the underclass with different terms. Each of the terms will emphasize one particular feature of the impoverished urban inhabitants. In the third chapter I will use the redefinition of the term 'mob' (Aradau & Huysmans, 2009) in order to account for the relevance of mobility and of the criminalization that this group is subjected to by the state. In Chapter Four I will write about this same group in terms of 'surplus population' (Clover, 2016) in order to stress its relation with the informalization of labor and state abuse. I will argue that these two aspects – precarious informal labor and state violence – are what leads this category to become the vanguard of the mobilisations in 2010 and after.

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<sup>56</sup> Further inherent contradictions of the term 'underclass' will be explored in section 3.3.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I will describe this group in terms of the 'liminal' (Scott & Wynter, 2000), since this term allows me to reflect on the specific knowledge that is produced from within the marginal space.

The events of rupture that compose this first diagram show that the underclass is sometimes supported by activists with political experience, such as the representatives of the UGTT trade union, or the graduated unemployed trade union, as well as by the high school and university students, the more guaranteed workers, such as teachers, lawyers; and by their own kin. Consequently, there is a trans-generational participation to the mobilizations, which involves both men and women.

The most violent precedent of the revolution - which the underclass was a protagonist of in the recent Tunisian history - was registered in the Gafsa mining basin between January and June 2008. In the past 100 years, the region had hosted the industry of phosphate exploitation, which turned most of its nomadic Bedouin population sedentary. Of the initial 15,000 miners, only 5,000 still held jobs with the Gafsa Phosphate Company (GPC) in 2008, after the progressive de-industrialization. A massive rebellion was triggered by the announcement, on 5 January 2008, of the results of the hiring contest for 380 workers, technicians and managerial staff (Gobe, 2010). Thousands had applied for those positions and the impression was that the results followed nepotistic criteria. The protest spread to the neighbouring cities of Redeyef, Moulares, M'dilla and Metlaoui, employing tactics such as hunger strikes, demonstrations, sit-ins, and riots. Long-lasting sit-ins and tents were set up in the strategic sites, in order to slow down the economic and commercial activity of the phosphate extraction company. Camps were set up in front of the iron ore washing plants or along railway tracks (Gobe, 2010: 2). The protest tent of the 'Eleven Widows' became the symbol of the movement, organized by the widows of workers who died in work accidents in the GPC, demanding that their children be hired as due reparation for the loss of their husbands.

The repressive answer was massive. 6,000 policemen were set to siege and occupy the afore-mentioned cities, and frequent raids were operated in the homes of the rebel unemployed. Hundreds of protesters were arrested and many subjected to torture (Missaoui; Khalfaoui, 2011: 127-8). The local trade union

delegate, Adnan Hajiji, was sentenced to 10 years in prison. Four people were killed during the clashes with the police. Despite the solidarity from the neighbouring cities, the régime managed to obstacle the propagation of these protests. The ‘mining basin rebellion’ or the ‘Intifada of Gafsa’ was pursued both against *and* alongside the UGTT trade union. On the one side, some representatives of the ‘trade union aristocracy attached to the *status quo*’ (Gobe, 2010: 8) directly managed the outsourced staff of the GPC and were consequently ousted by the population; on the other side, other representatives disobeyed the directives of their leaders and fully engaged in the struggle. This is an interesting example of how activists have collaborated with the less experienced unemployed rioters, creating a synergy of strategies of contestation. In fact, for most of the time, the motor of contestation was the people with no previous political experience. As such, Gafsa is commonly considered the ‘general rehearsal’ of the Tunisian revolution.

In August 2010, another rebellion occurred at the border with Libya, in Ben Guardane, after the Libyan authorities blocked the passage of Tunisian citizens in the process of introducing imported goods. Many of the inhabitants of the city got by thanks to the small trade with Libya so the border block was met with broad clashes.

Later that year, on 17 December, local municipal agent Fadia Hamdi dispossessed Mohammed Bouazizi of that which allowed him to maintain his family. He was, like many, a street fruit vendor without a license and, that day, his merchandise and cart got confiscated for the nth time. He tried to negotiate in vain – allegedly the policewoman even slapped him in public (Tlili, 2013).<sup>57</sup> Eventually, Bouazizi chose to set himself on fire in front of the local governor's headquarters, after asking in vain for his belongings. He was taken to the hospital, where he would die in January, but his gesture ignited a series of protests across the region. Brigades of public order were called in from Kasserine, Kairouan, and Sfax to sedate the unrests, but, this time, the mobilization spread. The protestors of

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<sup>57</sup> This aspect of that day has been heavily debated, with agent Hamdi even being temporarily imprisoned, as the authorities identified her as responsible for having triggered the protests. Yet regardless of the slap – and of the highly significant debates that one might develop around it – I think the attention should remain on the way the Tunisian state suffocated the ‘bread race’ of the disenfranchised, therefore driving large segments of the population to the desperation that the revolution was born from.

Menzel Bouzaiane, Meknassy, Regueb, Gafsa and Regueb marched in solidarity with Sidi Bouzid and clashed with the police, often attacking the centres of the local governors or the police stations. On the other side, the state forces shot at the protestors, raided their houses at night and made arrests. The following months, two other people killed themselves in Sidi Bouzid as a sign of protest against hopeless unemployment.

On 24 December, the police of Menzel Bouzaiane killed two people, the first 'martyrs' of the revolution. By the end of December, the unrest reached the coastal cities of Gabès and Sousse as well as the capital. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of December 2010, the lawyers' movement organized a 1000 people march and sit-in in front of the Interior Ministry in solidarity with Sidi Bouzid. In less than two weeks the cry of peripheral Tunisia had reached the capital, becoming the catalyst of a long-suppressed discontent. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of December 2010, Ben Ali held a televised speech promising to take into account the requests of the protesters but promising to repress whoever will continue the protests.

After the speech, the most aggressive repression occurred in the city of Kasserine where 60 people were killed in three days, between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> of January 2010 (Cantaloube, 2011). The city dived into massive riots. Several buildings of local authorities were burnt down, alongside three bank centres, the police station and the centres of the government's party, the RCD (*Rassemblement Constitutionnelle Démocratique* – the Constitutional Democratic Party). The police shot from the roofs and employed buckshot bullets. Children and burial marches were also shot at. The slogans chanted *Bread and water, but Ben Ali no! Bread and oil, Ben Ali against the wall!* (Missaoui; Khalfaoui, 2011: 114). This is a very significant episode because it marked the moment when all protests allied against Ben Ali and his authoritarian rule. After the events in Kasserine even the *Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens* (UGTT) trade union, the strongest and most represented union state workers, decided to support the protesters. More riots enflamed the cities of Thala and Regueb, but also touched upon Tunis' suburbs, while police surrounded the El Manar University of the capital because of the students' support to the rioters. The régime announced the liberation of all the arrestees and on the 13<sup>th</sup> of January Ben Ali held his last speech, proclaiming the freedom of press, the lowering of the prices of some food products. He publicly

asked the police not to shoot the protesters and assured he will no longer be a candidate in the future elections. Only from the 14<sup>th</sup> of January 2011, when the Internet censorship - colloquially labelled as 'Erreur 404' - fell, did the media activism, which was highly repressed before, start playing a fundamental role in spreading the insurrection. Nevertheless, it is crucial to point out that 'the central role of the web has been to create proximity between the spaces inside Tunisia and the spaces outside it and to create real – not virtual – spaces for practices of resistance' (Garelli et al., 2013: 180).

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of January, a general strike was declared by the UGTT trade union and thousands rallied in front of its headquarters joining others in front of the Interior Ministry on Avenue Bourghiba, in the centre of the capital. The police charged and shot tear gas, while a curfew and an emergency state were announced. Nevertheless, Ben Ali eventually left the country that night, fleeing to Saudi Arabia (Missaoui; Khalfaoui, 2011: 151-182). The 15<sup>th</sup> of January was a night of heavy looting and destruction in Tunis, some believe by the hand of Ben Ali's militias - the so-called *baltaghias* - interested to seed chaos and legitimate the return of the president. The protesters' self-organized committees of defence of the neighbourhoods in collaboration with the *Garde Nationale* and the army, who, at this point, had started to publicly support the rioters.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of December a provisional government under Ben Ali's prime minister, Mohammed Ghannouchi, was announced. Many were outraged by the continuity with Ben Ali's régime and took the streets to ask for Ghannouchi's resignation. Right after Ben Ali's last speech, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of January, a 'Liberation Caravan' was initiated in Menzel Bouzaiane, the city of the first 'martyrs,' situated in the Centre-South of the country. The Liberation Caravan was determined to march towards the capital for its demands of social justice and ask the resignation of Ghannouchi.<sup>58</sup> Around 4000 people joined the caravan, which crossed the cities of Meknassy, Regueb and Saida (Missaoui; Khalfaoui, 2011: 88). The crowd left their means of transportation at the outskirts of the capital and reached the square

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<sup>58</sup> This remarkable form of protest – by which groups from the periphery would march towards the central power's headquarter in Tunis - has an historical lineage in the ancient marches that the people from the South pursued in the 19<sup>th</sup> century - when the Tunisian territory was under Ottoman rule - to take their demands to the Bey, the prefect of the Ottomans (Massarelli, 2012: 59).

of the Kasbah,<sup>59</sup> the ancient residence of the Bey, now inhabited by the prime minister and considered the governmental centre of the capital. This crucial occupation of the central administrative headquarters in Tunis is historically referred to as the 'First Kasbah' and took place between the 23<sup>rd</sup> and the 28<sup>th</sup> of January 2011. People reached it from Sidi Bouzid, Kef, Siliana, and Kasserine. They set up a Bedouin tent and, despite the curfew, slept in the square putting pressure on Mohammed Ghannouchi to resign and leave the power to a new political class, not connected with the previous regime.

A conflict soon emerged between the temporary inhabitants of the Kasbah and the well-off neighbourhoods of the capital. The revolutionaries' presence at the heart of the administrative centre was a reminder of the historical inequalities that the Western and internal areas had always been subjected to. But for many of Tunis' inhabitants, the block imposed by the occupiers' presence was perceived as a danger for the urban routine and, most importantly, for their property. They gathered at the Qobba sports complex, the same space that Ben Ali would employ for his party's gatherings, in the rich neighbourhood of Menzah to show their support to the Ghannouchi government.

While the *Kasbah* protests were held in the name of the people united behind the slogan: "We took down the dictator, now let's take down the dictatorship," at *Qobba*, slogans were in the name of the "silent majority" and called for a return to work. Work and property were considered symbols, creating a mirror image of the young political revolutionaries that were unemployed and cared very little about property, portraying them as lazy and dirty. (Dahkli, 2013)

The first occupation of the Kasbah was forcefully cleared after six days. It was followed by a second occupation of the Kasbah square, between the 22<sup>nd</sup> and the 25<sup>th</sup> of February 2011, which included the participation of many trade union and

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<sup>59</sup> In the North African cities, the *Kasbah* represents the administrative centre, which hosts the government, and is opposed to the *medina*, which hosts the central mosque and the market (*suq*).

Leftist activists, who re-emerged in the public sphere after the interruption of state repression.<sup>60</sup> The second Kasbah's demands were the resignation of the old guard of Benalists politicians alongside the formation of a constituent assembly. The police killed two people during the violent eviction of the second Kasbah. But in the end, the Kasbahs achieved their goal. On the 27<sup>th</sup> of February Ghannouchi resigned and was substituted by the old Bourghibist ministry, Béji Caid Essebesi, known for his opposition to Ben Ali, yet part of the old establishment. Some have criticized this return to gerontocracy (see Fig. 10), but for most Tunisians, this was lived as a victory.

The Kasbahs represent the most important moment of the Tunisian revolution, although they are set beyond the commonly revolutionary time frame, after the fall of the régime. While the previous moments were marked by an audacious constellation of contagious riots, what happened after Ben Ali's departure is just as impressive. Thousands of revolutionary disenfranchised Tunisians took the centre of the capital, imposing their troublesome presence to a political establishment that had always ignored them, therefore making themselves visible to their governors but also to their fellow citizens. The Kasbah was the place of class alliances, where the poverty of the rest of the country became visible to the inhabitants of the capital. Those moments fostered significant practices of solidarity and literally inaugurated Tunisia's new public space, leaving behind the terror imposed by censorship and repression.

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<sup>60</sup> It is very important to understand that the repressive regime of Ben Ali had suffocated any attempt of politicization of its citizens. As a consequence the revolution was initiated by an apolitical category, later joined by traditionally politicized categories such as Leftist and Islamist activists.



*Fig. 10. Tunis, 2011: 'I can't dream with my grandfather' - stencil by Ahl al-Kahf, made in 2011, critiquing the 'old guard' of Béji Caid Essebsi.*

*Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile (March 2011).*

From the accounts of its participants, the Kasbahs are the experimental space of a revolutionary sociality, one where classes and languages crossed in one safe, common space. A participant in one of the occupations of the Kasbah compared the gathering to the reincarnation of the Greek *agora*:

I spent one entire week debating and protesting! There were tents and knots of people discussing everywhere. I even saw some Salafists debating with some feminists. If you walked around the second Kasbah you could choose the topic you were more interested in and easily make an intervention in the debate. It was like the Greek *agora*, only that we had to defend it from the police and the attempted evictions. (Massarelli, 2012:62, my translation)



*Fig. 11. Images of the occupied Kasbah, displaying the photos of the martyrs.*

*Source: srs-siliana.blogspot.co.uk (January 2011)*



*Fig. 12. The occupiers defy the curfew by sleeping in the Kasbah, on the covers provided by their supporters in the capital.*

*Source: [www.lapenseedemidi.org](http://www.lapenseedemidi.org) (January, 2011)*



*Fig. 13. The Kasbah in July 2014. Enclosed and protected by barbed wire.*

*Source: Personal archive (July 2014).*

After the moment of the two Kasbahs, the front of struggle was subjected to a sort of decomposition, which put an end to the cathartic alliance of most of the

Tunisian society behind the revolutionary motifs. The social demands kept being the main focus of the underclass. After their electoral victory, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October 2011, the liberal Islamists of Ennahda became the new interlocutor of the people who had initiated the revolution. Occasional riots and self-immolations still continued to touch upon the poor regions. After the massive migration of many young Tunisians towards Europe a new significant struggle was animated by the mothers of the young Tunisians dispersed in the Mediterranean Sea, who sought truth and justice for their sons (Garelli et al., 2013: 154).

Despite the alleged achievement of freedom of speech, between 2011 and 2014 the dissent put forward by politicized activists like video-makers, bloggers, and independent journalists has often been met with state repression and detention. Sometimes the state employed the excuse of the fight against the use of cannabis, according to the infamous 'Law 52,' which was invoked in the case of the arrest and detention of several activists (Bayouh, 2014). Massive international campaigns helped release some of the arrestees (El Hamni, 2011).

An important last date of the 'Tunisian permanent upheaval' (Alba Rico, 2012) and of the struggle of the unified Tunisian underclass at home, as I will be depicting it in the diagram of the flows, happened on the 28<sup>th</sup> of November 2012. On that date, a massive march was organized in Siliana, a city South of Tunis, demanding new policies of investment able to create jobs and the resignation of the local governor. The march was supported by the trade union and the Leftist party of the Popular Front and was also meant to put pressure on the Islamist government, both local and national, which had refused any negotiation with the trade unions. The protestors were shot at with Italian buckshot bullets, which explode a series of metallic spheres, and are usually employed for the wild bores hunt. 250 people were injured and 20 protestors lost their sight after being hit by the buckshot bullets. Because the city was put under siege by the police and as a protest against the governor's rule, the people decided to symbolically abandon it, marching for 5 km in the direction of Tunis. The city's governor eventually resigned and the blinded protestors of Siliana became the new symbol of the struggle of the underclass (Fig. 14).



*Fig. 14. Tunis, Headquarters of the UGTT trade union, stencil of the Bios movement, demanding: 'Have you seen us?' referring to the blinded protestors of Siliana.*

*Source: Bios Movement (November, 2012).*

In conclusion, the flow of the struggles of the underclass – as selected in the diagram of the flows - started in 2008 in Gafsa and unfolded as a contagious riot against state oppression and for social justice across many of the internal as well as Southern cities, before spreading on the coast and eventually reaching the capital. The culminating point of this flow was the double occupation of the central Kasbah in January and February 2011, which succeeded in pressuring Ben Ali's prime minister, Mohammed Ghannouchi, to resign. The mobilization of Siliana was the last significant collective episode related to this flow.

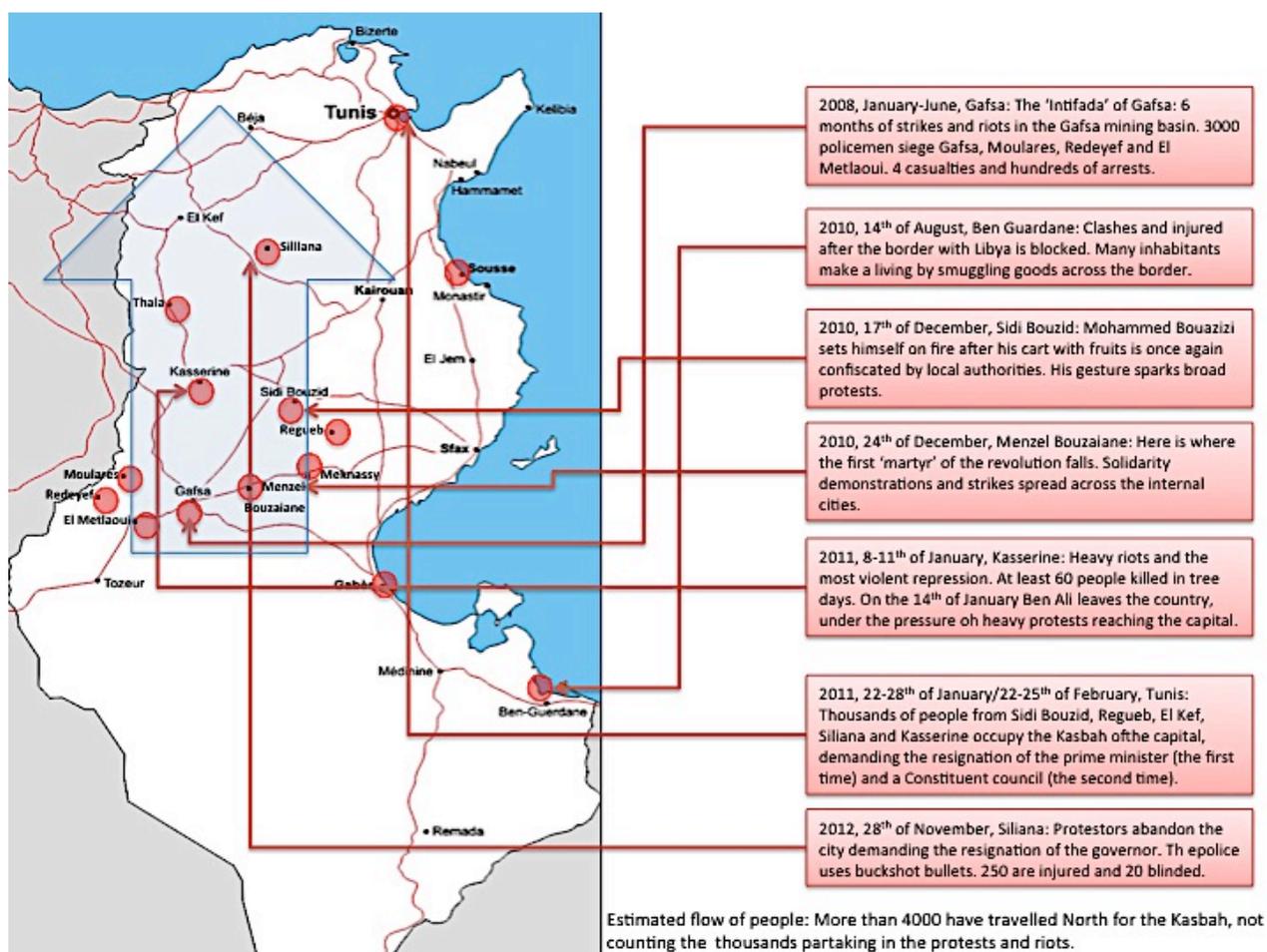


Fig. 15. Diagram of the Flow of Struggles of the Underclass.

### The Flow of the *Harraga*<sup>61</sup>

The flow of struggle of the *harraga* is a consequential articulation of the Tunisian underclass. As mentioned above, when the border control was loosened many unemployed revolutionaries identified migration as a finally viable solution to the 'bread race'. Significant sums were paid to the smugglers or *panseurs*, and while defying the visa and anti-immigration policies of 'fortress Europe', thousands set sail for Italy. The island of Lampedusa, South of Sicily, not far from the Tunisian coast became the symbol of this flow. The first 100 Tunisians reached Lampedusa only one night after the departure of Ben Ali, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of January

<sup>61</sup> As explained previously, 'literally *harraga* means 'to burn' and *harraga* in the Maghreb indicated 'those who burn', meaning both young people who 'burn' frontiers as they migrate across the Mediterranean sea and those who are ready to burn their documents (but also their past and eventually their lives) in order to reach Europe' (Garelli et al., 2013: 14).

2011. This flow of struggles witnessed the transformation of the much-praised reckless Tunisian revolutionary into the troublesome illegal migrant scornfully entering the West. The boats departed from the coast, from Zarzis, Djerba, Sfax, Mahdia, Monastir, Sousse and Tunis (Garelli et al., 2013). In February the channel of Sicily started being patrolled by the Italian authorities joined by Frontex, while the ones who survive the crossing were often detained in the numerous detention centres in Italy. Soon, these centres were enflamed by massive riots and rebellions, as well as collective escapes. Many Tunisian migrants wanted to reach their friends and family in France. But France employed *ad hoc* measures to impede their access, invoking that they had to prove to be economically self-sustained in order to cross the border from Italy. In the first months of 2011, this measure unilaterally and temporarily suspended the Schengen Treaty, which regulated the freedom of movement between Italy and France. In less than a month (March 2011) 1800 Tunisians were 'pushed back' by the French authorities. The flow of the *harraga* is symbolized by three instances related to the crossing: the massive shipwrecks (the *Fortress Europe* monitoring website estimated around 1822 deaths in shipwrecks only in 2011); the fight for freedom in detention; and the fight for dignity and the right to stay once they reached the European cities as 'undocumented migrants'. Between January and April 2011, the Italian Interior Ministry registered 21,519 arrivals from Tunisia by boat. Since the Italian territory became a crucial passing country towards France for thousands of Tunisians, the government was faced with the dilemma of whether to stop or ignore the flow of migrants. Eventually, the Italian authorities granted a temporary travel permit to the ones who reached Europe until the 5<sup>th</sup> of April. At the same time, Italy signed a repatriation agreement with the provisional Tunisian government for the migrants who had or would reach the peninsula after the 5<sup>th</sup> of April. The prospect of deportation ignited an infinite series of riots in the Italian detention centres, accompanied by hunger strikes, self-harm, fires and collective escapes. The protests culminated with the Sicilian Lampedusa detention centre being set aflame on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September 2011, which also involved violent clashes with the police and some local inhabitants (Garelli et al., 2013: 199).



*Fig. 12. Lampedusa, September 2011: the detention centre is set on fire by Tunisian migrants. Source: Sky TG24 (20 September, 2011).*



*Fig. 16. Lampedusa, 2011: The protests of the migrants degenerated into riots and clashes with locals. Source: ViaggiNews.com (21 September 2011).*

Meanwhile, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May 2011, a group of Tunisians organized under the name of 'Collective of the Tunisians of Lampedusa in Paris' had already reached Paris and carried out an occupation of a building, in 51 Simon Bolivar Avenue. Their demands were clearly stated on the banner exposed on the building: *Neither police, nor charity, but a place to organize* (see Fig. 17., Archives du Jura Libertaires, 2011). They had chosen to come out of the invisibility that illegal migrants are forced into, claiming 'we made the *democratic revolution*', 'we are here to help you do the same' (Archives du Jura Libertaires, 2011).

In the meantime, Italy employed extra-territorial detention measures against the rioting Tunisians (Garelli et al., 2013: 195-199). More precisely, it detained the migrants directly on ships, with 4 of them 'charged' with over 700 migrants, which eventually completed their deportation. By October 2011, 3385 Tunisians had been deported.



*Fig. 17. The short occupation of the Collective of Tunisians from Lampedusa in Paris: 'Neither police, nor charity, but a place to organize in!' Source: [juralibertaire.over.blog.com](http://juralibertaire.over.blog.com) (1 May 2011).*

The flow of the *harraga* exemplifies the circulation of the resistance strategies of the Tunisian underclass, such as riot, hunger strikes, sit-ins, occupations, and self-harm, already practiced during the revolution. However, the addressee of the protesters now is a different one. This time, the rioters were no longer contesting the local repressive state but the European anti-immigration policies enforced by detention and repression. In this context migration worked as a massive relief valve, allowing the mobility of precisely those young unemployed who inhabited the poor areas and who had ignited the revolution in the first place.

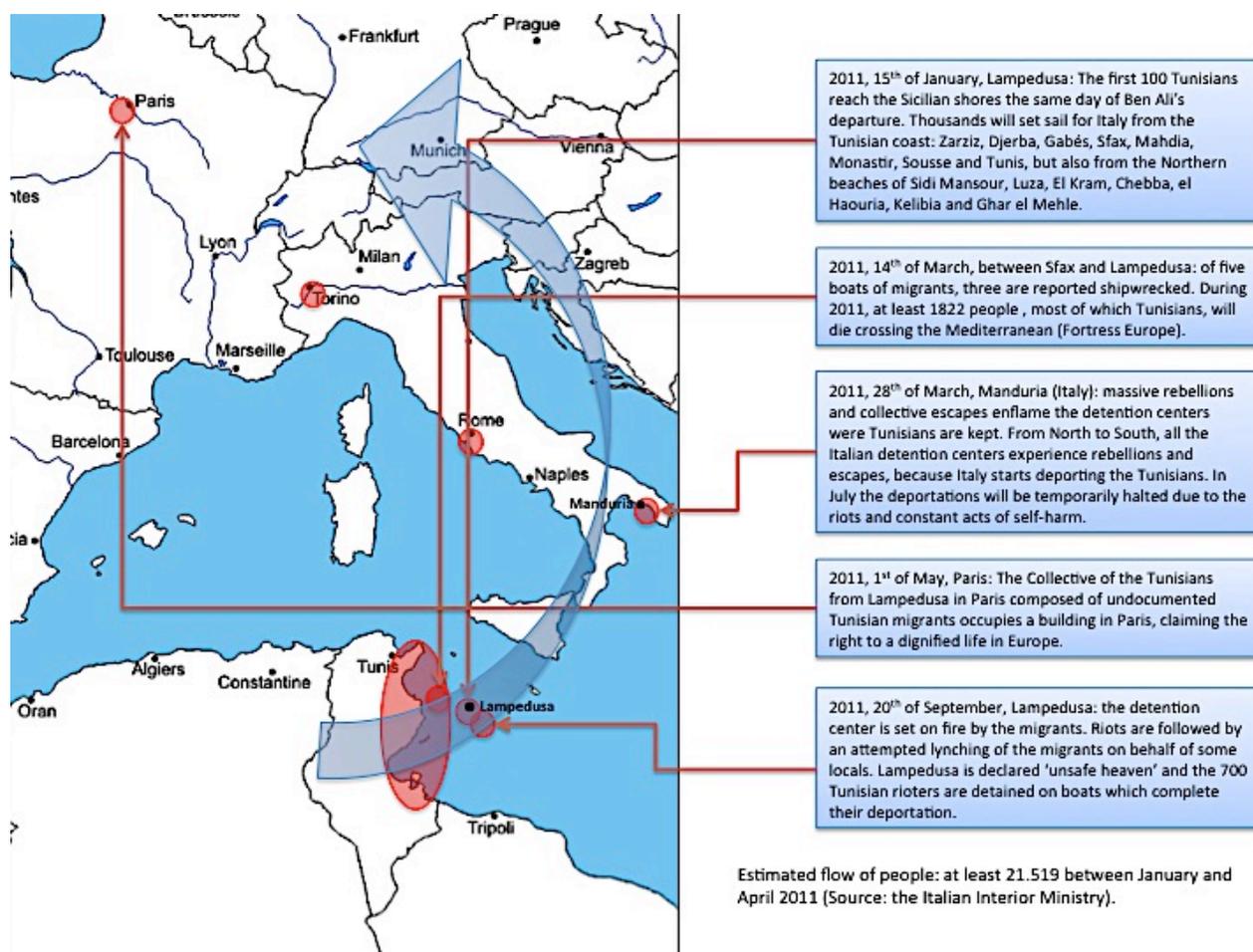


Fig. 18. Diagram of the Flow of Struggles of the 'Harraga'.

## The Flow of Refugees

The flow of struggles of the refugees on the Tunisian territory might seem disconnected from the revolution, yet it constitutes a fundamental challenge for the post-revolutionary Tunisian society, which many activists – both secular and religious – will find significant. Partially, this flow of events will follow the path of the struggles of the *harraga*, while a very resilient part of it will enact extreme strategies of ‘insistence in space’, at the risk of their very lives (Tazzioli, 2014). In other words, many refugees moved along the same paths of the *harraga* – both in terms of routes to reach Europe (through Lampedusa) and in terms of locations of struggles for the right to stay (Paris, for example). There were, nonetheless, a few extraordinary exceptions.

This flow was started after the so-called ‘Libyan crisis’ occurred between the 20<sup>th</sup> of February and the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November 2011, triggered by the bloody civil war before and after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi. The neighbouring country of Libya was, thus, devastated by three deadly forces: the anti-Gaddafi rebel groups, who targeted sub-Saharan Africans for their alleged support to Gaddafi; and eventually by the bombing on behalf of both the government and the allied Western countries. In the period between the 20<sup>th</sup> of February and the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November 2011, more than 200,000 African (including the Libyans) and Asian refugees crossed the border towards Tunisia through Ras Ajdir and Dehiba (Source: International Organization of Migration). On that occasion, the Tunisian population of the South of the country, some of which had just returned from the experience of the Kasbah, enacted one of the most remarkable examples of collective solidarity and organisation, the so-called *gifle tunisienne*, literally the ‘Tunisian slap in the face’, an implicit reference to the government and the humanitarian organizations (Garelli et al., 2013: 193-4). 160,000 refugees were hosted by the Tunisian families of two cities of the South: Tatouine and Djerba. The *gifle tunisienne* was a significant moment of mass self-organisation and solidarity but it also marked the limits of the Tunisian revolution. In fact, the Tunisians mainly focused on welcoming of the Libyan citizens, who they perceived as wealthy and ‘non-African’, which meant that they left the destiny of the refugees of colour in the hands of the

humanitarian organizations. Revealing a racial bias inherent, at least, in the local community, Tunisians ignored the 'Africans', as Tunisians call them, i.e., Libyan residents mainly coming from sub-Saharan countries, who had migrated and resided in Libya for work, where they escaped from due to the anti-Gaddafi persecutions alongside the governmental and Western bombings. These people were now instead sheltered in refugee camps run by humanitarian agencies (Garelli et al., 2013: 194). On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February 2011, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) opened the Choucha camp in the middle of the desert, 7 km away from the border with Libya, close to Ras Ajdir. The next month, the camp reached 22,000 inhabitants (see Fig. 19.).



*Fig. 19. Aerial view over the Choucha camp, 2011.*

*Source: Major Soussi, commons.wikimedia.org (18 March 2011)*

Like Lampedusa for the *harraga*, Choucha was the symbol of the struggles of the refugees escaping from Libya. Many of them hoped to receive asylum in Europe since they were unable to return either in Libya, where they had emigrated for work, or in their countries of origin. Some were willing to be repatriated; others were lucky enough to be relocated to Europe with an asylum status. But there remained a large group of people, mainly with sub-Saharan African citizenships,

not recognized as liable for asylum and thus rejected and eventually abandoned by the UNHCR. In fact, the agency declared the camp closed in the summer of 2013. Unable to integrate into an already economically challenged society such as the Tunisian one, and to have access to the - even informal - labour market as people of colour, many 'rejected refugees' decided to cross the Mediterranean. 'Between the spring and summer of 2012, migrants coming from Libya substitute[d] those from Tunisia at Lampedusa' (Garelli et al., 2013: 183). On the other hand, a part of the remaining 'rejected' refugees decided to stay in Tunisia fighting for their recognition as refugees by a European country, since Tunisia doesn't have an asylum law. Most importantly, despite the injunction to leave and the unliveable conditions at Choucha - set in the desert, with no water or electricity after its 'closure' - many decided to stay in the camp and pursue their struggle also in this way, exposing the deadly effect of the asylum laws on their lives and refusing to silently vanish in the nth shipwreck in the Mediterranean.



*Fig. 20. March of the Choucha camp refugees*

*Source: Radical Philosophy (March/April 2014)*



*Fig. 21. Sit-in of the Choucha camp refugees*

*Source: [voiceofchoucha.wordpress.com](http://voiceofchoucha.wordpress.com) (April 2015)*

The flow of struggle of the 'Libyan' refugees is the most indicative of the complexity of resistance mechanisms and power apparatuses in the contemporary global world. In fact, the refugees found themselves having to struggle in an inhospitable, often racist, territory - the Tunisian one - allied to other African and Asian citizens in their attempt to challenge the conservative notion of asylum based on the country of origin, enforced by the highest Western institutions, such as the UNHCR. In doing so, they've employed extreme strategies of an almost progressive suicide by means of 'insistence on the space' (Tazzioli, 2014).<sup>62</sup> In the Tunisian context and for its connections with the West and the rest of the African continent, the struggle of Choucha represents one of the most extraordinary examples of political contestation.

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<sup>62</sup> I refer here to the fact that many rejected refugees chose to remain on the location of the refugee camp that the UNHCR 'closed down,' even after access to water and electricity was cut. Since Choucha is placed in a desert area, the choice of remaining in the camp was a possibly suicidal choice, which the refugees were consciously taking on in order to enforce their demand to be relocated.

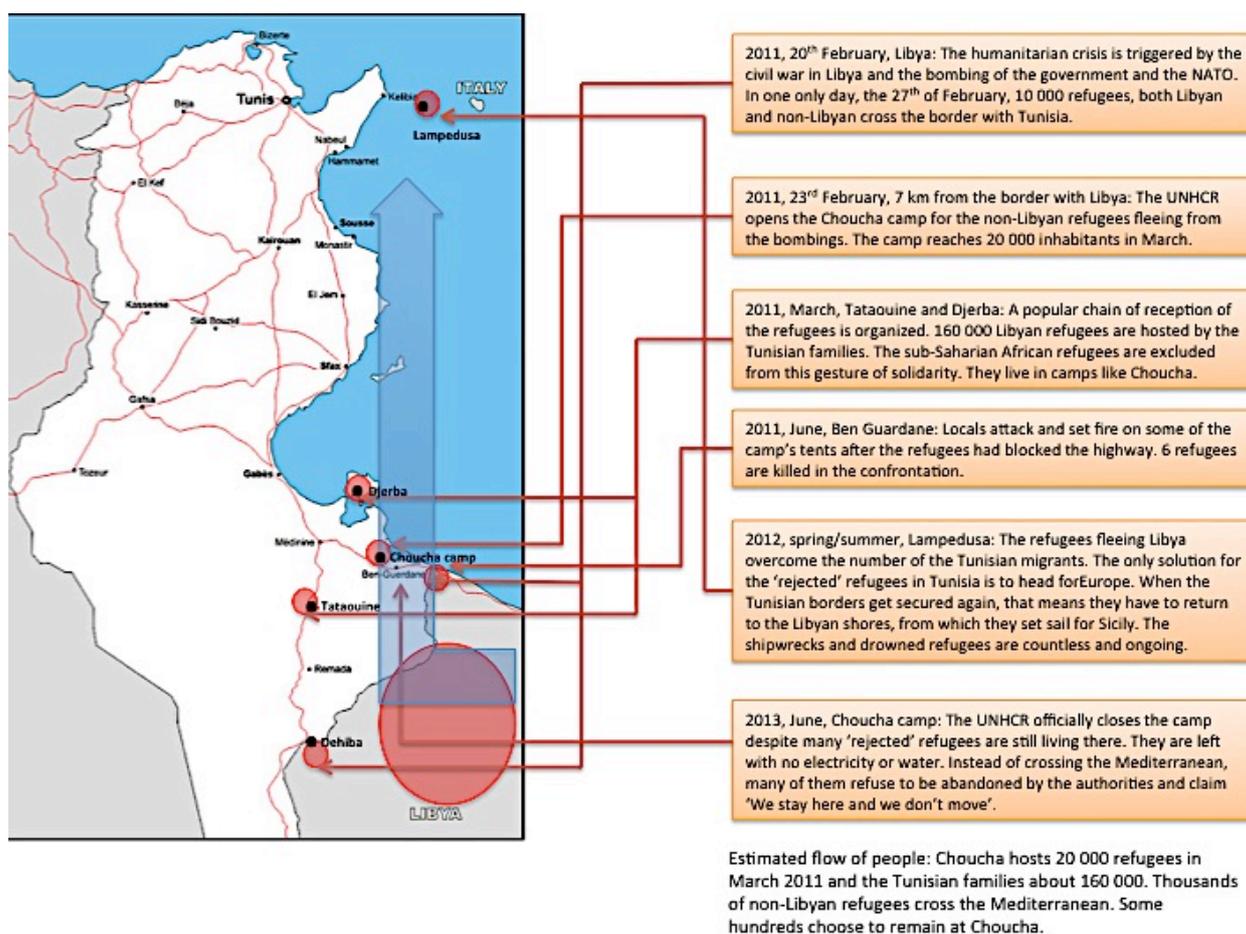


Fig. 22. Diagram of the Flow of Struggles of the Refugees.

## The Flow of Islamic Militants

It appears paradoxical to include the flow of the Islamic militants, so very connected to the notion of 'terrorism',<sup>63</sup> among the other flows of struggle. As Alba Rico explains in the aftermath of the 2015 Sousse attack, 'the post-revolutionary Jihadism cannot be defined as a radicalization of Islam, but on the contrary, as an

<sup>63</sup>Grégoire Chamayou summarizes the American Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms definition of 'terrorism' as 'all illegal and calculated use or threat of violence aimed at producing a feeling of terror for political ends' and critiques this vague conception as being 'not defined by certain operational modes, but by an intention whose objective is to produce a subjective effect, an emotion – fear' (Chamayou, 2015). As revealed by the diagram in Fig. 23, this flow is made of different events involving Muslim activists, both in terms of charity, protests, as well as armed struggle. My claim, drawing from Fabio Merone's reflection (Merone, 2015), is that the 'Islamic bloc' has undergone a significant radicalization due to its progressive political exclusion and massive state-repression after 2013.

Islamisation of radicality. The youth of this region (not to mention the European youth!) is radical, and if it won't be allowed to be radically democratic, then it will be radically un-democratic' (Alba Rico, 2015). In this sense, the problems arising, or rather obscured by, the nexus revolution- terrorism is crucial to discuss but is not the point of this specific section, yet it will be addressed in different ways in Chapter Four (in the section on *The Asabyiat of the Houma*).

The numbers of Tunisians involved in this phenomenon is the reason for this reflection on the Islamic militants. American sources estimate that around 7000 young Tunisians have joined the army of the Islamic State, fighting in Libya, Syria, and Iraq (Zarocostas, 2015). What drives these Tunisian citizens towards armed struggle and martyrdom? And what does that got to do with the Tunisian revolution? First of all, it was the Tunisian revolution that re-opened the public space for two categories, which had been heavily persecuted by the Ben Ali régime: the Leftist and Islamist activists. As a consequence of the fall of the regime, an 'Islamic bloc' had emerged in the post-revolutionary civil society, with a specific class stratification (Soli; Merone, 2013). The middle class rallied to the Islamic moderate camp, represented by the Ennahda party and the scriptural Salafis, interested in studying the *sharia* law rather than doing politics; the lower social classes emerged on the public scene thanks to organizations such as Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia (AST), literally 'the partisans of the *sharia*', the Islam-inspired law system, born in April 2011. As Fabio Merone explains, 'the particular function of Ansar al-Sharia was to act as a social movement, looking at how to form a consensus between the disenfranchised masses [...] focused on preaching and charity. [...] This group was interested in forming an alternative to the disastrous social conditions of large swathes of the Tunisian population' (Merone, 2015).<sup>64</sup>

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of September 2012, a protest in front of the American Embassy in Tunis against the desecrating movie *The Innocence of the Muslims* led to the killing of two protesters, with other two left to die in prison after a prolonged hunger strike. In the meanwhile, a series of deadly attacks at the border with Algeria, in the region of the mountain Chaambi started regularly targeting Tunisian military

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<sup>64</sup> It is important to specify that the Islam inspired participation was largely influenced by the financial aid and impulse coming from the Gulf monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia, pushing for a Wahhabist hegemonisation, based on a radical interpretation of Islam (Haddad et al., 2012).

forces. Although not proven, the assassinations of the Communist leaders Chokri Belaid and Mohammed Brahmi in 2013 were also associated with Islamist groups. At this point, the government initiated a massive repressive campaign, very much in continuity with the pre-revolutionary techniques, yet this time pursued in the name of the 'war on terrorism'. Over 6500 people considered connected to political Islam were detained; more than the ones imprisoned during the Ben Ali period (see Fig. 23.).

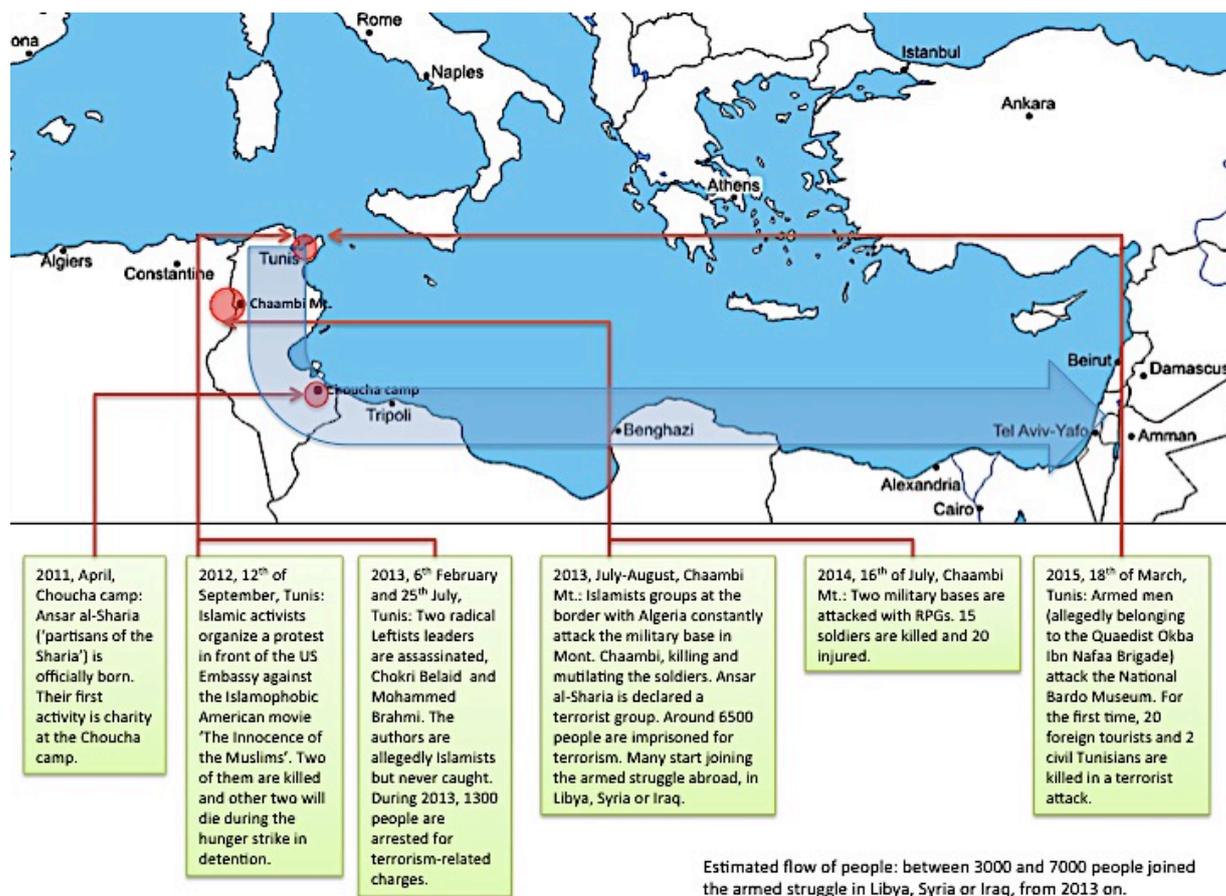
With the Ansar al-Sharia group blacklisted as a terrorist organisation in 2013, no political solution had been provided for the 'institutionalization of a significant part of Tunisia's Salafist movement' (Merone, 2015), which fuelled the departures towards *jihadi* fronts abroad or the radicalization of attacks inside the borders, as the shooting at the National Bardo Museum in 2015 proved. On that occasion, the *Okba Ibn Nafaa* Brigade (a splinter group of al-Qaueda in the Islamic Maghreb) killed 20 foreign tourists and two Tunisians. As Merone explains, after the repressive campaign started in 2013:

A large Salafist radical constituency remained in existence. One part of it went to Syria-Iraq and Libya; another stayed inactive, fearing repression, and rejecting the reaction for political and practical reasons. Yet another faction tried to join those who wanted to mount some reaction against the government (like Okba Ibn Nafaa). Okba Ibn Nafaa has indeed been evolving in this context of radicalization, which encourages a confrontation between Salafists and the State. (Merone, 2015)



*Fig. 23. Riot policemen protect the justice ministry building, as Tunisians gathered in front of the justice ministry in Tunis on the 6<sup>th</sup> of November 2012, as part of a demonstration by Salafi Muslims protesting against the imprisonment of hundreds of Salafi activists. Source: Amine Landoulsi/AP (6 November 2012)*

The important aspect of the Islamic militancy flow is that it stems out of the same disenfranchised youth that the revolutionaries and the *harraga* also originated from. It is yet again a cry of frustration and it can be argued that its radicalization has been partially conditioned by the largely repressive answer of the post-revolutionary Tunisian state. As Merone claims, besides the jihadi international dynamics, the typically Tunisian case cannot be reduced to a 'generic and abstract 'terroristic threat' [...] instead cries out for a political solution' (Merone, 2015).



*Fig. 24. Diagram of the Flow of Islamic Militants*

The intention of the counter-mapping of the Tunisian revolution was that of allowing the events of resistance to mould the geography and draw the chronology of contestation. In so doing, the diagrams proved to be both a practice and a result, by virtue of their non-discursive nature. In this sense, rather than building a new narrative, they allowed to simply follow the 'red line' of different examples of resistance and other significant actions.

At the same time, the diagrams made it possible to dig deep into the invisible layers of the Tunisian revolution, in terms of the events that triggered it and the events it caused. My claim is not that these four flows have composed the unitary revolutionary effect, but rather that it is through the flows' intersections that the most interesting aspects of the revolution are revealed. In fact, when the struggles create alliances or interrogate each other, it becomes clear how the territory of reference they relate to is much more complex and expands far beyond the Tunisian borders. At the same time, taking into account the geography drawn by

the flows also gives the chance to look at different apparatuses of power, both local and global, and at how extreme strategies of resistance have managed to challenge them.

### 3.3. The Emergence of the ‘Mob’ and the Expansion of the Political

In this research the interest in the class aspect emerged when reading the analysis pursued by Philip Rizk, a member of the Egyptian Mosireen collective,<sup>65</sup> who claimed that the ‘Lumpenproletariat have become the radical element within the revolutionary struggle’ (Rizk, 2014). By *Lumpenproletariat*, he referred to ‘those most suppressed, most exploited and most desperate under the former regime’s political system’, ‘the underclass without the luxury to attain an education, with no fixed jobs and thus vulnerable to the reality that police officers and employers existed above the law’ (Rizk, 2014).<sup>66</sup> Although his analysis regarded the Egyptian revolution, it is also applicable to Tunisia. In fact, many observers have pointed out that, related to this mass of occasional workers and graduate unemployed, the Tunisian working class – made of the ones who hold a permanent working contract, and are therefore more ‘guaranteed’ - assumed the role of a pseudo-‘working class aristocracy.’ This group, mainly represented by civil servants, often avoided participation in the various mobilizations for fear of jeopardizing their positions (Gobe, 2010: 6). To this trend, the 2011 revolution was an obvious exception.

Along the same lines, Mohammed Ltaief of the Tunisian Ahl Al Kahf collective stresses the protagonism of the disenfranchised citizens of the internal areas as opposed to a narrative focused on the artists and intellectuals,<sup>67</sup> as the agents of change:

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<sup>65</sup> Mosireen, literally ‘we are determined,’ are an Egyptian media-activism collective that has recorded, archived and shared videos and works around the Egyptian revolution. They are very relevant for this research, both for their practice and for their theorisations. Their work is available at [http://mosireen.org/?page\\_id=6](http://mosireen.org/?page_id=6).

<sup>66</sup> As follows, I will always specifically define what terms such as *Lumpenproletariat*, working class or underclass stand for in this section of my research. While doing that, I am aware that many aspects of the debate I’m here illustrating have been significantly addressed by Thoburn’s discussion around the interpretation of the Marxian terms *Lumpen vis-à-vis proletariat* (Thoburn, 2003), which I will engage with in Chapter Five.

<sup>67</sup> At this point, it might be worth re-stating my relation to the Tunisian (and Egyptian) artists and intellectuals I have quoted so far. I don’t intend to speak on their behalf, just like they clearly reject the role of representatives of their revolutions. Rather, the thinkers I worked on have allowed me

The same people who made the revolution are the poor people of Sidi Bouzid, of Regueb, of Thala and Kasserine. These are the people who want to achieve the goals of the revolution. People think it's the artists or the intellectuals who have come out to take pictures next to the tanks, who might be able to continue the revolution. These are the people who only come out during the celebrations, who arrive once the others have achieved the revolution. Their interests are not necessarily opposed to those of the oppressors. (Ltaief quoted in Tlili, 2011, my translation)

I have previously referred to this group of people as the 'underclass',<sup>68</sup> mainly to stress their distance from what could be called the 'working class', assigned to an 'aristocratic' condition due to their stable jobs. The Tunisian underclass is the result of the massive contraction of the labour force, polarized around nepotism, due to deindustrialization and the unequal regional development. It mainly regards the majority of the youth, both graduate and not, from Tunisia's less developed areas, like the poor internal cities and the outskirts of the larger, richer ones. The underclass occupies an intermediary space between the urban working class with stable jobs and the rural precarious workers: men, but mostly women,

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to elaborate and ground my critique and understanding of the construction of narratives around contemporary resistance. From a privileged position – of knowledge and empathy – they have shown me the way out of the totalizing narratives.

<sup>68</sup> Karl Marx, with his theorization of the *Lumpenproletariat*, had already proposed a conception of the categories below the working class. 'Underclass' instead emerges in the sociological field in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States. In 1963, Gunnar Myrdal defined it as the 'class of unemployed, unemployable and underemployed who are more and more set apart from the nation at large' (Myrdal, 1963: 10). The American genealogy of the 'underclass' contains some assumptions that must be adjusted and problematized when applied to the Tunisian society. In fact, the underclass doesn't only imply a structural position (below the working class), but also the lack of skills (due to low education) and will to be employed, the dependency on welfare and the employment of deviant behavior, habitually set in an urban environment. The term has been critiqued as being a derogatory synonymous with the impoverished Black Americans behaving in criminal ways (Gans, 1996). Yet, the Tunisian underclass holds different features, as mentioned above.

whose living conditions have hardly been challenged by the revolution and who continue being the poorest of the society (as documented by Alberti, Magoni, 2014).

The underclass is marked by a continuous and anxious activity focused on providing its livelihood, the so-called 'bread race', constantly threatened by the various agents of power, such as the local authorities, the police, or the employers. It includes the significant population of the suburbs of the richer cities, whose inhabitants are commonly called *houmani*, literally 'those attached to their neighbourhood.' The *houmani* are largely present in the capital's poor neighbourhoods, like Hay Ettadhamen. These are the same neighbourhoods, which have been marked by the first revolutionary confrontations in the capital and which have self-managed their defence against Ben Ali's alleged militias.

This large category of the Tunisian population, 'concerned with day-to-day realities' and 'frustrated because of the deterioration of their standard of living' operates outside the realm of the political, mainly monopolized by a small political elite, even after the revolution. As Fabio Merone observes, 'a generation of apolitical, but nonetheless actively youth engaged in what has been called 'street politics'' (Merone, 2013a). In the Tunisian context, the most popular instances of large-scale organized 'street politics' enacted by the disenfranchised youth are the Ultras movement of the football supporters, and the jihadi-Salafi movement, initially focused on preaching and proselytism (Merone, 2013a). The Ultras movement, similarly to Egypt, has been and remains an important element in the confrontation with the forces of repression, since it 'never misses an occasion to confront the police and to be a destabilizing element in an open conflict between the two political blocs', alternatively supporting the one identified as more 'anti-system' (Merone, 2013a).

It is important to also point out that this large underclass category, that expresses its frustration with particularly risky and conflictual practices, is not considered part of the political arena. In fact, 'what is being analysed in terms of 'political events' is largely down to the narrow categorization of a small political elite', 'reliant on the same middle class' (Merone, 2013a). In addition, the national authorities also indistinctly criminalize this category. As Merone has referred after the 18<sup>th</sup> of March (2015) terroristic shooting at the Bardo Museum in Tunis: 'The

Interior Minister is convinced that no difference exists between *this large disenfranchised population*, Ansar al-Sharia [the Tunisian Salafi social movement] and Okba Ibn Nafaa [the Qaedaist brigade]: they are all ‘terrorists’ (Merone, 2015, my emphasis).

This is the reason why I have chosen to re-name what I provisionally and generically called ‘underclass’ as ‘mob.’ This is a term revisited by Claudia Aradau and Jeff Huysmans following Spinoza and Etienne Balibar’s reflection on the notion of mass (Aradau; Huysmans, 2009). Their work emerges as a critique to the notion of ‘rights,’ which produces a separation between citizens (*demos*) and masses, depicted as ‘being denied rights or with limited capacity to claim rights’ (Aradau; Huysmans, 2009: 595). Their claim is that forms of mobility - such as those of the migrants - open up new political terrains, while they challenge the global power structures and allow ‘excluded social groups to enter the political process and accede to equality’ (Aradau; Huysmans, 2009: 592). In this way, they both question who is a subject of rights as well as invent democratic practices (Aradau; Huysmans, 2009: 603).

The ‘mob’, a derivation of the Latin *mobile vulgus*, literally the ‘moving riffraff’, classically described a category emerged in the eighteenth-century urban setting of London, that of the ‘citizens-discontents marshalled by the Whigs for political processions and rallies.’ ‘Not just rioters but everyone in London’s lower classes who was present in the streets;’ ‘politically motivated groups who are represented as numerous, mobile and an urban phenomenon’ (Aradau; Huysmans, 2009: 596). By its very definition, the contemporary mob stands outside of the realms of politics, democracy, and citizenship, or it could be said that it represents the ‘constitutive limit’ of these very categories, *qua* ‘disorderly force, whose actions are depoliticized either as economically determined – e.g. by hunger – or as socially irrational’ (Aradau; Huysmans, 2009: 597).

As opposed to terms such as ‘underclass’ or ‘mass’, the ‘mob’ contains an inherent depreciatory note, which I find very significant because it represents the common reactions of dismissal, but mostly of heavy criminalization that the ‘politics of the underclass’ is generally met with. As a matter of fact, the Tunisian revolution is a perfect example of this category’s practices being completely overshadowed by the activity of actors coming from the middle class, or the

'working class aristocracy', such as bloggers, artists or trade unionists. Instead, the latter have only been temporarily allied with a phenomenon triggered by the underclass of the internal cities and the metropolitan peripheries of the country. In this sense, the 'mob' is the main - yet invisible - actor of the revolution, both in Tunisia, and abroad, when struggling as a migrant.

However, the process of 'mobbisation' itself – intended as the process of criminalization/moralization/de-politicization carried out by the authorities, both institutional and intellectual, around the practices of the disenfranchised citizenship – is the best indication that a process of subjectivation has taken place. In this sense, the 'mob' can be regarded as indicating the space of visibility and political protagonism that the disenfranchised majority is banned from. Once this space is occupied and a large category emerges from its invisibility due to intolerable governance conditions, the space of their political contestation is promptly neutralized through 'mobbisation'. Which basically exorcises the government's fear of the 'mob's' radical demands, asserting instead its incontestable irrationality and need to be repressed. The 'mob's politics' is the substantial expression of a political will, by virtue of its 'rejection of the price of being a subject,' by enacting a 'collective and physical refusal to be governed that way in all the realms of existence' (Tazzioli, 2015). The Tunisian 'mob' has enacted this type of rejection towards the regime, eventually bringing it down. This is why I claim that the 'mob' politics constitutes an indication of both an attempt of erasure, of the already excluded categories renegotiating their subject position, alongside the attempt of a fundamental expansion or extension of the political terrain. This expansion questions who can be the subject of rights and operates a resignification of the political, indicating its priorities, such as less precarious livelihood, less abuse from the state, while also devising new strategies of struggle to achieve them.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> I am not mentioning yet not excluding the potentially reactionary nature of the politics of the mob. Wilhelm Reich has, after all, documented the genuine popular desire for fascism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I am here specifically referring to the struggles carried on by the unemployed, migrants and refugees who advanced claims such as regional equality, end of state violence, alongside freedom of movement and stay in Europe.

## Conclusion

In addressing the consistency of this event in a different manner, I have chosen to follow the accounts of the participants both in terms of the temporality and of the spatiality they re-draw. I have interpreted the resulting series of events of resistance visually as diagrams of flows. It became clear right away that the revolution had its historical precedents and political emergence in the poor internal areas, rather than in the capital. Moreover, after weeks of protests, repression and the departure of the president, those same streams of contestation coming from the internal areas had also spread across Europe, thanks to the unexpected possibility which allowed the Tunisian citizens to cross the border, even if illegally. This temporary opening up of the borders determined the arrival of thousands of ex-revolutionaries in Europe, where another series of struggles unfolded, mainly set in the detention centres and the Western cities. Along the lines of the previous theorisation of the network of events of resistance and of its implicit contagious dimension, all these layers of struggle have been interpreted as 'flows', since they inherently imply the circulation and mobility of their practices of contestation. The spreading of unrests and the mobility of large masses of people characterize these flows. The Tunisian territory has been marked by at least four flows: the first one saw the people from the internal areas spread the uprising towards the North; the second regarded the *harraga*, the undocumented migrants crossing the Mediterranean; the third gathered the mostly sub-Saharan African refugees fleeing the civil war and the bombings in Libya, who lived in the refugee camps with no prospect of asylum; while the last flow was that of the young Tunisians who had chosen to devote their life to the Islamic militancy in Tunisia but mostly abroad, traveling for the *jihad* in countries like Syria, Iraq or Libya.

Borrowing Aradau's reflection, I have referred to the agents of the revolution as the 'mob', because of their constant criminalization and depoliticization on behalf of the authorities, whether they were rioting in their town demanding *Bread, freedom and dignity!*, occupying the capital's Kasbah claiming the resignation of the post-Ben Ali government or burning down the Italian detention centres.

In this sense, my claim is that the emancipatory potential of the Tunisian events stems precisely from the conditions of possibility of the intersection of these streams of struggle. In this sense, the 'mob' could be the political agent of the future, with its radical demands and tactics, its constant challenge posed to the border system and its ability to implement contestation in hostile and foreign environments. One of the most significant tasks of the future becomes that of building patterns of transversal support and solidarity with these struggles. That's why accounting for them and acknowledging their push to expand the notion of the political is a first step towards the alliances of the future.

This chapter is an attempt to transform into practice the claims that I have developed in the previous chapters. For example, here I engage in a detailed manner with the *singularity* of the Tunisian revolution, in that I seek to show the specificity of the different struggles and mobility practices connected to it. The diagrams of the flows of struggle are the concrete application of the *network of events of resistance* and address in a visual way the contagious dimension of resistance, especially in the case of the flow of the underclass. In other words, the diagrams are one of this work's attempts to counter the practices of representation that capture the event, by showing how it continues to develop its potential, by acknowledging its virtual dimension. In the next chapter, I will focus more on the *roots* of the flow of struggle of the underclass and reflect in what its practices can be read in terms of what Deleuze and Guattari called *war machine* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980).

#### 4. Histories of Dispossession and Contemporary Vanguard

Only the act of resistance can resist death: either in the form of an artwork or in the form of the human struggle.

Gilles Deleuze, *What is the Act of Creation?*, 1987

##### The Inaudible Vanguard of Art and Politics

In the previous chapter, I laid out an alternative chronology and geography of the Tunisian revolution, by focusing on the flows drawn across the territory by the events of resistance, both within and beyond the Tunisian national borders. I have, therefore, drawn the attention to how this event is to be regarded as an intersection of flows of struggle, of which I provided a snapshot with the help of diagrams. The protagonists of these flows – drawn by a series of events of resistance that emerged as significant – were mainly Tunisian nationals, alongside which I've signalled the fierce struggle of the sub-Saharan refugees from Libya in Choucha.

In the view of this research, the symbolic triad figure of the 'revolutionary;' the 'undocumented' migrant/*harraga*, and the 'terrorist'/*irhabi*, are all connected to a category of people marked by existential precarity and a great sense of striving. I chose to call this category 'mob,' drawing from the resignification of this term operated by Aradau and Huysmans. In fact, the term 'mob' makes visible two fundamental aspects that the previous term I employed – underclass – was suggesting to a lesser extent. Firstly, it inevitably points to a process of stigmatization. Secondly, by virtue of its resignified version, it indicates how practices of mobility work towards expanding and transforming the field of the political.

The following chapter will develop some of these conclusions, taking them one step further. The inquiry will place the year 2011 within a wider context of lineages of both dispossession and resistance that have touched upon the Tunisian territory, starting with the period of the French colonial rule until the 2016 protests in Kasserine. In this sense, I will argue that the peasants (alongside the indigenous Amazigh communities) represent the constitutive absence of the Tunisian revolution since the poor cities and suburbs (*hwem*) that the revolution

started from are the physical consequences of the historical rural dispossession. In fact, in terms of 'economy of dispossession' (Ayeub, 2011), the richer Tunisia, the Sahel region, where capital was and still is accumulated has traditionally exploited the West, centre and South, the 'Tunisia of the resources' (Idem).

Furthermore, I will trace a relation between what I refer to in terms of two types of 'vanguard.' On the one hand, the practices of minor art enacted by the Tunisian Ahl Al Kahf street art collective (between 2011 and 2013). On the other hand, I will introduce the reflection on practices of minor politics (which I'll further discuss in Chapter Five) enacted by the Tunisian 'relative surplus population' who in 2011 'entered the world of politics through riots' (Lamloum, 2016: 9). Following on from the previous reflection on nano-modulation of affects (Chapter Two, Parisi and Goodman, 2005) and building on the chrono-geography traced by the actions of the Tunisian Islamic militants after 2013 (Chapter Three), I will frame the phenomenon of the Tunisian 'foreign fighters' for the Islamic State (IS) in terms of an 'apparatus of capture' which appropriates the 'war machine' constituted by the people who have initiated the 2011 revolution (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972). Against the argument that many impoverished Tunisians are inexorably destined to work on the battlefields of the IS, I will bring the example of the 2016 mobilisation of the unemployed in Kasserine, originated by the public suicide of Ridha Yahyaoui. Reflecting on the significance of this episode, I will address the political subjectivity of the revolution in terms of 'vanguard' (after having previously thought about it through terms such as underclass and 'mob'), in order to acknowledge the affirmative determination of this group of people. The members of this Tunisian vanguard, I will argue, enact the political also by weaponising 'bare life,' by paradoxically demanding for their life to be valued while they risk it with gestures of self-harm or public suicides (that I will address in terms of necroresistance, Bargu, 2014). The necroresistant practices of the vanguard, especially given the centrality of the body as a political arsenal, will be further discussed in relation to minor politics within 'cramped spaces' (Thoburn, 2016) and the importance of the gesture as a mediator of circulation of dissent and political alliances (Chapter Five).

#### **4.1. Looking at the Revolution from the 'Blind' Spot: The Peasants and the *Imazighen***

This parallel journey, of imagining perspectives of the revolution that aren't immediately apparent, started with the work of Habib Ayeb, the critical geographer, and his 2013 article titled 'The rural in the Tunisian revolution: the inaudible voices' (Ayeb, 2013). Analysing an event from a perspective, which appears to be external to it, that of the peasants and the Amazigh community, in this case, has proven to be productive, because it made visible a series of layers that were mostly effaced from the common discourse, or deemed irrelevant.

This is what Ayeb alludes to when he writes about 'inaudible voices.' Inaudible is maybe the keyword for the Tunisian revolution. It indicates an entire tradition of interaction between governed and governing bodies. It tells the story of a category who would repeatedly speak and not simply remain unheard, but rather confirm its constitutive inaudibility! It also draws attention to a particular distribution of the sensible, and of disposability, that has evolved with a certain continuity throughout the colonial and the post-independence period, until the years prior to the revolution, namely from 1956 to 2011.

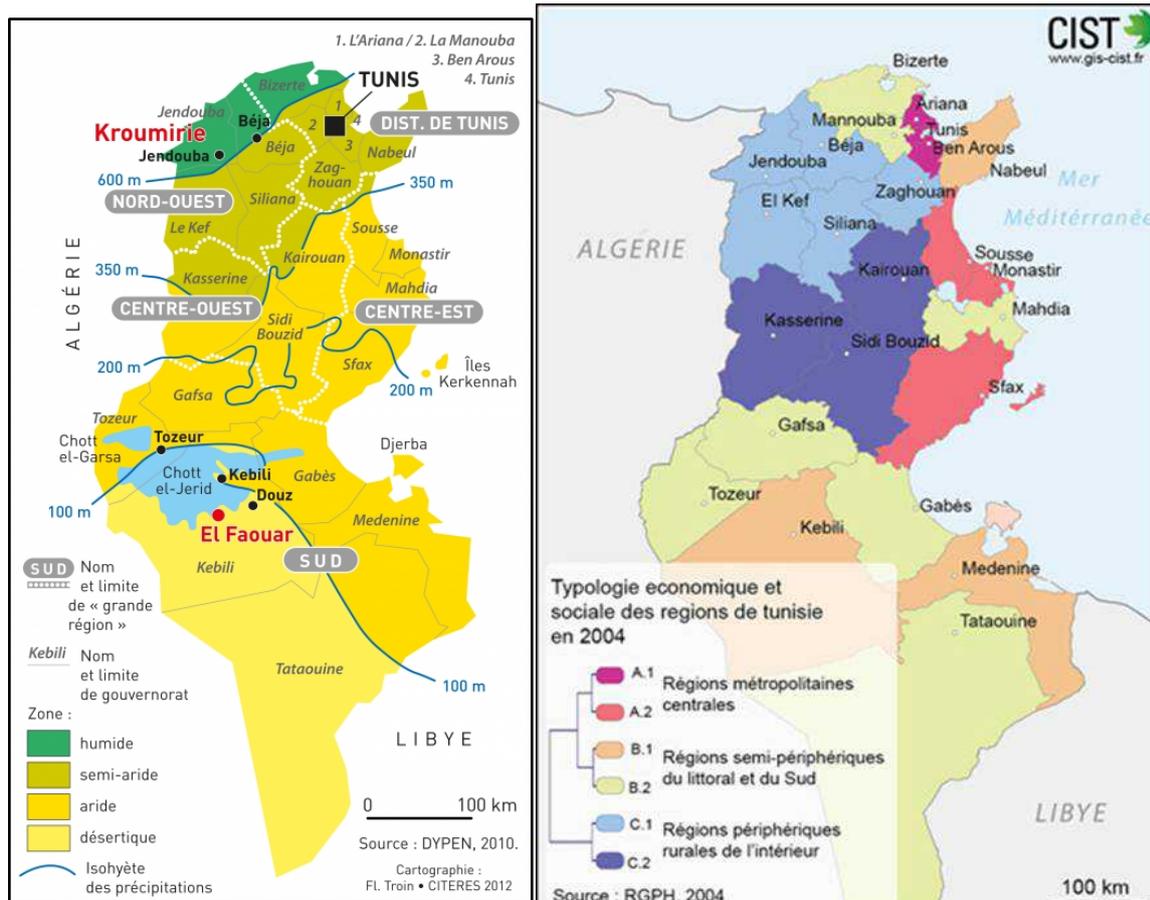
The social and economic marginalization is 'the main cause of the invisibility and inaudibility of the small peasantry,' since the debate around the revolution was often limited to 'the only space of politics/politicians and the usual dominant issues around identity, religion, political rights and individual liberties,' thereby avoiding to address economic and social issues. As a consequence, the 'unpleasant question around the social classes (wa)s disregarded in the political, media and even academic analyses.' In other words 'the classes nobody knows how to look at' were being hidden (Ibidem.).

Upon a closer look, in fact, the rural dimension appears to be the very motor of the revolution. Peasants are in fact a constitutive absence of the event itself. More precisely, they inhabit the very roots of the revolution and are a crucial component of the lives of the men and women who have inflamed the poor cities and suburbs of Tunisia, in a way that I will try to unpack as follows.

Ayeb's research is focused on agriculture and food policies in post-colonial Tunisia. His analyses show how the French colonists have targeted the extensive

subsistence agriculture of the Tunisian peasants. He argues that the post-independence governments enacted the same attack with their cooperativist agricultural projects (Ibidem.). Eventually, the final blow to the rural survival economy was inflicted by the liberalization processes, also known as 'structural adjustments,' which targeted the state-subsidized agriculture at the beginning of the '90s and succeeded in massively impoverishing the rural population by 2007, a year that was marked by an agricultural commodities crisis (Elloumi, 2015).

Under the pressure of the international financial organizations, the Tunisian government initiated a process of public divestment and liberalization of resources, such as land and water in the rural environment, namely the majority of the Tunisian territory. These policies progressively crippled the subsistence activity of most of the population, especially given the harsh desert-like climate that most of the country is affected by and the centrality of family farming (see Fig. 25.). In 2006, for example, 43% of the families lived on and of farmlands with an extension of less than 5 ha (Ibidem.).



*Fig. 25. These maps show the current, yet changing distribution of the climate areas in Tunisia and how important climate is to the establishment of the main urban centres, as opposed to the rest of the country, mostly rural.*

*Source: DYPEN, CIST (France).*

To put it in a simple manner, the Tunisian state initiated a process of public divestment, decreasing its presence on the internal agricultural market in a very particular way. Whereas immediately after independence, the state had invested in the internal market empowering the autonomy of small family farms, from the '80-'90s the state was conditioned to increasingly withdraw or rather only provide support to large agricultural actors, therefore pushing the subsistence and the extensive agriculture into a progressive and disastrous decay. This is particularly visible, Ayeb argues, in the state's actions vis-à-vis one of Tunisia's most important resource, namely water.

In fact, the state continued to subsidize the irrigation network, but only the one necessary for the so-called big investors, the big agricultural companies whose

products are exported and mainly managed by the entrepreneurs of the North, who benefit from their collusions with the government and the Western economic interests. Irrigation is a litmus test for the increasing segregation of what some have called the 'two Tunisiyas.' It is, in fact, omnipresent in the documented discourses of the 'inaudible' voices of the rural population (Ibidem). Most of the peasants interviewed by Ayeb explained that they have no access to running water, neither for their households nor for their farmlands. This is even more dramatic, considering that desertification is an increasing phenomenon on the Tunisian territory.

The uneven access to water further exemplifies the widening of the gap initiated with the 'Franco-Sfaxian colonization,' intended as the economic domination of the North and the coast, and developed into what Ayeb calls the 'economy of dispossession.' What he refers to is the national labour division between rich Tunisia, centred on the capital, and the coast, with pioneer cities like Sfax and Sousse; and the 'Tunisia of Rich resources' (Ibidem). As Amel Rahbi from the League of Human Rights explains, 'ever since the colonial period, the country has been built upon the illusion of a useful Tunisia concentrated on the coast. This model continued after independence. The rest of the country is therefore abandoned, impoverished, discriminated' (Moussaoui, 2016).

On the one side, rich Tunisia is the financial centre of the gains derived from the agricultural, mining, textile, and touristic industry. On the other side, the rest of the country is subjected to a constant extraction of its natural resources, such as 'water, agricultural lands, oases, ores (like phosphate, iron), gas and oil' (Ayeb, 2011). At the same time the poorer areas of Tunisia, namely the South, the centre and the West, are being pushed into a 'spiral of exclusion' (Elloumi, 2015) that sees them drifting away from the national project itself.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> This phenomenon almost seems to bear similarities with what in other territories (such as the US, South Africa, India, Israel etc.) has been deemed as internal colonialism, as

a *geographically-based* pattern of subordination of a differentiated population, located within the dominant power or country. This subordination by a dominant power has the outcome of *systematic* group inequality expressed in the policies and practices of a variety of societal institutions, including systems of education, public safety (police, courts, and prisons), health, employment, cultural production, and finance. This definition includes the subordinated population – the colonized – and the land on which they reside within a former settler colony or settler colony system. (Journal of the Research Group on Socialism and Democracy, 2012)

In this case, the Tunisian underprivileged areas were subjected to a double dispossession, from both the state and, most importantly, the international market. More precisely, the state pushed them towards the expropriative international competition, which was focused on enforcing and legitimizing the power of the already dominant monopolies, mainly through financial strategies.

In this way, the 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2007) radicalized by the liberalization policies deepened the gap between the two Tunisiyas: 'one, the Tunisia of power, money, comfort and "development," which covers the coastal areas, particularly the capital city and its upper-class suburbs and the Sahel (including the gulf of Nabeul, Sousse and Monastir) and, second, the marginalized, poor, submissive and dependent Tunisia (of the South, the centre and the West)' (Ayeb, 2011: 470). In this direction, at least from the '80-'90, the state supported the interests of a particular minoritarian political community, that of the '*baldi-Sahel*<sup>71</sup> which is *francisant* and bourgeois' (Sadiki, in Zoubir, Amirah-Fernandez, 2008: 115), to such an extent that some have called Tunisia the 'bourgeois republic' (Idem, Zubaida, 1993: 3).

This process of territorial differentiation was partially initiated by the colonists, who invested in the development of the capital in general as a sign of the 'colonial triumph' (Liauzu, 1976), while actively hindering the food sovereignty of the rest of the country, and destroying the pre-colonial networks of subsistence exchange between sedentary and nomadic groups. This tendency, to concentrate all the wealth and production in the North, continued after independence. The gap in terms of access to the resources was only briefly interrupted in the '60s and '70s (Elloumi, 2015), when the state focused more on supporting the internal market by making it easy for all its citizens to develop subsistence strategies, mostly within agriculture, and the mining industry, whose dismantlement started later.

The wider the gap between the Sahel and the rest of the country grew, given that the demographic growth was not absorbed by the labour market, the more these areas started implementing a series of ever-changing survival strategies connected to the 'race for bread' (Meddeb, 2011). In pre- and post-revolutionary Tunisia, survival depended on monoculture family agriculture (mostly worked by

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<sup>71</sup> The foreword *baldi-* indicates an urban *Tunisian* family, as opposed to *afaqi-*, rural outsider, *al-mackzan-*, state, or *ulema-*, learned scholar of Islam (Zoubir, Amirah-Fernandez, 2008: 115).

the women), the men's poly-activity and the internal migration, alongside many activities of informal economy such as smuggling and street vending. These are the subsistence activities of the poor Tunisians. To these, the revolution added a temporary alternative (from the 14<sup>th</sup> of January to the 5<sup>th</sup> of April) by disturbing the system of borders control put in place by Ben Ali, in that it gave the opportunity to many Tunisians to set sail for Europe in the search of a financial fulfilment. At least 20.000 left immediately after the fall of the regime and many perished in the Mediterranean.

Finally, one of the most important consequences of the existence of the 'two Tunisias' is the 'human desertification,' namely the fact that the regions of the South, the centre and the West have been subjected to a heavy emigration, both internal and external, which has also drained them of their human resources (Ayebe, 2013). In many cases, it is the young men of the family who migrate towards the rich cities, where they can find some form of employment able to support the family in the rural environment. It is also important to point out that the various generations of internal migrants, driven away from their original birthplace by poverty, mostly settle down in the *hwem* (plural of *houma*), the suburban peripheral neighbourhoods of the capital and the big cities, which are often stigmatized for their poverty and insecurity.

It is in this sense that Ayebe has identified the 'spatial, economic, social and political marginalization of one part of the country and society in favour of another' as being the 'direct cause of the revolutionary process that ended the mafia dictatorship of Ben Ali-Trabelsi' (Ayebe, 2011: 467). Moreover, the fact that a popular movement has succeeded in short-circuiting the patterns of power, both internal and external, was 'due to an *ad hoc* and conjunctural alliance of the middle classes and the popular classes around a common demand: dignity, a major condition for the ability to be and to do' (Ibidem.).

My argument is that the revolutionary outcry came mainly from the *hwem*, which are nothing but the physical extension of a rural space that represents the majority of the Tunisian territory, deprived of its own subsistence by a stratification of oppressive interests. These interests are both local and global and include the local mafia, the national interests of the main families, alongside the liberalization policies imposed by the foreign countries in their interest, which the

state implemented under financial pressure. Following the works of Liauzu (1976) and Elloumi (2015) it is easy to reconstruct the genealogy of accumulation by dispossession, which the Tunisian territory has been subjected to.

In fact, this has started in the recent period - if one is to look back only to the 19<sup>th</sup> century - with the territorial re-organization operated by the French colonists, once the so-called French Protectorate had been established in 1881. This is when the self-regulating sustainable inter-dependence between the Tunisian communities had been violently severed in order to deprive the colonized people of their autonomy and subdue them to the colonial mode of production.

In the following section, I will be taking three consequent steps back in history, in the attempt to identify the recent genealogy of this process of accumulation by dispossession that was questioned by the 2011 revolution. First, it is crucial to follow the genealogy of the *hwem*, the Tunisian *banlieus* and to point out that they descend from an initial urban development of the colonial capital. Tunis became, in fact, at least from the '30s an emigration target for thousands of *fellaga* (Tunisian peasants), animal breeders, alongside the poor European settlers. These people, described as *corteges de déracinés*, 'cohorts of uprooted people', were compelled to move mostly because their agricultural or breeding activity no longer allowed them to survive, let alone to pay the French taxes or credits. As Liauzu explains, 'the climatic and capitalist calamities push(ed) entire sections of the rural society into becoming a sub-proletariat' (Liauzu, 1976). This process was initiated by the colonial system through the destruction of the pre-colonial subsistence networks and through debt, which also hit the poor European settlers. Most significantly, the French researcher points out that 'it is not possible to have clear figures of the selling of land in the tribunals, but what is certain is that the suspension of the repossession for debt in 1934 has avoided the dispossession of the biggest section of French and Tunisian peasants' (Liauzu, 1976: 611).

According to the official numbers, the precarious *bidonvilles*, or *gourbi-villes*, at the outskirts of the capital hosted 2000 people in 1935, 1500 in 1936, 5000 in 1938 and already 10.000 in 1941 (see Fig. 26.). The inhabitants of the *bidon-villes* were associated with the *lumpenproletariat*. They got by with petty crimes, reselling objects and food they found in the garbage, making small robberies, begging or practicing open or clandestine sex-work (Idem., 615). The local beylical



When the French colonists took hold of the Tunisian territory in 1881, the survival of the peoples who inhabited it was based on a symbiotic relationship between the nomadic and the sedentary groups, distributed throughout the mostly arid land, centred on the oases for agriculture and the desert for the breeding of animals, such as the camel. This interaction was based on collective ownership of lands and on the occasional exchange between crops and animal-derived products or tools, in addition to a protection tax (*saliab*) that sedentary groups paid to the warrior nomadic tribes. The French colonists have, instead, prohibited the *saliab* tax, that was supporting the nomads, and imposed their own taxes, while forcing nomads to sedentarisation. In addition, the inhabitants of the Tunisian territory were also subjected to taxes and a process of privatization of the commonly owned land was initiated. The forced sedentarisation, the privatization of lands and the imposition of taxes resulted in a progressive proletarianisation, and erosion of autonomy, of all those peoples who supported each other in the past. This is an illuminating passage of how the French described their endeavour in 1911, evaluating the 'improvements' they had brought to what they called the 'indigenous agriculture.' This description also makes visible how credits were introduced, in a way that they would eventually cripple the peasants and dispossess them of their lands.

We must act with much attention and patience in this matter of collective lands, especially since it particularly interests the nomads – i.e. - those of our citizens who had seen with the worst eye our installation in the country, since as from our arrival we suppressed one of their resources: the tributes paid by the Djebalia people (a sedentary tribe living in the mountains). (...)

Moreover, in a country where one has a good harvest only every five or six years, while the rest of the time the indigenous peoples hardly collect the seeds they've planted; where the crops and livestock are the main resources of the tribes, discouragement threatens to seize people at any moment and cause their migration towards

Northern cities. Therefore the military authority had to provide for the reduction of the taxes. The reduction is put in place every time the harvest is lacking and it exempts the indigenous to pay back the seeds because often, after several bad harvests, the natives have no grain at the time of ploughing, to sow and it is necessary to make them benefit from the Insurance Society.

*L'Agriculture indigene en Tunisie. Rapport general de la commission d'amélioration de l'agriculture indigene constituée par le décret du 13 mai 1911*

(Saliba, 1911: 668-9, my translation)

As far as the forced sedentarisation of the nomads is concerned, it is chilling to read the way the French military authority invoked the people's well-being – with a very biopolitical undertone, one would say today - also alluded to in the title, with the reference to the *amélioration* or improvement of the 'indigenous' agriculture.

While the military authority has worked to improve the lives of nomads, always respecting their wandering habits, it hasn't renounced fixing them in certain points and making them adopt more regular habits. But the military authority wanted this to be the work of time and of their well-being. She has thought that the most effective measures to create and enhance the well-being were the following: settling an absolute security in the country, allowing the workers to peacefully enjoy, in a guaranteed manner, the products of their labor.

The insecurity that has prevailed in the country since the end of the Roman occupation until the coming of the French, was, more certainly, the cause of its ruin. (Idem., 669-670, my translation)

What I wanted to show with these snapshots of the genealogy of the process of accumulation by dispossession that has afflicted the Tunisian territory is that the 2011 revolutionaries have a long lineage, at least as long as this short history of dispossession stretches upon. Every power apparatus that has imposed a certain regime of dispossession, either by limiting people's mobility, their collective ownership or simply by suppressing their subsistence activities, therefore their very existential sovereignty, was met with resistance. Many of these stories of resistance have been circulated only within local oral histories. Some have left traces in the known historiography, such as the 1906 rebellions of Thala and Kasserine or the 1911 events of the al-Jallaz cemetery, alongside the much-celebrated 1938 anti-colonial riots, which are commemorated as the national Day of the Martyrs on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April.

In the post-independence period, the most explosive protests erupted in 1978, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January, on the 'Black Thursday,' and with the 1984 'Bread riots.' Both dates were connected to the worsening of the economic crisis in Tunisia and were met with a violent response from the state. More recently, the 2008-2015 period has been a constellation of protests and riots, which I've detailed in the previous chapter. My understanding is that this last season of post-independence protests is a reaction to a renewed wave of accumulation by dispossession, similar to the colonial one. One by virtue of which, local interests of the Sahel families, such as the much hated Ben Ali and Trabelsis, in charge of the government are interwoven with those of the global market of debt, alongside the water and land grabbing. In this sense, the revolution - started from Tunisia's agricultural regions and the *hwem* of the Northern cities - is the cry of an entire generation against further dispossession.

More importantly, this framework allows one to tackle the debate around whether the revolution had a political *or* social nature, and which would be the more desirable one. Thanks to the initiators of the revolutionary coalition, the young poor people of the rural and suburban environments, the revolution can only be perceived as social, which is precisely what makes it so incisive and strong politically. As Maha Abdelrahmane explains (quoted by Ayeb), 'assuming a hierarchy of demands where the "economic" is portrayed as narrowly defined and inclusionary on the one hand and less revolutionary than the "political" on the

other is historically and theoretically without base and only stands to serve the interests of the capitalist state and its agents' (Ayeb, 2013).

As follows, I will discuss an additional layer that many debates around the revolution have made invisible, but that, I believe, bears an important role in the unfolding of the event and should be acknowledged as such. Before its Arabisation, Tunisia, as much of Northern Africa, has traditionally been the land of the Amazigh nomadic peoples, also known as Berbers. Today, it is generally known that Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia are populated by Berbers, although these countries' population is often deemed 'Arab.' These indigenous peoples call themselves *Amazigh - Tamazight* for the women, *Imazighen* for the plural. The term literally means 'free and noble humans.'

The Amazigh and their language have survived their many conquerors: the Phoenicians, the Byzantines, and the Romans, but initiated a still ongoing process of assimilation ever since the Arabs started conquering and inhabiting their lands, in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. The Amazigh language was progressively substituted with Arabic and their worship of the sun and moon, substituted with Islam. When the French colonized the Tunisian territory in 1881, the peoples living on it were mainly of Amazigh origins, either from Iberian-Numidian or Lybian descent and were classified according to their level of Arabisation and sedentarity (Berger-Levrault, 1896). Most commonly, the Imazighen, also described by the famous scholar Ibn Khaldun (Khaldun, [1377] 1969), are nomadic peoples who inhabit the desert. Ibn Khaldun describes them as camel breeders and valuable warriors, who also master the craft of working with metals and produce tools, weapons, and jewellery.

Throughout history, until their self-determination struggle of the current days, the Imazighen have maintained a self-awareness of their identity and kept claiming that it be respected by the central government. Paradoxically, the Imazighen and the *fellaga* (the peasants) played a crucial role in the anti-colonial movement that pushed the French out of what then became Tunisia. And yet, the Amazigh peoples have been perceived as a threat by the post-independence Tunisian state. The case of the anti-colonial fighter Lazhar Chraïti, executed in 1963, is indicative in this sense. Engaged in the anti-colonial fight, Chraïti was then

tried and executed by the first Tunisian government, alongside other anti-colonial fighters, as 'conspirators' (Tlili, 2014).

Tunisia is therefore not only a state built around the political community of the Sahel, but also one marked by the domination of the Arab-Islamic culture, which has historically 'denied the Amazigh identity of the country' (*Organisation Non Gouvernementale de défense des droits des Imazighen*, 2003), by prescribing Arabic as the official language in the Constitution and adding that 'the state belongs to the Arab family' (Ibidem.). Moreover, in the words of the Tunisian Imazighen, 'all the individual and the collective attempt of expressing the Berberity and a will to take charge of the Berber culture was repressed. The expression of Berberity is considered an attack on the interest and the integrity of the state' (Ibidem).

The Tunisian Imazighen are a relevant presence in Tunisia today because, just like in the case of the peasants, although they seem to be external to the revolutionary process, they indicate a certain accumulation by dispossession, which is usually the trigger of collective action. In fact, although they are made invisible - their identity is not explicitly mentioned - the Imazighen still speak their language today in many regions such as the Djerba island, in the central regions and the South-East, around Tatouine, Matmata and Gafsa. The so-called Berberophone regions are the poorest ones, lacking development possibilities, infrastructure, and opportunities, which is why their populations are compelled to a continuous exodus towards the richer cities of the North, where their customs and language are subjected to an inexorable Arabisation. As a consequence, the Imazighen inhabit those same spaces of poverty and dispossession, especially in the deep desert South, both rural and urban that have fuelled the revolution. Because of the traditional repression of 'expressions of Berberity', and since the revolution contained no claims of their recognition, it is difficult to evaluate what the Amazigh presence among the revolutionaries was. But it is, nonetheless, crucial to account for this layer of oppression, be it even only to make clear the implications of calling an entire nation 'Arab,' when the Arab identity constitutes for many the active and state legitimate denial of their own identity, especially in terms of how the Tunisian state has been set.

Alongside the ethnic, more or less assimilated, identity of the Imazighen, the revolutionary process and the events that followed it have also surfaced another

identity formation that informed the Tunisian revolutionary alliances. I am here referring to the sense of belonging to a tribe or clan. Clans are common extended families with a high internal cohesion. Mohamed Bouazizi, for example, the 26-year-old who immolated himself and sparked the revolution, belonged to the Hamama clan, which is the majoritarian clan in the region of Sidi Bouzid. Fayda Hamdi, the policewoman who slapped the young man, as well as the region's richest entrepreneur, Mohamed Hechmi Hamdi, both belong to the same Hamama clan (Ayad, 2011; Bayle, 2015). This information is important because it indicates one possible pattern of solidarity that allowed for the protest to spread. In fact, no self-immolation, before and after the 14<sup>th</sup> of January 2011, was followed by such a significant collective and far-reaching reaction. It can be argued that in the case of Mohamed Bouazizi, the clan belonging also played an important role, since his clan is perceived as the leading one of the region and represents the majority of the population, and this aspect plays an important role in the contagious propagation of protests. The status and belonging of the individual who chooses to sacrifice himself is very important for the level of affective reaction it will determine. This is to say, communities, as well as authorities, are more likely to respond if the person committing the sacrifice is perceived as close to them and high rank.<sup>73</sup>

Another important clan that has a connection with the pre-revolutionary protests is the Ouerghemma clan, an Amazigh clan living in the South, in the area of Ben Guardane, which spreads all across the border with Libya. The clan's main activity is, by virtue of its position, the smuggling of Libyan products, some of which are produced in Tunisia and subsidized by the Libyan state (Ayeb, 2016). Ayeb explains how the Ouerghemmas have been massively affected by the closure of the border and the unfolding of security forces in the area, with the military freezing the mobility across the border and therefore, once again, suppressing those people's only subsistence activity, with the excuse of the anti-terrorism militarization of the premises (Ibidem.)

The French colonists have completed the most detailed record of the distribution of the tribes or clans on the Tunisian territory. A revealing example is

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<sup>73</sup> In Banu Bargu's example set in Turkey in the '90s, the state had reacted to the protest against the maximum security prisons after 121 activists had died of hunger strike but mostly because their lawyer, holding a higher status, chose to enact the same form of protest (Bargu, 2015).

the 1896 *Tunisia. Vol I* edited by Berger-Levrault, where every tribe is described according to its descent (Amazigh or Arab), its mobility patterns (nomadic, sedentary, semi-nomadic), the number of its members, its activities and financial resources, alongside what the colonists perceived as its 'character.' The latter was based on the French observing how the clan interacted with other groups. All these pieces of information were necessary for the calculation of taxes and the implementation of the most efficient production systems, somehow in relation to the local traditions.

To provide an illustration of this exemplary Orientalist literature, here is how the French described the tribe of the Djerba island, on the Eastern coast of Tunisia:

The island of Djerba is inhabited by a population of Berber origin who speaks a dialect that seems to derive from the Berber language. The natives of the ancient island of the Lotus Eaters follow, since the eighth century, the Kharedjite cult, of which they are almost the only followers alongside the people of Zanzibar and Mzab, but they are not that tied to their beliefs.

The island is a vast oasis, well cultivated and dotted with many wells. Its olive trees are considered the most productive of the Regency. The fruits of Djerba are appreciated throughout Tunisia. The industry is also developed: they produce multicolored striped blankets called *frechias*, the *burnous* and especially pottery, which they export until Egypt. Fishing is also a precious resource for the population. It is completely sedentary, we estimate it to 64 000 souls (Berger-Levrault, 1986: 478, my translation).

The investigation of the French, the current reflections of the Tunisian Imazighen and today's clans reveal a complexified snapshot of the senses of belonging that are interacting in the contemporary Tunisian society, all of which bear a trace of ancient conflicts, conquests, and resistances.

The 14<sup>th</sup> century scholar Ibn Khaldun uses a different notion to indicate what could be referred to as the sense of belonging. Namely, he speaks of *asabiyya* (عصبية), which I will also develop in Chapter Four (section 4.3). *Asabiyya* defines the *esprit de corps*, the social solidarity of a group, its internal tribal kinship, in the sense of the dynamic of the social cohesiveness. In Ibn Khaldun's vision of his history (which he drew a logic or philosophy of), the population of his territory is divided between the nomadic and the sedentary peoples. The nomadic warrior tribes hold a special social cohesiveness that allows them to defeat and conquer their sedentary rivals. In Ibn Khaldun's view, sedentarity and the delegation of the military functions to external groups determine an erosion of the social cohesion or solidarity (Merone, 2015b). In this sense, *asabiyya* is connected to a tribal identity and a particular regime of mobility, which determines a well-developed military standing in the relationship with other groups.

Alongside the ethnic and the tribal *asabiyyat*, the Tunisians are also divided according to their urban (*baldi*-) or rural dwelling (*afaqi*-) (Sadiki in Zoubir; Amirah-Fernandez, 2008: 115). In Larbi Sadiki's words, the Tunisian territory was marked by a tribal pluralism in the pre-nation period; yet it became then strongly polarized during the French colonisation when Tunisians felt united against the French. Finally, after independence, 'Tunisianness' was invented through state-oriented nationalism. Since the first president Habib Bourghiba based his idea of nationalism on the French model, religion was not part of the state performed sense of cohesion. Rather, Bourghiba ran the state in a patrimonial way. 'During the 50 years of Bourghibist domination of the political scene, the dogmatism with which *ethnos* and *demos* were blurred in Bourghiba's Tunisia rationalized the discarding of viable identities; religious, tribal, and democratic. That hegemony was embodied in *l'Etat-patron* (state as tutelary) and *l'Etat-parti* (party state)' (Belkhodja, 1998 quoted in Idem: 131). In this sense, Bourghiba's patrimonial ethnonationalism had suppressed the expression of any 'non-governmental or non-party actor' except for the UGTT, the general trade union of the Tunisian workers (Sadiki in Idem, 121). As a consequence, any expression of another identity be it political, religious or ethnic, was deemed as being anti-national, against the state's integrity and prestige (against the *haibat al-dawla*). Nevertheless, up until today 'group solidarities (*asabiyyat*) have not disappeared

and interpenetrate with nation-states, political parties, and parliaments' (Salamé and Zubaida, 1989: 84 quoted in Sadiki in Idem: 115).

With these apparently unrelated focuses on aspects of the Tunisian history and conflicts, my goal was to suggest a different manner of reading the recent history of the revolution, while simultaneously tying it to the long lineage of resistance, which has inflamed the Tunisian territory. The next section will engage in more detail with the artistic production that I've constantly referred to so far, with the intention to show how useful it has been in order to account for this event's singularity, but also with the aim to frame the work of the Ahl Al Kahf collective as an example of minor art.

#### **4.2. The Ahl Al Kahf Collective. The Exiles Believers and The Seeds of Revolution**

Born from within the 2010 revolution, Ahl Al Kahf, literally 'the people underground,' is a fluid and anonymous collective of provocative young artists working online and on the walls of post-revolutionary Tunisia. Their approaches are crucial in looking at the Tunisian revolutionary-becoming, without the intention of representing it, that many art practices have put forward. Following their art practices is like a journey through the voices of dissent of the revolution, because they address much of the issues I have discussed so far such as the danger of the rhetoric of the 'Jasmine revolution,' the marginalisation of the South, centre and West, or the political relevance of the struggles of the peasants and the Amazigh populations (alongside the pre-revolutionary mobilisations of the unemployed). I will be looking at the chronological sequence of their works drawing on to the way the collective puts forward different issues and on the way it challenges the narratives of the revolution. The attention will be placed only on particular moments of their production.

I chose to focus on their work because this collective represents one of the most refined and incisive politicized voices, which chooses to employ sophisticated artistic techniques. Its production is an extremely dynamic and fruitful archive of practices and reflections, which have marked the Tunisian society. My entire research started as a consequence of their analyses and artistic practices since

they were the first to vocally attack the eulogy and co-option of the revolutionary narrative on behalf of the Tunisian authorities. They have also fought for the affirmation of the idea of revolutionary processes or becoming, as opposed to the common idea of the completed – either achieved or failed - revolution. But most importantly, the Ahl Al Kahf have constantly fought against external observers (often Western) deeming them as the actors, or worse, as the representatives of the Tunisian revolution. They made it their goal to constantly create public discomfort by pointing out that the ‘revolution had been made by the poor’ and that it ‘wasn’t over’ (Tlili, 2011). In this sense, they provide a valuable example of the role of the intellectual in the struggle.

In terms of the temporal span of their practice, I will be looking at their production which started with the Sidi Bouzid riots, sparked on the 17<sup>th</sup> of December 2010, until their participation in the project *Interpretation of Exile: Tunis >>> Berlin* in Berlin, between October and November 2013. For reasons of limited space, my analysis here will be limited to Ahl Al Kahf’s first three years, since that period is a valuable example of how their aesthetics evolved, especially once they started to work more beyond the Tunisian borders, more precisely in Vienna and Berlin.

Ahl Al Kahf offer a practical interpretation of the interweaving of art and life in a difficult political setting, such as the pre- and the post-revolutionary Tunisian one. So in my research, this art scene was the space that indicated the specificity of the Tunisian revolution. According to them, the actor of the revolution was the poor Tunisian, who unexpectedly broke the neo-colonial shackles and imposed a political short-circuit. This deviation was embraced by the reactionary forces in different ongoing ways: either by channelling that energy into the elections, under new faces of the ancient regime or in the deadly whirl of the Islamic militancy, in the homeland and abroad.

The work on the Ahl Al Kahf production must necessarily be accompanied by a series of caveats. Their production is vast, diversified and I don’t intend to provide an exhaustive interpretation of it. For the sake of clarity, it is not my intention to systematize it, but rather to reflect on their collaborative practices, enacting a sort of ‘plastic reading.’ Drawing from Catherine Malabou, Brenna Bhandar explains this reading as involving ‘a consciousness of what she (the reader) brings to her

reading of a text' (Malabou, 2010: 52; in Bhandar, 2011: 231). In other words, my interaction with the collective's production is declaredly conditioned by my personal practice with particular forms of political and artistic movements. By engaging with their artworks, I intend to produce an impartial understanding of some of their crucial elements, informed by my previous life and research experience with revolutionary movements. My intention is not to ossify or totalize their production, but rather to open up a debate around what I relate to as a very audacious and enriching artistic practice. Eventually, it is also not my intention to provide an objective or a rigorous interpretation of this artistic production. Therefore my methodology is mainly based on a direct interaction with the works of the collective, based on the way the collective itself has chosen to make their archive of works public on their Facebook profile.<sup>74</sup> I am therefore accountable for any inaccuracy or interpretation. Moreover, I have made use of Luce Lacquaniti's very rigorous and valuable work, *Tunis' Walls: Signs of Rebellion* (Lacquaniti, 2015), in which she outlines the work of many post-revolutionary street art collectives. Additional elements for my reading have been also sourced from the online comments and posts of the collective, but also from their manifesto, written texts, videos, interviews and from Tlili's 2011 documentary on their activity, *Revolution under 5 minutes* (Tlili, 2011).<sup>75</sup>

Ahl Al Kahf are probably one of the most important and well-known Tunisian street art collectives born out of the Dignity revolution, but certainly not the only one. They are part of a large highly politicized street art movement that includes other relevant collectives such as Zwewla, and Molotov (Laquaniti, 2015). The reason art on the streets and graffiti became such a powerful and political tool after the revolution is precisely because of the harsh system of censorship and occupation of the public space enacted by the Ben Ali régime. The Ahl Al Kahf collective is connected to the capital's Academy of Arts and gathers young artists belonging to the Leftist underground, active in the student trade unions during the regime, therefore holding a strongly political awareness. On their Facebook profile, they describe themselves as a 'movement of young artists from Tunisia,

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/أهل-الكهف-ahl-alkahf-115175015229496/?fref=ts>

<sup>75</sup> Ridha Tlili is a Tunisian director from Sidi Bouzid who has had a prolific production after the revolution and whose works have significantly influenced my analysis (Tlili, 2010; 2011; 2012; 2014).

anti-Globalization & anti-Orientalism, born inside the revolutionary process.’ They promote “aesthetic terrorism” and ‘revolutionary art’ as opposed to the art ‘of the revolution,’ namely against the celebratory *façade* aesthetics, subtending the narrative of the ‘Jasmine revolution’ or of the ‘Arab Spring’ (which are Western definitions, in any case)’ (Lacquaniti, 2014: 132-133). In fact, their activity starts with the coverage of the Sidi Bouzid riots in December 2010 and later on, after the toppling of Ben Ali, with the participation to the occupations of the Kasbah (1 and 2) in February and March 2011. They get their inspiration from Banksy, the Situationists, from the classical street artist Ernest Pignon and from the ones they call the ‘philosophers of resistance’: Deleuze, Negri, Said. While the revolutionaries take the streets, Ahl Al Kahf participate in the taking of the walls, filling them with political messages. Their art weaves together European and Middle Eastern theory and resistance histories, with Dada and no-global visuals, while building harsh critiques to the political transition and, *de facto*, making available forms of counter-information on one of the most democratic urban platforms: the walls. With their manifesto, they’re also the first to make explicit and thematise the question around identity and signature in the art industry and beyond. In fact, they encourage anyone to take on their signature and create, add or destroy their ephemeral artworks – of which only virtual photographic albums trace the existence.

In this sense, the Tunisian walls, ‘the non-Western walls, in the postcolonial sense of the term, have succeeded in becoming the memory of resistance’ (Ltaief in Lacquaniti, 2015: 173-4). Like the work of the Mosireen collective in Egypt, this group’s critiques and practices constitute an archive of political reflection on the Tunisian revolution, built in an inclusive, collective, anonymous and often humour-led manner, where contemporary public art is conceived as a means of education and liberation. In this sense, their artwork is a very good expression of many ‘seeds’ of the Tunisian revolution, in terms of all meanings that that event was able to re-activate and propel towards the rest of the world, both ‘Arab’ and non-‘Arab’.

Before their artistic manifesto is made public, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of December 2011 on their profile, the group already was alluding to a particular type of aesthetics with their name. Ahl Al Kahf (أهل الكهف), can be literally translated as ‘the people

underground.' The name is actually referred to the 'Pious Long-Sleepers' myth, which exists in Greek, Jewish and Christian antiquity, known as the 'Seven Sleepers of Efeso' in the Christian martyrology. In its Muslim version, it is developed in the Qu'ran in the 8 Sura, verse 9-26 and it doesn't specify the number of the sleepers. The legend goes that a certain number of young believers, who are not willing to submit to the dominant faith, hide from persecution in a cave, where they fall asleep for a very long period of time (the Qu'ran speaks of 300 solar years). They wake up in a different epoch, which recognizes their faith but die soon after. The cave that different countries claim as local is surrounded by religious celebrations of the Sleepers' martyrdom.

All the elements are perfect to name a movement of anonymous members, whose number is to remain unknown, forced by circumstances to operate underground, not limited to one particular country but aspiring to universality. A movement able to deal with contemporary art, which, in Félix Guattari's definition – one of the group's cultural reference – is articulated as a 'non-temporal art' (Lacquaniti, 2014: 132, My translation).

In this sense, the name suggests the practice of an anonymous, potentially threatened, untimely artistic group aspiring to a universal production. In fact, the collective is adamant about declining its sense of belonging in terms of a universality coming from the marginal spaces of society. They explain that

the people underground are (...) those ones living underneath the rubble (...) the ones working underneath the rubble. Those ones working illegally and who belong at the same time to a culture and to the world. There are some Tunisian citizens and some other citizens who belong to a universal culture. This is the principle of the

People Underground movement' (Tlili, 2011, my translation).

On the issue of 'culture,' they specify their anti-essentialist position, quoting the practice of Edward Said in the US, in the sense that 'the issue has nothing to do with geography or borders' and that 'culture is in a constant process of development. I take it with me wherever I go...' (Ibidem.).

It is important to understand that alongside its capacity as an anonymous, underground, universal group, Ahl Al Kahf functions like a signature available to everyone. In other words, their main goal is to open up a space of expression in the public sphere, which had been previously cluttered by the regime-led rhetoric and art. That's why the group is very fond of the idea of public art and stresses the necessary access to expressing oneself. In this sense, their name, their signature itself is a liberating practice. In their manifesto, the artists exhort their public to use their identity: 'If you walk down a street and you happen to find on a wall one of Ahl Al Kahf's works, put your signature. The artistic work is said to derive its value and price from the signature it bears' (Ahl Al Kahf, 2012).

Their art is born out of the absence of any freedom within the art circuits funded by the state, or the foreign countries, which commission productions that confirm their Orientalist expectations. This is why the privileged space of their art is the street, rather than the gallery or the museum. At the same time, the street allows Ahl Al Kahf to explore the collective practice of co-authorship and to make 'revolutionary art' accessible to all.

Eventually, this collective is a signature and their signature works as a re-appropriative practice, open to all. They make this very clear when they address a Facebook comment on them being *Banksy à la tunisienne*, 'the Tunisian version of Banksy'. Banksy is undoubtedly a source of inspiration for them, in so far as he is considered a 'reference.' 'In the visual arts that is called a "reference" (like when you reference a text in another text).' In fact, they explain, 'it needs to be known that Banksy is not an individual, rather a signature. Everywhere in the world, there are young people employing these motifs. Just in the same way, Ahl Al Kahf is a signature and many young people work using it'.

Moreover, the group's main goal is that of making visible the abuses of authority, by means of infecting the most agglomerated public spaces, such as beaches, train or metro stations, high streets, and squares. The artists, therefore, re-signify these spaces through ephemeral artworks produced thanks to a close organic relation with the surrounding environment, both human and non-human.

The collective employs various media. Not only street and online art, but also video, projections on the city's walls, performances, occasionally long pluri-language reflection texts, and even online radio, which they employed temporarily in 2011 to broadcast poetry. As concerns the street art, their media are mixed. Their production started off in the form of digital posters, so-called 'revolution posters,' used to promote the cause of the rebellion in Sidi Bouzid. These initial products (see Fig. 27) were spread online in an attempt to counter the censorship of information and make the rebellion known to the public

After the escape of Ben Ali, the group was invited to support the '14<sup>th</sup> of January Front' as its 'artistic brigade' (Lacquaniti, 2015: 127). They took part in the occupations of the Kasbah (January-February 2011), where they started using the walls as canvases. Their initial approach was that of employing stencils, alongside occasional collages of rather extensive paper images or pre-printed posters. Sometimes they sprayed additional writings, other times they subverted already existing adverts with their written messages. Most of their interventions are a complex of all these media and represent each time a unique recombination of pre-existing highly reproducible elements, such as the stencils. On other occasions, they instead produce special street art projects, in which they employ massive stencil-based street painting. Their production is always location-specific, temporary and unique.

As follows, I will attempt to provide a temporal and spatial dimension of the evolution of the collective's work, as far as I was able to trace it based on the public resources I've had access to, the main one being the group's Facebook archive. This means that I could be missing many of their interventions and that this can only be a provisional understanding of the extension of their work.



Fig. 27. A collage of some of Ahl Al Kahf's digital affiches de la revolution, 'revolution posters.' Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook Profile

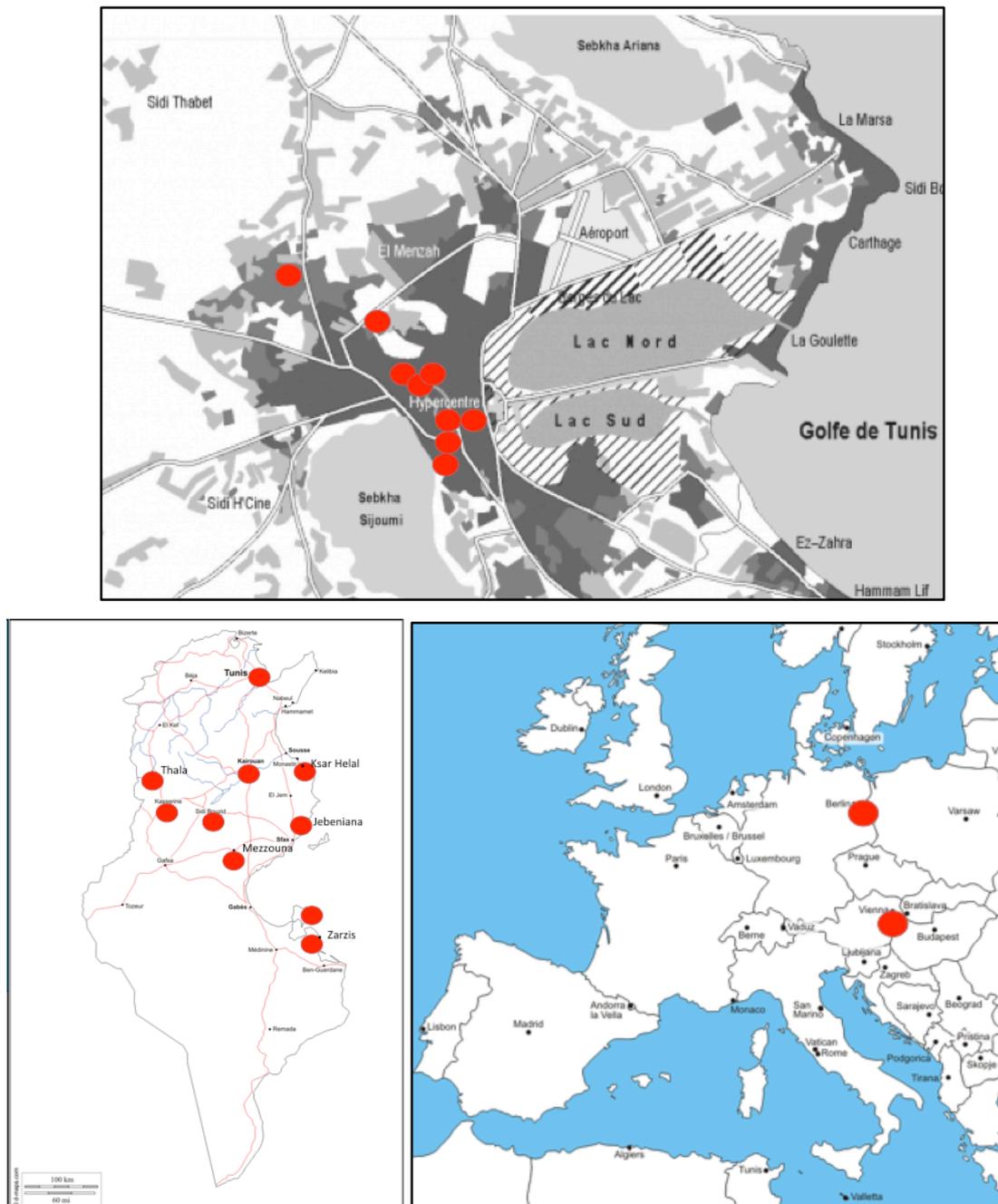
The titles of the following works are mine; they are only indicative and aimed to identify the works. When the date is uncertain, it is signalled in the title with a question mark, whereas the reference date is mainly based on the date of the online upload of the relative album of works. When I refer to 'stencil-based street painting,' it is to indicate projects of large dimensions produced employing the stencil technique.

*Fig. 28. List of the artistic interventions of the Ahl Ahl Kahf collective  
(2010-2013)*

<b>Indicative Title</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Media</b>	<b>Location</b>
<i>Les affiches de la révolution</i>	December 2010	Digital art	Virtual Space
Kasbah 1	January 2011	Street art (stencil)	Tunis, the Kasbah
The Listening Rats	February 2011	Street art (stencil, collage)	Tunis, Place Barcelone
Kasbah 2	22-25 February 2011	Street art (stencil)	Tunis, the Kasbah
The Zarzis Arches	(?) April 2011	Street art (stencil, street painting, collage)	Zarzis
The Day of the Martyrs	10 April 2011	Street art (stencil, street painting)	Tunis, Djebel Lahmar
Farhat Hachad in El Kairouan	(?) April 2011	Street art (stencil)	El Kairouan
The centre of Tunis	(?) 24 April 2011	Street art (stencil, collage)	Tunis, Avenue Bourghiba/National Theatre
Bibliography (Deleuze, Negri, Said, Choukri)	(?) April 2011	Street art (stencil-based street painting)	Tunis, Bab Sadoun
Art in an abandoned factory	(?) 6 May 2011	Street art (stencil, collage, street painting)	Tunis, rue Carthage

The teaching of a fighter in a wheelchair	21 June 2011	Street art (stencil, stencil-based street painting)	Mezzouna, Sidi Bouzid
Said, Deleuze and the activist Mouda Mhadheb Sboui	(?) June 2011	Street art (stencil-based street painting)	Jbenyana, Sfax
Deleuze and the tanks	July/August 2011	Street art (stencil)	The island of Djerba
Darwish and the children	October 2011	Street art (stencil, street painting)	Tunis, Hay Ettadhamen
Occupy Tunis	11 November 2011	Digital art	Virtual Space
Sidi Bouzid/Palestine	17 December 2011	Street art (stencil, collage, street painting)	Sidi Bouzid
Collaboration with a homeless street artist	(?) December 2011	Street art (stencil)	Ksar Hellal, Monastir
<b><i>Manifeste Fondateur</i></b>	<b>27 December 2011</b>	<b>Text</b>	<b>Virtual Space</b>
Vienna Performance	January 2012	Performance	Vienna, Austria
Mahdi Amel and the Anti-Oedipus at school	February 2012	Street art (stencil, collage, 3d collage)	El Gorjani, Tunis
Projections on the walls of Tunis	(?) March 2012	Street art (projections)	Tunis
Projections on the walls of Bizerte	(?) May 2012	Street art (projections)	Bizerte

Solidarity with Fadwa Suleiman	16 May 2012	Street art (stencil)	Tax office, Tunis
"Dogma"	10 November 2012	Video	Virtual Space
Resistance vs. Power	January 2013	Street art (stencil, stencil-based street painting)	Thala, Kasserine
"The Interpretation of Exile"	October/November 2013	Street art (stencil, collage) Video Text	Tunis/Berlin



*Fig. 29. Maps of the group's intervention: in Tunis, in Tunisia and abroad*

Two preliminary observations will help to frame their production. The first one is a brief consideration of the group's geographical sensibility. The second provides an outline of its main theoretical, political and artistic references.

Firstly, as I tried to show with the table and the map of their interventions (Fig. 28. and Fig. 29.), although the collective is based in the capital, it goes to great lengths to de-centralise its practice. When in the capital, the artists focus on very agglomerated spaces, like the Kasbah, bus stations, squares, the tax office and the

surroundings of the Internal Affairs ministry. Their ephemeral works are intended to target as many Tunisians as possible. In fact, they are not interested in touristic spaces such as the Medina, the Bardo museum or the elitist Sidi Bou Said neighbourhood, or at least there isn't any record of their works in these areas. This indicates that their target audience is the average Tunisian citizen holding no privileged social status. This is even clearer, given that the artists focus some of their most significant projects on suburban neighbourhoods of the capital, such as El Gorjani, Ettadhamen, and Djebel Lahmar, the latter being a former shantytown. Moreover, the artists have actively made an effort to reach many cities beyond the capital. This is particularly relevant, since, as I have tried to make clear so far, the revolutionary process was accelerated and promoted mostly in the poor areas of the South and the centre of the country. Finally, they have also operated abroad in the last period of their production, mainly in Germany. Changing the setting of their work has stimulated a new thread of reflection on mobility and the anti-immigration policies of 'fortress Europe.'

One can imagine the collective's intervention organized in concentrically arranged circles, starting from the heart of Tunis, spreading across its suburbs, followed by the cities in the centre and the South, all the way to the Northern European cities, Vienna and Berlin. This, of course, only applies to their material production, of course, since their virtual archives and works have a far wider circulation.

Secondly, in order to make an additional step within the Ahl Al Kahf universe, it is worth listing some of the references that the artists have incorporated into their artwork and texts, both in terms of politics and in terms of art. For the artists, practice and reflection are constantly reciprocally generative, since 'they have always merged the improvisation in the artistic practice with a conscious reflection on their goals, forming a virtuous circle in which one originated the other' (Lacquaniti, 2015: 132).

On a political level, the Ahl Al Kahf refer to Tunisian martyrs, such as

- Mohamed Bouazizi, the young man who sparked the revolution with his self-immolation;
- Hafnaoui Maghzawi, the first martyr of the 2008 'Gafsa Intifada';

- Mouda Mhadheb Sboui, a philosophy teacher and activist in a wheelchair of Mezzouna, active against the regime; and

- Farhat Hachad, the assassinated founder of the Tunisian trade union.

These names appear alongside icons of symbolic past and ongoing struggles such as Fadwa Soulaymen, the Syrian actress and activist involved in the 2011 Syrian revolution; Ernesto Che Guevara, the Argentinian revolutionary; *el subcomandante* Marcos, the Mexican Zapatista revolutionary; and Mahdi Amel, the assassinated radical Lebanese theorist and activist, also known as the 'Arab Gramsci' (Prashad, 2014).

In terms of artistic practice, the British graffiti artist Banksy and the French classical street artist Ernest Pignon are the collective's more visible influences, alongside the Dada and the Situationist movement. They also name the French performer and theorist Antonin Artaud, the Palestinian cartoonist Naji Al-Ali, the Lebanese musician Marcel Khalife, the Black American jazz composer, Miles Davis, as well as the Moroccan painter Jilali Gharbaoui.

The philosophical and literary references stretch all the way from what the artists call the 'philosophical movement of resistance,' in which they include French theorists like Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, alongside Edward Said, to important names of the Arab literature, such as the Palestinian poets Mohamed Darwish and Mu'in Bseiso, the Tuareg poet Ibrahim Al-Koni, and the Moroccan novelist Mohamed Choukri. They also occasionally quote significant French thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as the novelist Louis Ferdinand Céline, the poet Jean Cocteau and the filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard.

The type of culture and history the collective is a promoter of, through their works and texts, is somehow a declination of that global, universal, common set of practices and theories they declare to be part of. One expanding from the Palestinian struggle and the Amazigh poetry to the experimentations of the French Surrealist movement and the way Deleuze, Foucault, and Said were reading resistance in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I have argued above that one of Ahl Al Kahf's main achievements is that they make authority visible, while they challenge it. In fact, some of the group's most used and popular stencils regard the portraits of the Tunisian politicians that the revolution fought against, accompanied by ironic captions. The ousted president,

Al Zibidine Ben Ali, is depicted above a sentence stating ‘Those who induced him in error are still there.’ This is an extremely incisive historical connection as it references not only the president’s last speech but, most importantly, the fact that this expression was borrowed from the French president Charles de Gaulle, while he was addressing the Algerian people fighting against France for its independence (Lacquaniti, 2015: 128). By choosing this sentence, the artists are underlining the continuity between the French colonialism and the post-independence Tunisian rule. Most significantly, Ben Ali’s stencil is often articulated within a performatively iconoclast spatiality, in the sense that the artists locate it on the pavement for it to be stepped over, or in dirty corners (see Fig. 30).



*Fig. 30. The Ben Ali stencil and the accompanying sentence, on a wall, sprayed on the pavement and in a dirty corner in Zarzis.*

*Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile.*

The same devaluative operations influence the iconography of the Libyan president, Muammar Ghaddafi, whose head is depicted on top of a rat body; sometimes the stencil is sprayed on top of a real dead rat (see Fig. 31.).



*Fig. 31. Three instances of the usage of the Ghaddafi stencil: on a traffic sign, a trash bin, and a dead rat. Zarzis, 2011.*

*Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile.*

Another frequent target of the group is Caid Essebsi, a member of the governmental old guard (n. 1926), nominated prime minister at the end of 2011, after a series of protests forced the resignation of the Benalists prime minister. Essebsi's political protagonism gives the artists the opportunity to address the dangerous gerontocratic structure of institutional politics, and the extent to which no new actor was allowed to take part in the political decisions, even after the revolution. The caption clearly states: 'I cannot dream with my grandfather!' Another, subtler version of it is the collage of a dinosaur with the caption saying 'No to the rule of the dinosaurs!' (see Fig. 32.). Their critique of an active governing

politician explains the need for anonymity since Tunisia was and is well known for being very intolerant towards political critique and opposition.

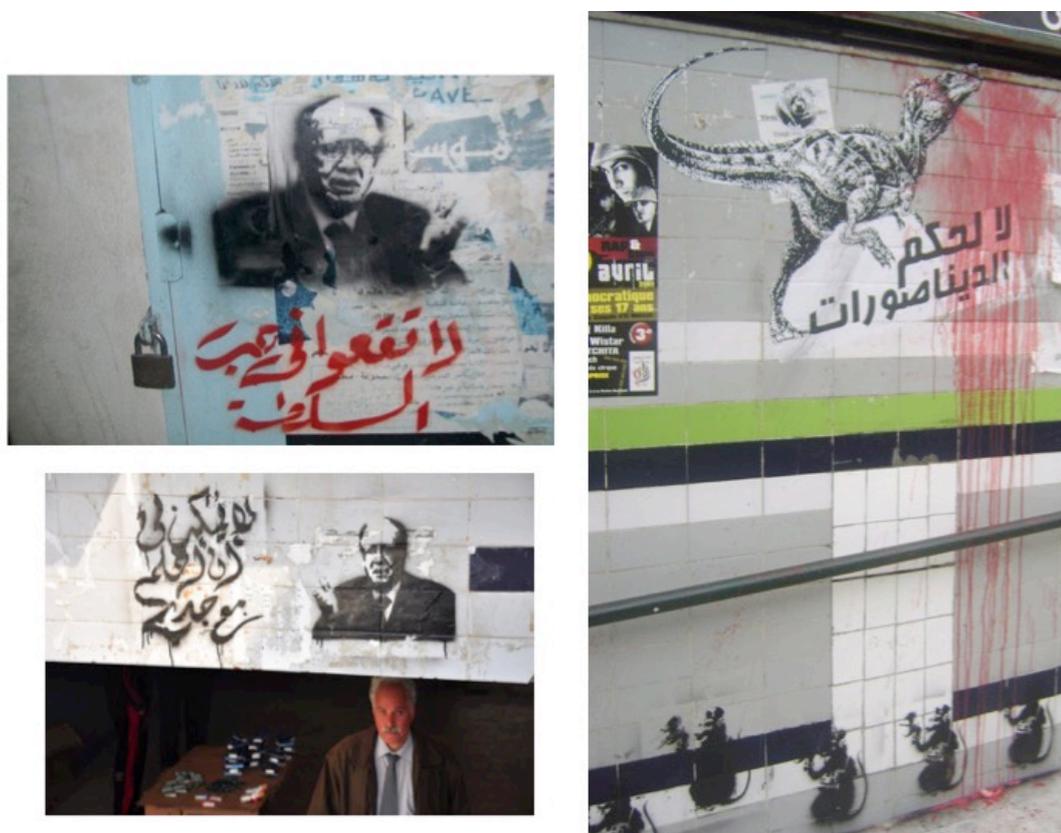


Fig. 32.

*'I can't dream with my father;' 'No to the rule of the dinosaurs.'*

*Tunis, 2011. Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile*

Nevertheless, the most dangerous opposition that the Ahl Al Kahf engaged in was the one that exposed police brutality. As mentioned before, a strong repressive apparatus managed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs supported the Ben Ali rule. The police forces frequently employed violence, unlawful detention, and torture against dissidents. Unfortunately, these practices continued after 2011 (Human Rights Watch, 2016). With their stencils, the group addressed three levels of state violence: 1) the unlawful surveillance, alluded to with Banksy's sonic rat followed by the caption: 'No to political police!'; 2) the constant police brutality; and 3) the mysterious impunity of the operatives who killed the revolution's martyrs, and who were still mentioned in the public discourse as unknown 'snipers.' To tackle the aspect of the justice for the martyrs, the artists

used one of Banksy's stencils again: the little girl with the floating red balloon. Yet the artists turned the balloon into a haunting question: 'Where are the snipers?' (see Fig. 33.).



Fig. 33. Zarzis/Tunis, 2011. Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile

The collective was also critical of the global governing authorities, such as the US represented by Obama, whom they chose to depict above a set of *tibiae*, alluding to his deadly foreign policy, possibly referring to the American 'war on terror' and security campaign (See. Fig 34.).



Fig. 34. Tunis, 2011. Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile

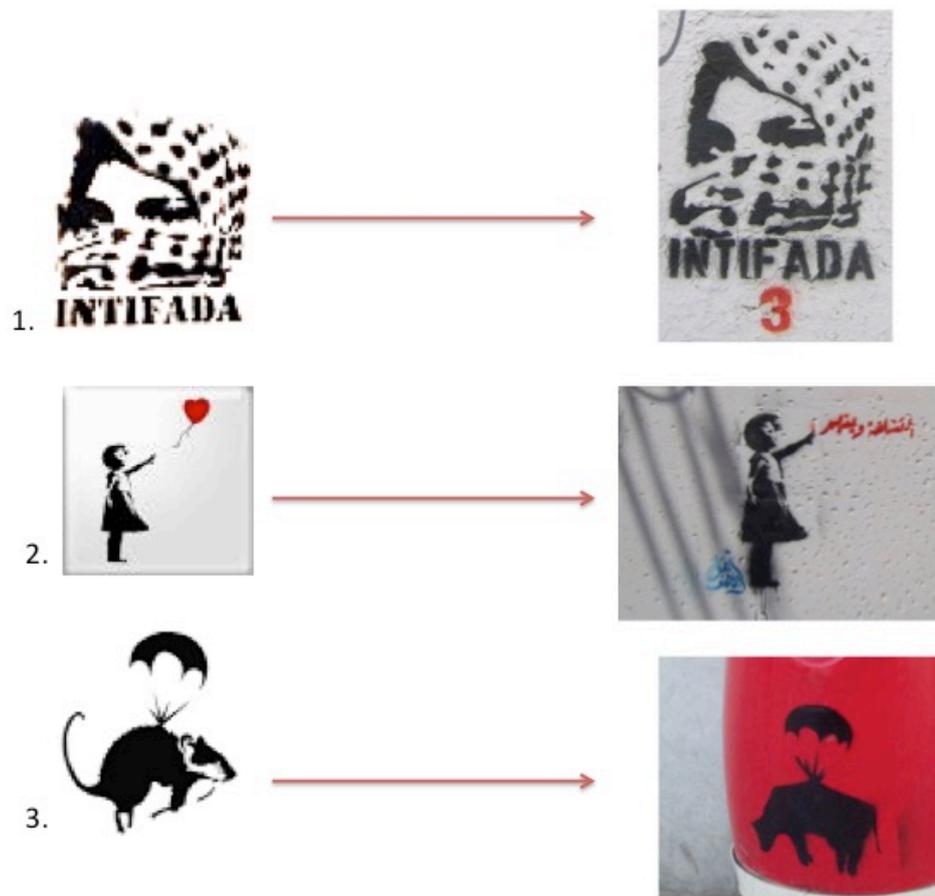
With these examples, I wanted to show how important stencil-related art was for the collective. This *medium* was so suitable for their practice for various reasons. First of all the employment of stencil matrixes facilitated a high rate of adaptability and speed of intervention on the walls. The relatively small matrixes were easy to transport and hide, and allowed a fast composition between various elements, resulting in rapid original and modulable assemblages. The same matrixes could be organized geometrically and chromatically in a different manner, therefore changing their impact every time they were ‘uttered’.

The small stencil matrix was the ultimate ‘revolutionary art’ dispositive in post-2011 Tunis, which was still under serious surveillance. The stencils functioned as *memes*, by virtue of their high reproducibility and circulation. These elements focused on local contagion and defiance, but they also contain different degrees of connectivity to the rest of the global stencil language. In fact, Ahl Al Kahf’s stencil language could be divided between 1) classic already existing matrixes (see Fig. 35.); 2) matrixes that have been adapted to the Tunisian context (see Fig. 36.); and 3) completely original matrixes (see Fig. 37.). To the latter, I have also added the group's original and most often reproduced collages (see Fig. 38.).



*Fig. 35. Some of the common no-global stencils the group uses. Tunis, 2011.*

*Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile*



*Fig. 36. The group's adapted stencils: 1. To the intifada stencil, they added the number 3, alluding to a third uprising, either alluding to their own or a new Palestinian one;*

*2. They substituted the balloons from Banksy's stencil with the question alluding to the people who have been killed during the revolution: 'Where are the snipers?';*

*3. Instead of Banksy's parachuted rat, they used a cow, given that the word is pronounced similarly to the Arabic 'revolution,' to allude to a subtracted, stolen revolution. Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile*



*Fig. 37. Some of the group's original stencils: 1. Mohamed Bouazizi;  
2. Mhadheb Sboui;  
3. Farhat Hachad; 4. Mahdi Amel; 5. Mahmoud Darwish; 6. Mohamed Choukri;  
7. Fadwa Soulaymen; 8. Antonio Negri; 9. Gilles Deleuze; 10. Edward Said;  
11. a human with a clock head with the caption: 'revolution under 5 minutes';  
12. Muammar Gheddafi; 13. Caid Essebsi with caption: 'I cannot dream with my  
father'; 14. Al Zibidine Ben Ali. Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile*



Fig. 38. Some of the original collages: 1. A dinosaur with the caption 'No to the rule of dinosaurs'; 2. 'cutting out' police brutality; 3. An angry face with its head open and the caption: 'it is forbidden to store trash in here,' alluding to the waste crisis and the co-opted media; 4. A policeman with a tv head, a shield and the captions: 'The police talks to you every day on na(z)tional TV' and '(20)11 not '68.'

Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile

In terms of speed of intervention one could imagine a scale going from the handwritten graffiti, the small stencil, the collage, and ending with the massive stencil based painting on the wall, which requires the most continuous physical presence of the artists, and which I will be looking into later in this section.

The adoption of popular anti-capitalist stencils, also employed by their fellow street artists in other corners of the world, seems to suggest the alignment to a sort of graffiti *koiné*, a common language with reference to a critique of power; especially since graffiti artists operate, by their very nature, within a criminalized anti-authoritarian space. When they adapt the already existing stencils, the Ahl Al

Kahf are adding creativity to a common, recognizable set of elements, therefore increasing their contagious reach. Furthermore, their original stencils and collages are developed to add the Tunisian specificity to that language. In their production, they are always plugged to an anti-Orientalist sensibility as they declare from the beginning.

As can be seen from their most used stencils (see Fig. 35.-38.), their messages are focused on some general themes. Firstly, they promote a strong anti-capitalist critique, influenced by anti-globalization aesthetics and informed by global instances of resistance, such as the Zapatista but mostly the Palestinian struggle. Secondly, they harshly expose and dismiss the media propaganda, which claims that the Dignity revolution is over and who ignores state violence. Finally, they show a passionate solidarity with the uprisings in the neighbouring countries, Syria and Libya, which, at that time, were still pioneered by a popular movement.

One of the most frequent points made by the group, which partially explains their activity in the streets, is a violent critique of the system of production, institutionalization, and commodification of art, as well as to the regimes of appropriation and ownership that condition and regulate the circulation of art, images, and information. Art and information, or rather counter-information - in a country with a long tradition of censorship and comprador media - are never separated domains in the group's practice. And both of them are practiced with the intention to foster liberation and, where it is most needed, education. As such, the Ahl Al Kahf are born out of the rejection of any space for art production granted and controlled by the state, the market or the Orientalist foreign donors.

Their texts express their distance from any institutionally sanctioned art dimension:

Any resemblance that may be perceived between Ahl al Kahf's actions and art is a mere product of the viewer's imagination. Thus Ahl Al Kahf refuses to accept any responsibility for it. (...)

One of Ahl Al Kahf's members might enter an art gallery if he feels an urgent need to crap or to pee (even if it is better to pee in front of a wall)(Ahl Al Kahf, 2012).

One of the collective's projects was strongly focused on their critique of the artistic establishment. It was located in an abandoned industrial ruin near Rue Carthage in Tunis and completed in June 2011. The intervention's photographic album is significantly titled 'Art in the Rubble before institutions take over;' in their manifesto, they had written 'Art doesn't blossom but in rubble and ruins'. One of the main walls of the building they chose to 'attack' is filled with the multi-layered portrait of the Italian Autonomist Antonio Negri above the caption 'Power can somewhere be broken', alongside an explosion of the word *Intifada*, 'uprising' in Arabic, and the portraits of Farhat Hachad, the assassinated Communist founder of the Tunisian trade union and Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. In the corner of the wall, a television stated 'I lie to you every day,' while on the opposite side Obama's face appeared placed above two skull *tibiae*, as a deadly warning.



Fig. 39. Tunis, 2011. Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile

Another reason the artists prefer to work within the public space is due to the fact that galleries and museums are perceived as classist and hierarchical

institutions that rather separate the artists from their fellow citizens. Ahl Al Kahf make it clear that there is no separation between the producers and consumers of art, that they are part of the margins where the art blossoms. They argue 'we would rather paint with children, mad people, tramps, crooks, and drunkards of the street...since these people are Ahl Al Kahf' (Ahl Al Kahf, 2012).

It should be specified, at this point, that the collective's manifesto was published in December 2011, approximately one year after the group had started its activity. That is to say that nearly every sentence in it is a direct reference to at least one particular project or practice, and not the other way around. As they explain in the manifesto: 'Art isn't issued by theories, but gives birth to them.'

In terms of 'painting with children,' the group has several projects to support this particular aesthetic assertion. The artists are very fond of creating in collaboration with the children, especially children from the poor cities or the capital's suburbs, which is to say the largest majority of the Tunisian children. On these occasions, the artists bring in their knowledge and skills, which they transmit to their co-workers and whoever witnesses their practice and its results. What the Ahl Al Kahf achieved on these occasions were instances of radical collaborative education in the most underprivileged corners of the country, where art and certain cultural expressions are unlikely to be accessed.

The most significant example in this sense is the project the artists put in place in Hay Ettadhamen, one of the capital's poorest suburbs, in October 2011. They provided the local children with painting colours and with the help of a big stencil they impressed the portrait of the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish on the wall, alongside a quote from his poem *A State of Siege* (I will quote the entire stanza and *italicize* the quoted section):

Here, by the downslope of hills, facing the sunset  
 And time's muzzle,  
 Near gardens with severed shadows,  
*We do what the prisoners do,*  
*And what the unemployed do;*  
*We nurture hope.* (Darwish, 2007: 120)

The presence and collaboration of the children were widely documented in the photographic album (Fig. 40.). In their comments, this is how the artists described the encounter between the children and Darwish's poetry: 'Unhappy because of their impoverished education system. Mahmoud Darwish was discovered through what we have done together.'<sup>76</sup>



*Fig. 40. Hay Ettadhamen, Tunis, 2011. Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile*

Another educational project was completed by the group upon the commissioning on behalf of a secondary school in El Gorjani, another suburb of the capital. On this occasion, the artists chose to merge the tradition of four very significant characters (see Fig. 41.). The gigantic multi-layered stencilled portrait of Hassan Abdullah Hamdan - more commonly known by his pseudonym Mahdi Amel - was the main presence on the school's wall.

<sup>76</sup> As a further detail about this project, Lacquaniti explains how the project wasn't completed since the initial idea was that of drawing the Palestinian flag in the background. Only the green and black sections have been completed because the project was blocked by the intervention of a local Salafist group, who threatened the artists and tried to cancel the poet's face. By the time the photo was taken, they had tried to smear his face, hence the red trace on the portrait's right eye (Lacquaniti, 2015).



*Fig. 41. The images of Mahdi Amel and Mhadheb Sboui. El Gorjani Secondary School, Tunis, 2011. Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile*

In fact, the album is called 'Amel No;' the word and symbol No, *la* in Arabic, is also the symbol for anarchy in the Arab world. Mahdi Amel (1936 - 1987) was one of the most influential Marxist theorist and activist in the Arab world and was assassinated in his homeland Lebanon in 1987. His work hasn't entirely been translated from Arabic, but he is known for his work, 'Marx in Edward Said's Orientalism,' and for his poetry. The group often quotes his line: 'You shall not be

defeated as long as you resist,' which they employed in a digital poster supporting the Syrian revolution.<sup>77</sup>

Alongside Amel, the work also promotes the image of Mhadheb Sboui, a Tunisian philosophy teacher and activist, known to have been very active in protests and strikes despite his wheelchair, and whose memory the collective had extensively worked on during their project in Mezzouna, which I will expand on shortly. The portraits of Amel and Sboui are joined by a rain of Arabic words and interjections alluding to the 1972 work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, which is also present with its English title, which is bouncing inside, or outside, a basketball hoop.

Thanks to the brief series of works I have outlined so far, it is more visible how the group's universality is significantly constituted out of the interweaving of Western and Arab cultural and political references. One of the most obvious declinations of their universal references is the project they've completed at Bab Sadoun, one of the city's gates, situated next to an agglomerated tram station in Tunis, most probably in the spring of 2011 (see Fig. 42.). It is constituted of multi-layered gigantic stencilled portraits of four thinkers: the Moroccan novelist Mohamed Choukri, the Italian Autonomist Antonio Negri, the Palestinian scholar Edward Said and the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. Each of their portraits is accompanied by a significant quote easily relatable to the Tunisian situation: 'I write in order to be banned' (Choukri), 'Power is everywhere. It can be broken' (Negri), 'The intellectuals must be witnesses of the bad use of history' (Said) and one of the group's favourite mantra, of course, 'To create is to resist' (Deleuze).

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<sup>77</sup> Amel's reflection applied the Marxist thinking to the West-Asian context, considering the existing conditions on the ground and integrating the colonial past and the imperial present. He fought alongside the tobacco peasants in Lebanon and inaugurated a new way of conceiving the type of pressure labour *could* put on capital, therefore liberating the horizon of the Arab resistance (Jaddaliyya, 2014; al-Saadi, 2014; Prashad, 2014).



Fig. 42. Bab Sadoun, Tunis, 2011. Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile

The 'bibliography' is accompanied by a sarcastic composition on its left side, ironizing upon the Arabic word *irhab*, 'terrorism' and advertising it as an Activia-like digestion yoghurt (Lacquaniti, 2015).

But almost more important than the portraits of the quoted thinkers is the black hole on their left side, out of which dozens of stencilled ants and flies make their way out. The hole is easily associable to a 'crack in the wall,' which the artists mention in their manifesto: 'Ahl Al Kahf members may leave under a spot or a crack in the wall the movement's signature. And this may not be deemed as desecration or blasphemy but as one of the pagan rites of the movement' (Ahl Al Kahf, 2012). In this case, the crack in the wall is also a direct reference to a Tunisian dialectal expression: 'all those ants that went in that hole.' It is an informal way of saying, 'I was saying something and you weren't listening' (Lacquaniti, 2015: 133). It can be argued that the inaudible voices could, at this

point, belong to either the artists fighting to express themselves in the Tunisian society or, more likely, to the Tunisian disenfranchised people who brought about the revolution. Ahl Al Kahf's ants are coming out of the hole. Could this mean that the inaudible voices are no longer wasting their breath to be heard? This return to the dimension of the 'inaudible' voices links back to the beginning of this chapter and the discussion on the importance of considering the constitutive absence of the peasants and the Amazigh communities from the most common narrative of the revolution. The collective is certainly aware of the way certain communities are disregarded, and this is proven by their frequent references to the peasants and the Imazighen. In fact, the narratives they have propagated through their practice have been determinant for this research.

There is also an instance – arguably one of the group's most influential experiences – in which the collective actively contributes to transferring the knowledge from a local oral history into a global memory of resistance. It is the case of their project in Mezzouna, a small city in the poor governorate of Sidi Bouzid, the region where the 2011 revolution originated. This time, instead of stencilled portraits, the walls of the downtown café are filled with the silhouettes of local children, who participate in the project (see 340.). They are photographed and their figures inspire the stencils on the walls, but they also participate in the colouring. They are both the objects and the subjects of the work. In the album's description, the artists point out that the 'children of Mezzouna were not present in this work as images only, but also as actors.'

The texts impressed on the wall belong to Mhadheb Sboui, the late philosophy teacher of the city, who, despite being in a wheelchair, had been always at the forefront of the local protests. This is how the collective celebrates him in their manifesto:

Mhadheb Sboui got up and took part in protests, strikes, and marches, being at the same time in his wheelchair. And he tells you: "No one has any longer the right of guardianship on our reason and our perspicacity under the pretext of a permanent paternity and maternity, that does not realize that we were weaned a long time ago. We

no longer need the sermons of preachers nor the advice of chaplains. We are neither ignorant nor minors.” (Ahl Al Kahf, 2011)

These sentences are a direct critique of the patronizing attitude of the dictatorship and its president, who promoted himself as the ‘father’ of the nation. But they also symbolize the struggle for self-determination of the Tunisian people, who strongly asserts its independence and autonomy in front of any attempt to submit it, make it feel inferior, powerless. Sboui’s quotes enrich the city’s walls. Another one of the fighter’s sentences that the group chooses to reproduce and circulate is one that additionally contrasts with the man’s disability, which the artists accompany to the children’s stencilled climbing bodies, namely ‘This body will be victorious.’

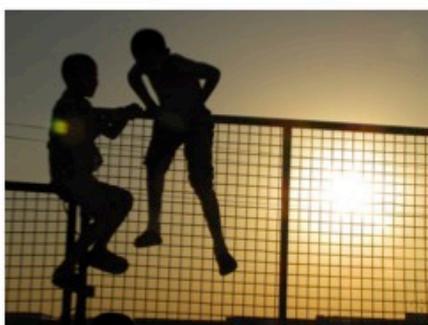


Fig. 43. ‘This body will be victorious!’, Mezzouna, 2011. Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile

Sboui's teachings leave a deep trace in the collective's production. His words are present in their manifesto, as well as the projects they completed in Jbenyana, El Gorjani (Tunis) and Sidi Bouzid. In Sboui's case, the collective is actively building a minor history, made of stories, comments, quotes and images of his body, for it to be virally accessible, locally on the walls and globally thanks to their photographic archive.

Throughout its relatively short but intense history, the collective was faced with two extremely productive rejections. I chose to signal these rejections, because both of them determined a significant modulation in the group's media, pushing them away from their mural 'canvases'. Firstly, in 2012, the artists were prohibited to take part in the Carthage Film Festival, after it became apparent that they were to use faeces in their performance with reference to the art world. As an answer, they turned to the video installation medium and projected their images on the city's high buildings. One of them was a Playboy rabbit *détourned* to represent the 'epoch of the rabbits,' referring to the festival's fear to display their work (see 44.). In their Facebook album description, they included Antonin Artaud's poem 'The Search of Fecality,' alluding to their intention to employ faeces during their banned performance.



Fig. 44. 'The Era of the Rabbits,' Tunis, 2012. Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile

The second documented rejection came from abroad and was conditioned by the harsh European migration policies alongside the Tunisian government's eagerness to limit its people's mobility. The artists were invited to take part in an event at the Academy of Fine Arts of Vienna, Austria, but one of their members was denied the visa. Therefore, the entire group chose to desert the event and, instead, produce a performance. The performance denied any visual prompt that the present audience could cling to, but was simply a text written in German, English, and Arabic, which was read out loud by members of the public. It was a strong reflection on the centrality of the body and on how it is a constant target of violence, by virtue of its subversive potential. And it drew upon the violence on the bodies made absent through to the xenophobic Euro-centric migration laws:

The body is crucial in its presence to form a political space, to claim the streets in their politicality. The body is present to claim, to demand, to negotiate and to interfere. The body is there to form together with other bodies a multitude of political subjects. If we see politics as a part of life, we have to see the body behind the demands and ideas. This body – in its presence – is a target of violence. It risks to be beaten, arrested, tortured, shot dead. The body has to be present to stand against this threat. It has to act. (Ahl Al Kahf, 2012b)

Moreover, on this occasion, the collective showed to have perfectly understood the hypocrisy of the European Union, whose freedom of movement only regarded its white middle-class citizens and who considered the Arab revolutions only in their capacity to provoke 'new migration and security challenges' (Ibidem.).

By attempting to move abroad, the collective went deeper into a series of new debates surrounding the regimes of mobility and the notion of exile and diaspora, from their significant Tunisian post-revolutionary perspective. This was more clearly expressed in their participation in the project *A Journey of Ideas Across. In dialogue with Edward Said* organized by the *Haus der Kulturen* in Berlin, between October and November 2013. The project united the contribution of Arab and non-

Arab scholars and artists reflecting on the legacy of the Palestinian thinker. The collective developed a parallel street art project around the notions of Orientalism and exile, between Tunis and Berlin. They then filmed and edited the images and added a multi-language text. The video was called *Interpretations of the Exile: from Tunis to Berlin*.<sup>78</sup>

In Tunis, the artists chose to expose Orientalism as ‘a method that keeps existing during our days and takes different shapes adapted to the new colonization.’ They did so by spreading an entire archive of Orientalist depictions of ‘Oriental’ women, objectified in their ‘savage’ exoticism (see Fig. 45), placed in the areas of the city’s transportation hubs, such as the agglomerated node *Le Passage*.



Fig. 45. Tunis, 2013. Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile

On the other hand, in Berlin, where they managed to travel this time, they were offered a wall in Haeckescher Markt in the proximity of Anne Frank’s memorial

<sup>78</sup> Available at <http://journeyofideasacross.hkw.de/out-of-academia-in-places/ahl-al-kahf.html>.

house. Their collages and stencils in Berlin were incredibly dense and multi-layered (see Fig. 46.). There was an emergence of German and English sentences, but Arabic stencilled words and sentences were still present.



Fig. 46. Haeckescher Markt, Berlin, 2013. Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile

The focuses were on exile, which was written in both English and Arabic منفى (*ammunfaa*), and which was alluded to with the presence of the portrait of Hannah Arendt and those of the Palestinian fighters covered by their *kefiahs*. In this case again, the controversial notion of 'terrorism,' which the artists had been deconstructing in Tunisia as well, was associated with art and its contaminatory potential. In fact, they wrote in German: 'Art is dead. Long live the art of terrorism' and 'The role of art is not to communicate but to contaminate' (see Fig. 47.).



*Fig. 47. 'The art is dead. Long live the art of terrorism;' 'The role of art is not to communicate but to contaminate', Berlin, 2013. Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile*

At the same time, Europe's policy of security was criticized. In this regard, an expression written in German stated 'Europe has become a security empire.'



*Fig. 48. 'Europe has become a security empire', Berlin, 2013.*

*Source: Ahl Al Kahf Facebook profile*

If the group's Tunisian production was mainly focused around the notion of resistance, and on its relationship with art, this time the Ahl Al Kahf came full circle, explicating the condition of exile, and connecting it precisely to the reason they chose to be named after the myth of the Cave Sleepers. Their Berlin project made it clear that exile goes beyond a geographical displacement, and is rather a state of unhomeliness that can only be fully embraced through creativity. In fact, one of the quotes, from Victor Hugo, that they impress on the wall is: 'The exile is a sort of long insomnia.' To that they added a broader explanation of the relationship between exile and creativity, in the text accompanying their street art (in Arabic): 'the Ahl Al Kahf's movement idea is to *enact creativity and resistance from within the exile*. The story of the people of the cave, according to the religious mythology, is the story of a group escaped from the unfair sultan into exile to Hiljaoa, namely in a cave' (Ahl Al Kahf, 2012b, my emphasis).

I have so far attempted to provide just *some* hints as to the reason I consider them one of the most influential artistic movement of post-revolutionary Tunisia. They are undoubtedly an artistic *avant-garde*, not only a very sophisticated street art project. They speak of producing 'revolutionary art' as opposed to the eulogic 'art of the revolution' and they stress a non-hierarchical, collective and contagious authorship. In fact, they write 'we would rather paint with children, mad people, tramps, crooks and drunkards of the street,' and 'the only memories we have come from an age when we were Negros, Kurds, Berber tribes or fish swarms' (Ahl Al Kahf, 2012a). The type of art they promote comes from a space of marginality, of silence and develops untimely reflections, which is also why their identity is centred upon the idea of exile, alluded to by the choice of their name. In this sense, I propose that the Ahl Al Kahf practice resonates very much with Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of 'minor literature,' which they developed in their reflection on the practice of Franz Kafka against the backdrop of the Jewish literature in German-speaking Prague (Deleuze; Guattari, 1986). 'A minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language. But the first characteristic of a minor literature is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization' (Idem., 16).

It might sound peculiar to be employing a notion connected to the literary production, especially since the Ahl Al Kahf don't seem to be using a different language from what could be called the dominant, Arabic, or maybe French language if one was to consider the country's colonial past. In fact, the artists are working with an artistic, symbolic language, rather than a verbal one. They speak in the global 'stencil language,' as I have tried to point out. But when they use the verbal language, in their texts for example, then they use an extensive range of 'major languages,' be they Arabic, French, or English and German. So it can be argued that the Tunisian artists operate within a series of major languages, both strictly verbal as well as artistic. Especially if one thinks how 'major' Banksy's stencil language is for global street art.<sup>79</sup>

And yet, they are irreducibly distant from all these forms of being-major in so far as they are constantly connected to formations of becoming-minor, which they seem animated by, both at home and abroad. They somehow embrace, with their art, extensive spaces destined to be silenced and deemed as 'inaudible:' the independent artists, the poor, the migrants, the refugees. In a word, all the exiled.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, minor literature holds three main characteristics. First, it deterritorialises language, bringing about a 'neutralization of sense' (Idem., 21), and short-circuiting its symbolic, significant usage; making it 'vibrate with a new intensity' (Idem., 19)). Secondly, it connects the individual to a political immediacy. And finally, it results into a collective assemblage of enunciation, therefore making visible that 'the most individual enunciation is a particular case of collective enunciation' (Idem., 83).

In this sense, O'Sullivan has productively worked on how the notion of 'minor literature' can be applied to the artistic field and has developed the concept of 'minor art practice' (O'Sullivan, 2005). Just like Ahl Al Kahf's practice, minor art is not dialectic as such, but it rather 'produc(es) movement from within the major.'

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<sup>79</sup> I speak here of the globally shared language of stencils, and the employment of the term *language* might seem to go against my previous focus on non-signifying semiosis rather than semiology, that I develop in Chapter One and Two, mainly drawing from Guattari and Lazzarato. Yet the stencil language is not in opposition with my previous focus because despite its discursive consistency, and whether or not it can be associated to practices of representation, it is fundamental in order to understand the event of the revolution since it operates as a counter-hegemonic way of organising meaning and contagious affects. This precise aspect will be the focus of the first two sections of Chapter Five, in which I will introduce the notion of *mediation*.

Most significantly, movement is the very constitutive feature of becoming-minor, since the major or molar basically refers to an instance of ‘immobilization of becoming.’<sup>80</sup> In fact, O’Sullivan points out, ‘becoming minor art is deterritorializing forms that have become fixed’ (Ibidem): such as political and artistic institutions. The practice of the Tunisian artists abandons the canvas and escapes into the streets, which it attempts to contaminate with their ‘aesthetic terrorism.’ The group’s work resonates significantly with O’Sullivan’s understanding of minor art. Firstly, the collective focuses mainly on the interventions within the local, like in their Mezzouna project, in which they drew upon Mhadheb Sboui’s work. Secondly, they use not specifically artistic materials, including any object present on site. They fight against commodification, by making their ephemeral art available to their poorest fellow citizens. The works often concentrate a lot on the level of affects, which they try to stir up and make viral, rather than conveying a highly articulated discursive message. Finally, they push against the edges of representation, by often employing humour as a strategy of both propelling dissent and pushing towards the invention of new behaviours.

The most important feature of minor art is that it both negates *and* creates since it is ‘involved in the production of new subjectivities as well as in turning away those already in place.’ It, therefore, puts in practice both a politics of dissent as well as a politics of affirmation, both critique and creativity. ‘It might well speak to an already constituted audience (no doubt a small one) but at the same time it speaks from a future place in order to draw forth from its audience subjectivity still to come (a subjectivity in progress),’ ‘always at a different speed to those discourses of disciplines that attempt to track it’ (Ibidem).

Ahl Al Kahf’s minor art does just that. First of all, it develops within a parallel temporality, similar to that of the martyr visionaries of the Cave, who were ahead of their times. But it also declines that sense of irreducible distance from one’s homeliness, by claiming exile to be the constitutive dimension of their creativity. Secondly, the collective questions the ossified regimes of power, such as the

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<sup>80</sup> As Deleuze points out:

The difference between minorities and majorities isn’t their size. A minority may be bigger than a majority. What defines a majority is a model you have to conform to. A minority, on the other hand, has no model, it’s a becoming, a process. (Deleuze, 1990: 173)

gerontocratic Tunisian leading class and its art circuit financed by state propaganda or by the Orientalist foreign donors. It deconstructs the abusive power of dictatorship supported by the media and by its police apparatus. It restlessly disturbs the appeasing eulogic image of the revolution and calls forth the active pursuers of social justice, the 'second' Tunisia: those ones tirelessly fighting for their dignity against the neoliberal post-independence régime supported by the 'democratic' Western powers. And yet, while they make their art vehicle of this fearless and risky critique, they employ poetry, they write minor histories with the children of the *hwem* and contaminate the public space with laughter, through their ironic stencils and wordplays. In this sense, they promote new modes of life based on collaboration, listening and a strong coalition with the past's poets, martyrs, freedom fighters, and with 'children, mad people, tramps, crooks and drunkards of the street' alongside 'Negros, Kurds, Berber tribes or fish swarms' (Ahl Al Kahf, 2012a).

The collective's practice has been crucial for this research for two reasons. First, because it provided an interaction with, rather than a representation of, the revolution that made visible a whole range of assemblages and conflicts most of the narratives would conceal. Second, because it thematised the strong coalition that some artists had articulated with the group of marginalized Tunisian citizens who have pioneered the 2011 Dignity revolution. As I will explain in Chapter Five (in section 5.4. *Relation*), the revolution itself resulted out of the alliance between two very courageous and productive vanguards, one of which is represented by the likes of the Ahl Al Kahf collective. In the following section I will continue the reflection on the political subjectivity brought to fore by the revolutionary event, hypothesising some of the ways in which identity is formed in the context of the Tunisian underclass, but also suggesting the concept of *vanguard* as a suitable way to account for how this political subjectivity enacts forms of transformative politics.

### 4.3. The Vanguard. The Body that Questions the Territory or the Mutiny of the Reserve Army

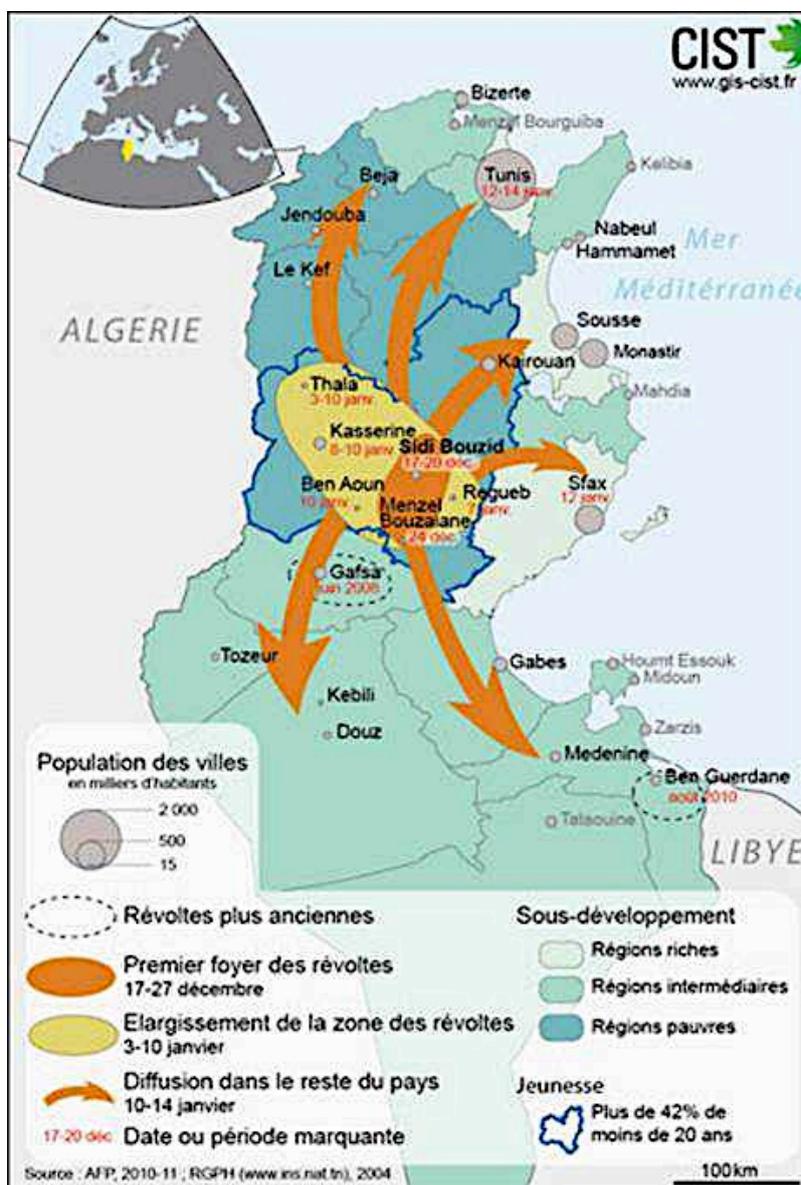
Throughout this research, I have been struggling with the difficulty and the politics of naming. I have criticized the Orientalist implications of the narrative accompanying the Arab Spring discursive configuration, I have wondered whether the Western words *revolution* and *resistance* still have a grip on contemporary explosions of *rebellion*, as opposed to ثورة *al-thawra*, مقاومة *muqawama*, or الانتفاضة *intifada*.

And I tried to show that it isn't only a matter of shifting languages, but also a matter of shifting lineages of resistance and their minor histories while abandoning the patterns of understanding that too many Western observers believe they can still employ in explaining and evaluating instances of non-Western resistance. Just like this text occasionally chooses to embrace the graphic presence of Arabic characters, which I still cannot fully grasp, the interaction with, rather than the understanding of, resistance is also a matter of surrendering to the unknown sound and image of it.

In the previous chapter, I attempted to approach the class aspect of the Tunisian revolution closer. I have started from the assumption that the event was *neither* the result of the mobilization of the Internet-savvy middle-class bloggers and artists *nor* of a depoliticized generic 'youth' using peaceful methods to achieve Western-like democracy. The revolution was anything but peaceful and its initiators, anything but depoliticized, although most of them had grown up in a country where any political expression was met with instant state repression.

I have also referred to them as the underclass, *Lumpenproletariat* (Rizk, 2014), or 'mob' (Aradau & Huysmans, 2009), while describing how they have altered their identity through mobility practices, becoming either *harraga* in Europe or Islamic militants fighting in Syria and Iraq. The class-based frame struggles to embrace their fluidity, but it is important to point out that these people live beneath the proletarian living standards, if the proletarians are to be identified as people with a job. The 'underclass' or the 'mob,' therefore, gets by thanks to small family farming, informal economy, and illegalised migration. Here I mostly refer to the under- and unemployed people, most of whom are very young – as shown in the

illustration below, living in the poor cities of the West, South, and centre and in the suburbs of the rich cities, mostly the capital (see 49.).



*Fig. 49. This map shows how the most underprivileged, but also the youngest population is concentrated in the centre-Western part of the country, where the revolution broke and where protests keep emerging constantly.*

*Source: CIST, France.*

But there is more to this category of people than just their desperate economic precarity and the courage to sacrifice their bodies when challenging a dictatorial police state or the deadly European migration laws. In this sense, while making visible the limits of the class aspect of the revolution, I will no longer employ the

term underclass, because I find the evaluation of insufficient political consciousness subtended to this approach ungenerous and deceptive.<sup>81</sup> The same can be said about employing the term 'mob,' born out of the 18<sup>th</sup> century's urban unrests and bearing an extensive derogatory tradition throughout the English-speaking world.

In fact, in the previous chapter, I chose to start with a revisited notion of 'mob,' drawing from the important work of Huysmans and Aradau, because I wanted to show the irreducible criminalization that the mob was a result of and, despite that, the way this group managed to forcibly 'enter the political process and accede to equality,' while expanding the notion of the political outside its rigidly institutional boundaries (Aradau; Huysmans, 2009: 603). I have, therefore, chosen to associate the different overlapping flows of struggle, namely the revolutionaries, the *harraga*, and the Islamists as coming from the dimension of the 'mob', which each group was related to in different terms.<sup>82</sup> This provisional term of 'mob' will be used until I am able to develop an alternative one, which can make visible yet more folds of the political practices inhabiting or crossing the Tunisian territory.

In this sense, it is important to point out that many (such as Marzouki; Aliriza, 2015) have identified the revolutionary achievements to be determined by the existence of an extensive trade union infrastructure, namely the UGTT, the general union of the Tunisian workers, also supported by its students' union, the UGET). Basically, implying that the trade union, which was not the carrier of particularly radical politics - especially since it managed to survive during the dictatorship - significantly organized the revolution, that was also a result of long-lasting previous labour struggles, such as the Gafsa mining basin Intifada in 2008.

Against the 'highest rates of unemployment in the world across recent decades,' and the reaction to Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation, Gilbert Achcar explains, 'the UGTT started organizing roaming general strikes, in one region after another. The day that Ben Ali fled Tunisia, January the 14<sup>th</sup>, 2011, is actually the day when the strike reached the capital. So, The UGTT was, in fact, the real organizer of the

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<sup>81</sup> This also resonates with the hierarchisation of the social vs. the political revolution, which I've previously addressed as misleading.

<sup>82</sup> I have here left out the important category of the Sub-Saharan refugees, whose political operations are maybe even more courageous and impressive, both within and beyond the Tunisian borders, given the additional racism they are subjected to.

uprising in Tunisia' (Achcar, 2015). The intervention of the union was certainly crucial, and yet, its action could have been presented in a more nuanced manner. In fact, the 2008 Gafsa Intifada was partially pursued *against* a corrupt wing of the trade union, which directly managed the nepotistic hiring process of the outsourced staff. Also, it is extensively reported that the trade union had only started to publicly support the riots started in Sidi Bouzid after the three bloodiest days of state repression that shook the city of Kasserine, where 60 people were killed in less than three days (in the 8-11<sup>th</sup> of January period) (Cantaloube, 2011). Only *then* did the union reach a general consensus on initiating the general strike. And by that time the capital's poorest suburbs: Ettadhamen, al-Entilaka and el-Mnihla, were already synchronized with the riots from the South and had organized the first anti-Ben Ali demonstration, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of January 2011 (Lamloum, 2016: 9). This is to say the revolution wasn't so much 'organized' as such by the trade union, but rather that the trade union joined a revolutionary wave originated from the self-organized sectors of the society, which by virtue of their condition had little previous contact with the trade union.<sup>83</sup>

In this sense, my claim is that neither the trade union nor the middle-class bloggers and artists organized the revolution. Its process was rather initiated by one of the most vulnerable sectors of the society, the impoverished young urban and suburban people. They were then fortunately joined by the aforementioned groups of the Tunisian society, which turned the riots into a mass popular movement that managed to topple the dictatorship.

Why is it so important to acknowledge the alliance-based nature of the revolutionary process? First of all, because it makes visible groups of marginalized peoples, who are too often deemed as 'inaudible.' More precisely, the peasants, the Berbers, the poorest inhabitants of rural Tunisia, but, most importantly, their sons and daughters who agglomerate the metropolitan peripheries and started the revolution.

Second, being aware of the alliance also provides elements to understand how politics re-articulates in the absence of unity between the middle-class and the popular groups. In this sense, the absence of alliance can be conditioned and

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<sup>83</sup> Except for maybe the unemployed graduates, who had organized themselves in a trade union, the UDC, the union of the graduate unemployed in 2007.

therefore represents an efficient anti-revolutionary 'protection,' which various state apparatuses employ.

Finally, knowing what an alliance or coalition can lead to is also an encouragement to the practice of converging with other people's interests and sensibilities, across the class line. It indicates the symbiosis between groups holding differential degrees of disposability as a possible path towards revolutionary becoming.

Although I have declared suspicion with regards to the Marxian understanding of *Lumpenproletariat* and the very reflection based on a rigid conception of social classes, there are elements in the first book of the *Capital*, which certainly shed additional light on the assemblages I am looking into. It is mostly in his disquisition on the British colonies and the industrial reserve army, that Marx develops assumptions, which I find very relevant to the Tunisian setting. More precisely, in the passages in which the scholar illustrates how existential precarity is produced and valorised by the capitalist mode of production.

Although written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Marx's words easily resonate with the systematic dispossession enacted by the French colonists who forcibly pulverized the Tunisian *fellaga's* subsistence, but also with the way the neoliberal and post-independence appropriation drive have later produced poverty by either imposing 'structural adjustments' or through the extensive system of bribes inflicted upon all the economic activities, both formal and informal, in the name of the *halibat al-dawla*, the 'prestige of the state' (Marzouki; Aliriza, 2015). Marx stresses the centrality of dispossession - here referred to the colonial primitive accumulation - insofar as:

The development of the social productive power of labour, co-operation, division of labour, use of machinery on a large scale, are impossible without the expropriation of the labourers, and the corresponding transformation of their means of production into capital. In the interest of the so-called national wealth, he seeks for artificial means to ensure the poverty of the people. (Marx, [1867] 2015: 549)

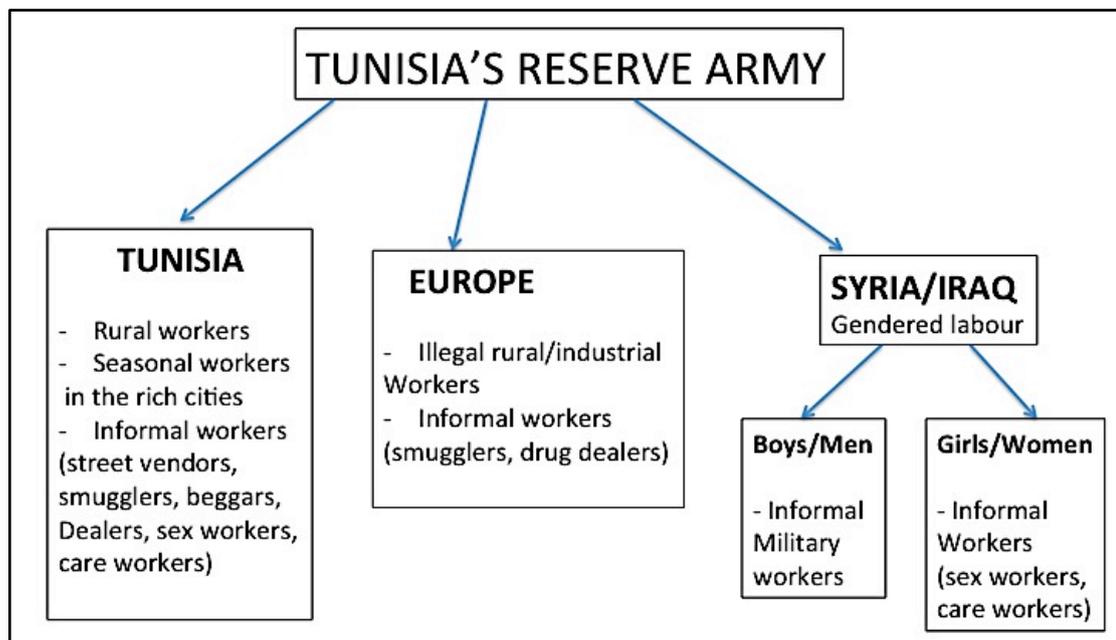
What the German thinker calls the 'industrial reserve army' is precisely the result of this crucial process of dispossession or expropriation, one that deprives people of their subsistence and ties them irreducibly to their relationship with capital, under the form of a salary and some retributed activity. As such, the industrial reserve army is a 'mass of human material always ready for exploitation (...) that belongs to capital quite as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost' (Idem., 444). The starving reserve army of unemployed people is, therefore, not a calamity or the 'collateral damage' of an economic system, but its very essence, since 'the whole form of modern history depends (...) upon the constant transformation of a part of the labouring population into unemployed or half-employed hands' (Idem., 445). This is also a necessary condition of the general movements of wages. As a consequence

during the periods of stagnation and average prosperity, (it) weights down the active labour-army; during the periods of over-production and paroxysm, it holds its pretensions in check. The relative surplus population is, therefore, the pivot upon which the law of demand and supply of labour works. It confines the field of action of this law within the limits absolutely convenient to the activity of exploitation and the domination of capital. (Idem., 447-448)

In Marx's vision, the way to counter this productive impoverishment and reciprocally-conditioning exploitation - of the over-worked workers threatened to become jobless and of the jobless relegated to 'forced idleness' - is through the organisation of a 'regular *co-operation between employed and unemployed*' (Idem., 448, my emphasis). This is a very spot-on description of what the Tunisian Dignity revolution managed to achieve, temporarily nullifying the barriers between two types of workers: the ones bearing a recognized labour status and the ones being exploited by the informal circuits and, from a certain perspective, deemed unemployed.

In fact, even after the revolution, the industrial reserve army has gone back to its everyday battle for survival, this time exploring two new exploitative destinations, as an addition to the traditional internal migration towards the capital for work. Firstly, the migration to Europe, for those lucky enough to survive the trip and escape deportation. Secondly the migration towards the Islamic battlefronts in Syria and Iraq. In this sense, the Tunisian disenfranchised continued to engage in non-recognized forms of labour, including smuggling, substance trade, military labour, alongside sex and care work in highly risky environments such as the militarized Islamic communities in Syria and Iraq.

Below, I have tried to list some of the forms of labour that the reserve army has lately resorted to (see Fig. 50.).



*Fig. 50. Some forms of the informal labour of the Tunisian reserve army, 2016.*

This suggests a historical stratification of expropriation technologies, which have preyed upon the territory and the people's resources throughout the past more than two centuries. It started with the French colonization that severed the symbiotic survival relationship between the sedentary and the nomad groups, and ended with the contemporary regime of Ben Ali, who was only the last example of a deadly 'negotiation between international oligarchy and national plutocracy' (Marzouki; Aliriza, 2015), with all its implications.

As I have suggested with the diagram above, this research not only reflects where this surplus population has come from, but also where it chose to move towards, in the legitimate attempt to gain its dignified livelihood. In what follows I want to briefly reflect on two of the reserve army's destinations, namely the urban peripheries of the capital and the battlefields in Iraq and Syria.

#### 4.3.1. The *asabiyyat* of the *houma*<sup>84</sup>

This reflection starts off with the work of Ibn Khaldun. He was a scholar of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, born in Tunis and considered among the founding fathers of sociology, historiography, demography and economics with his work, *The Muqqadimah*, literally the 'Introduction' (Khaldun, [1377] 1969), in which he attempts to develop an understanding of the logic or sense of universal history.<sup>85</sup> Ibn Khaldun's work is informed by a method of research very receptive to the conditions on the ground, which he largely explored thanks to his numerous travels, in his capacity of chamberlain, secretary, ambassador, and advisor. He believed the group, not the individual, to be 'history's focal point and determining factor' (Katsiaficas, 1999). He drew a line between the nomadic human groups inhabiting the rural environment – most precisely the mountains, the hills, and the valleys – and opposed them to the peoples who have become sedentary and organized into urban settlements. He argued that the nomadic peoples faced with extreme survival necessities – especially the ones inhabiting the desert, like the Berber camel breeding communities – develop a particular social bond, an *esprit de group*, an intense solidarity which makes them perfect warriors. Ibn Khaldun calls this group sense of belonging and commitment *عصبية*, *asabiyya*.

On the other side, the sedentary peoples progressively see the *asabiyya* erode, while they delegate the survival activities to other groups and become increasingly inter-dependent and tied to their territory. This is why their defence is often delegated to the nomadic warrior peoples. Moreover, the nomads' *asabiyya* accompanied by the propelling force of the ideology of Islam, is what,

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<sup>84</sup> I have chosen here to focus on the unemployed and underemployed population of the capital, as an example. But important groups for the revolution also reside in the rural environment and the other poorer cities of the country.

<sup>85</sup> He is allegedly the first intellectual to have written about the philosophy of history, preceding Giambattista Vico.

according to Khaldun, allowed the nomad Bedouins to grow into an empire. At least until they too ran out of the group solidarity, which sustained their rise.

In this sense, the *asabiyya* corresponds to group cohesion. I have, in fact, quoted it in reference to the sense of belonging to certain clans or tribes. When referred to the nomad peoples, it probably regards groups who have been in the past characterized by specific and common technologies of mobility. The same can be said of the *harraga* in the contemporary age, whose very identity is defined by their mobility towards the North. *Asabiyya* can, in fact, be viewed as a social cohesion indicator of particular categories, across tribal, territorial belonging and social status. In this sense, the working class holds its own internal *asabiyya*, based on its occupation and the capacity to defend it. But what happens when jobs can no longer provide identification, and unemployment takes over as the main identity marker?

Olfa Lamloum, a Tunisian sociologist who looked into the political processes crossing the country's suburbs, argues for the 'emergence of the working-class neighbourhood as the *main platform for collective action* among poor people,' since 'with the erosion of the social bonds formed by work, territory is now the main factor that creates bonds between young people and shapes their social identity' (Lamloum, 2016: 27, my emphasis). Funded by the British charity and NGO International Alert, Lamloum has developed an extensive ethnographic research in 2014 (39 semi-structured interviews, 6 focus groups, 714 questionnaires) in the capital's most populated suburbs, Douar Hicher and Hay Ettadhamen also called *houma* (plural *hwem*), inhabited by around 180 000 Tunisians. Her research focused on understanding the young inhabitants' sensibility towards the revolution, politics and the Salafist phenomenon.

The findings have made visible the multiple layered inequalities that the suburban youth is subjected to. First in terms of social exclusion, because coming from a *houma* automatically means being exposed to precarity and unemployment. Second, in urban terms, since the inhabitants have 'unequal access to the available resources (e.g. leisure, culture, eating/drinking establishments, places where social groups and genders can mix) in these side-lined urban territories' and finally, by means of the stigmatization and discrimination that these citizens are a victim of (Lamloum, 2016: 7). It must be noted that the *houmani*, the inhabitants

of these neighbourhoods, have no interest in representative politics, therefore the revolution has constituted an explosively inclusive moment. 'From the 9<sup>th</sup> of January 2011, onwards, it was through riots that hundreds of these young people entered the world of politics' (Lamloum, 2016: 9). On that occasion 'a mixture of left-wing activist, Islamists, *clochard* Salafists and *zabrata* (literally party goer, can be referred to people smoking cannabis) all came together and joined forces to confront the police and attack symbols of authority' (Lamloum, 2016: 9). After the riots that chased the police out of the neighbourhood and the toppling of the dictatorship, 'young people, even minors, set up self-defence committees, an embryonic form of power structure, which ended up being the only real source of authority in the two neighbourhoods for over five months (Lamloum, 2016: 10).

This proves how intense the *asabiyya* of the inhabitants of the *houma* was and how it managed to not only destitute a form of organisation but also create a new one. This violence against instances of authority was also alimeted by the high rate of police brutality in these territories, with police allegedly even sealing off the neighbourhoods during the weekend pre-emptively, against 'potential resurgence of juvenile delinquency,' therefore preventing the *houmani* from reaching the centre of their city (Idem, 11). 'Even after the revolution, the *houma* remained 'excluded from all the benefits of social citizenship (such as health insurance, social protection, community facilities), and deprived of access to cultural or leisure infrastructures' (Idem, 12).

As an answer to this political and social marginalization, the *hwem* have often organized around religion. The *Movement de la tendance islamique*, a predecessor of the moderate Islamic party, Ennahda, was, in fact, born in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen in the '80s (Idem, 16). Moreover, the revolution has also seen the rise of a radically conservatory type of Islamic activism, that of the Salafist movement, who literally advocate for the return to original Islam practices, to the *salaf*, the 'predecessors', the 'ancestors.' The Salafis organized in associations such as *Ansar Al-Sharia*, literally 'the partisans of the Sharia law', declaredly involved in charity work and preaching.

But, unlike the state, which put the organization on the national terrorist list in 2013 after attacks that they were allegedly connected to, the inhabitants of the suburbs don't perceive Salafists as a threat. On the contrary, they occasionally

accept being advised and oriented by these young people when violent conflicts arise between rival groups or tribes within the *houma* because many *houmani* see the Salafists as devoted to moral integrity as a religious mission (22). The inhabitants draw a line between the 'bad' Salafists, represented by the *mutashaddid* (the 'extremists') or the *irhabi* ('terrorists') and the *awlad al-salafiyya* (the 'children of Salafism'), who they see as *ouled houma*, 'kids from the suburbs.' Most importantly, they are perceived as sharing their same 'daily existence full of obstacles, difficulties, hardship and uncertainty' (Idem., 20-1). In fact, 64% of the respondents rejected the idea that Salafism wants to impose the Sharia Law (Idem., 20). And nevertheless, 80% of those same people knew somebody in their neighbourhood who went to Syria. This suggests that the majority of the 7-8000 foreign fighters of the Islamic State are actually coming from those same marginalized suburbs (Idem., 24).

This brings me to the second destination of the Tunisian reserve army. It can be suggested that this paramilitary organisation can be regarded as an instance of 'corporate terrorism,'<sup>86</sup> which has absorbed vital unemployed labour force in the region, while neutralizing the radical potential unleashed by the revolutionary process.

Adam Hanieh, among others, explains the relationship between the Arab revolutions and the consolidation of the Islamist groups, as the latter stepping into the vacuum created by the former, therefore as an ultra-conservatory militarism suffocating the new Arab Left. Rather than seeing the 2011 Arab revolutions as a mere opposition of democracy vs. dictatorship, their causes are 'deeply connected to forms of capitalism in the region: decades of neoliberal economic restructuring, the impact of global crises, and the ways in which Arab countries were governed by autocratic police and military regimes long backed by Western powers' (Hanieh, 2015).

Beyond the Islamic State's eschatology, based on utopic religious authenticity and the employment of the brutality meme as a deterrent (Ibidem.), the radical Sunni organization is the result of a complex assemblage of responsibilities of foreign states. Namely the American de-Baathification of Iraq in 2003, with the

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<sup>86</sup> I employ the term 'corporate,' mainly in order to draw attention on the impressive economic articulation of the organization.

imposition of the Shia rule (backed by Iran), the repression and exclusion of the Sunnis (many of the Islamic State's generals having met in the American camps of Abu Ghraib and Bucca), alongside the sympathy of important states such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which facilitate the smuggling of oil and foreign fighters across the borders (Burke, 2015). In addition, the historical roots of the Islamic fundamentalism can be traced back to the 'alliance between the US and the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia, through the 1960s and the 1970s' (Hanieh, 2016).

Moreover, it must be said that religious ultra-conservatism and sectarianism<sup>87</sup> have been largely promoted by Western and Arab powers, as a counterweight against the progressive emancipatory popular movements. In fact

Faced with growing left-wing and nationalist political movements in the region, the sponsorship of Islamism was seen as an effective and disarming counterweight. By the 1980s, this policy was applied most systematically through the US and Saudi support for Arab Islamist fighters in Afghanistan. It was here that preparations for armed *jihad* received their first practical boost (Ibidem.).

More recently, Islamic sectarianism, between Sunni and Shia, was also employed by the Syrian president Bashar Al Assad as an 'antidote' to the revolution that shook his regime.

A few months into the uprising, Assad released hundreds of prisoners (among them well-trained

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<sup>87</sup>This is the suggestive definition of sectarianism provided by the Marxist scholar and activist, Mahdi Amel, reworked by Hanieh:

Sectarianism is a modern technique of political power, a means through which ruling classes attempt to establish their legitimacy and social base while fragmenting the potential for any kind of popular opposition. Post-invasion Iraq and the subsequent rise of ISIS provide a tragic confirmation of this thesis. (Hanieh, 2016)

jihadists), many of whom became leaders and fighters in Islamic fundamentalist groups. Former high-ranking Syrian intelligence agents have claimed that this was a deliberate attempt by the regime to stoke sectarian discord and paint the uprising in an Islamist light (Ibidem.).

This way 'when Assad attacked the protestors, they turned to the Islamist groups such as *Jabhat al Nusra* ('the support front for the people of Syria')' (Ibidem.). This means that there is a complex weaving of rivalries, both sectarian and not, that Tunisian fighters are exposed to when reaching the front. How can one place the same underprivileged subjectivities I've previously spoken about, the young unemployed men coming from the capital's *houma* or poorer cities of the country<sup>88</sup> within this over-layered sectarian conflict? How can the same people who have initiated the toppling down of a dictatorship or who fight for their dignity in Europe (despite their deportability), also become involved in such a deadly military occupation?

The answers can only be approximated and are largely similar to what could be argued around Western military service engaged in fighting operations in general, be they under Western or Islamic management. The Islamic State organisation holds one of the most successful propaganda outlets, controlling over 100 000 Twitter accounts, with 50 000 tweets/day selling the 'Islamic dream' (Ibidem). This system is fuelled by an extensive and ever-growing wealth: it owns 9 oil fields in Syria and Iraq worth 1,5 million \$ per day alongside the money coming in from the control of the access and supply routes and from kidnappings, extortions, the sale of antiquities, smuggling and various taxes the organisation imposes (Ibidem).

Therefore part of the answer is connected to the well-spread propaganda of a proposed justice mission against Assad and his crimes, but also with the promise of a Golden Age return to a Muslim dominated caliphate blessed with prosperity and peace, which the region hasn't been enjoying for a long time. As Hanieh puts

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<sup>88</sup> Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, the most rebel cities, where the revolutionary protests were most active, are also the cities where most of the foreign fighters come from.

it, 'in a moment of deep crisis, the promise of some level of security is part of what makes ISIS attractive (or, at the very least, a less-worse option)' (Hanieh, 2016).

Moreover, it must be noted that the pay for an IS fighter is of 300-400\$ per month, which is double than the amount paid by the Iraqi army and way more than any Tunisian *houmani* could hope to earn with some continuity (Idem.). Paradoxically to the mainstream discourse, some thinkers suggest that 'without the political integration of Islamism, the people of the region will never free themselves from the dictatorships that promote themselves to counter it, nor from the Islamism itself which finds legitimation against them' (Alba Rico, 2016b).

In my understanding, corporate terrorism is a way of conserving and accelerating the movement of dissent, which emerged in the Tunisian Dignity revolution, and in the other popular movements in the region. The goal of this capture is not only that of blocking the movement towards emancipation of the poorer categories, but, on the contrary, that of possibly increasing their discontent and frustration, in order to be able to extract value out of their affective energy, by using the frustration linked to impoverishment and marginalization as a leverage for military labour. Essentially, the military system capitalizes upon the frustration, the desire for freedom and for independence. In this case, corporate terrorism has both contributed to providing a relief valve for much of the dissent of the disenfranchised, while, simultaneously supporting the marvellous functioning of a million dollar economic enterprise based on insignificant salaries. In order to further illustrate the functioning of this operation of capture and value extraction, I will be employing Deleuze and Guattari's work on the war machine (Deleuze; Guattari, 1980).<sup>89</sup>

Drawing from Ibn Khaldun's appreciation of the nomadic tribes, the French thinkers explain the alternation between a form of cohesion based on a strong solidarity (the *asabiyya*) as opposed to the established state apparatus whose main goal is appropriation. The two dimensions, war, and state, machine and

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<sup>89</sup> The forms of value that I refer to here are multiple. There is the monetary value, of course, the one connected to the corporate dimension of the organization and to the way the motivation of the rank and file militants - its main labour force - is indirectly proportional to the expense they represent. Yet this monetary value and the manpower also translates in terms of an important political and geopolitical leverage in the region and globally, considering the traction and media omnipresence of the brand of this organization.

apparatus, are opposite and yet constantly confront and occasionally challenge each other, in ways I will discuss in what follows.

#### The war machine

Unties the bond as he betrays the pact. He brings a furor to bear against sovereignty, a celerity against gravity, secrecy against the public, a power against sovereignty, a machine against the apparatus. He bears witness to another kind of justice, one of incomprehensible cruelty at times, but at others of unequalled pity as well (because he unties bonds). (Idem.: 411)

In this sense, I see the Tunisian revolutionary youth as a war machine, which has spread the smooth space with its practice: by burning down police and party headquarters, by subverting established authorities and self-managing its own neighbourhoods, alongside migrating from one city to the capital with their demands. The authors explain that

Each time there is an operation against the State – insubordination, rioting, guerrilla warfare, or revolution as act – it can be said that the war machine has revived, that a new nomadic potential has appeared, accompanied by the reconstitution of a smooth space or a manner of being space as though it were smooth. (Idem.: 450)

The Islamic State organization, on the other hand, is an instance of massive capture and appropriation of a war machine on behalf of a very peculiar type of state. Since ‘the State has no war machine of its own; it can only appropriate one in the form of a military institution,’ but ‘one that will continually cause it problems’ (Idem., 413). Deleuze and Guattari’s text holds a significant metaphor for this capture, in the comparison between the hunting and the breeding of animals. Rather than neutralizing the dissenting energy, the state capitalizes upon it for its purposes, like the human being capitalizes on the movement of certain

animals. 'Whereas in the hunt the hunter's aim was to arrest the movement of wild animality through systematic slaughter, the animal breeder (sets about) conserving it, and, by means of training, the rider joins with this movement, orienting it and provoking its acceleration' (Idem.: 462).

If I were to hypothesize a recent lineage of war machines in Tunisia, I would start with the resistance of the Berbers, I would continue with the struggle of the *fellaga* against the colonists, and I would end with the young reserve army, the surplus population who has inflamed the streets with its riots and has crossed the Mediterranean, challenging the European border imperialism (Walia, 2012). Each and every one of these groups – the Berbers, the anti-colonial *fellaga*, the revolutionaries and the *harraga* – holds a degree of subversive nomadism which different state apparatuses - such as the French colonialist 'military authority,' the Benalst state, the migration restrictions of the European Union – attempted to neutralize. In this sense, the war machine is a theoretical device that allows two fundamental gestures of thought. The first one it helps to connect the lineage of revolt back to the pre-independence practices of organisation enacted by the peoples inhabiting the Tunisian territory. In other words, the concept of war machine makes it easy to look back to some examples of resistance against the 'forces of striation,' namely those drives of the state apparatus who attempt to turn a smooth into a striated - organized, dominated - space (Idem., 485). On the other side, the same concept accounts for the way components of the war machine-like political body are appropriated by the State and other striating compositions: either under the form of institutional and paramilitary state-funded police or in the rank and file of corporate instances of terrorism such as the IS.

It must also be clear that the war machine doesn't focus on war alone. Rather, the goal of the nomadic war machine is to 'occupy and hold a smooth space' (Idem., 478). In fact, 'when the State apparatus appropriates the war machine, (it) subordinates it to its "political" aims, and gives it war as its direct object' (Idem., 489). In this sense, what the Tunisian revolutionaries enacted with their protests, both in the Tunisian cities and the Italian detention centres, for instance, is not war. It is more an existential guerrilla, by virtue of which they made their own existences visible, using their bodies as means and occasionally destroying them.

In the 2008-16 period that I am looking at though, the military institutions, namely the type of war machines appropriated by the different states, are somewhat different from what Deleuze and Guattari described in 1980. And so is the state as such, which became a vessel of different forces of striation. On a military level, one has to now account not only for the Tunisian national police and army forces but also for many other formations. Such are the paramilitary forces, like the unmarked snipers, *baltaghia* or the ex-convicts supported by the state to perpetrate their repression, all-present during the revolution. Moreover, there are the Islam-inspired militias, like the moral police, alongside the different range of Islamic militancy organizations. There are also numerous compositions of power, which operate above the state, such as the EU, NATO, or the militia controlled territories.

I, therefore, argue that the 'mob' or the reserve army held a war machine-like function inside the urban territory with a capacity to produce smooth space as a voice enacting a strong critique against the paradigm of the Benalst state, given its neoliberal-driven destitution and the centrality of police brutality. At the climax of the revolutionary process, the poorest Tunisians, in fact, are no longer compliant with the ritual of obedience and make all the contradictions and exhausting consequences of the neoliberal/police driven state visible.

In fact, much like Deleuze and Guattari explain, when the Tunisian revolutionaries understandably abandon the struggle and choose to work on the battlefield, war becomes a primary function of the war machine as the state captures it. It is the state's way of turning the war machine back against the nomads (Idem., 287). What appears difficult is to make clear what type of state is the IS and in what relationship does it lie with the Tunisian state and the other regional and Western powers. I have tried to briefly outline this previously, showing how the militarized state apparatus of this organization is recognized for its potential of neutralizing any progressive popular movement in the region, given its ultra-conservatory reactionary politics. For the sake of clarity, being a counterweight to the post-Arab Spring anti-imperialist Arab Left is just one of the reasons why this organization receives support from other states. In fact, it is also inscribed in the lineage of the collaboration between East and West on the project of Islamic fundamentalism as a barrier for the left wing and nationalist

movements, which was developed in the '60 and '70s by the US and the Gulf States, and in the '80s in Afghanistan (Hanieh, 2016).

Moreover, Deleuze and Guattari also take into consideration what occurs at a global level, when total war becomes the object of an extensive war machine. They explain how this can result in the figure of fascism or the figure of postfascism, to which, they argue, historical instances of fascism are just 'rough sketch(es)'. The former 'makes war an unlimited movement with other aim than itself;' the latter, more significantly, 'is a war machine that takes peace as its object directly, as *the peace of Terror or Survival*' (Idem., 490). The idea expressed by the term *postfascism* is particularly relevant because it resonates both with the French colonial 'military authority,' who forcibly sedentarized the Tunisian nomads with the aim to offer them a *peaceful, secure* environment to be working in, but also with the IS propaganda, which promises a return to the Golden Age caliphate, and, more importantly, *stability*.

In this sense, the IS can also be read as a war machine having total war as its object, 'the dominant war of which States themselves are now only parts.' Therefore as not only a state, which has appropriated a war machine but also a war machine that has appropriated a state, the Tunisian one in this case. In fact, war machines, much like lines of flight, cover two poles towards which they can develop. One pole is focused on worldwide organisation and total war (Idem, 491).

The other pole seemed to be the essence; it is when the war machine, with infinitely lower "quantities," has as its object not war but the drawing of a creative line of flight, the composition of a smooth space and of the movement of people in that space. At this other pole, the machine does indeed encounter war, but as its supplementary or synthetic object, now directed against the State and the worldwide axiomatic expressed by the States. (Idem, 491-2)

The difference between these two poles, which feed on each other, is in the way they articulate creation and destruction. The line of flight can either create or turn

into a line of destruction. As a consequence, the plane of consistency can 'constitute itself, even piece by piece' or turn into a 'plan(e) of organization and domination' (Idem, 492).

Does this imply a constitutive political ambiguity of the war machine? Does it mean that war machines can go either way, either liberating and creating, or, organizing and dominating? And that their movements are totally unpredictable? I would argue that this is generally the case.

Yet this is not the case as far as the Tunisian reserve army is concerned, which is the starting point for this reflection on the modulation of war machines. In fact, despite the emigration towards Europe and the IS fronts,<sup>90</sup> in 2015 alone the country was inflamed by 4288 social protests, most of which have had their epicentre in the centre-West of the country (Alba Rico, 2016b).

There was one particular event that has made me reflect on the egalitarian vocation of the 'mob' and its choice to fight for dignity at home. Namely, the protests that broke out in the Western city of Kasserine on the 16<sup>th</sup> of January 2016, when a young unemployed man named Ridha Yahyaoui protested alongside other fellow citizens against their blacklisting and erasure from the employment lists, due to their activism in the students' trade union. Yahyaoui climbed on a light pillar and committed suicide by exposing himself to the high voltage electricity.

What follow[ed] can be seen as the copy of the class-based mapping of the 2011 protests: following the same paths of contagion, with differential speeds, the rebellion spread out, first around Kasserine and then in the neighbouring regions (Sidi Bouzid, Thala, El Kef, Jendouba, then Kairouan) until it reached the suburbs of the capital, Hay Ettadhamen and Intilaka on Thursday night [the suicide happened on Saturday]. (Ibidem)

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<sup>90</sup> I should make it clear that my assumptions are somewhat approximated. In the sense that Europe and the Eastern fronts are privileged destinations for the poorer Tunisians, but this trend doesn't exclude also a broad participation of middle-class Tunisians to the Islamic militancy project, for example. Other, more qualified, Tunisians also chose to emigrate towards Gulf countries.

Yet there were several differences in comparison to the 2011 revolutionary process. This time, after five years, unemployment and corruption had increased. In addition, the authorities had learned the lesson on violent repression and mostly focused on low intensity repression, such as arrests, fines, and detention, accusing the protestors of terrorist infiltrations and of 'forming gangs and inciting to disorder,' rather than shooting at them like the Benalst state had done five years before. Unfortunately, few local and global observers recognized the authenticity of the protests for fear of the terrorist threat. This also worked as the government's legitimation for not addressing the protestors' demands, but rather for limiting their mobility and for detaining them.

Finally, the most important difference was that this time the Tunisian trade union didn't express solidarity and didn't join the popular movement, destining it to fade away, while its members got individually pursued and worn off by state repression.



*Fig. 51. 28 years old Ridha Yahyaoui killed himself on a light pillar protesting in front of the Kasserine governorate. The banner says: #We are all Ridha Yahyaoui #Employment is a right. Source: Tunisia Red*

After Ridha's suicide and the expansion of the protests in other cities and the capital's suburbs, one of the collective actions that were taken was the occupation

with tents of the *wilaya*, the Prefecture of the city of Kasserine, carried out by two hundred unemployed citizens (Sana, 2016) (see Fig. 52).



*Fig. 52. Wajdi Khardaoui, 27 years old, no graduation, is the charismatic spokesperson of the movement of unemployed people of Kasserine. While he is being photographed, a struggle comrade hands him a baguette and says: "This way, we follow-up on both the Bread riots and the revolution!" Wajdi was too young to have taken part in the Bread riots in 1984 when Kasserine rose up against the decision to increase the bread price, therefore, starving the poorest among Tunisians. But in December 2010 and in January 2011, when this part of Tunisia rose up and initiated the 'Jasmine revolution,' Wajdi took part in all the demos. Some friends of his fell under the bullets and became 'martyrs of the revolution.'* (Ibidem. My translation). Source: Mediapart.

Thirteen of the occupiers of the *wilaya* chose to start a hunger strike for employment. To show their determination they sewed their lips and demanded public employment. They were called the 'Kasserine 13'. As Nawfel Nasralli, one of the protesters - who has been unemployed for five years - explains, employment is a luxury few can afford: 'in order to work, one has to pay the corrupt men and

prove one's loyalty towards the State. They talk about freedom. Which freedom? Does freedom feed anyone? The animals, in Europe, are better treated than we are. We want work, a dignified life, that things finally change' (Massaoui, 2016).

I have called these protests a paradox, the *Kasserine paradox*, because they challenge the thesis of the political ambiguity of the 'mob,' according to which the unemployed could easily be revolutionaries one day and oppressive military forces at home or abroad the next day, as Islamic militants. Maybe this is the case in some instances, yet the well-spread poverty based on years of dispossession should then also be acknowledged as a radicalization factor. And still, this assumption of political ambiguity is not applicable to all of the Tunisian reserve army, many of whom don't choose to migrate for work in Syria, but remain in their territories and continue fighting for their dignified livelihood in the complicated post-revolutionary technocratic and securitarian setting.

The Kasserine paradox has helped me develop at least three relevant conclusions: 1) that the national state is just the tip of the iceberg of a complex organisation of power apparatuses; 2) that the term 'mob' should be substituted with a more affirmative term, able to recognize this group's devotion to emancipation politics; and 3) that the Tunisian disenfranchised can only push for a revolutionary change if they are joined by more protected sectors of the society.

First, thinking through the war machine/state apparatuses and the dynamics that the new protests have made visible, it has become clear to me that the disenfranchised Tunisians found themselves challenging a series of state and para-state institutions, engaged in pursuing dispossession and exploitation, such as the national state, but also the Islamic militancy fronts, the international speculators or the European labour market.

In this sense, the Tunisian national state is but an intermediary figure. One based on exclusion, since it is centred on the Sahel urban political community of the Northern cities, and the ex-colonial development of the 'useful' part of Tunisia. The state continues to ignore the vast majority of the rural and ex-industrial settlements and areas of the centre, West and South, whose inhabitants focus on subsistence and informal economy for survival. In other words, the Tunisian state is only based on a minoritarian citizenship and does not include within its project the dignified existence of the majority of its territory, both rural and suburban.

As explained by Ali, a young inhabitant of the *houma* interviewed by Lamloum, 'whether you're a *zatal* (someone who smokes joints), a Salafist, a bricklayer, a painter...no one is relying on the country any more, everyone has to make their own way of life' (Lamloum, 2016: 21). The 'two Tunisias,' of which the revolution is but the most recent expression, are the index of a profoundly exclusionary national project.

So the Tunisian revolutionaries – what I have so far called the 'mob,' or the reserve army, but also all the less visible peasants and inhabitants of the rural environment who live beneath the poverty line – inhabit a space where the state is absent, and is most of the time perceived as taking advantage of people's poverty, both through legal and illegal taxation. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to argue that the country's poorest countryside, cities, and peripheries live under a sort of colonial rule, which is why I have put forward the notion of 'internal colonialism' (Blauner, 1969; Pinderhughes, 2011).

### **The Vanguard and Necroresistance**

The Kasserine paradox and another significant event, namely the killing of Mabrouk Soltani's in November 2015,<sup>91</sup> have pointed out that not all the disenfranchised Tunisians – whether they've taken part in the revolution or not – are attracted by Islamic militancy or other forms of violence upon others.

This is why, based on these recent events, I wanted to substitute the term of 'mob' with one that would leave less doubt as to the conscious radicality of its members' politics. So I have chosen to call these people the 'vanguard.' The patterns of propagation of the category of the vanguard can be thought in terms of contagious resistance, as the diagrams in Chapter Three show, yet later on, in

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<sup>91</sup> On the 16th of November 2015, Mabrouk Soltani, the only supporter of a family of seven, a 16 years old shepherd from Daouar Slatniya, in the governorate of Sidi Bouzid, was beheaded in front of his 14 years old cousin by Islamic militants, who had set their training camp in the Mghila mountains, where Mabrouk brought his sheep. He was killed because he refused to hand over his sheep to them (Marzouk, 2015). Two years later, his brother, who had come back home leaving his job on a construction site in Sfax, was also kidnapped and beheaded by the militants of the Islamic State as a punishment for his non-allegiance towards the organization. This time, the organization also made public a video of the execution (AFP, 2017). These two tragic episodes show the dimension of civil war between the poorest categories of the Tunisian society, but they also reveal the absence of the state in supporting the most vulnerable.

Chapter Five (in section 5.3. *Contagion vs. Resonance*), I will argue how the resistance spreads along lines of the embodied commonality of marginalisation.

My notion of vanguard is emancipated from vanguardism, and although it refers to a group of people, it is inspired by what Nunes has called ‘vanguard-function’, ‘akin to what Deleuze and Guattari call the ‘cutting edge of deterritorialization’ in an assemblage or situation; opening a new direction that, after it has communicated to others, can become something to follow, divert, resist’ (Nunes, 2014: 39). The vanguard is a highly mobile political subjectivity driven by an internal contradiction. It challenges the regime of governmentality, by claiming its life to be valued, while at the same time, employing that same organic life as a political weapon.

I don't intend to draw from the tradition of ‘revolutionary vanguards’ literature, nor affirm a hierarchy of the revolutionary movement based on political education or class-consciousness. On the contrary, my understanding derives directly from the reflection around the Tunisian revolution, where a radical change - the official end of the Ben Ali era - was achieved thanks to an alliance between popular and middle-class groups. In this alliance, the popular groups, the disenfranchised, unemployed of the poor cities and the suburbs, were the vanguard. Without their courage and action, nothing would have changed. By using the notion of vanguard I am acknowledging that these people consciously challenged the most dangerous forms of power and that, rather than any type of superiority, their being-vanguard implied the highest risk, in the frontline against state repression, especially by virtue of their highly disposable existential condition.

The vanguard that I have imagined to refer to the Tunisian revolutionaries is one that continuously puts forward techniques of ‘unruly mobility,’ while inhabiting a space marked by destitution, ‘illegalism and criminalized conducts’ (Tazzioli, 2016). It is the result of a constitutive excess or surplus of the neoliberal post-independence economy; but, by virtue of its very existential precarity, it is also a haunting promise of sedition.

Like Ibn Khaldun’s nomadic groups, the vanguard is animated by a group spirit, an *asabiyya*, which grants it with an impressive capacity to defend and organize militarily. This has been proven during the revolution when the peripheral neighbourhoods were defended and self-organized for five months. The vanguard

has demonstrated the same mobility-based organisation capacity also when it protested in the European detention centres and on the European streets, despite being under the threat of deportation. Like Deleuze and Guattari's creative war machine, the vanguard uses war as a supplementary tool, while also promoting new forms of life, such as social organisation based on solidarity and collaboration, usually put in place during the long occupations (like the Kasbah 1 and 2) and the sieges of the police (such as the siege of Gafsa in 2008).

Finally, the vanguard has a particular relationship with its people's bodies and the way they claim recognition, two inter-connected aspects on which I will be now focusing.<sup>92</sup> First of all, as I already pointed out in the past chapter, the body has been central to the resistance emanated from and crossing the Tunisian territory. The Tunisian vanguard's claims are marked by self-burnt bodies, suicides, sewn lips and eyelids alongside the contagious riot fire devouring the headquarters of authority and the detention centres.

Banu Bargu is a Turkish scholar who has worked on the techniques of protest enacted by the Turkish socialist activists in the '90 against the repression, mainly in the high-security prison. She has mostly focused on the hunger strike, which led to the death of 122 activists in that period, and her work aims to counter the assumption that hunger strike and self-harm are inferiorly respectable political practices. This is also in relation to the Agambenian distinction between *bios* and *zoe*, which Bargu critiques. The debate here unfolds around the interweaving of the political and the biological (like in Esposito, 2013), reflecting on the potentiality of using 'bare life' as a political weapon (Ziarek, 2012; Landzelius, 1999; Aradau, 2004).

Bargu develops Mbembe's notion of necropolitics as opposed to biopolitics and, by looking at the practices of the Turkish activists, she theorizes the notion of *necroresistance* against the neoliberal bio-sovereign assemblage. 'Necroresistance

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<sup>92</sup> For the sake of clarity, it might be worth mentioning again that in my understanding the term 'vanguard' is uniquely derived from the Tunisia setting and is not intended to draw from previous philosophical traditions. By vanguard I refer to the under- and unemployed Tunisians who have *initiated* the revolutionary process in extremely risky situations, and who continue to struggle in Tunisia and in Europe for their lives to be respected, often using their bodies as a political tool. In this sense, while I am aware of Deleuze and Guattari's anti-populist position, I don't intend to oppose 'mob' and vanguard. The latter is my response to the Kasserine paradox; it's my attempt to seek a more affirmative term able to account for the determination of the protagonists of the revolution.

transforms the body from a site of subjection to a site of insurgency, which by self-destruction presents death as a counter conduct to the administration of life. Practices of necroresistance are thus both creative and destructive lines of flight that constantly escape being co-opted into the biosovereign assemblage and destabilize the assemblage itself' (Bargu, 2014: 85).

The biosovereign assemblage refers to a particular interweaving of sovereignty and discipline in which the 'administration of life' is overtaken by 'sovereign decision, while the power of life and death is marshalled in support of life and well-being' (Idem., 52). This is why self-harm and suicidal violence becomes a practice of delegitimizing the power of a state, with 'bodies deny(ing) their state-sponsored mutation into colonial subjects, obedient nationals' (Dabashi, 2011: 9). Not only is the body a significant political tool, but its necroresistance rearticulates the order of the political and an appropriation of agency precisely and paradoxically around biological disposability. 'Necroresistance presents an embodied form of radical critique. Embodied because the biopolitical management of bodies needs resistance from the points of its application. Bodies have become sites of contestation and the vessels of a political intervention' (Bargu, 2015).

It is noteworthy to point out that bodies have been largely and tragically at the forefront of the political activity of the Tunisian vanguard. 'According to the Forum for Economic and Social Rights there have been 4 288 protests and 498 succeeded or attempted suicides in 2015' (Alba Rico, 2016a). The Kasserine 13, namely the group of unemployed men who joined the occupation of the Kasserine Prefecture - after the protests sparked by Ridha Yahyaoui's suicide - and who started a hunger strike for public employment, is one of the most recent examples of Tunisian necroresistance. They took their protest form one step further, sewing their lips (see Fig. 53.-54.); a practice also enacted by Tunisians in the Italian detention centres for migrants in 2011. This is a very significant gesture since it tacitly implies that those ones that they wanted to reach - the authorities, the politicians - wouldn't take their protest seriously. Their sewn lips represent a metaphor of the 'inaudible' voice, but also enforce the causality relation of their potential deaths, suggesting 'if we die, there must be no doubt on who is responsible'.



*Fig. 53. Hunger striker with his lips sewn in front of his tent. 'We just need a job.'*

*Source: Nawaat*



*Fig. 54. 4 of the Kasserine 13 with their lips sewn*

*'**Icham Lebanoui**, 36 years old, not graduated, unemployed man on hunger strike. From the beginning of the movement, he attempted to commit suicide by hanging himself twice. Both times, his comrades saved him. **Taher Labbaoui**, 31 years old, unemployed man on hunger strike. **Mohassen Khadraoui**, 35 years old, with three children, unemployed man on hunger strike. **Fatih Labraoui**, 43 years old, three children, unemployed man on hunger strike. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of January, desperate, he tried to hang himself from the giant Tunisian flag on top of one of the buildings of the Prefecture. He no longer knows how to feed his family.'*

*(Sana, 2016) Source: Mediapart*

In her discussion around Mohamed Bouazizi's gesture of self-immolation, Bargu briefly illustrates the reasons why necroresistance can be associated to counter-hegemonic political practices or counter conducts (to use the Foucauldian term she employs) aimed at emancipation, which is the case the afore-mentioned Kasserine 13. Necroresistance actively works against the 'individual good, self-preservation and the value of life,' which the biosovereign administration of lives is based on. Moreover, suicides, self-immolations or practices of self-harm are attempts to 'make a dent in a *status quo* that appears unchangeable' and occasionally initiate a process of mutation, when the practice spreads to other sectors of the society. But eventually, since necroresistance is mainly individual, it is 'upon the collective to decline it according to a progressive emancipatory politics' (Bargu, 2015). This reflection on the necropolitical modalities of the vanguard ties into the reflection on the underclass and the 'mob' in Chapter Three, in the sense that it's an attempt to reflect on how the political is enacted in settings of high disposability. Furthermore, this focus on necropolitical resistance will be further discussed in the next chapter, in the sections 5.3. and 5.5. with regards to the way politics unfolds within articulations of police states and in relation to practices of political invention. It is important to clarify here that this thesis is faced with two lines of necropolitics based on the case study. One aspect of necropolitics is directly linked to necroresistant gestures and the way they propagate and mobilise, through contagion (and resonance, as I shall theorise in Chapter Five). Another aspect of necropolitics related to the Tunisian revolution is the one connected to the way necropolitics is captured, as I have discussed drawing the parallel between the Islamic militancy on the battlefields of Iraq and Syria and the appropriation theorised by Deleuze and Guattari's as the particularity of the 'state apparatus.' In Chapter Five, I will mainly focus on the first line of necropolitics, namely on the receptive capacities of gestures of necroresistance.

## **Conclusion**

This ambitious chapter has attempted to keep together three different lines of thought originated by three crucial research questions. The first question

regarded the absent or 'inaudible' voices of the revolution, which I identified as rural Tunisia (thanks to Habib Ayeb's work) and the Imazighen. Both the peasants and Tunisia's indigenous population, the Imazighen, shed light on the lineage of dispossession – both colonial and post-independence – that the revolution was a response to. In fact, I argue that the 2011 revolution was a cry against a historical sequence of expropriative and impoverishing gestures from above, the last of which was marked by a convergence between neoliberalism and local oligarchy, both supported by a growing regional inequality.

Moreover, this framework allowed me to acknowledge the importance of the contemporary metropolitan suburb – the *houma* – as a direct result of historical dispossession, but also as the location of a new sense of belonging and of emancipatory politics.

The second question regarded the practice of the Ahl Al Kahf collective, which I've read in terms of minor art. With their interventions – which I've provisionally listed, both chronologically and geographically – they provided an example of the risks and achievements of a type of contemporary minor art. With their opposition to and exposure of the Tunisian police state; their recognition of the revolution as enacted by the disenfranchised; and their 'untimely'<sup>93</sup> devotion to the condition of exile (both at home and when they became diasporic artists), the Ahl Al Kahf showed how, at a given time, it was possible to push against art commodification and stay profoundly 'respectful when a singularity revolts, intransigent when power violates the universal' (Foucault, 1979).

Finally, this chapter marks my passage from the term 'mob' to the term 'vanguard,' which I've chosen with the intention of acknowledging the affirmative dimension of the political commitment of the Tunisians who pioneered the revolution, in the light of the 2015 Kasserine protests. In this sense, the vanguard appears as the contemporary manifestation of a lineage of resistance, whose roots include the resilience of the Imazighen against Arabisation and the anti-colonial *fellaga*. This resistance can be read in terms of what Deleuze and Guattari termed 'war machine.' This concept facilitates some understanding of the Islamic militancy phenomenon. The Islamic State is, in fact, more than just an instance of

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<sup>93</sup> I use this term because they draw a lot of inspiration from Nietzsche's understanding of the untimely thought.

'corporate terrorism' and the aggregator of local and global dissent. It is also the example of how a war machine – such as the Tunisian revolutionary youth – can be partially appropriated and extracted value from.

In conclusion, thanks to the valuable work of Banu Bargu, this chapter also establishes the link between the practices of the vanguard and the employment of the body as political terrain and tool, able to weaponise 'bare life' in terms of *necroresistance* (Bargu, 2014; 2015). With this term, I intend to argue for the political validity of the practices of the vanguard, while bearing in mind the way this group's resistance functions as a possibility of contagion for all those who share conditions of marginalisation. In fact, the next chapter is devoted to the aspect of propagation of protests. I will reflect both on how communication occurs alongside the corporate media outlets (including the corporate social media ones), and on how the revolution and the following struggles of the Tunisian brought to light counter-hegemonic ways of organising meaning and affects while moving them across the Mediterranean. Finally, I am interested to show what explains certain patterns of contagion of protest, such as the similar propagation of mobilisations in Tunisia, which occurred with very similar geographies both in 2011 and in 2016. What do these modalities of political composition show in terms of how the contemporary transformative politics can be imagined? And also, how could the necroresistant drive be captured?

## 5. Mediation of An Event. Circulation of Cultures and Practices of Resistance

Until some gang succeeds in putting the world in a straitjacket, its definition is possibility.

Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man*, 1952

There will be no pictures of you and Willie Mays  
 Pushing that shopping cart down the block on the dead run  
 Or trying to slide that color television into a stolen ambulance  
 NBC will not be able to predict the winner at 8:32  
 Or report from 29 districts  
 The revolution will not be televised.

Gil Scott-Heron, *The Revolution will not be Televised*, 1971

The virtual that proliferates around each and every knot of the real constitutes the chaosmic background based on which every event and every reality define their own consistency.

Introduction to the Italian edition of Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, 1966<sup>94</sup>

### Mediation and Politics from within Containment

In the previous chapter, I looked at the lineage of dispossession, which touched upon the Tunisian territory after 1881, and at some of the ways in which it developed until the 2011 revolution. This historical outline made visible the long history of oppression of the populations inhabiting the area, but also how resistance was always present, enacted by groups such as the *Imazighen* or the anti-colonial *fellaga*. I have, therefore, tried to identify some ways in which dispossession and resistance unfolded before and after the 2011 revolutionary climax. It became clear how crucial the impoverishment of rural Tunisia was for the current situation, and how much it conditioned the agglomeration of the dispossessed in the metropolitan suburb, the *houma*. At the same time, the

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<sup>94</sup> Written by Franco Berardi Bifo and Massimiliano Guareschi (Guattari, 2007: 15).

*houmani* and the *harraga* emerged as some of the categories that resisted and fought the ongoing process of dispossession and consequent segregation. Their struggle has been thematised and supported by the critical practices of the Ahl Al Kahf collective, whose work I've chosen to describe as a remarkable example of minor art. Finally, I returned to the discussion around the terms able to name the political subject of the revolution. In the light of the 2015 protests after Ridha Yahyaoui's suicide and after the killing of Mabrouk Soltani in 2016, to the revisited term 'mob,' I substituted the term 'vanguard,' in recognition of the pioneering and affirmative vocation of so many of the most disenfranchised Tunisians.

The following chapter will develop along three lines of enquiry, more or less connected to the aspect of communication related to the Tunisian revolution. In the first section, I will interrogate what concretely lies beyond and alongside the much-praised social media presence connected to the protests. By drawing from examples of struggles inspired by the 'Arab' revolutions in Italy, I will reflect on the circulation of practices and cultures of resistance, investigating the role of technology and of connectedness. The reflection will articulate how the struggle circulates within an informational culture, in which technology seems to be increasingly embodied.

I will explore how the notion of mediation can be intended in an oppositional manner, namely as working against hegemonic forms of organisation of meaning and affects. Thinking beyond the 'technofetishism' connected to the Arab Spring, I will draw from the previously described practices of the Tunisian rioters, of the *harraga*, and from the way languages of resistance born in Tunisia were taken up in the struggles of migrant porters in Italy in 2013. To account for these types of organisation of meanings and affects I will use the notion of mediation (drawing from Braidotti, 2014; Griziotti, 2016; Massumi, 2002; Munster, 2001; Terranova, 2004; 2007; 2016; Kember and Zylinska, 2012) that I will complexify in accordance with issues raised by my case study. The main aspect of this understanding of mediation is that when it is faced with a breaking point, such as the accumulation of dissent that leads to a generalised mobilisation, it operates as an agent of plurification rather than one of containment of dissent (as is the case of hegemonic representation and of modulation of affects).

Secondly, this chapter is also intended to address the question around the propagation of protests in more depth, describing how protests spread across the social field within different communities and also looking into how alliances occur between groups who hold different political cultures. Aware of the uneven distribution of digital connectivity in many of the sites of politics I describe, I will stress that propagation of dissent is based on the commonality of an embodied experience, rather than on the digital connectedness or on mere contagion/contamination (a paradigm I've relied on previously, but of which I identify the limits here). The notion of 'resonance' (that I borrow from Clover, 2016) will address this aspect of embodied commonality, that I make a declination of in terms of sense of space (the suburban 'internal colony,' Cowen and Lewis, 2016), of time ('weaponisation of waiting time,' Povinelli, 2011) and of illegalised forms of mobility.

Thirdly, I will conclude with a reflection on the subject of contemporary politics, as exemplified by my case study. What kind of transformative politics can be imagined beyond the classical models of recognition? In this sense, I will read the political practice resulting from 'resonance' as an example of 'minor politics from cramped space' (Thoburn, 2016) and show in what way it articulates a kinship based on dispossession, thanks to Sylvia Wynter's discussion of the 'counter-world of the liminal' (Wynter, 1992). Alongside resonance, which relates, in this case, to the propagation of riot, I will also focus on the propagation of dissent across the class-line, which I identify as crucial for the Tunisian revolutionary transformation. Edouard Glissant's notion of 'Relation' will help to make sense of how a 'metissage' of different class cultures could work (Glissant, 1997). Finally, I will argue that the Tunisian revolution (with its flows of struggle) represents an example of political minor authorship because it suggests one way of challenging conditions of the impossibility of existence through practices of political invention (drawing from Thoburn and Wynter).

As an arrival point of the previous chapters, here I will show what lies alongside the capture of the event (that I address in Chapter Two) and how a revolution is defined in terms of addition of resonances and relation (drawing from the Tunisian example). Furthermore, I will expand the previous reflections on political subjectivity (on the underclass, 'mob,' vanguard) discussing how 'minor

politics out of cramped spaces' unfolds beyond political paradigms based on representation, recognition or the 'autonomy of the global subject' (intended as clear class formations) (Thoburn, 2002).

### **5.1. Mediation and The Circulation of Struggles**

I am using the concept of 'mediation' because the Tunisian revolution is strongly attached to a particular narrative of technological mediation in the mainstream media, mainly through the lens of 'technological optimism' or 'technologies of liberation' (Mejias, 2012). What is alluded to by these descriptions, alongside expressions such as 'Twitter/Facebook revolution,' is that the 'Arab' people have accessed a space of much-awaited democracy and political 'modernity' – that they have finally overcome the stigma of the 'Arab exceptionalism' – mostly thanks to the use of Western-designed technologies of communication, such as social media. In this chapter, I will use the term mobility to indicate the movement of bodies, and use the term circulation to indicate the movement of affects and knowledges along different types of infrastructures: online, offline, but mostly hybrid ones combining both.

For the sake of clarity, I will not deal specifically with the interaction between the Tunisian revolution and the state and/or corporate media outlets, be they television or social media. Rather, my intention is to turn mediation on its head. It is not my intention to dismiss the role of social media within the techno-social articulation of the revolution. I am aware that social media stands for a sociality of a particular type (Terranova, 2016) and that it is relevant for aspects of contagion (and resonance) even in cases of discontinuous connectivity, which mark many of the struggles of the Tunisian vanguard. What I intend to reveal by exposing the limits of paradigms of technofetishism, is that a focus on the technical (social media) as an agent of revolution and 'democratisation,' such as in the Arab Spring narrative, silences the complex histories of this revolution. This doesn't mean that the revolution, and the struggles after its apex, has not been propagated through media, such as the necroresistant gestures, rumours, songs, and street art. It simply means that social media is just one aspect of this ecology and that it cannot be made to account for the event's complexity. This is why I choose to focus

on aspects of mediation that I consider under-represented and overshadowed by the focus on social media.

In this sense, I will look at the ecology of situated, embodied media used by the revolutionaries - as rioters, first, and as 'illegal' migrants, later - while acknowledging the qualitative modifications that they have effected in the environments they have crossed with their cultures and practices of struggle. As I described in Chapter Three, I see the Tunisian revolution as characterised by an intersection of flows of mobile categories. The three flows that directly regard the Tunisian population are the revolutionaries, the 'undocumented' migrants and the Islamist militants. Rather than considering the latter the 'proof' of the failure of the Tunisian revolution, I view their choice as the development of a 'deadly line of flight' (mostly) addressing the historical marginalisation that the revolution was an expression of, in the first place. Yet, in this chapter, I will only focus on the mediation enacted by the first two groups: the revolutionaries and the migrants. The reason is that I have a particular interest in accounting for the circulation of resistance practices and because my previous experience has allowed me to come in contact with Tunisian revolutionaries who have emigrated to Europe.<sup>95</sup>

The Tunisian revolution was an important moment of disruption for a certain receptacle of powers (an assemblage of national and international interests), therefore it was connected to significant practices of perception management and affect modulation, enacted as attempts to capture the event's possible ramifications. The mediation that I am interested in goes beyond and against these practices. I am interested in reflecting on the interactions discontinuously interwoven with the plane of hyper-connectivity. What kind of mediation inhabits the offline space? Or what mediations are enacted when the connectivity is seriously compromised and inaccessible? In addition, while activating in a discontinuously connected space, the Tunisian revolution and the struggles in its aftermath have unfolded within a post-cybernetic control regime,<sup>96</sup> whose

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<sup>95</sup> My stay and activism in Italy in the post-2011 period gave me the opportunity to informally come into contact with many Tunisian migrants, some of which were involved in housing rights struggles in the Italian capital, as I will further discuss in this section.

<sup>96</sup> I borrow this term from Terranova's reflection on the Negrian Hyper-network Empire and I find it relevant because it stresses the level of development of global networks and the way networks animate cultural articulations, both in terms of control and in terms of forms of resistance. To put it simply, the Tunisian revolution occurs in a historical setting significantly marked by some

disciplinary face, in terms of a police state, was also very present. How can this aspect be acknowledged and reflected upon?

In this understanding, mediation is a particular type of circulation of affects and information, which bears the intentionality of the protesters; it is the transmission of tactic knowledge and affects. I have developed this understanding by asking what patterns of communication unfolded alongside the institutional ones, both in the political activity of the rioters and in that of the illegalized migrants.

As a response, I have thought mediation as a counterpart of representation. In this view mediation and representation function as parallel and often antagonistic forms of organisation of meaning and affects, especially when they are related to instances of mass dissent such as a revolution. Therefore, I have regarded representation as a large-scale, strategic operation of containment of dissent, exemplified by the 'domination narrative' described in Chapter One. On the other hand, mediation is seen as an underground tactic and subversive operation of plurification of the sites of dissent. This plurification occurs, for example, when the news of Bouazizi's immolation circulates, thus spreading the impulse to riot; but it also occurs with the transmission of information regarding safe passages towards Europe, for instance.

I have derived the notion of mediation from the work of authors such as Rosi Braidotti (Braidotti, 2014), Paolo Griziotti (Griziotti, 2016), Brian Massumi (Massumi, 2002), Anna Munster (Munster, 2001), Tiziana Terranova (Terranova, 2004; 2007; 2016), Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska (Kember & Zylinska, 2012). The work of these thinkers has helped me craft a term that accounts for a transmission of meaning which runs parallel to the hegemonic functioning of representation. The term, allows me to shift the focus towards the process and the becoming of mediation rather than on its stabilization in institutionalized forms (i.e. the media), while considering the intertwining between organic life and mediation, as 'an intrinsic condition of being-in, and becoming-with, the technological world' (Kember & Zylinska, 2012: 1).

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people's access to wide-range networks bearing a further complexity in comparison to the cybernetic ones. The way these networks have the potential to work directly forge the unfolding of events (Terranova, 2004).

Along the same lines, Terranova poignantly shows how ‘remembering and sharing by technological means produce both surplus value for netarchical capitalists but also an exceeding of affects, desires, and beliefs materializing a “common ground”’(Terranova, 2016). This ‘common ground,’ represents an important pre-condition for the struggle. In fact, the possibility of transformation, Terranova argues, ‘depends not on interest, but on transferable social quantities’ such as beliefs and desires (Idem). Although the mediation I will be analysing benefits from a discontinuous access to connectivity, the focus is the ‘common ground’ built upon the beliefs and desires, by virtue of its importance for the revolutionary unfolding of the event.<sup>97</sup>

The Tunisian revolution – with its migratory ramifications – offers a unique instance of situated, embodied mediation of an event, through the meanings and affects that its participants chose to circulate through their mobility practices. In this sense, bodies become primary mediators and circulators. Unruly bodies, like those of the rioters and the protesters; dead bodies, like those of the martyrs; disappeared bodies, like those of the Tunisian *desaparecidos*, lost between the Mediterranean and Europe. The argument is that the same group that propelled the mobilization turned revolution in 2011 (i.e. the under- and unemployed Tunisians of the poor cities and suburbs) also enacted particular practices of mediation connected to this event. I regard as instances of mediation political gestures such as self-immolation, chants, protest tactics, as well as poetry, music or both, as in the case of the famous hip hop anthem of the *houma*, *Houmani* (Hamzaoui, 2013).

At the same time, this idea of mediation brings into discussion not only the mediation involved in the ‘minor politics,’ the politics of the ‘mob’, of the population produced as ‘surplus’,<sup>98</sup> but also the one brought into being by the ‘minor art’, specifically the work of the Ahl Al Kahf collective. In this view, visual

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<sup>97</sup> With regards to my case study, it was particularly the work of collectives such as Ahl Al Kahf and Mosireen that made it possible to imagine what an anti-hegemonic circulation of meaning could look like.

<sup>98</sup> When I speak of populations produced as surplus, I mainly draw on Clover’s work, who defines this group as expelled from formal labour and destined to ‘informal economies, often semi- or extralegal,’ a ‘portion of humanity that earns less than subsistence amounts’ often at great risks (Clover, 2016: 156). For a more detailed discussion see Pârvan, 2017.

art, sound and gestures are some of the means of mediating the revolutionary event.<sup>99</sup>

Mediation will be understood through its quality as an agent of plurification and as opposed to practices of containment of resistance such as Orientalist representations or divisive modulation of affects. This understanding of mediation can be linked to the way resistance has been discussed previously in terms of contagion, which will be developed in section 5.3. with a more detailed focus on patterns of resonance.

As I shall discuss in the following sections, in terms of the specificity of the Tunisian revolution, it was resonance between different disenfranchised communities that helped the riots spread according to a recognition between subaltern groups based on 'structural similarities,' namely on the shared experience of dispossession and constant abuse (Chouti, 2011). Moreover, this expression of dissent has managed to evolve into a revolutionary climax thanks to the alliance, that I will call Relation (and discuss in section 5.4.), of these groups with other groups of Tunisian society: most importantly with the unionized workforce (mostly state employed), but also with students the artists. Therefore, the event's singularity is built upon these two elements – the possibility of resonance and Relation – but these aspects are particular to each conjuncture, as I have shown in the maps of struggles punctuating the European trajectory of the Tunisian migrants, for example. 'Structural similarities' and alliances are constantly undergoing reconfiguration. They remain possible both on the Tunisian territory as well as on any territory that the Tunisian citizens choose to inhabit. In this research, I have chosen to focus mostly on the suburban population, which played a significant role in the revolution. This is why I relate instances of resonance and Relation to this group of people and their mobility within and across borders. Also because drawing from the Tunisian case – as a *post factum* analysis – it can be argued that when both resonance and Relation occur, is when a revolutionary transformation is more probable. In this sense, the notion of mediation and the focus put on the gesture is intended to address the social

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<sup>99</sup> Although it could also be argued that many of these instances are what transformed a series of gestures into the event of the revolution in the first place. In this sense there would be no preeminence of the event over the mediation, rather the mediators would have determined the eventfulness of the revolution as such.

production and circulation of meaning and affects involved in the process of resonance and Relation.

Before specifically addressing the differences and interactions between the practice of mediation and representation, I will engage with some relevant examples of circulation of struggles connected to the Tunisian revolution, which have been pivotal for this inquiry.

In 2012 I had the chance to take part in a national gathering in Rome of several activist groups who were working on housing rights, most significantly involved in housing occupations of empty private facilities alongside communities of evictees, both Italians and migrants.<sup>100</sup> While driving towards one of the occupations – a private facility housing over 400 people – with A., a member of the Metropolitan Precarious Blocs,<sup>101</sup> he started telling others and me about what the arrival of the ‘Tunisian young men’ had meant for him and his comrades. After the Tunisian revolution, the Italian Minister of the Interior, Roberto Maroni, had spectacularly declared that the ‘Maghreb wall had fallen,’ and thus Italy needed support in ‘managing’ the migration ‘flow’.<sup>102</sup> A. was talking about exactly the same people Maroni was desperately trying to police. And he was describing their impact on the housing rights struggle in Rome. ‘They are many, very young, courageous, and willing to take big risks, after the experience of struggle they come from.(...) There is something about the way they understand politics. We don’t speak Arabic and they don’t speak Italian but we have a common language. They are attuned to our work.’<sup>103</sup> This common language is arguably a determinant foundation for the ‘creolisation’ of practices of struggle or for the alliances that increment their traction, such as in the case of the Tunisian alliance between the unemployed and unionised workers in 2011.

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<sup>100</sup> The Italian capital carries a long tradition of housing rights activism promoted through occupations of empty public and private facilities. One of the most notable examples is the occupation by 150 families of the empty social houses in the suburban neighbourhood of San Basilio (in 1974), followed by the violent eviction, known as the ‘battle of San Basilio’, during which Fabrizio Ceruso, a nineteen years old activist of *Autonomia Operaia* was shot to death by the police (Progetto San Basilio, 2014)

<sup>101</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Blocchi-Precari-Metropolitani-675076152611908/>

<sup>102</sup> When demanding 100 million Euros from the EU so Italy could face the migration ‘emergency,’ the Interior Ministry Roberto Maroni declared in February 2011: ‘We are witnessing the fall of the Berlin Wall of Maghreb. It’s the new ‘89’ (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2011).

<sup>103</sup> From a personal conversation with, A., a member of the Metropolitan Precarious Blocs in Rome, on the 21st of March, 2012.

What A. said made me reflect on the circulation of the cultures and practices of struggle, given how the Tunisian young suburban unemployed were attuned to the struggle strategies of the housing rights coalitions, beyond a specifically verbal correspondence. In other words, it made me consider how different revolutionary assemblages communicate beyond words.

With A.'s words in mind, it is even more relevant to look at instances of circulation of cultures of resistance within the Mediterranean space, from the Middle East towards Italy and, surely, other European countries. Paying attention to the chants, the slogans and the choreography of protests in Italy, for example, reveals how the promise and the language of dignity of the Tunisian revolution has been travelling from Sidi Bouzid to Granarolo, Italy. I refer here to the admirable struggle of the outsourced porters working in the dairy and the logistics industry in Emilia-Romagna, a region in the centre-North of Italy.

In 2013, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May, a massive wildcat strike, supported by the porters of the SI-Cobas rank and file union, brought many logistics hubs throughout Italy to a standstill, calling for better working conditions for the porters employed by outsourced companies, commonly organized as 'cooperatives' (Infoaut, 2013). The mobilization had also started at the Granarolo milk factory, in the Emilia-Romagna region, where 40 porters had been suspended after having exposed the company's bad working conditions in a YouTube video (Stinco, 2013). While forming a picket line with the intention to block the flow of transportation of products, some of the porters had been run over by the trucks, which led to a further mobilization of groups of underpaid and precarious logistics workers all over Italy. The majority of these workers were migrants: either coming from Arabic speaking countries, or from Bangladesh and Pakistan. Many of the mobilization's political practices, narratives, notions, and words were directly derived from the imaginary connected to the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt.

Most strikingly, the Granarolo workers used a 'Game over' banner (see Fig. 57.), similar to the ones that the Tunisian and Egyptian protesters had made internationally recognisable during their gatherings (see Fig. 55. and 56.). It could be hypothesized that the 'Arab' protesters had employed the 'Game Over' expression in 2011 as a result of many of them being involved in gaming communities, alongside their attempt to project a widely comprehensible message

towards the Western audiences. In this case, though, it was the migrant workers, alongside the Italian activists, from Granarolo, Italy, who picked up the message.



*Fig. 55. A Game Over banner on Avenue Bourghiba in Tunis, 2011.*

Source: <http://kamizole.blog.lemonde.fr/2011/01/>



*Fig. 56. A Game Over banner in Tahrir Square, Cairo, 2011.*

Source: <http://www.shahidulnews.com/>



*Fig. 57. Demonstration of the porters in Bologna, in April 2014.<sup>104</sup>*

*The banners say 'Cooperatives of Exploitation' and 'Granarolo Game Over'. Granarolo is not only a city, but also the name of the dairy brand that the cooperative works for.*

*Source: <http://www.michelelapini.net/portfolioct/porters-revolution/#>*

Moreover, the workers' banners also featured slogans in Arabic (see Fig. 58.), many of which linked their political claims to the notion of dignity, a crucial keyword of the Tunisian revolution. One of its most famous chants called for 'Bread and Dignity', and many call the event itself 'the Dignity Revolution'.

<sup>104</sup> The protests started in 2013 (see Fig. 58.), but continued afterwards and constantly employed imagery, slogans and concepts relatable to the 2011 Arab revolutions, partially because many of the participants were Arabic speakers.



*Fig. 58. Demonstration of the porters during the 15<sup>th</sup> of May strike, in 2013, when the logistic hub of the Interporto (Bologna, Italy) was blocked. The banners say 'The cooperative of porters = Slavery' and 'Strike and Struggle for **Dignity** until we reach the Victory' in Italian, Urdu, and Arabic.*

Source: <http://www.infoaut.org/>

Bearing in mind this remarkable example of circulation of the language of struggle, it is important to address in which way the Tunisian case sheds light on the interaction between the circulation of revolution-related affective intensities and the work of corporate or state media. Is it fair to argue that the institutional media, both social media and television, attempt to not only contain, in some instances, but also quantify those affective intensities, by extracting value out of them (drawing from Terranova, 2016)?<sup>105</sup>

<sup>105</sup> In this case, by 'affective intensities' I mainly refer to the anger, the frustration. Different modalities of extraction based on affects are possible in this case. The most common one that I haven't referred to yet is the one that involves the profit of netarchical corporations (such as Facebook, Twitter etc.) whose flows increment the more dissent is stimulated by a certain event. Furthermore, in terms of modulation of affect, the Tunisian state media outlets, for example, tend to either neutralise it with celebrations of the 'achieved' revolution or to criminalise it. Finally, as I have argued in the previous chapter, organisations of Islamic militancy are heavily stimulating and extracting value out of these affective formations, by capitalising on the cheap military labour they make possible.

In this sense, the mediation of dissent, which concerns this research, communicates the possibility of resistance and multiplies its sites by producing and circulating tactical knowledge. In this sense, the world of the revolutionaries, which corresponds to the world of the Tunisian disenfranchised suburban population, runs parallel to that of the Tunisian state or that of the European states and their respective media outlets. Within this world, there are gestures of defiance that work as mediators of the interruption of traditional power relations. Outside this world, the organic artists, who enact their own mediating gestures, support this interruption. In this sense, mediation partially resonates with the political importance of instances of self-representation or self-affirmation.

## **5.2. Representation vs. Mediation. 'It's like the underground railroad, only that it's digital'**

The sentence I've included in the title is a quote from Maurice Stierl, who works for the NGO Watch the Med. He refers to the way rumours and news about routes of passage spread among the migrants directed towards Europe (Economist, 2017).

Stierl's parallelism between the Afroamerican fugitive knowledges and the contemporary routes of migration is crucial for this section, as it helps me to better frame my usage of the notion of 'mediation.'

In this sense it's useful to state that the employment of the notion of 'mediation' that will be made in this chapter goes strategically beyond the mere understanding of it in terms of technological mediation, mainly focused around the so-called bio-hyper-media (Griziotti, 2016). In other words, I have turned to mediation *as a counter-part to representation*, in a sense that I will further explain. The understanding of the term, in this section, develops from a focus on its political and/or artistic nature, although such separations are only useful for the argument and I don't consider the two natures distinct. The main aspect is that mediation operates as an *agent of plurification*, opposed to the technologies of 'containment of the virtuality of the social' (Terranova, 2004: 12) aimed at by the practices of representation. More precisely, the difference lies mainly in the attitude towards the dimension of virtuality held by the revolutionary assemblage. When I speak of mediation in this section, I focus on those operations whose main

goal is *not* that of containing, harnessing, and directing the virtual nested within the unruly community which has started the revolution and continued the struggle across the borders.

I am making this argument drawing from the realization of how the contemporary informational environment organizes perception, especially when the dominant system is faced with significant events of disruption, in those occasions in which it becomes more visible how informational dynamics work towards delimitating a 'possible action that moulds and remoulds the social field.' In such moments, power systems attempt to govern the relationship between the real, the probable and the improbable (Terranova, 2004: 19).

Following the work of Henri Bergson, Tiziana Terranova explains, 'what lies beyond the possible and the real is thus the openness of the virtual, of the invention and the fluctuation, of what cannot be planned or even thought in advance, of what has no real permanence but only reverberations' (Idem, 27).

In this case study and section, the concept of the virtual helps to imagine what lies alongside the Orientalist narratives funnelled by state and corporate media outlets, what lies alongside the famous 'Arab' bloggers and the façade of the 'Twitter/Facebook revolution.' Terranova's work has been crucial precisely because of her refined understanding of the dynamics of the contemporary informational culture, while not disregarding the political aspect, that is, the need to reflect critically on the distribution of power relations. In fact, as has been stated earlier, the event of the revolution occurred during a period in which the global state apparatuses reached a significant development in terms of societies of control and of spectacle, alongside the affirmation of an informational culture (though this does not, by any means, imply an even distribution of the access to connectivity).

The contemporary informational environment is characterised by features that necessarily need to be taken into consideration when looking at the unfolding of an event of disruption. First of all, rather than conceiving of communication in terms of meaning and signification, when looking at the functioning of informational cultures, information should be regarded as indicating the successful transmission of a signal, once a contact is established and the noise is overcome. 'The relation of signal to noise (...) is concerned not only with the

successful transmission of messages, but also with the overall constitution of fields of possibilities' (Idem, 20). This understanding (based on Claude Shannon's information theory) stresses the importance of attention management, for example. In fact, 'the manipulation of affects and signs is an essential part of the politics of communication in informational cultures' (Idem, 14). In this immersive informational space, the actions of a subject are 'decomposed, recomposed and carried along' (Idem, 37) and even resistance is often welcomed and incorporated as difference by the network power (Idem, 62). But, most importantly, in this system, each 'movement (of information) is a modification of the overall topology: of the sender, the code, the channel, the signal and the receiver' (Idem, 51). The modification of the overall topology is significant in this case because it allows one to understand how cultures and practices of struggle have impacted the environments they have crossed, whether from the South to the North of Tunisia, from the *houma* to the centre of a city, or from Tunisia to Europe.

In my understanding, mediation amplifies these cultures and practices of struggle, based on past meanings and affects as opposed to representation and modulation, which are constantly attempting to reduce and harness the disruptive fluctuations of the power system. The way mediation occurs is through a constant circulation of beliefs and desires connected to the everyday experiences of the people involved in these types of struggles. What circulates are stories of past resistances, tactical pieces of knowledge on how to dodge the system, but also the different levels to which certain systems - whether the Tunisian police or the European border police - render certain bodies disposable. But most importantly, what circulates is the acknowledgement that certain forms of resistance are possible. In this sense resistance, as pointed out in Chapter Two, holds a crucially contagious potentiality, which, as I shall discuss in section 5.3. is based on commonalities that determine patterns of resonance. The importance of the propagation of the message of possible resistance is why I pointed out the direct relation between the actions of the revolutionaries in Tunisia and the examples of their integration in the activist groups in Rome, Italy, after their emigration towards Europe. Every knowledge or experience of organisation or collective action matters for the communities who choose to migrate, either towards the richer Tunisian cities or towards Europe. I have touched upon this aspect by

focusing on the instances of the struggle of the Tunisians, both in the Italian detention centres, and in the urban setting of Paris, which are just two of the most visible examples. In this sense, mediation regards the circulation of forms of counter-knowledge. It also involves the collective construction of strings of signs - narratives, symbols, aesthetics, embodied practices connected to sound, movement, visibility - which originate from a significant breaking point. It is noteworthy that this production from below does not come out of nowhere and is not spontaneous, but rather connected to a consistent lineage of past meanings and affects.

In what follows, I will sketch the initial reasoning behind this section, the way this research has understood the mediation connected to the event of the revolution. The starting point is a particular localized affective accumulation, which indicates a level of excessive frustration that can no longer be absorbed by the system. That excessive affective accumulation is transformed or mediated, through collective political gestures, which, thanks to propagation and solidarity, reach a revolutionary dimension, namely the dimension of a mass mobilization that overthrows the power system. Faced with this snowball effect of affects and political gestures, the power system - or other systems, which this disruption could disturb - mobilizes its media outlets, themselves fighting to survive the revolutionary transformation, in the attempt to incorporate the disruptive fluctuations. This corresponds to the representation of the event, which can be understood both in symbolic terms ('speaking *about*') as well as in political terms ('speaking *for*'). In political terms, certain categories (and I am here thinking about the former regime's media outlet) might attempt to harness the flows of dissent, often by becoming their most vocal spokesperson, while making sure to preserve their own power throughout and after the transformations forced by the revolution, enacting a sort of *gattopardismo* (according to which 'Everything changes, so that everything can stay the same,' Di Lampedusa, 1958). This attempt to incorporate and limit the fields of possibility of the revolutionary assemblage are expressed through interventions as different as the 'Jasmine Revolution' or Arab Spring narratives, alongside the promotion of the fear of the Other, whether referred to the poor, the Muslim, the 'terrorist', or the generic 'West.'

In this sense, the operation of meaning organisation can be divided into three directions: mediation, representation and modulation. Mediation indicates how meaning is recreated within the uprising community; it overlaps with self-expression to some extent, and it also employs non-discursive ways of mediating, such as the gesture.<sup>106</sup> The main aspect of mediation as a form of meaning creation and organisation is that it represents a positive feedback to the initial affective breaking point. In other words, it seeks to amplify it and it essentially respects its virtual dimension, as far as the demand for dignity is concerned.

On the other hand, the negative feedback to the affective breaking point is constituted by representation, on the logico-discursive level, and by modulation, on the affective level. In this model, the outlets of the challenged power calculate the implications of the breaking point and attempt to direct dissent, either by neutralizing, by harnessing it, or by incorporating it into the ongoing power relations system in such a way as to limit the transformation. I already addressed the representation and modulation of affects in Chapter Two, where I showed how both strategies of containment of dissent have been employed in the Tunisian post-revolutionary period.

On the other hand, the operations that I catalogue as mediation seek to amplify the initial affective charge, to expose the abusive nature of the power outlets and push for their transformation. The resulting fluctuations are constantly reverberated in new and unpredictable directions of political gestures, as demonstrated by the resonance between the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and the struggle of the porters in Italy. While representation has a logico-discursive nature, in contemporary apparatuses of power that level is intertwined with a set of asignifying practices, which operate according to a logic of modulation, the most paradigmatic example of which is the emergent importance of the 'affective fact' as a tool (addressed in Massumi, 2002).<sup>107</sup>

Going back to the work of Gayatri Spivak, 'representation' carries two meanings, which she derives from the employment of two German terms by Marx. Namely: 1) *vertreten*, translated as 'speaking for', in the sense of political representation;

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<sup>106</sup> I have placed the artistic gestures within the field of mediation too, especially bearing in mind instances of organic or minor art.

<sup>107</sup> As Said had already alluded to in the '70s, with the term neo-Orientalism.

and 2) *darstellen*, in the sense of 'speaking about' or 're-presenting', in the sense of 'making a portrait' (Spivak, 1988: 275-276, Kapoor, 2004: 628). This double reference – both political and symbolic – is relevant for the event of revolution because it draws the attention on two representational practices – both of which have attempted to contain the possibility of dissent.

On the one side, from the point of view of a political representation, the ones who started the revolution had little to no contact with molar political bodies, such as parties and trade unions, mainly because of their condition as informal labourers. The Tunisians who pioneered the revolution and the struggles in its aftermath have only been granted representation through their direct actions. Many organizations and individuals have claimed to be speaking *for* the martyrs of the revolution, but these declarations never went beyond electoral marketing.

On the other side, the symbolic representation of the event - with narratives such as the Arab Spring, the Jasmine revolution, the 14th of January revolution - both promoted by state and corporate communication outlets, has expressed a constant will to de-/immobilize the protest, reducing it to a standstill, employing both the tool of eulogy (the Arab 'Awakening') as well as that of the stigma (the Arab 'Winter'). In some cases, these narratives have conquered such depths that the participants themselves have interiorized these ideas, sometimes 'performing the roles they thought were expected of them' (Kapoor, 2004: 636). I refer here to the extensive corpus of artistic and journalistic expressions produced in connection to the imperative of 'performing the Arab Spring,' which often resulted in practices in alignment with the 'official story', prompted either by the state or the global media.

On the level of modulation, images instead function as real 'bioweapons,' which harness different orders of affects (Terranova, 2004: 141). When analysing the affective technologies of the traditional media, mainly television, for how they react in moments when disruptive events unfold, some tendencies seem to be recurrent:

- 1) A focus on the politics of attention, and the diversion of attention towards more appealing news used as smoke screens.
- 2) A focus on propagating fear by any means, by exacerbating clashes/threats/conflicts; an approach that has historically been the

precursor of abusive power interventions since it legitimizes states of exception.<sup>108</sup>

3) An unexpected alignment of the media with the interests of the movements of disruption, which are disproportionally celebrated and met with an explosive euphoria; for example, by over-celebrating the 'achievements of the revolution' and the 'martyrs,' while overlooking their demands or the outcomes of justice.

These few examples of modulation technologies resonate with the image of modulation given by Deleuze in 1990: 'a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point' (Deleuze, 1990).<sup>109</sup>

In order to discuss the third mode of organisation of meaning and affects, that of mediation, I will start with the focus on the importance of its embodied nature. In fact, Paolo Griziotti has referred to this aspect with regards to the 'bio-hyper media technologies,' linked to the employment of those

Devices, such as smartphone, tablet, ultrabook, reader and hybrids (which) are the physical tools of mediation of the *homo cognitivus* with regards to a space-time in a continuum in which the interaction involves living bodies, machines, codes, data and networks: the environment of bio-hypermedia, a term drawn from the assemblage of bios/biopolitics and hypermedia. (Griziotti, 2016: 35, My Translation)

In this setting, 'the whole body is connected to the networked devices so intimately that it enters in a symbiosis that determines reciprocal modifications and simulations' (Idem, 120). Furthermore, the mediation is not only informational but also biogenetic. In fact,

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<sup>108</sup> Although it should be noted that in 2017 in the central Western countries threat has been largely normalised, alongside the state of exception it legitimises.

<sup>109</sup> Although on that occasion he wasn't necessarily reflecting on the interaction between media establishments and disruptive events.

the contemporary embodied subjectivities operate under a double imperative: they must be responsible for their surplus value, in their capacity of biogenetic containers, on the one side, and in their capacity of visible goods, on the other side, which circulate in the global media circuit and in the global financial flow. Bodies today are met with a double mediation, both biogenetic and informational. (Braidotti, 2014: 128 in Griziotti, 2016: 96, My translation)

The aspects pointed out by Griziotti and Braidotti are part of this research's view of mediation, but in this chapter I also want to push further in certain directions relevant to my case study. In the following sections, I will, therefore, focus on four particular aspects of mediation: 1) its situatedness; 2) its processuality; 3) its relationship with the body, and 4) its manifestation through gestures and mediators.

### **5.2.1. Situated Mediation: Who mediates and why?**

I am interested to put forward a notion of mediation that accounts for the *milieu* or the situation that it derives from. In this sense, mediation runs on an informal circuit, alongside hegemonic communication, as a parasite, with its nicknames, jokes, anecdotes, oral history, popular music, alongside many other manifestations. These means of circulating information were also employed before the revolution, despite and because of the censorship of the regime. This particular field of production is to be regarded as oppositional in the sense that it counteracts the specific organisation of the sensible and of the desires operated by the hegemonic media. In this sense, it could be termed *mediation from below*, because it indicates a battle over the meaning of the revolution, but also the galaxy of knowledges tactically rotating around the actions of the people who promoted the revolution in the first place.

The first issue that is often ignored in this type of approach is *which* expressions the focus is put on. Whose mediation are the studies interested in? What unfolds alongside the tweets, the blog posts, the citizens' YouTube videos relayed by Al Jazeera and the Facebook profiles of the most prominent activists from Tunis? Are

there any 'specific communication networks that do not overlap either with national or with global television' (Terranova, 2004: 16)? Since the communities that this research is interested in are those of the revolutionaries, who have later become *harraga* or 'undocumented' migrants, the latter offer an interesting example of mediation from below and of how/for what it is being used.

The following descriptions are mainly based on the experience of people asking for asylum in Europe in 2017, but I draw from them because they are highly similar to the experience of the Tunisian *harraga*.

When refugees leave their homes they enter an "informational no-man's-land".

Where should they go, and whom should they trust? Phones become a lifeline. Their importance goes well beyond staying in touch with people back home. They bring news and pictures of friends and family who have reached their destination, thereby motivating more migrants to set out. They are used for researching journeys and contacting people-smugglers. Any rumour of a new, or easier, route spreads like wildfire. "It's like the underground railroad, only that it's digital," says Maurice Stierl of Watch The Med, an NGO that tracks the deaths and hardships of migrants who cross the Mediterranean, referring to the secret routes and safe houses used to free American slaves in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Economist, 2017).



*Fig. 59. June, 2016. Stranded migrants charge their phones in a field with electricity provided by a generator at the Greek-Macedonian border near the Greek village of Idomeni. Source: Reuters.*

In this regard, scholars of the autonomy of migration have pointed out the importance of communication technologies for the construction of the common, precisely from within practices of unruly and dissident mobility, thanks to what they call ‘mobile commons’ (Trimikliniotis et al., 2014).

On the level of mobility practices, technological mediation is a constant battlefield between the agents who enact containment<sup>110</sup> and the mobile communities: ‘people in northern Iraq use Whatsapp and Viber to talk to friends who have made it to Germany; UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency) uses iris scans for identification in camps in Jordan and Lebanon; migrants on flimsy rubber boats in the Mediterranean use satellite phones provided by people-smugglers to call the Italian coastguard’ (Ibidem). Technology is omnipresent, true, but it often animates the folds of control, therefore the proliferation of connectedness is always situated and weaponised according to the distribution of power relations.

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<sup>110</sup> When I refer to ‘containment’ in relation to practices of mobility, I mainly draw upon the work of Tazzioli and Garelli, who have widely studied the European border regime and have looked into strategies of immobilization that go beyond detention as a management tool against migration. In this sense, they refer to *containment* as ‘mechanisms for *channelling and capturing mobility* deployed by state and non-state actors’ (Tazzioli & Garelli, 2017, my emphasis).

Within the territory of contained mobility, technology corresponds to a deadly touch for disobedient bodies, as the research on the 'Left-to-Die-Boat' shows, with its exemplary biopolitical title. In this work, the Forensic Oceanography collective reverted the use of surveillance technologies to show the unfolding of a tragedy, the death of sixty-six people on a boat in distress, left unassisted. 'The Forensic Oceanography report turned the knowledge generated through surveillance means into evidence of responsibility for the crime of non-assistance,' showing how the control grid that striates the Mediterranean and its crossers totally disregarded their survival (Forensic Architecture, 2012).

The second issue that is often ignored when discussing matters of technological mediation is the distribution of the access to connectivity. Some underline, for example, the leading role of social media in the Tunisian revolution, or, worse, allude that connectivity has somehow supported a process of alleged political 'maturation,' therefore promoting what some have called 'technofetishism' or 'techno-optimism' (Mejias, 2012). This framework silences precisely the uneven economic development that has led the people of the South of Tunisia to put an end to the rule of Ben Ali. In fact, even if connectivity was to equal to freedom or democracy, 'in many parts of the world electricity is still a rare commodity (...). Connecting depends on pancapitalist enterprises – to be free you have to pay' (Fernandez, 1999). This is undoubtedly the case in Tunisia, whose southern and central arid regions survive struggling against unimagined peaks of poverty and precarity. 'Utopian rhetorics of electronic media occlude the practical project of creating new markets and workforces for capitalist enterprises. In electronic media, this applies to all levels of production, from writing code to the assembly line' (Idem, 60).

Moreover, as demonstrated by the capitalization upon affects carried out by corporate social media, such as Facebook or Twitter. 'One cannot dissociate the manufacture and distribution of these technologies from economic profits made in the developed world or from an ongoing process of the colonisation of knowledge that began with the book and continued with media such as film and television' (Ibidem).

It is clear that connectivity is a discontinuous resource for many of the communities that this research takes into consideration. This is why the

operations of mediation – which I directly link to the aspect of circulation of ideas and bodies – also follow different lines of transmission, made of material networks, which go beyond the Internet cables or the satellite frequencies. Alongside the rumours, the Whatsapp groups, the solid networks of fellow travellers who became witnesses (who informed the families when they witnessed a drowning in the Mediterranean), the erratic Facebook posts of photos – the infrastructure of mediation is formed of human and non-human components: private cars, dusty routes, boats, trains, *passeurs*,<sup>111</sup> car trunks and safe houses. Even the places of detention along the borders play a crucial role in the transmission of information among the mobile communities.

### 5.2.2. Processuality and Topologies

Another aspect that I want to keep in mind when working on this understanding of mediation is to account for the dynamic and ever-changing sets of relations that mark most of the environments that the Tunisians have crossed after the revolutionary climax. In this sense, movement - of narratives, bodies, affects, ideas, pieces of information - is key, especially as a component of mobility practices, such as marches or migration. But as Terranova points out, drawing from Bergson, ‘movement is not about passage, but about duration. We are therefore ignoring the virtuality of duration’, in the sense of what the permanence and crossing of a certain space make possible (Terranova, 2004: 50-1). This way of understanding movement draws attention to a crucial aspect of these mobility practices, namely to what extent they affect the environments they encounter. In other words, as was illustrated with the examples of the struggles relocated through mobility, when the Tunisian protesters crossed their country (moving from the South and West to the North), but mostly when they crossed the Mediterranean and then Italy and France, both with their bodies as well as with their practices, they determined qualitative change that has gone way beyond the mere toppling of a dictatorial government. In fact, ‘the qualitative change that every movement brings (is) not only that which moves but also to the space that it moves into and to the whole into which that space necessarily opens up’ (Ibidem).

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<sup>111</sup> Literally ‘the ones who help you pass’ in French. What Tunisian citizens call those informal workers called ‘people-smugglers’ in Europe.

More importantly, from a political point of view, focusing on qualitative modifications allows one to conceive of change as possible, which is among the most important achievements of the struggle of the Tunisians, both at home and abroad. 'It is at the level of the micro, however, that mutations and divergences are engendered and it is therefore in the micro that the potential for change and even radical transformation lie' (Terranova, 2004: 37).

For the sake of clarity, the potential for change of the micro, in this case, refers strictly to events such as the events of resistance that were listed in Chapter 3.<sup>112</sup> As Deleuze points out, a 'revolutionary machine' must act at different levels, both punctual and general. In this sense, the micro transformations are part of what – in absence of absorption by the power system – builds up a revolutionary movement. 'It is obvious that a revolutionary machine cannot content itself with local, punctual struggles: hyper-desiring and hyper-centralized, it must be all of that at once' (Deleuze, 1977: 104-5 in Thoburn, 2002: 457).

One way to account for all these existing levels is, as Massumi suggests, that of finding 'a semiotics willing to engage with continuity,' able to put the emphasis 'on process before signification or coding' (Massumi, 2002: 4, 7). The idea of topology is one of the conceptual frames able to account for the overlapping of dynamic relations. It is drawn from the study of non-Euclidean geometry and employed recently by critical geographers and political philosophers who want to account for the ever-changing patterns of transformation and mobility.

In a topological society, we no longer live in or experience 'movement' or transformation as the transmission of fixed forms in space and time but rather movement – as the ordering of continuity – composes the forms of social and cultural life themselves. This is not, of course, a matter of one rationality displacing the other, but of their overlapping and mutual implication such that the continuity of movement – or the continuum – becomes fundamental to contemporary culture. (Lury et al., 2012: 6)

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<sup>112</sup> In other words, I am here, by no means, encouraging a comforting view of change mediated by social media gestures, for example, or the so-called 'clicktivism.'

More importantly, the topological rationality is able to imagine levels 'beyond and beneath the law-like symbolic system of signification' (Idem, 28), therefore overcoming the centrality of the structure promoted by the Structuralist approach or the linguistic semiotic model (based on the relation signified/signifier). In this sense, Massumi refers to what Félix Guattari described as 'diagrammatics,' drawing from the work of Charles Sanders Peirce. Guattari's diagrammatics are 'a-signifying or signal-etic semiotics that describes the processuality of signs and not their position on a structural grid' as 'processes in which ideas, intensities, functions are transmitted without having to pass through a structure of (symbolic signification)' (Guattari, 1977: 281 in Massumi, 2002: 17). The reason the concept of diagrammatics is relevant for the event of this case study is that it opens up the possibility of imagining political gestures beyond the mere discursive politics model. In this sense, a gesture such as a self-immolation or the arson of a building associated with abusive forms of power holds political importance, whether or not a clearly structured discursive claim is attached to it. In the same way as, looking at it from the other side of the barricade, 'affective facts' – mainly a tool of the power apparatus - hold a crucial political undertone, although they are characterized by what seems to be a total focus on affective intensities only. This brings me to the third aspect of mediation that needs further attention.

### **5.2.3. The Body as Mediator**

The physical body is obviously omnipresent in the practices of protest and mobility that this research has considered. Important reflections have been made so far on the body of the protester, in the act of self-immolation, and the body as a terrain of necroresistance. The body also appears to be a fundamental element of the operations of mediation, as it is seen to 'always already be subject to technological mediation' (Blackman, 2012: 8). Yet, when scholars focus on the electronic media, they sometimes dematerialize that same body. As Fernandez notes, 'in postcolonial theory, the body is conceived as a palimpsest on which relations of power are inscribed. In electronic media, the body is irrelevant to those relations,' as if suggesting that 'marginality and subalternity exist only *outside* of cyberspace in the masses yet to be linked to the global network'

(Fernandez, 1999: 63). Along these lines of reflection on the interaction between cyberspace and the rebel bodies, when Judith Butler speaks of the 2011 series of protests, she refers to the media as the 'scene' of politics, in which the 'bodies carrying the camera, audio-recorder or cell-phone become the frame or border between the scene and the media, included and excluded at the same time and because of this vulnerable to the violence of the state' (Butler, 2011 in Lury et al., 2012, 11).

While this description is certainly pertinent, I would instead argue that the bodies are more than a frame, they are also the *medium* itself, and as such, they can be regarded as primary mediators in many instances. In this sense, it still makes sense to distinguish the 'materiality of embodiment' and the 'vectors of digital information,' in order to be able to reflect on how they interact, since 'the materiality of embodiment has a particular way of receiving and generating meaning that gives it a vector of movement that may be parallel to or out of sync with but definitely not the same as vectors of digital information' (Hayles, 1996 in Munster, 2001).

This observation stimulates a reflection on the intra-action between the way meaning is received and generated through embodiment vis-à-vis the modalities of production and circulation of digital information. Although the body is a constant participant to and hyper-mediated by the digital flows, in the Tunisian case the materiality of the bodily gesture and the way its consequences propagate through other bodies is what ignited the revolutionary spark, especially given the poor connectivity and the censorship of the internet, that characterized the digital landscape of Sidi Bouzid in 2010.

#### **5.2.4. Gesture and Mediators**

Furthermore, in order to look at the mediation patterns keeping in mind the three aspects that have been so far discussed – 1) the situatedness of mediation; 2) the focus on processuality and topologies, and 3) the body as a mediator – two reflections have proved their utility. On the one side, the understanding of *gesture* developed by Agamben in *Means without End* (Agamben, 2000). On the other side, Nicholas Thoburn's idea of *mediator*, as an element that represents 'the agency of

the minority' (Thoburn, 2016). Both working concepts, the gesture and the mediator, are most relevant to the understanding of the forms of the political linked to the Tunisian protests and mobility. These concepts speak against the prescriptive political approaches, which, in order to recognize the emergence of politics, seek consolidated political bodies and discourses with continuity in space and time. By imposing these standards, often what is ignored is the fact that the practices of struggle are developed under the pressure of abusive power and marked by a constant unruly mobility.<sup>113</sup>

In relation to the gesture, Agamben argues that 'any communication is first of all communication not of something in common but of communicability itself' (Agamben, 2000: 10). This observation is caused by his reflection on how media establishments of the 'spectacular-democratic society' nurture alienation, while actively attempting to prevent revolutionary movements.

For Agamben

What characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported. (...) *The gesture is the exhibition of mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such.* It allows for the emergence of the being-in-medium of human beings and thus it opens the ethical dimension for them. (...) Gesture is a moment of life subtracted from the context of individual biography as well as a moment of art subtracted from the neutrality of aesthetics: it is pure praxis. (Agamben, 2000: 57, 58, 80, original emphasis)

In this sense, the gesture can be understood as the distillation of certain embodied lineages or memories of affects. Once the gesture's praxis unfolds, the nature of its mediality projects a significant wave of intensities in all directions. These intensities are welcomed and re-transmitted within those communities who hold the experiential background that grants them access to those gestures. In this sense, the 'game over' banner, the attack on police headquarters, the

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<sup>113</sup> This is an aspect I will be developing in the following sections in which I will discuss the notion of politics within a police state setting.

employment of the notion of 'dignity' or the anti-Western symbols plug the relative gestures to very particular and situated ecologies of meanings. It can be argued that the locations of these meanings are spread globally. In other words, different communities across the globe can resonate, as I will argue in section 5.4., with the same gesture according to specific patterns of relation. Significantly, many such political gestures, linked to the event of the revolution and its aftermath, express anger, as an 'outlawed emotion.' 'The magic of anger is a response not to injustice, but to a frustrated political impulse to speak and be heard, and the existence of anger itself is an evidence of the denial of a right to social participation' (Lyman, 1981: 71 in Lugones, 2003: 106).

An important aspect of anger in this setting is that it operates as a moral assessment. In other words 'to be angry is to make oneself a judge and to express a standard against which one assesses the person's conduct, both of which are marks of a moral agent.' This anger 'makes a claim on respect and signals one's own ability to make judgments about having been wronged, one's own respectability' (Spelman, 1989: 271 in Lugones, 2003: 109-110). Anger is the type of 'outlawed emotion' that riots are mainly connected to. In fact, most political gestures within the setting that this research works on are somehow relatable to instances of riots. Considering the riot as an example of moral assessment, with its agents implicitly asserting their respectability, starts to reveal more of the political significance of forms of dissent often labelled as only self-destructive. Given this focus on anger, one of the most frequent critiques of instances of protest or revolutions is that they are solely relief valves for accumulated *ressentiment* and that they are lacking in terms of political construction (this is a critique broadly discussed in Caygill, 2013). Drawing from Fanon, this research argues that instances of mass action are unavoidably an example of construction, even when they are pioneered by categories of people with no ideological or organizational background. For categories of people who aren't granted the access to the tool of respectable politics, their anger and their bodies become crucial political tools. Especially since, as Lugones notes, anger functions as a moral challenge to the legitimacy of those in power, by bracketing the manageability of the governed (Lugones, 2003). Anger is what animates the gesture of disobedience, which opens up the possibility of negotiation between two groups involved in the conflict.

Rather than an irrational self-destructive explosion, often critiqued for its lack of political vision, anger is what opens up the possibility of politics, while signalling not only the historical absence of a dialogue with the administrators of power but, most importantly, the arrival at a breaking point. In the Tunisian setting, the suburban disenfranchised population used anger to literally signal the impossibility of survival. As a consequence, the event raises the problem of survival, which had declined in terms of cohabitation and exploitation between different groups. This is why I have argued that one of the revolution's main implicit demands is that of redistribution of wealth. The stakes of the negotiations are precisely the margins of survival.

Moreover, certain forms of dissent, such as the Tunisian riots, also make visible the limits of forms of politics centred on recognition,<sup>114</sup> intended as the 'struggle to become full legal and political persons' (Bhandar, 2011: 228), which mainly informs the Western liberal understanding of politics. From an Indigenous perspective, Coulthard argues that 'the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power' (Coulthard, 2014: 3). In this sense, one of the ways for the dialectics of recognition to overcome the logic of subordination is for it to acknowledge the centrality of the body. In other words, Brenna Bhandar argues, recognition politics is relevant as long as it accounts for that which exceeds it. 'The body from which the demand for recognition issues makes an appearance, it is here and there, it exposes and reveals a 'breakthrough of sense' (Nancy, 2008: 24 in Bhandar, 2011: 237) that is an excess'. Much like the Tunisian revolutionaries and the Kasserine 13's practice, the struggle for recognition requires a body that can fight this battle and risk death (Idem., 240). The devastated body of necroresistance, which has devoted its organic being to making visible the deadly action of power, 'presents us with a materialist theory of being, a theory that carries with it the potential for political resistance to the violence of dispossession' (Idem., 242).

Furthermore, thinking beyond the contradictions of recognition-based politics, Coulthard, for example, advocates for the alternative of the 'resurgent politics of

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<sup>114</sup> When discussing paradigms of recognition I refer to the originally Hegelian dialectical view of the slave-master relationality, which authors such as Glen Coulthard critique (Coulthard, 2014).

recognition' (Coulthard, 2014: 18), one that is premised on 'self-actualization, direct action, and the resurgence of cultural practices that are attentive to the subjective and structural composition of settler-colonial power' (Idem, 24). Along the same line of thought of Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, this form of 'disalienation through affirmative reconstruction' is only seen as a means rather than an end, 'as a precondition for establishing broader bonds of social solidarity and collective struggle' (Idem, 138). In the contemporary Tunisian context, the people who have been and are produced as surplus have no access to recognition-based politics. Their very existential condition is affected by the absence of recognition on behalf of their state, which devalues the lives of its poor citizens on a daily basis. This devaluation is pursued through an oscillation between state abandonment, confinement, heavy policing and dispossession of resources, of water and land, for example, which is increasingly pushed into private hands in Tunisia. The Tunisian case indicates two ways of exiting the condition of surplus and attempting to be acknowledged by the state. On an individual level, this mission is mostly pursued through the attempted access to new resources, as in the case of migration. On a mass level, though, the only way to challenge one's own production as surplus is through persistent and collective interruptions of the existing power relations. This is the political demand of the Tunisian riots, which, once joined by the general strike, have turned into the Dignity revolution. As such, riots challenge recognition, and mostly its absence, by putting an end to the state's project of management of its peoples. In fact, 'if the state's solution to the problem of crisis and surplus is prison – carceral management – the riot is a contest entered directly against this solution – *a counterproposal of unmanageability*' (Clover, 2016: 163, my emphasis).

A short-circuit brought to the continuity of manageability seems to be an accessible negotiation tool for those people for whom forms of protest such as strike are unavailable. In fact, the interruption of manageability is able to jam profit flows connected to the circulation and consumption of raw materials and commodities. Nevertheless, nowadays it can be argued that similar disruptions assist other forms of profit extraction, such as profit deriving from the increased usage of social media, for example, which is common during instances of unrest. Clover's point makes clear how a marginalized category of people – produced as

underclass, 'mob,' surplus – employs the riot as oppositional, and how the 'counterproposal of manageability' interrupts the surplus management or containment techniques operated by the state. In this sense, it is important to observe that even instances of struggles caught up in the 'affirmation trap' are part of what builds up towards revolution, at least in light of the Tunisian revolution. The 'affirmation trap' (Clover, 2016) indicates those cases in which labourers struggle to maintain their relationship with capital, namely in which protests aim at keeping employment. This is mainly visible in the Tunisian example of the 2008 'Gafsa Intifada,' when the unemployed started an uprising against the hiring processes, implicitly demanding to have a chance at being employed by the Tunisia Phosphate Gafsa Company. In cases of 'affirmation trap,' 'capital and labour find themselves in collaboration to preserve capital's self-production, to preserve the labour relation along with the firm's viability. This provides near-absolute limits for bargaining. (...) Labour is locked into the position of affirming its own exploitation under the guise of survival' (Clover, 2016: 147).

Although Clover argues that 'caught in the affirmation trap, labour ceases to be the antithesis of capital,' in Tunisia, the 'Gafsa Intifada' is largely recognized as the precursor of the 2010 revolution. From this perspective, the Tunisian experience shows that struggles caught up in the 'affirmation trap' can also be part of a revolutionary development, especially after they are met with the state's repressive response, which increases their propagation.

In this sense, in relation to the examples so far listed, politics holds the important component of exposing mediality, the 'being-into-language, the being-into-a-mean as an irreducible condition of human beings,' since 'politics is the sphere neither of an end in itself nor of means subordinated to an end; rather, it is the sphere of a pure mediality without end intended as the field of human action and of human thought' (Agamben, 2000: 117-118).

Agamben's focus on mediality without an end hints at the importance of political gestures – especially the ones springing out of anger – that seem to hold 'no meaning'. Furthermore, Thoburn expands the notion of the mediating gestures beyond human agents, when he describes how mediators 'have a catalytic capacity to carry, intensify, and diversify the interrogation' that is produced from within

the conditions of oppression. This capacity to 'carry, intensify and diversify' is what was referred to when writing about the notion of mediation, when focusing on its preservation of the dimension of the virtual of the social within the context of cultures and practices of resistance. In this context, 'a mediator can be real, imaginary, animate, or inanimate – a person, an object, plants, animals, myths, a certain discourse, an image, a refrain, or a problem' (Deleuze, 1995: 125-7 in Thoburn, 2016: 11).

So far, this section has attempted to sketch out my understanding of mediation as an agent of plurification as opposed to technologies of containment of dissent such as representation or modulation of affects. A special effort was put into imagining how these interactions unfold within the informational ecology of the Tunisian revolutionary period, with regards to the ways of functioning of the contemporary informational culture. The focus of this section has been on mediation as a situated process, marked by a discontinuous and complex relationship with connectivity, whose dynamic articulation has been addressed in terms of topological rationality. Moreover, I have introduced the importance of the gesture and the notion of the body as a mediator of the political gesture, whose centrality will be further analysed in the following sections dealing with resonance and 'relation.'

The next section will take on the previously developed reflection around resistance as contagion and identify its limits while showing how it can be understood in a more politically sensible manner in terms of resonance.

### **5.3. Contagion vs. Resonance**

This section addresses the question of how protests spread in the particular context of the 2010 Tunisian revolution and with regards to the struggles during its aftermath. There are two models that suggest different approaches to understanding how protests spread. On the one side, the patterns of propagation are read in terms of contagion or virality (Nunes, 2014). This approach, which I illustrated in Chapter Two, has proven essential in order to open up a reflection on the aspect of circulation connected to the event. On the other side, there is the approach which considers the distribution of the protest gestures to be the result

of patterns of resonance (here I will mainly draw from Clover, 2016).<sup>115</sup> The two approaches are not incompatible, but this section will focus on the latter because I argue that this critique of a certain paradigm of contagion can help unearth further dimensions of the way an event like the Tunisian revolution comes into being.

Naturally, in looking at the patterns of propagation of protests, one must also consider issues around phenomena such as solidarity, empathy and the construction of alliances and coalitions. To this end, I have decided to consider two levels of synchronization of protest forms promoted between different groups.

Firstly, I will discuss a form of synchronization of protests that touches upon groups of people who are subjected to a similar degree of disposability by the state or other molar power systems, such as the border system, for example. I will call this type of synchronization resonance. The term refers to the way cultures and practices of struggle reverberate within the circulation of actions of disruption. Secondly, I will refer to instances of connection between struggles that merge the interests of groups whose conditions are different, such as the unemployed and the public workers; the unemployed and the students, or the 'illegalised' migrants and the European citizens.<sup>116</sup> I will refer to these cases as examples of 'relation.'

There are two preliminary assumptions that this section is based on: one traces the limits of the impact of connectedness; the second reaffirms the centrality of the body. First of all, connectedness *does not* equal empathy. As Fernandez has pointed out, commenting on technological optimism 'at the opening of this decade, prominent electronic media artists contended that electronic communication would help facilitate global peace as the exchange of text, sound, and image among virtual strangers would increase human empathy and understanding' (Fernandez, 1999: 60).

On the contrary, based on my definition of resonance, whether connectedness, digital or otherwise, is present or not, the relation between different resistant communities is not based on an 'exchange between strangers,' but on a certain

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<sup>115</sup> Though other authors such as Mezzadra and Neilson have also addressed the issue of resonance in political terms (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013).

<sup>116</sup> When referring to 'illegalised migration,' I mainly draw from some important reflections produced within the field of critical migration studies and political theory (De Genova, 2002; Mezzadra, 2006; Garelli & Tazzioli, 2012; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2014).

degree of commonality with regards to the frames of experiencing and responding to abusive forms of power.

The second assumption posits that when engaging in forms of support and solidarity, there is a centrality of the body, and of the availability to alter the distribution of risk. The Egyptian Mosireen collective has articulated this idea very poignantly in their *Revolution Triptych* (Mosireen, 2014) when speaking to the way political solidarity chains are formed around the circulation of images of abuse:

If an image does not provoke you, is it a continuation of the system you are trying to overthrow? An extension of it? The martyr doesn't want your sympathy. The martyr wants you to overthrow the system.

The image that only seeks your pity only perpetuates the industrial cycle of morbid titillation. People, in this world that has been built, in this cycle, can now suffer from "compassion fatigue."

F\*\*\* awareness.

We do not ask for your charity, we do not ask for your prayers, or your thoughts or your words but your bodies. We do not ask for your martyrdom, we ask for your bodies on the streets of your cities, we ask for your ideas and your energy.

We ask for your resistance. (Mosireen, 2014)

In some way, what needs to be achieved is a union between the aesthetic level of coordination - intended in an etymological sense, as to perceive, to openly see, to manifest, drawing from the Greek *aisthanomai* - αἰσθάνομαι - and the level of suffering, of grief - drawing from the Greek *pathos* - πάθος. This union of publicly seeing and suffering *together* (therefore *syn-aisthesis* + *syn-pathos*) must take into account the patterns of mimetic communication at a distance, intended as 'corporally based forms of imitation, both voluntary and involuntary' (Gibbs, 2010: 186 in Blackman, 2012: 8). By this, I mean that mimetism runs along the

lines of resonance both in terms of replicating patterns of abuse, not only patterns of resistance.<sup>117</sup>

One of my most important references for this research has been the work of Rodrigo Nunes. Here, however, I would like to reflect further on the way he has employed the ideas of contagion and virality in terms of the spread of protests in 2011. In that context, he has tied the idea of event to the idea of contagion, arguing for the event as ‘a process of contagion,’ that ‘spreads and replicates at once information – words, images, narratives, actions etc. – and the *affective charges* that travel with it’ (Nunes, 2014: 21-2). Nunes has further developed this approach with the help of notions such as the ‘structural germ’ (drawing from Gilbert Simondon, in Milton, 2005: 549 in Idem, 49) and the ‘vanguard-function’ (drawing from Gabriel Tarde in Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 264 in Idem, 52).

While I recognize the absolute relevance of these ideas, since they helped me understand the broad dimension of circulation of cultures and practices of resistance, I am concerned that a focus on contagion and virality might occlude the political motivation behind these protests. In this sense, I draw from Firoze Manji’s critique of the framework of contagion, when he says that

While the media sought to portray this as some form of contagious disease, the reality was that the dispossessed across the continent and beyond recognized in the anger and demands of the Tunisians and Egyptians their own demand to reclaim their own dignity, and the aspirations of their own desires. They *recognized immediately the common experience* of the decades of neoliberalism that had impoverished them.  
(Manji & Sokari, 2012: 10, my emphasis)

The limit of the contagion framework is that it suggests a mobility of practices untied from the participants' intentionality. It could be willingly employed in a

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<sup>117</sup> I have first reflected on this aspect when I noticed the police in my home country, Romania, perform the same choreographic moves of American police during arrests. These moves have become viral thanks to cultural industry products and videos of police brutality. But the imitation of these moves – mainly focused on brandishing weapons and brutalising the arrestee with specific gestures, which are both highly uncommon for the Romanian police – add a further layer of aggressiveness.

manner as to obliterate any reference to specific subjectivities. But this case study is mainly concerned with showing the complex texture of interactions between different specific groups, which animate the event. Also, it somehow overshadows how the base of the connection of struggles lies within forms of historical and man-made inequality, rather than within mere communication. The same information of the repression of a riot will be received in a different manner depending on whether the receivers consider themselves part of the group that has been targeted. In this sense, the circulation of a piece of information is not enough to spread a riot.<sup>118</sup> A certain type of intensely embodied recognition of an experience - for example, of the abuse lived by Mohamed Bouazizi - and the organisation of a riot in response to this experience both run along a community infrastructure built upon a shared condition of marginalization. The recomposition lies within the shared experience of everyday precariousness and also within the common, restless *course à l'hobza*, the 'race for bread.' In other words, what I am suggesting is that the *affective charges* that Nunes refers to are not the same for all the receivers.

Moreover, this reflection is influenced by the way the geography of protests in Tunisia has unfolded in December 2010, after the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid, as opposed to January 2016, after the suicide of Ridha Yahyaoui on an electricity pillar in Kasserine. Both gestures - carried out by Mohamed and Ridha - have intensively rippled through the volatile system of the 'two Tunisias'. Yet twice, the riots generated by the two suicidal gestures did not *spread by contamination, but by resonance*, because, as Clover observes, "riot goes looking for surplus populations, and these are its basis for expansion" although 'this is not to deny the agency of rioters' (Clover, 2016: 154). Just like information, riot 'propagates by autonomously finding the lines of least resistance' (drawing from Terranova, 2004: 65), usually determined by how well people resonate with its signal. In this sense, resonance can be read in terms of interference patterns and connected to the way the echo propagates through the emptiness between

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<sup>118</sup> I am here strictly referring to the Tunisian case. I am aware that riots can be both weaponised by the state and enact heavily reactionary practices. Such was the case in the Tunisian context, when informal militias - the *baltaghias* - attempted to destabilise the rebel neighbourhoods, with the intention of legitimising the forceful interventions of the state, after Ben Ali's escape from Tunis; or when locals from Ben Guardane launched a racist arson attack on the refugee camp of Choucha. I am listing these two examples since they could be easily associated with forms of rioting.

surfaces. As ‘interference pattern arises where the sound wave intersects with itself,’ ‘resonance can be seen as converting distance, or extension, into intensity,’ therefore, transforming distance in common affect by means of riot and protest. In this sense, ‘it is a qualitative transformation of distance into an immediacy of self-relation’ (Massumi, 2002: 14). Furthermore, resonance signals the switch from competition or indifference between certain groups, to cooperation and coordination between those same groups. And because information has the potential to ‘amplify or inhibit the emergence of commonalities and antagonisms,’ the space of commonality is marked by the formation of a ‘public as counter-weapon,’ which makes it possible for local responses to oppression to be shared across distant spaces, creating a sort of live archive of tactics and languages. The public I am referring to is the one recomposed by the act of witnessing the event, which inhabits a virtual space that hypothetically ‘multiplies the chances of re-invention of possible shared worlds’ (Terranova, 2004: 2; Terranova, 2007: 140-2). Maybe the public as ‘event of possibility’ and a ‘starting point for an affirmative activity’ (Ibidem) is one of the lines of flight that Deleuze invokes when he says: ‘there is no need to ask which is the toughest or most tolerable regime, for it’s within each of them that liberating and enslaving forces confront each other. (...) There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for *new weapons*’ (Deleuze, 1990).

Resonance interrupts the pattern of competition and opposes an alliance-based politics to the hegemonic attempts linked to *divide et impera* strategies of fragmentation and isolation, promoted through the production of internal conflicts such as ‘ethnic’ conflicts, sectarianism or ‘war on the poor.’ In this sense, it can be argued that resonance questions the Malthusian functioning of the ‘selfish gene as a technique of capture of value.

The selfish gene is the subjectifying function that turns a multitude into an assemblage of isolated individuals. (...) Selfishness closes the open space of a multitude down to a hole of subjectification. The selfish gene is a simple diagram of the apparatuses of subjectification that the abstract machine of soft control distributes and perpetuates not so much among molecules as among collectivities (Terranova, 2004: 126)

In addition to interrupting the functions of soft control, resonance is powered by a certain memory or trace of an embodied experience. To give an example, the suicide of Mohamed or Ridha didn't represent 'the breaking point' for *all* of the Tunisian citizens, but just for some particular categories of Tunisians. In this sense, the patterns of reception such as the patterns of production of political gestures come from within particular receptacles of experience. 'The poetics of sense memory involves not so much speaking of but *speaking out of* a particular memory of experience – in other words, speaking from the body sustaining sensation' (Bennett, 2000 in Munster, 2001). This is why it can be argued that the features of the contemporary riot connect dots crossing the globe, from Clichy-sous-Bois to Tottenham and Baltimore (as Joshua Clover suggests) including Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine and the suburbs of Tunis. Along these lines 'the riot is the form of collective action that features participants with no necessary kinship but their dispossession' (Clover, 2016: 16). Thus, 'the global *classes dangereuses* are united not by their role as producers but by their relation to state violence. In this is to be found the basis of the surplus rebellion and of its form, which must exceed the logic of recognition and negotiation' (Idem, 157).

In this sense, from an analytical standpoint focused on the American setting, Clover makes it clear that, in his understanding, the surplus is not synonymous with race and that it includes the diaspora. On another occasion, he underlines the pioneering function of what he calls the 'expanded proletariat,' namely a category including 'the women, children, peasantry, aged people and the unemployed' (Idem, 169-70; 189).

In conclusion, the patterns of resonance are based on the commonality of shared experience. Some important aspects of this common experience are 1) people sharing the same spatiality; 2) people sharing the same sense of temporality, and 3) people sharing the same unruly mobility practices. These are the terrains out of which the politics of events such as the Tunisian revolution and its aftermath are born.

First of all, in terms of commonality of spatiality, it is the urban ghetto, the 'internal colony,' that is the source of a shared experience, since it cements the element of kinship. It can be argued that in the Tunisian case, the life in the poor

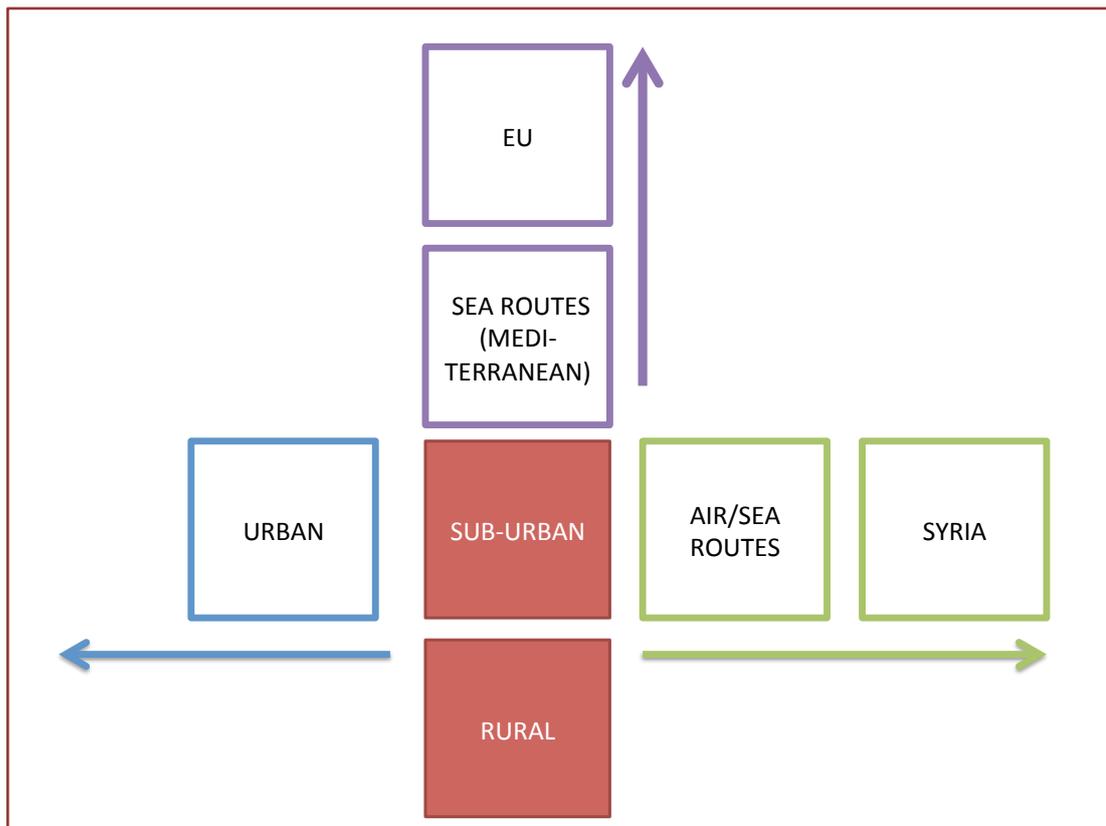
suburb, the *houma* (plural *hwem*), is what rearticulates a sense of class belonging. As Griziotti points out regarding the proletarian class composition in Italy, 'being forced to spend the largest part of the day together in the same physical space and the rest of the day in the typical neighbourhoods next to the factory is an important element of the origin of the sense of class belonging' (Griziotti, 2016: 161, My translation).

In the same way, the Tunisian under-and-unemployed spend most of their time in the poor suburbs struggling for subsistence. This permanence in space, as Lamoum observes, ties the group cohesion (*asabiyya*) to the territory of the neighbourhood, especially in absence of a professional occupation, other than the *course à l'khobza*. Moreover, if the *coup d'état* can be seen as 'a temporary departure from laws and legality (that) goes beyond ordinary law' or an 'irruptive assertion of *raison d'état*,' as the visibilisation of a power structure, then the ghetto is the *spatialisation* of that same structure (Foucault, 2007: 261; 264). This is a space where power is always absolute and where the conflict with the state apparatus is always open. In this sense, this form of "internal colonialism" is intended as a 'geographically-based pattern of subordination of a differentiated population, located within a dominant power or country' (Pinderhughes, 2011: 236 in Cowen and Lewis, 2016), with the state's police operating "like an army of occupation" protecting the interests of outside exploiters and maintaining the domination over the ghetto by the central metropolitan power structure' (Baluner, 1969: 404-5 in Cowen and Lewis, 2016). In this setting, 'urbanization has supplanted industrialization as the engine of capital accumulation on a world scale' (drawing from Lefevre, 2003 in Cowen and Lewis, 2016).

Second, in terms of the sense of shared temporality, it has already been argued that the temporality of the *houma* oscillates between existential anxiety and panic related to the *course à l'khobza* of informalised labour; and the suspension of time, in an eternally depressing time of waiting: waiting for the chance to earn something, waiting for a job, waiting for an answer on one's asylum claim. This suspension is described in the hip hop anthem of the *houma*, *Houmani*: 'We wake up late; we never see the time passing/I don't even have a clock/Here the atmosphere is suffocating' (Hamzaoui and KAFON, 2013). The damage inflicted by the imposition of a constantly suspended temporality, one that drastically reduces

the power to act of the people - the *houmani*, the asylum seekers - shows a repeated weaponisation of the waiting time, employed as a strategy of management (Povinelli, 2011). In this sense, it is suggestive to see how central this form of abuse is in the work of the artists of the suburbs (such as the rappers I've quoted or street artists).

Thirdly, and most importantly, resonance runs easier across lines of commonalities in terms of unruly mobility practices. For the case of the Tunisian revolution, I believe that the most important mobility practice was the one from the rural towards the suburban setting, motivated by the historical and progressive dispossession and isolation of the rural environment. As I discussed in the previous chapter, this occurred on behalf of the colonial state first and the post-independence state later; increasingly so after the '80s, when the neoliberal 'structural adjustments' were implemented under pressure from international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In the following diagram (Fig. 60.), I have schematically indicated how from the initial position of the suburban, the location of most of the urbanized informal labour, which pioneered the revolution, Tunisians have moved – mostly illegally – following at least three directions: 1) towards the centre of the richer cities, either to work or to protest; 2) towards Europe; and 3) towards the Islamic militancy fronts in Syria and Iraq.



*Fig. 60. This diagram shows three directions available for the suburban poor or the younger generation of poor men migrating from the rural areas towards the more resourceful settings.*

In this sense, an inhabitant of the poor neighbourhoods, a *houmani*, would cross the border between the ghetto and the city, usually heavily policed. Sometimes the same person would cross the border between the Tunisian city and Europe, being caught in the containment technologies of the hotspot or the detention centres at the gates of Europe. If the person were able to continue their mobility plan, they could then reach the centre of European cities, as in the case of the Tunisians protesting in the centre of Paris. But that person would then only end up in the same ghetto-dimension, this time of European cities, unless this person got arrested, deported or decided to go back home. For As for the mobility practices that take Tunisians towards the Islamic militancy fronts in the East, the routes depend uniquely on the traveller's status and economic resources. In order to reach Syria, the 'foreign fighters' might either reach Turkey by airplane, reach it by sea or air from Libya or fly towards Turkey from a third country, as the diagram below illustrates (Fig. 61., Malka and Balboni, 2016).

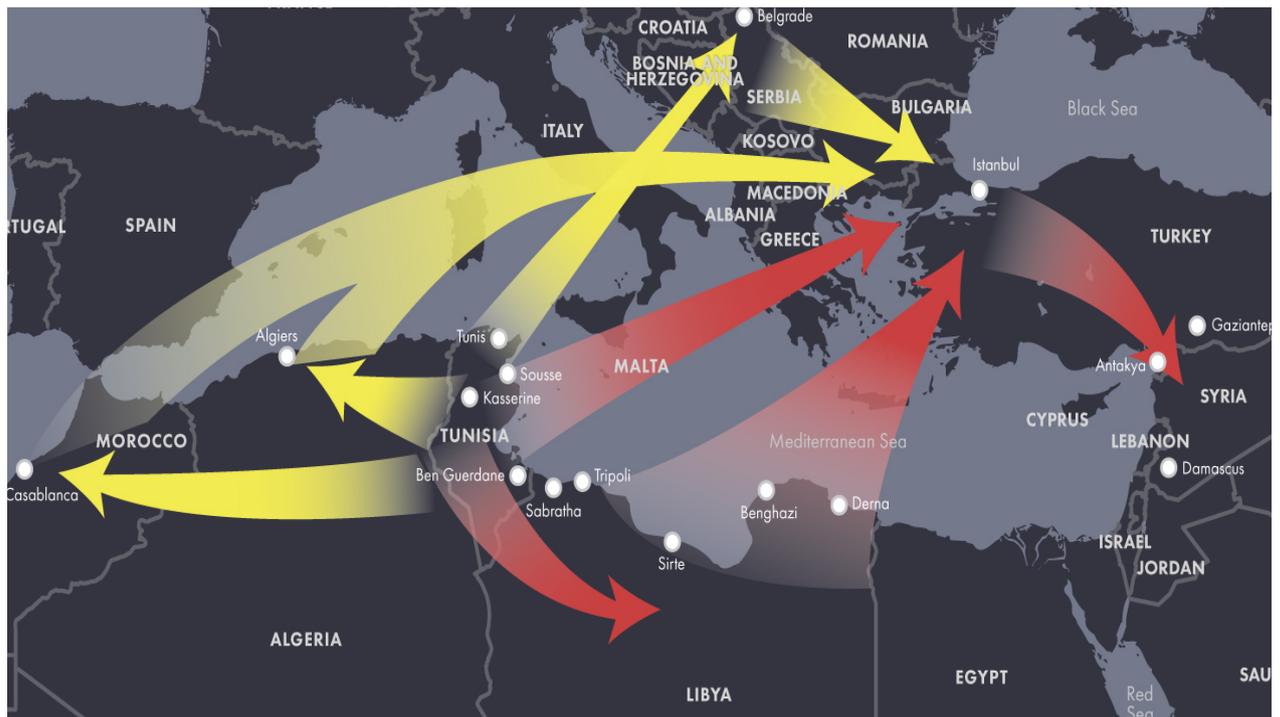


Fig. 61. Routes that the Tunisian 'foreign fighters' use to reach the Islamic militancy fronts in Syria and Iraq.

Source: <http://foreignfighters.csis.org/tunisia/getting-there.html>

In these examples, borders assume a topological character in the sense that they become 'parameters that enable the channelling of flows and provide coordinates within which flows can be joined or segmented, connected or disconnected' (Lury et al., 2012: 11). All the while, the *refugee*, as subject of mobility, becomes 'the only thinkable figure of our time and the only category in which one may see today – at least until the process of dissolution of the nation state and of its sovereignty has achieved full completion – the forms and limits of a coming political community' (Agamben, 2000: 16).

In this sense, thinking about the politics enacted by the 'refugee,' or any other category of people produced as surplus, either the *houmani* or the *harraga*, is an essential gesture, because it suggests how politics can look in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when its actors are entangled in an articulation of power whose relations are those of a police state. The first police state that I refer to is the Tunisian one.<sup>119</sup> In

<sup>119</sup> It might be useful to point out that I refer to Tunisia as a police state because I am rather uninterested in notions of 'authoritarianism' or 'dictatorship,' which have commonly been

the Tunisian case, the police state indicates a choice of the government to lend arbitrary power to the police, rather than to the army, as is the case in Egypt, for example. Furthermore, this term is relevant in order to point out that police states aren't only defined by nation-state borders, but are, more likely, an indication of a particular relation or articulation within certain circumstances. In these situations, coercion is adopted as a privileged management style, especially in relation to marginalized communities, and human lives are aggressively devalued. This last observation is crucial; when I use the term 'police state' I don't simply refer to the Western neoliberal state with its surveillance complex, but rather to immediate ways in which survival is under attack through this modality of management.

It is well documented (by Hibou, 2011; and others) that an impressive police apparatus supported Ben Ali's regime. It always behaved harshly with the poor, and was traditionally known for the recurrence of torture.<sup>120</sup> In addition, the Ben Ali administration strongly promoted a process of de-politicization and of repression of both political Islam and Communist activism. This way, Ben Ali made sure that no outlet of organized opposition could develop during his rule. In this sense, the general union proved to be an important remaining opposition actor, although it had been partially co-opted by the government by 2010. This last aspect is important because it stresses that the revolution happened despite the police state and the forced depoliticization, which made the transmission of past experiences of organisation very difficult.

In this sense, the question around politics must be 'how does one organize in a police state?' Other police state articulations that this research has come across are the Tunisian *houma*; the detention centres in Europe; the same European cities, which are highly dangerous places for the Tunisian migrants; the refugee centres, such as Choucha; and the Islamic militancy fronts. All these environments are experienced as violent in terms of deportability, detention, heavy physical and psychological damage and death, as they exponentially increase the disposability of the lives of the people who cross or inhabit them. The reason this is important

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associated to Tunisia and Egypt. These notions unavoidably localize and spectacularize articulations of state control to certain geographies, tying them to non-Western spaces, which is not an approach that is in any way useful for my research.

<sup>120</sup> Alongside other forms of torture, anal and virginity tests were and still are, as recently documented, perpetrated as a form of retaliation against dissidents (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

is not as a description but in order to imagine the conditions of possibility of politics in such environments. Or, more precisely, in order to reflect on the conditions of the *impossibility* of respectable politics. It is mainly Thoburn who reflects on this aspect, when he develops Deleuze's concept of 'cramped space' (Thoburn, 2015, 2016), while suggesting that 'politics begins with specific and particular experience and oppression in the 'cramped space' and 'impossible positions' of 'small people' who lack or refuse coherent identity' (Thoburn, 2003: 44). The question is how does the political unfold from within such levels of social constraint, starting from the example of the ghetto inhabitant during the Ben Ali regime or from that of the Tunisian 'illegalized' migrants in Europe, for instance. This question is especially pertinent in the context of the conditions in which 'the struggles that will be called riots are inevitable' and 'come inward from periphery to core' by virtue of a 'double motion' in terms of 'a convergence of colonialist and capitalist logics, their disorders coming home to roost' (Clover, 2016: 167).

Under these constraints, the consolidation of a political body such as a party, a commune or a trade union is very difficult. Rather, instances of organisation are punctual and occasional, because the subjects of politics are in a constant race against repression. In these cases, dissident visibility and collectivity are difficult to attain, or better, require a massive disruption of the state apparatus so that they can manifest themselves with a certain continuity. It is very difficult for dissident archipelagos of politics to form themselves and resist within systems dominated by heavy militarization. It is not a coincidence that the forms of anonymity and high versatility of resistance practiced during Ben Ali's repressive period have turned out to be useful when the *harraga* have enacted political gestures within the territory marked by 'border imperialism' (Walia, 2012).<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> The concept of 'border imperialism' is drawn from the work of Harsha Walia, who develops it within the American context and lays it out as follows:

Border imperialism encapsulates four overlapping and concurrent structurings: first, the mass displacement of impoverished and colonized communities resulting from asymmetrical relations of global power, and the simultaneous securitization of the border against those migrants whom capitalism and empire have displaced; second, the criminalization of migration with severe punishment and discipline of those deemed "alien" or "illegal;" third, the entrenchment of a racialised hierarchy of citizenship by arbitrating who legitimately constitutes the nation-state; and fourth, the state-mediated exploitation of migrant labour, akin to conditions of slavery and servitude, by capitalist interests. (Walia, 2013: 5)

According to this research, instances of political invention such as the Tunisian revolution and the struggles in its aftermath are to be catalogued as examples of 'minor politics' stemming out of 'cramped spaces,' in opposition, that is, to 'political models founded on the representation of a subject or an identity, whether in the form of the 'People' or a self-declared marginal' (Thoburn, 2002: 436). According to Thoburn, who draws from Deleuze and Guattari,

Against these molar models, which are premised on the fetishization of an already present identity, minor politics operate in the 'cramped spaces' and 'impossible' positions of 'small people' and 'minorities' who lack or refuse coherent identity – those who, constrained by a wealth of determining social relations, exist under, and in a sense affirm, the condition that 'the people are missing.' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 16-17; Deleuze, 1989: 216 in *Ibidem*)

The condition of 'cramped space' characterizes the people belonging to minoritarian groups (produced around race, class and gender) struck by further overlapping social constraints such as 'unemployment, spatial segregation, prison and police murder with impunity' (Thoburn, 2016: 4). The cramped space

Might be an experience of circumscribed confinement – being bound to the home, incarcerated in an immigration detention center or a prison cell – but the concept seeks to describe not confinement as such but immanence to the social, to the multitude of constraints and commands associated with lives interlaced with and buffeted by global social relations. (*Ibidem*)

The transformative power of 'minor politics' lies beyond identitarian claims and is connected to the way it manages to question fields of impossibility in a constantly dynamic way.

Rather than allow the solidification of particular political and cultural routes, forms and identities, the 'willed poverty' of cramped

space ever serves to draw thought and practice back into a milieu of contestation, argument and engagement, *forcing thought and practice from within the constraints and impossibilities of social relations* (Idem, 10, my emphasis)

As such, “undocumented migration – where constraint and flow are interlaced – presents a paradigmatic minor experience,” where “the individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 17 in Idem, 4). In this sense, it is worth weaving together minor forms of composition, both artistic and political, in order to think of the Tunisian revolution as an instance of political minor authorship, intended as ‘a ‘collective enunciation’ that emerges in the cramped conditions,’ ‘the elaboration and proliferation of the collective intrigue as it is expressed in particular moments by particular authors’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1996: 17 in Idem, 30). This is especially the case since ‘the minor author is not a subject, but an event or a singularity, a composite ‘foci of creation” (Deleuze, 1998: 42 in Idem, 31).

But how does the building of kinship work between different communities living within ‘cramped spaces’? In other words, how do struggles synchronize themselves as in the examples that the Tunisian revolution provides? The philosopher Sylvia Wynter provides an insightful approach to this question.

In this research, the work of Wynter has been a valuable resource mainly because it helped me address the issue of the subjecthood of the Tunisian revolutionaries, thanks to intuitions, which led me well beyond the question around class composition, and which enriched my understanding of what the Dignity revolution was a sign of. There are three main lines of thought developed in Wynter’s practice that have been of crucial inspiration for this research: 1) her theorization around humanism; 2) her depiction of the liminal, and 3) her aesthetic view of politics. Each of these reflections has shed light on some important research questions around subjectivity and the revolution.

Firstly, Wynter's concern with Western humanism is directly influenced by the anti-colonial struggle of the '50-'60s and the critiques formulated by Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon. Born in Jamaica and educated under colonial rule, the eclectic

thinker is interested in "tracking the "codes" and "genres" in terms of which the understanding - including self-understanding - is constituted" (Scott, 2000: 121).

Drawing from Fanon, she identifies the code as being the content of the "sociogenic principle," a situated social order based on a shared narration of symbolic life and death, what Fanon would have referred to as the "mask" of the "skin." According to Wynter, these codes have historically been transformed through epistemic ruptures, which delineated, from time to time, a different distribution of the experience of being and non-being, therefore legitimizing the supremacy of different groups: the clergy, the land gentry, and, currently, the Western bourgeoisie.

Within the current social order, the code that constitutes the experience of being human is a bio-economic one that articulates the following categories: eugenic/dysgenic; selected/dysselected; evolved/non-evolved. The "original sin" today is represented by economic scarcity and salvation lies within individual economic emancipation. This reflection is illuminating because it reveals and explains how poverty and destitution becomes fundamental markers of non-being, which the Tunisian revolution is a significant answer to, through the actions of the *houmani* or of the *harraga* that are also articulated through necropolitical resistance, such as in the exemplary case of Mohamed Bouazizi. In Tunisia, the category of the urban poor is also referred to with the derogatory term of *jabri*. 'In this country, we call "Jabri/Go3r" those one who can't speak French, those who hadn't had the chance to complete their education, those who aren't aware of the latest technology, who don't dress well, who have loud arguments and who live in the poor neighbourhoods' (Étudiant Tunisien, 2012, my translation).

Establishing the ethnoclass of the Western bourgeoisie as the standard of humanness determines the emergence of the "breadwinner democracy," "not a democracy of human beings" but "only [of] those categories of people who attain to our present middle-class or bourgeois conception of being human" (Scott, 2000: 157). This conception automatically excludes the ones Wynter calls the *liminal*, "groups that were excluded and oppressed and who were not captured in the formal categories of Western radical political theory" (Bogues, 2006: 328). These are precisely the Tunisian revolutionaries, but also the illegalized migrants and the Islamic militants, the majority of whom come precisely from a liminal

background. The triadic figure of the rioter-migrant-“terrorist” in the Tunisian setting represents an important part of the society’s disposable, expendable population.

Because of their systemic marginalization, they were forced to daily experience their deviance, their imposed liminal status with respect both to the normative order, and to what it is to be human in the terms of that order. (Scott & Wynter, 2000: 149)

Precisely because of their marginal location, the liminal produce a special knowledge embedded in the experience of injustice and “engaged in forms of symbolic coding which challenges the normative order” (Bogues, 2006: 331), by means of “counter-invention of the self” (Idem, 332). These instances of counter-invention are mainly based on a substantial rejection and on the re-signification of normative codes, by means of which “those who are liminal construct new spaces in the process of resistance” (Idem, 331).

This leads me to Wynter’s aesthetic view of politics. The Jamaican philosopher draws from Rancière, for whom politics is “first of all a way of framing, a specific intertwining of ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking” (Rancière, 2004 in Bogues, 2006: 326). Along Rancière’s thought, radical politics is built upon both action and epistemic ruptures since “the removal of domination and its guises requires concrete actions of the liminal *and* the construction of a radical politics of speech, word and action” (Bogues, 2006: 335, my emphasis). This addresses two main issues connected to this research. First, it stresses the importance of self-representation as an instance of resistance against hegemonic narratives, such as the one this research started from. In this sense, Wynter alludes to the fact that the counter-world of the liminal, of the ones produced as deviant, is animated by alternative and defiant ways of being, doing, and speaking. This is the reason why this research has focused on alternative names for the revolution, on the self-narration of life in the suburbs (such as the one contained in the “Houmani” hip hop anthem) and on the gesture of the body as a mediator of resistance. I am fully aware that I am only scratching the surface of the Tunisian

liminality counter-world, but these are precious indications of what world the revolution was born from.

Secondly, the aesthetic way of understanding politics also sheds light on the relationship between the promoters of the revolution, the suburban poor, and the artists who have supported them, whose work has fundamentally directed this research. For a long time, I have myself interrogated what the relationship between these two categories has been: the disenfranchised population and the organic artists I chose to look at. I am now able to see it in terms of a temporary alliance, an instance of 'relation' by which groups of people holding different degrees of vulnerability are aligned. It is clear now that the artists' contribution was crucial in order to reinforce the operation of "counter-invention of the self" initiated by the revolutionaries. The artists mainly did this by constantly challenging the global and state-led narratives of the event, while drawing attention to the protagonism of the poor and their still unfulfilled demands. The act of counter-invention here lies in the fact that they drew significant attention to poor Tunisians who had traditionally been either ignored or denied political credibility in the contemporary age.

The particularity of Wynter's approach lies in managing to intertwine three different dimensions in her theory: the ontogenic, the filogenic and the sociogenic, which she conceives in a unitary way, inspired by the work of Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire. According to Wynter, after what she calls the "Third Event" – the emergence of the *homo narrans* – human communities have grown increasingly characterized by their cultural production, their *mythoi*, especially with regards to how they conceive of their myths of origin. Since "each mode of aesthetic is isomorphic with a specific mode of human being or "form of life"," the ideas of symbolic life and death are distributed accordingly to the sociogenic principle, based, that is, on a certain human group's "*narratively instituted cultural Imaginary*," which draws a hierarchy between the members of that same group (Wynter, 1992: 253, my emphasis). The hierarchy thus constructed can depend on the application of religious, racial or economic standards. But most importantly, these standards define and condition the behaviour of its members at a neurochemical level, because they become indexes of "positively (opiate-triggering) and negatively (opiate-blocking) marked meanings" (Idem, 253).

In other words, ‘our contemporary now globalized order of knowledge, its truths of solidarity, are always already prescribed by the storytelling-chartered code of symbolic life/death of *homo oeconomicus* and its descriptive statements (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015: 29). This means that our relationship with others, when it comes to synchronised political gestures and alliances, and the risk that both entail, depends on culturally situated narratives of humanness and worthiness. In fact,

Sylvia Wynter’s hypothesis of auto-speciation suggests that we have been uniquely enabled, by means of our origin myths and cosmogonically charted narratives, to subjectively experience ourselves as semantically-neurochemically opiate-rewarded, thereby fictively eusocialising, inter-altruistic, kin-recognizing member subjects of the same *symbolic life kind* (here “kind” refers to our *genre-specific* or *pseudo-species-specific* human groupings – our class, our tribe, and so forth). (Idem, 25)

In conclusion, different human groupings hold different relations with the opiate-triggering or positively marked meanings of certain communities (and I’m here referring to the differently articulated relations to accumulation, or destitution, for example).<sup>122</sup> It can be argued that the people of the poor Tunisian suburbs have a different relationship with the hegemonic ‘descriptive statement’ than more protected Tunisian people, who have access to accumulation and its respectability. Yet the Tunisian revolution shows an example of how different groups holding different values have come together to topple an abusive system. How was that possible? More importantly, following which principles could this phenomenon be replicated? To respond to these questions I will engage with the work of Edouard Glissant, alongside Maria Lugones and Joshua Clover, in an

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<sup>122</sup> This directly speaks to the Glissantian notion of ‘relation,’ that I will discuss in section 5.4., in the sense that certain categories have a strongly embodied experience of destitution and existential precarity, which facilitates the understanding and imitation of certain gestures of protest in a fundamentally different way from the reception of that same gesture by a person or community which hasn’t had a similar embodied experience of what it means for one’s livelihood to depend on the daily *course à l’hobza*.

attempt to reflect on the potential of political cross-class alliances, drawing from the Tunisian example.

It is important to point out that when I write about cross-class alliance, I refer to a specific interaction that, I argue, was vital for the unfolding of the Tunisian revolution as a mass mobilisation.

In fact, when investigating who was the protagonist of the revolution, I have written at length about a category that I defined in terms of 'underclass,' 'surplus population,' and 'mob.' More precisely, I was referring to an impoverished category of people, inhabiting the suburbs or the poor cities of Tunisia, with close to no access to formal employment and often targeted by state abuse. This group largely corresponds to the triadic figure of the rioter/undocumented migrant/'terrorist' that I've reflected on in Chapter Three.

However, the revolution became a mass mobilisation thanks to the union of this above described group with another category: that of the unionized workforce: teachers, lawyers, public servants. This union happened precisely after the 11<sup>th</sup> of January 2011, when Ben Ali's government killed 60 people during three days of riots in Kasserine (Cantaloube, 2011). That was the moment when rioters – with little previous experience of political organisation – received the support of the unionized workforce, who consequently organized a general strike in the capital.

Therefore, my understanding of cross-class alliance refers to the temporary alignment of the political agendas of two groups with inherently different levels of social recognition and disposability. The first group – that of the underclass – fighting daily for its survival; the second – that of the more stable workforce – able to put in place more consolidated practices of organization, such as a general strike.

In this sense, my understanding of cross-class alliance is different from a liberal conception of it. In fact, I don't want to suggest the possible erasure of social conflict between classes, but rather to show the impact of an alliance occurred between two groups holding very different degrees of vulnerability, whose political collaboration was a fortunate and historically rare exception.

That being said, one could argue that what appears as an alliance across social classes is actually an alliance within the same class, an intra-class alliance,

between different components of it, depending on how each group makes its labor force available (whether formally or informally, for example).

#### 5.4. 'Relation'

This section reinforces the idea, anticipated previously, that the circulation of protest depends on relationality, not on the mere circulation of information. Resonance partially explains this propagation, when protests unfold along lines of commonality. But what about the formation of connections between groups of people who don't share similar conditions of oppression?

In this specific case – of the Tunisian revolution and the struggles of its aftermath – I refer to the way a connection was formed between the Tunisian unemployed and workers, students and artists. I could also refer to the way Tunisian migrants have occasionally been supported by European citizens, once they crossed the borders that 'illegalised' their permanence, like in the case of the occupation of the Tunisian migrants in Paris described in Chapter Three.

This section reflects on the conditions of possibility of a relation between different human groupings. In this case, it can be argued that the main feature of this connection is class difference, but this might not be an exhaustive approach. So how do different cultures of resistance and political expression communicate at all, ideally reaching forms of coalition (Lugones, 2003) or of translocal solidarity (Cowen and Lewis, 2016)? This interrogation around the way different cultures speak to each other is based on Wynter's hypothesis of auto-speciation, according to which each human grouping or *symbolic life kind* is marked by a "specific mode of human being or "form of life" (Wynter, 1992: 253; Wynter and McKittrick, 2015: 25).<sup>123</sup> Put in other words, "every human culture will have its own particular imaginary," keeping in mind that each group's identity is based not only on

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<sup>123</sup> In order to avoid a sense of over-emphasis on the biological or anthropological aspect, it is worth observing that Wynter's work is partially born as a reflection on the Transatlantic slave trade and the rooting of the African cultures in the Caribbean. This analysis takes the relationship between the colonial plantation and the plot cultivated by the African slaves as a starting point (Eudell, 2010). Moreover, in the spirit of what Glissant called the 'study of the Word' (able to conditions the study of nature, Césaire, 1946, 1990 in Wynter, 2003: 328), Wynter is interested in weaving together different registers of knowledge – the cognitive, biological and physiological – all encompassed in her 'comprehensive theoretical project' (Scott and Wynter, 1999: 187) aimed to define humanness in terms of praxis.

permanence but also on the “capacity of variation (...) either under control or wildly fluctuating” (Glissant, 2010: xxii; 141). In this regard, in order to reflect on the conditions of possibility of ‘relation’, I have drawn from the work of the Caribbean philosopher Édouard Glissant in his *Poetics of Relation* ([1990] 2010) because I consider his writing to be an inspiring blueprint for future politics. Glissant is interested in the “*metissage* of cultures,” and the uncertainty that governs it, mainly by virtue of his diasporic experience and as an interrogation of power relations between different cultures in postcolonial settings. In this sense, he opposes identities based on filiation to identities based on relation, as will be later illustrated. “Glissant sees imagination as the force that can change mentalities; relation as the process of this change; and poetics as a transformative mode of history” (Betsy Wing in Glissant, 2010: xii). He explains that:

Relation is not to be confused with the cultures we are discussing nor with the economy of their internal relationships nor with the projection of their external relationships nor even with the intangible results of the intricate involvement of all internal relationships with all possible external relationships. Nor is it to be confused with some marvellous accident that might suddenly occur apart from any relationship, the known unknown, in which chance would be the magnet. *Relation is all these things together.* (Glissant, 2010: 170-1)

The most important features of Glissant’s ‘relation’ are: 1) the inexistence of a hierarchy between cultures since “all cultures are equal within relation. And altogether they could not be considered as its prime elements” (Idem, 163); and 2) its capacity to be at once movement and (open) totality. ‘Relation is open totality; totality would be relation at rest. Totality is virtual. Actually, only rest could, in itself, be legitimately or totally virtual. For movement is precisely that which realizes itself absolutely. Relation is movement’ (Idem, 171).

Because in ‘relation’ “every subject is an object and every object a subject” and the encounter of cultures is immeasurable and uncertain: “nobody knows how cultures are going to react in relation to one another nor which of their elements

will be the dominant ones, or thought of as such" (Idem, 163). In this sense, what Glissant calls the "thought of the Other" becomes crucial because it signals "the moral generosity disposing me to accept the principle of alterity, to conceive of the world as not simple and straightforward, with only one truth – mine" (Idem, 154). Consequently, 'relation' operates when none of the participants is passive and in absence of an identity based on filiation, which he sees as a sign of a hierarchy/dependency among cultures. He points out, instead, that 'relation' identity is "produced in the chaotic network of 'relation' and not in the hidden violence of filiation" (Idem, 144). This type of "interaction-in-the-making" is what interrupts the divisive technologies of fragmentation and binary divisions (Massumi, 2002: 18), or forms of "individualist recuperation," when "the system intervenes by introducing elements of division and individualist recuperation, by creating fences on the borders of which control and value extraction are enacted" (Griziotti, 2016: 100, my translation).

In addition to Glissant, there are other authors who have reflected in a more concrete way on what can be regarded as the political applications of his idea of 'relation.' These relevant examples offer further tools towards the understanding of how revolutionary assemblages can be built, keeping in mind the Tunisian case study.

Maria Lugones, for instance, addresses the conditions of possibility of political alliances, wondering "How much and what sort of "agency" do we need to move with others without falling into a politics of the same, a politics that values or assumes sameness or homogeneity?" and advises to attempt to "stand in the crack and intersections of multiple stories of domination and resistance to dominations" (Lugones, 2003: 6). For her, the 'relation,' the alliance, is based on an operation of de-centring, which she depicts as "travelling worlds," a movement opposite to forms of "arrogant perception." 'By travelling to other people's "worlds," we discover that there are "worlds" in which those who are victims of arrogant perception are really subjects, lively beings, resisters, constructors of visions even though in the mainstream construction they are animated only by the arrogant perceiver and are pliable, foldable, file-awayable, classifiable' (Lugones, 2003: 97). This is especially relevant since "any particular political site must draw in and push out to other sites and problems in fragmented series," since "this is the social

condition of cramped space, and its peculiar mode of collectivity” (Thoburn, 2016: 14).

Finally, it is Clover who provides a historical example of how the alliance can be enacted politically – speaking about the American setting, yet with a high relevance for the Tunisian case as well. He speaks of the ‘double riot’ – in the context of the protests in France (2005), the UK (2010) and Oakland (2013) – as a ‘misrecognized commonplace at a systematic level.’ What he refers to is the coordination between the protests of groups holding different interests, historically workers and students, more recently unemployed and workers/students.

One riot arises from youth discovering that the routes that once promised a minimally secure formal integration into the economy are now foreclosed. The other arises from the racialised surplus populations and the violent state management thereof. (...) When this contemporary pairing is recognized, the two sides are purported to be in opposition, the abjection of one betraying the relative privilege of this other. (...) The task (...) is to bring forward the real movement within which these social categories develop, change, elaborate themselves internally and in relation to other social forces. (Clover, 2016: 179-80)

It must be noted that Clover also sees another political and existential formation, which goes beyond forms of struggle such as strikes or riots, which he connects to either production or circulation. The political and existential formation that he advocates for is the *commune*. “Not as an “event” but as a tactic of social reproduction. A tactic that is also a form of life” (Idem, 191). ‘The coming communes will develop where both production and circulation struggles have exhausted themselves. The coming communes are likely to emerge (...) in open cities where those excluded from the formal economy and left adrift in circulation now stand watch over the failure of the market to provide for their needs’ (Ibidem).

The image of ‘those excluded from the formal economy’ bears a significant resonance with the landscape of the Tunisian revolution, although Clover refers

to the American context. Both his description of the past (the double riot) and of the future (the commune), is articulated around the political mobilization of those expelled from the formal production and who focus on struggles around circulation. I think these are important features of the future politics that the Tunisian events allow us to further interrogate.

To recapitulate, the past two sections have dealt with two crucial aspects of the propagation of protests: resonance and 'relation.' Resonance is empowered by "structural similarities" and regards the circulation of affects within the marginal categories of the population, even across the nation-state borders. It indicates an accumulation of the propensity to protest of similar yet distant categories, based on an act of recognition between people belonging to subaltern groups. This is how and why the riots spread across the Tunisian suburbs, both in 2010 and in 2015.

'Relation,' on the other hand, is a term I have borrowed from Glissant to indicate the accumulation of the propensity to protest, which brings together people belonging to different groups and political cultures. 'Relation' indicates a connection – that can be the starting point of a revolutionary construction – between different levels; for example, between different types of workers united thanks to an alliance. The crucial strength of 'relation' is that it valorises the differentials of vulnerability and that it socializes a diversified range of tools of struggle. Such is the case in Tunisia, with the alliance between riot and strike that led to the end of Ben Ali's rule.

The difference between the two is that 'relation' unfolds much more rarely than resonance. 'Relation' indicates the achievement of a significant level of consistency of the struggle. In other words, the struggle must be already unfolded, before an alliance is able to strengthen it. The connection between the two modalities of accumulation of propensity to protest is that together they lead to revolutionary transformations, as the Tunisian case showed in 2011.

### **5.5. On the Subject of Political Invention**

This section follows up on the question around the subject of the Tunisian revolution and of the following struggles, intended as the subject of a push against

internal colonialism and neoliberalism.<sup>124</sup> I consider the subject of riot and the subject of illegalized migration as the main examples of a political subjecthood marked by particular practices of unruly mobility. In this sense, the work of Clover (2016), Thoburn (2015, 2016), and Cowen and Lewis (2016) have helped trace the articulations of the revolution beyond formal labour and a traditional understanding of class belonging. Their work underlines the importance of state and structural violence, in terms of distribution of social death, that becomes – throughout the flux of mobilities – a uniting principle for many, at times coordinated, communities of struggle. To this regard, the Tunisian example shows that political experience is no longer uniquely based on the common experience of exploitation within the industrial sector, but rather on the experience of dispossession and segregation (Harvey, 2006; Sassen, 1991). As Clover notes, the inhabitants of the segregated communities – which is the *houma* in the Tunisian context - are both “subjects of politics and objects of state violence” (Clover, 2016). Moreover, these subjects of politics are promoters of disobedient practices in terms of mobility against forms of constituted power that work hard to keep them immobile. However, in the case of the Tunisian citizens, the 2008-2016 period offered extensive examples of mobility: from the urban peripheries to the centre (either in order to work or to protest); from the South of the country to the North (again to work or to protest); and eventually from the African to the European shores. All these mobility practices were significantly influenced by a process of ongoing dispossession, which reveals the connection between the rural and the sub-urban in terms of internal migration. In Tunisia, colonial and neoliberal economic policies have relevantly and historically corroded the autonomy and sovereignty of the rural communities, accelerating their proletarianisation, as I discussed in Chapter Four.

At this point, if, as Cowen and Lewis suggest, drawing from Lefebvre’s work, I were to consider urbanization, rather than industrialization, as the new, or additional “engine of capital accumulation on a world scale” (Cowen and Lewis, 2016: 6), there would be serious implications for the way the contemporary subject of politics is to be regarded. In fact, the Tunisian triadic figure of the

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<sup>124</sup> In terms of the neoliberal ideology that has forged the post-independence state economic policy after the '70 and '80s in Tunisia.

rioter/'undocumented' migrant/Islamic militant clearly addresses the dramatic transformation of labour, in terms of the importance of its informalisation, whether in domains such as substance commerce, sex work, smuggling – of commodities and people - or in military and agricultural contexts. At the same time, the triadic figure lays out the interplay of labour and capital, in a post-colonial and post-independence setting.

In this sense, there are two main aspects that can support my view of the strong connection between the revolution, the mobility of the migrants and the relevance of the segregated space of the *houma*, intended as a territory with a high concentration of stagnant and relative surplus labour. First, the space of the Tunisian *houma* is historically a space of attempted military containment. As the sociologist Olfa Lamloun has found, during the Ben Ali period the poor neighbourhoods were sealed off pre-emptively during the weekend against alleged “potential resurgence of juvenile delinquency,” preventing the inhabitants from moving freely towards the centre of the city (Lamloun, 2016: 11). Unfortunately, even after the Tunisian revolution, “the *houma* remained excluded from all the benefits of social citizenship” (Idem, 12). Paradoxically, after the revolution and Tunisia’s further commitment to the “fight against terrorism,” exacerbated by a series of attacks started in 2013, the marginalized Tunisians underwent increased degrees of criminalization, as the sociologist Fabio Merone has pointed out regarding the attitude of the state: ‘the Interior Minister is convinced that no difference exists between *this large disenfranchised population*, Ansar al-Sharia [the Tunisian Salafi movement] and Okba Ibn Nafaa [the Qaedaist brigade]: they are all ‘terrorists’ (Merone, 2015).

In this sense, it is clear that the groups out of which the triadic figure (of the rioter-migrant-Islamic militant) emerged were, in their majority, part of a “collective population rendered surplus” (Clover, 2016: 123). On the one hand, this category of people is produced as surplus labour and abject, but on the other hand, this same category is the active producer of forms of defiance, along the lines of “affirmative thanatopolitics” and necroresistance (Esposito, 2015; Bargu, 2015). It must be noted that these forms of defiance can be caught in the “affirmation trap” (when “labour is locked into the position of affirming its own exploitation under the guise of survival,” Clover, 2016: 147), or can unfold as what Deleuze and

Guattari have named “deadly lines of flight,” of which the military industrial complexes of the Syrian and Iraqi fronts are an important aggregator. Nevertheless, the people produced as surplus will always be the depositary of a promise of disorder. This is the reason why “the public of surplus [is] treated as riot at all times – incipient, in progress, in exhaustion – not out of error but out of recognition” (Clover, 2016: 170). It is in this perspective that certain social research identifying the “stagnant relative surplus population” as the agent of the 2011 protest series resonates with Deleuze’s thought on how, in the future, “control will not only have to deal with erosions of frontiers but with the explosions within shanty towns and ghettos” (Global Social Protest Research Group, 2015; Deleuze, 1990). This group’s agency also makes visible what Agamben has referred to as the “biopolitical fracture” between *people* as naked life and *People* as political existence, as “*what cannot be included in the whole of which it is part of as well as what cannot belong to the whole in which it is always already included*” (Agamben, 2000: 32, original emphasis).

With the erosion of industrial labour infrastructures and the relative class composition based on a specific identity, the commonality of the experience of being produced as surplus, alongside sharing the living space of the segregated urban territories, constitutes a starting point for a political invention from within the “cramped space.” To this regard, Thoburn imagines the “proletarian unnameable” as a “mode of composition which calls forth processes of minor difference and creativity without or against determined subjectivity” (Thoburn, 2002: 446). In this sense, minor politics ‘works over the cramped social conditions of any particularity with the knowledge that the answers will not be found in projecting the autonomy of a global subject’ (Thoburn, 2016: 14).

In the meantime, the identity of working class is “evacuated of positive identity and becomes increasingly experienced and understood as an external imposition” (Idem, 8). In this setting, politics is even more clearly an act of invention or creation, since its aim is that of “tracing a path between impossibilities,” which are the main features of the ‘cramped space’ that the minor politics is born from. The minor, Thoburn argues,

is thus marked by a certain “impossibility.” Every movement presents a boundary or an impasse to movement rather than a simple possibility or option. There is no identity that is not “impossible” to inhabit unproblematically. Yet the impossibility of action is matched with the impossibility of passivity if anything is to be *lived*. (Thoburn, 2003: 19, original emphasis)

So the hope comes partially from the “unnameable proletariat” as a mode of composition of minor politics and from the act of invention, able to suggest new ways of ‘tracing a path between impossibilities,’ intended as the impossibility to be independent, to live a dignified life, to move. Moreover, in the age of soft control, what is also important is the formation of “publics as counter-weapons,” able to sustain those transformations operating in the micro, an important ground for future “revolutionary assemblages.”

What relevance do these subjects of minor politics have for the way the praxis of the human is regarded? Wynter’s work allows us to reflect on this interrogation by moving away from the danger of re-affirming forms of exclusive “liberal mono-humanism” (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015: 11). She explains how a particular “biocentric ethnoclass” is at the centre of the “descriptive statement of human” (for which she draws from Bateson, 1969), which builds its own forms of “adaptive truths-for,” in accordance with which to recognize people as members of their human grouping. The descriptive statements also significantly condition the behaviour of the members, in the sense that it constitutes an “altruism-inducing and aggregative “unitary system” of positively (opiate-triggering) and negatively (opiate-blocking) marked meanings” (Wynter, 1992:253). Consequently, Wynter ‘redefines Marx’s class struggle in terms of a “*politics of being*,” that is, one waged over what is to be the descriptive statement of the human, about whose master code of symbolic life and death each human order organizes itself’ (Wynter, 2003: 318).

The contemporary descriptive statement of the human uses the category of accumulation as its main code, with its counterpart of “human Otherness” represented by “the jobless, the homeless, the Poor, the systematically made jobless and criminalized – (...) the “underdeveloped” – all as the category of the

economically *damnés*" (Idem, 321). This is the category 'made other' by our present dominant episteme, according to which "capital is the indispensable, empirical, and metaphysical source of all human life," since "mankind's enslavement to natural scarcity (...) has replaced what had been its/our enslavement to original sin" (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015: 10; 26).

Wynter exposes and fights this tendency by conceiving of the human as a hybrid, relational practice, that leaves no more room to "classify human individuals, as well as human groups, as *naturally selected* (i.e., eugenic) and *naturally dysselected* (i.e., dysgenic)" (Idem, 16, emphasis in the text). In this regard, 'the human is (...) a hybrid being, both *bios* and *logos* (or, as I have recently come to redefine it, *bios* and *mythoi*). Or, as Fanon says, phylogeny, ontogeny, and sociogeny, together define what it is to be human' (Idem, 16, emphasis in the text).

The fundamental implication of Wynter's understanding of the Fanonian view of humanness based on the duality between "skins (phylogeny/ontogeny) and masks (sociogeny)" is the fact that "*humanness* is no longer a *noun*. *Being human is a praxis!*" (Idem, 23, original emphasis). And this praxis is always articulated in terms of relationality within its hybrid dimension.

Furthermore, this new way of looking at the praxis of being human also requires a "new scientific order of knowledge," able to support us "to now *both consciously* and *communally* re-create ourselves in ecumenically inter-altruistically kin-recognizing *species-oriented* terms" (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015: 62, emphasis in the text), 'a science in which the "study of the Word" – of our narratively inscribed, governing sociogenic principles, descriptive statement, or code of symbolic life/death, together with the overall symbolic, representational processes to which they give rise – will condition the 'study of nature'" (drawing from Césaire, 1996 in Wynter, 2003: 328).

A science able to write the human, yes, but while "introducing invention into existence" (Wynter, 1992: 268).

## Conclusion

This final chapter dealt with one of the most complex aspects of the Tunisian revolution, namely the aspect of communication around, about and from within the folds of the 2011 event.

This aspect is problematic because of the thick stratum of recurrent technofetishism, mostly supported by the idea of social media “facilitating” the revolutionary transformation. I have repeatedly shown, in Chapter One and in the present chapter, how this assumption is animated by Orientalism and how detrimental it is if one wants to flesh out the sophisticated articulation of subjects and drives at work within this event. Starting from this point of rejection of technofetishism or techno-optimism, this chapter looked deeper into the infrastructures of circulation of signs and affects that lie in between and alongside the networks of corporate and state communication. In this sense, I have drawn upon important reflections within media studies, yet always tried to keep the reflection grounded around the questions that my case study has raised.

Many of this chapter’s proposals – namely the reflections around mediation, resonance and ‘relation,’ alongside the subject of the revolution – are proposals that derive directly from the architecture of the event, but are also intended to go beyond it.

My notion of mediation emerges 1) out of a critique of technofetishism and 2) as a question of what proliferates alongside the grand narratives of social and state media, which I label as instances of representation. With this, I attempt to account for the highly productive level of communication populated by counter-knowledges able to explain the circulation and propagation of cultures of resistance during and after the revolution. In addition, mediation signals the existence of additional infrastructures operating alongside the digital ones, in those cases in which access to connectivity is poor.

Furthermore, resonance and ‘relation’ are my proposals as to that which directly propagated the revolutionary climax. Resonance, rather than contagion, I argue, is what allowed riots to spread in Tunisia, based on a process of recognition that occurs between different oppressed groups, and that is grounded upon a commonality of temporality, inhabited space, and practices of mobility. Taking the propagation a step forward, ‘relation’ is what characterizes the moment of the alliance between the category that ignited the protests – the suburban poor – and the more established workers: more specifically, the unionized workforce. Their alignment of the general strike with the protests is what transformed a national network of riots into a revolution.

Finally, this chapter reflects on the subject of political invention, arguing that the revolution has clamorously put forward the oppression but also the creativity of that category that Sylvia Wynter calls “the liminal,” that I have, so far, called the underclass, the ‘mob,’ the vanguard and the surplus population, referring to the Tunisian setting. Furthermore, thanks to Thoburn’s work, the proposal that is advanced is that this type of politics, which emerges out of “cramped spaces,” holds the particularity of moving against molar identities, and of aiming to create new patterns of interaction. Some of these new patterns are consolidated through resonance and ‘relation.’

This chapter's core proposals are inspired by the practice of three thinkers: Maria Lugones, Sylvia Wynter, and Édouard Glissant. The three of them help address the research questions in a unique way and they all share a characteristic, which is crucial. As Caygill notes, theory is always one step behind historical struggles. Yet I’ve chosen these thinkers because their practice is significantly influenced, animated and refined through the experience of collective action that each of them lived through.

In this sense, Lugones offers a significant view on resistance that goes beyond the common prescriptive approaches, while re-instating and valorising two crucial aspects: the creative nature of resistance and the importance of anger as an instance of moral challenge against power.

Furthermore, Wynter operates a spectacular intersection of the materialist, anti-colonial and Foucauldian intellectual traditions, with the aim to work towards a “humanism made to the measure of the World” (Eudell, 2010). Her intuitions are particularly valuable because, with her work around the liminal and their counter- world, she accounts for the existential universe of those ones who are more likely to challenge hegemonic understandings of being human. Which is what, I argue, also helps shed light on the 2011 Dignity revolution promoted by the Tunisian suburban poor. In other words, Wynter gives an account of the subject of the revolution, while complexifying the reflection around the way different forms of life cohabit based on the current hegemonic descriptive statement of humanness.

Moreover, Glissant introduces his understanding of ‘relation,’ developed in the post-independence Caribbean setting and intended to problematize the

modalities of interaction between cultures - such as the Caribbean vis-à-vis the Western one - previously characterized by colonial relations. I use his work in order to reflect on the possibilities of cooperation between different class-cultures, such as the unemployed and the civil servants in Tunisia. By engaging with this notion of 'relation,' which he opposes to the more hierarchical filiation, Glissant's description is regarded as a sort of blueprint for alliance politics. One supposed to be realized and achieved through an experimental and laborious process, rather than considered the starting point.

## Conclusion

The passage from the micro to the macro, from the local to the global must not be done through abstraction, universalization or totalization, but rather through the capacity to keep together and progressively assemble networks and patchworks.

Maurizio Lazzarato, *La politica dell'evento*, 2004

The painter does not paint on an empty canvas, and neither does the writer write on a blank page; but the page or canvas is already so covered with preexisting, pre-established clichés that it is first necessary to erase, to clean, to flatten, even to shred, so as to let in a breath of air from the chaos that brings us the vision.

Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy*, 1991

Whether they are candidates for illegal emigration, self-immolation, hunger strike or for being recruited by Daesh, all of them repeat united: "We are already dead." The body becomes the last battlefield of resistance to the physical and symbolical violence that they are subjected to. And to the absence of hope.

Hela Yousfi, *a Tunisian activist*<sup>125</sup>

The Tunisian revolution has raised a question. Not answering it won't make it go away. Emigration and its capture within forms of "corporate terrorism," such as the Islamic militancy fronts in Syria and Iraq, will not manage to break the futurity of this question, as has been proven by the ongoing social unrest in Tunisia. The 2010-11 wave of protests has successfully challenged the longstanding entanglement between state and corporate interests while confronting their most taxing manifestations: dispossession and state violence. In this confrontation, people's bodies, often far removed from the much-heralded social media infrastructure, were the crucial mediators of both despair and insurgent knowledges.

This research was born out of the need to supersede certain approaches towards what happened in Tunisia in 2011. This endeavour is rooted in frustration about the way in which the 1989 Romanian revolution was similarly first praised and later ridiculed; used as confirmation of the incontestable political superiority of the West, or fetishized in the way that historical revolutions such as

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<sup>125</sup> Osservatorio Iraq, 2016: 25, my translation.

the French or Russian revolutions have been. This is why I argued for an interruption of the recognition based knowledge practice (described in Chapter Two), focused on identifying and applying traditional references in terms of what revolutions, in particular, and transformative politics, in general, should look like. In this sense, prescriptive politics is no longer acceptable. I, therefore, supported this event's singularity: first, in terms of its *irreducible* specificity; second, in terms of it being a trace of a highly risky process of singularisation or subjectivation, that deserved to be acknowledged.

Moreover, it is not only the orientalisation of the Romanian revolution that motivated this engagement with the Tunisian event. In fact, there are three main and very entrenched clichés that this research is born against, which have been addressed in a variety of ways. These clichés worked like well-masked traps because even the most radical among this event's observers didn't manage to avoid them.

The first cliché is the Orientalism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, enforced by post-9/11 Islamophobia and the mobilization of fear connected to the 'Arab' and 'Muslim' world, in light of the attacks that occurred in Europe and of the media campaign run by the Islamic militancy outlets. It is not enough to simply contextualize the current geopolitical setting, as Said had marvellously done in the '70s. Beyond the interests in fossil fuels, monopolies, cheap labour and geo-strategic alliances, the Western distrust towards the Arab and Muslim world, expressed in the paradigm of Arab Exceptionalism, is grounded in the implicit sense of superiority, hence the urgency to deconstruct it.

The second cliché follows from the first; it is the way in which instances of political 'progress' outside the West need to be somehow attributed to Western interventions, and this explains the fetishist focus on social media in relation to the Arab revolutions, alluded to as an agent of 'democratization.' In this sense, it is important to clarify, as I briefly mentioned in Chapter Five, that the Tunisian case shows how technology and the techno-social assemblage work towards mediating the struggle. What I mean is that I am not dismissing the importance of this assemblage, and I am acknowledging how it has worked creatively around scarcity and containment. What I critique is rather a focus on a particular usage of technology, namely the employment of social media by a particular category of

people (more connected to the middle class: the bloggers, the artists), whose actions are used to enforce the exclusionary and flattening narrative of the Arab Spring.

Finally, at a deeper level – one that transcends the boundaries between the West and the rest; or maybe at a level that reveals how these boundaries have been internalized – the main cliché this work intends to oppose is that of prescriptive politics, and of its teleology. According to this framework, various instances of collective and organized action are deemed more or less sufficient or complete depending on the presence or absence of practices, languages, and proposals in tune with certain expectations.

In this sense, this work advocates for the highly unpredictable, risky and creative nature of politics, intended less as stepping inside the expectations of an external observer, and more like “tracing paths between impossibilities” (Thoburn, 2003: 19).

Drawing from Lazzarato's warning, “those who hold predetermined answers, miss the event,” I tried to listen and develop one way to inhabit and think through this event while being aware that I am part of it (Lazzarato, 2004: 13). In this, the Tunisian revolution represented a highly dense ‘exemplary terrain’ of how different practices of resistance and transformative politics unfold in the contemporary (Scott, 2014).

In this sense, this research engages with the topic of the ‘Arab Spring,’ which is used as an entry point for different reflections. The term refers to the revolutions that toppled the governments in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, but it also refers to a broad series of protest in other countries, such as Yemen, Syria, Libya, Bahrain, Morocco, and on the rest of the African continent. This massive event has been considered a significant – yet temporary – ‘democratic’ update for the ‘Arab’ world, especially in light of the distrust connected to post 9/11 Islamophobia. These revolutions allegedly aimed to topple their dictatorships and establish Western-like liberal democracy centred on freedom of expression and economic prosperity. Nevertheless, the first elections put Islam-oriented parties in power – Ennahda in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt – and after 2011 most of the countries touched by the Arab Spring started experiencing ‘terrorist’ attacks, bloody internal conflicts, or full-blown civil wars. These phenomena dampened

the initial Western enthusiasm for the event and reinstated the convictions and ideas promoted by the paradigm of Arab Exceptionalism.

There are five main debates that this thesis makes a contribution to. First of all, the debate around the political relevance and internal organisation of the 'Arab Spring,' in terms of which elements are noteworthy of inspiring political practices across the East/West divide, be it the use of technology or the leaderless forms of organisation.

Second, there is a difference in conceiving of instances of interruption of the traditional power relations, which opposes a dialectical view – conveyed by authors such as Badiou, and implicit in the notion of resistance – to a view devoted to seeing the continuous and its modulations – promoted by Deleuze's understanding of the event.

Third, my case study is also a field of debate, which regards the hypotheses around the causes, the aims and the actors of the revolution, with a particular focus on the protagonism of artists and bloggers, as well as on the relevance of the general trade union, the UGTT.

Fourth, there is an interrogation of the modalities of propagation of protest, which is a particularly popular question that arose from the 2011 protests around the world. Some consider contagion to be the principle of propagation, while others stress the importance of the "structural similarities" (Manji, 2012).

Finally, this research addresses the debate around class composition and political subjectivity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Who is a significant political subject today? Is it the working class, the Lumpenproletariat, the refugee or the 'mob'? There are several hypotheses around how the actor of the Tunisian revolution is to be classified in terms of class belonging. But it is also a challenge to reflect on how class is articulated, if ever, with the increasing disappearance of formal employment and the enforcement of border imperialism.

This work argues that the Arab Spring is a discursive configuration aimed to make an instance of dissent more familiar and less threatening to Western observers while silencing the responsibilities of the West. An in-depth analysis of the case study is necessary because one of the limits of this 'domination narrative' is precisely its generalization (Rizk, 2014). Therefore, focusing on the Tunisian revolution, what emerges is that the 2011 disruptive movement is made of both

moments of rupture – which I list as events of resistance – and of significant roots and ramifications in space and time, that I drew a diagram of with the help of a historical overview of struggles before and after 2011. In other words, the revolutionary assemblage mobilizes both moments of discontinuity *and* of continuity. In terms of moments of discontinuity, instances of necroresistance function as aggregating gestures, as mediators of a minor politics emerging out of the constraints of the “cramped space,” in Tunisia as well as abroad (Bargu, 2015; Thoburn, 2016). Starting from the Tunisian setting, I chose to bring together the lineage of resistance traced by the *Imazighen* and the *fellaga* to the contemporary figures of the inhabitants of the suburb, the *houmani*, while acknowledging the challenge posed by the triad figure of the revolutionary, the ‘undocumented’ migrant and the Islamic militant. Furthermore, I argued that gestures of resistance are echoed by resonance, rather than contagion and that this synchronization is based on the commonality of the experience of dispossession and state violence (Clover, 2016). In addition, against instances of hegemonic representation and divisive modulation of affects, I proposed mediation as a form of transmission of counterknowledges, focused on preserving rather than containing the virtual dimension of dissent. Forms of minor composition - both minor art and minor politics – are crucial for this research, because they allow one to see the inspiring examples of art and politics which unfolded beyond representation. Finally, it is thanks to another concept created by Deleuze and Guattari, that I am able to identify ‘corporate terrorism’ as an example of appropriation of the war machine represented by the unruly dispossessed youth of the region.

In chapter 1, I deconstructed the narrative of the ‘Arab Spring,’ and showed how it conveyed a series of stereotypical assumptions around the ‘Arab’ world. Since some activists have even called it a ‘domination narrative,’ I labelled it as a ‘discursive configuration,’ and fleshed out its functioning. Beginning this work in this way was crucial because it constituted an immediate example of the performativity of ways of reading events of resistance. In this sense, I drew from the work of Foucault in Iran and of Guattari in Brazil, in order to receive inspiration on how revolutionary events can be approached in a way that is not based on representation, but on a responsible receptivity.

In chapter 2, I addressed one of the main methodological conundrums of this work, initiating a reflection on the debate between theories of the event and theories of resistance. Drawing from the work of Badiou and Deleuze on the notion of event, I integrated the valuable work of Aradau, Lazzarato, and Nunes, in order to build a concept of the event of resistance able to account for the importance of both continuity and discontinuity.

In chapter 3, I put to work the notion of the 'event of resistance', mainly drawn from Aradau's work and employed a diagrammatic methodology while tracing a different snapshot of the Tunisian revolution, one based on flows of struggles. I identified four crucial categories – the underclass, the migrants, the refugees and the Islamic militants – and reflected on the intersection of their practices of mobility. The triadic figure of the revolutionary-migrant-Islamic militant also allowed me to continue working on the class composition of the revolutionary subject, this time employing Aradau and Huysmans's revisited understanding of 'mob.'

In chapter 4, I engaged with the genealogy of the different waves of dispossession and resistance that touched upon the Tunisian territory: from the colonial French Protectorate defeated by the *fellaga*, to the modern-day violence of the neoliberalised oligarchy challenged by the *houmani*, before and after the revolutionary climax. Moreover, this chapter looked into the practice of the Ahl Al Kahf collective in more depth, showing how their commitment and remarkable methods of interaction have articulated forms of minor art within and beyond the national borders. This was also the chapter in which I addressed the debate around the phenomenon of Islamic militancy, by showing how it can be read in terms of the capture of the war machine represented by the Tunisian revolutionaries.

Finally, in chapter 5, I addressed issues around communication and propagation of protests. Against the common approach of technofetishism, I argued that the tactical information functional to resistance travelled across a diversified infrastructure, which held a discontinuous and complex relationship with technology and connectivity. I suggested mediation as a notion in order to imagine what lies alongside hegemonic representation instances and attempts to harness affects in order to extract value. Furthermore, this chapter laid out my

understanding of propagation of the protests in terms of resonance – in the case of solidarity between subaltern groups – and ‘relation’ – in the case of the alliance of different political cultures. Eventually, I drew on the work of Thoburn to show how the Tunisians have enacted a practice of minor politics from within the ‘cramped space’ of the Tunisian and European territory.

As Lazzarato points out, the mode of the revolution is the problematic; that of raising questions, rather than providing answers. The Tunisian revolution starts off as a question around colonial legacies and neoliberalised oligarchies, and ends up touching the rotten heart of the European liberalism when the *harraga* claim in Paris "we made the democratic revolution, we are here to help you do the same" (Archives du Jura Liberaire, 2011). In the same way in which Wynter challenges the liberal mono-humanism bearing in mind processes of de-humanisation, therefore, promoting a different vision of humanness (intended as praxis rather than as a feature), the Tunisian revolutionaries claim freedom, justice and democracy from within a space in which all of them are systematically denied. They also show that advancing this claim from within a liminal position can prove deadly.

Therefore, this event indicates where transformative politics begins and what its price is for the ones who enact it. These are some of the nuances that I tried to touch upon by utilising a vast array of terms in order to engage with the subject of the Tunisian revolution. Each of the terms refers to a particular feature of this group of people. *Underclass* was first used in order to start the reflection on the category of those who find themselves outside of the working class in terms of formal labour. Aradau and Huysmans’s revisited *mob* accounted for the centrality of mobility practices, for the criminalization of these people and, more importantly, for how these people were fearlessly stretching the margins of the political. The idea of *vanguard* emerged as a direct consequence of the 2016 Kasserine paradox, in the aftermath of the beginning of the Islamic militancy phenomenon. Clover’s concept of *surplus* population resonated with Marx’s notion of a reserve army and made visible the contemporary conflicts between capital and labour through the lens of the struggles around production vis-à-vis the struggles around circulation, such as the riot. Finally, Wynter’s concept of the *liminal* helped me to imagine the terms of the collective invention that the

revolution was a result of, by illustrating the specific type of knowledge that the liminal is a depositary and a constant innovator of, and by stressing the importance of a highly dynamic “counter-world” ramified in between the articulations of the hegemonic.

Ultimately, this work sets out to reflect on how contemporary examples of rupture – such as the Tunisian revolution – challenge and expand paradigms of understanding political processes. This is why I start by thinking different approaches to discontinuity together, illustrated by the theories around event and resistance that I engage with in Chapter Two. Nunes's work (Nunes, 2013) is a crucial contribution that helps me think the event of resistance in terms of contagion, as a ‘glitch,’ a ‘germ of action’ (or an instance of ‘proto-subjectivation,’ as Lazzarato would call it, Lazzarato, 2014: 219). This approach accounts for the modalities of transformative politics within the global unevenly hyper-mediated semiosphere, but it also stimulated me to look deeper into how cultures and practices of resistance propagated across big distance, which was the focus of the first two sections of Chapter Five. Eventually, though, I went beyond the concept of resistance as contagion in order to underline the importance of the embodied commonality of marginalisation as a pre-condition for the propagation of dissent, referred to as resonance. Both mediation and resonance are notions that I developed thinking *through* the Tunisian revolution and the questions it raised. In a certain sense, these two notions overlap. In fact, they relate to the same event from two different angles, as do different terms, underclass, ‘mob,’ and vanguard. Mediation is supposed to underline the existence of an anti-hegemonic mode of organisation of meaning and affects, which is a situated declination of the techno-social assemblage and which is significantly animated by gestures of necroresistance (as the Tunisian case shows). Resonance, instead, speaks to the ground behind the aspect of propagation; it draws attention to the fact that gestures of necroresistance, for example, are met with further mobilisation by *those* people who perceive a commonality with the subject of necroresistance. This commonality is based on a shared embodied experience of dispossession, containment, and social marginalisation.

In terms of future developments, this work aims in three directions. First of all, it only marginally touched upon the question of value, in terms of the

revolutionary ‘transvaluation’ and of how new values can be perpetuated. Moreover, the Tunisian revolutionaries, the *harraga* and the refugees struggling at Choucha actively challenged the way their lives were valued, to the point of weaponising their vulnerability and of presenting us with a “materialist theory of being (...) that carries with it the potential for political resistance to the violence of dispossession” (Bhandar, 2011: 242).

Along these lines, more work is needed around examples of collective action and organisation from within police state-type articulations, whether located in the “internal colony” of the metropolitan ghetto or, more broadly, in the increasingly militarized societies. In addition, this reflection must account for the different ways of weaving together discipline and control in the contemporary setting marked by the informational culture.

Finally, more needs to be said about strategizing new modalities of recomposition – whether around Terranova’s “formation of publics as counter-weapons” or around cross-class alliances such as the one suggested by Glissant’s ‘relation’ or by Clover’s “double riot.” Beyond molar models of identity formation and beyond a politics based on equivalence, the future, as the Tunisian revolution teaches, challenges us to build relations, in other words, to “keep together and progressively assemble networks and patchworks” (Lazzarato, 2004: 137).

What? If.

Trust was built  
Trust was earned  
New ways and worlds assembled (?)

Because there is nowhere else to go  
We need fugitives of the spirit  
And the heart and the mind.

Deborah Cowen, *What? If. [Infrastructures for the future]*<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> This is a poem that Deborah Cowen published on her social media profile on the 16th of November 2016. Dr. Cowen is a philosopher and an urban geographer whose writing on the politics of infrastructure (Cowen, 2014) and suburbanization of poverty (Cowen and Lewis, 2016) has been inspirational for this research.

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