Dispossessing Memory: Patterns of Dispossession in Tunisia
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Dispossessing Memory

Patterns of dispossession in Tunisia

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To my dad,
The everyday act of remembering you has guided me through all these pages.

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Figure 1 Tunisian Map

Introduction

More than ten years have passed since December 17th, 2010, the day Muhamad Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, self-immolated in Sidi Bouzid and became the catalyst of a transnational wave of revolutions known as the Arab Spring.[1] The era of uprisings ushered in by that fatal day would go on to shake the very foundations of the Arab world and become the subject of fervent academic debate around the globe.

This work focuses on Tunisian 2011 revolution and employs an interdisciplinary approach, whereby socio-economic processes are studied concurrently with processes of collective memory construction. Particularly, this study analyses the role played by memory in both consolidating and challenging processes of dispossession in Tunisia. Specifically, this study shows how the act of dispossession triggers a complex process of exclusion and marginalisation of social groups and geographical areas.

By investigating capitalist structures, we are able to understand that human and environmental rights in these areas are not overlooked by accident, and instead constitute a *conditio sine qua non* for the accumulation of capital. As such, the first and most fundamental consequence of dispossession is the creation of a subordinate relationship between two social groups – those who are dispossessed, and those who benefit from the dispossession. Thus, dispossession should also be understood as a socially alienating process; inasmuch as it manufactures social hierarchies where the dispossessed also become the subordinate, whose rights are naturally sacrificed for the economic good of the hegemonic group. I refer to this dynamic as a process of *othering*, whereby social groups are othered by the system, since unevenly incorporated within it.

The main academic contribution of this study is that it demonstrates that the process of othering is perpetuated within the cultural realm as well, specifically the field of memory. Hence, the research question at the core of this work is: *What role does memory play in processes of dispossession, and struggles against them, in Tunisia?*

To answer this, the study builds upon the Gramscian concept of hegemony, and more specifically the transverse linkages through which power is exercised and sustained between individuals, social groups, institutions, economic structures, and cultural traditions. In fact, the creation of a hegemonic collective memory is what culturally defines the boundaries between

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[1] For a general study see: Abat Ninet, I., Tushnet,A. *The Arab Spring,* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2015)

the social groups who belong and those that do not, hence manufacturing the cultural and historical exclusion of the subordinate groups.

In Tunisia, this exclusion has occurred in two main ways. First, as the study will show, the state has actively encouraged a politics of memory exclusion from the nation's collective memory, perpetuated against those same geographical areas that are dense in natural resources. I define this process as *dispossession of memory.* Second, the dispossession of memory is strengthened by an active campaign of cultural stigmatisation, which aims to denigrate the same social groups as a way to naturalise the right to dispossess them. As such, the dispossession of memory plays an important role in manufacturing subordinate social subjectivities. Thereby, this study stresses the need to broaden the concept of dispossession by including the dynamics of memory manipulation and exclusion within it.

The study analyses the top-down representations of power, as much as it studies the bottom-up reactions and resistance to it. As Tripp points out "a politics of resistance follows power in that it too is capillary in nature, branching out in many different ways."[2] In other words, broadening our understanding of how power is expressed, it can also allow us to broaden the scope of the fight against that same power. Hence, this study pays close attention to what it describes as *the memory of dispossession.* In other words, how individuals internalise, remember, react, and ultimately resist the process of dispossession and marginalisation. The study of the memory of dispossession allows this research project to analyse the internalised processes of othering. Specifically, the study argues that the perception of the inner social self, colludes with the external identity projected through dispossession and marginalisation. Indeed, memory plays a fascinating role within this collision. This is evidenced by the experiences of those who were interviewed for this study. For example, memory seems to have allowed individuals to hold onto their subjective social selves by withdrawing into their own past. In so doing, they both resisted the external pressures of identity negotiations and lessened the effects of their dispossession. In this manner, remembering one's collective memory is deemed an act of resistance against the dispossession of memory.

The material gathered herein shows that dispossession remains a vivid memory within the individual. Precisely, the *memory of dispossession* catalysed the creation of a wider collective subjectivity, characterised by a subordinate identity, a history of exclusion from the system, and of economic dispossession and geographical alienation. In these terms, the study

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[2] Tripp, C. (2012) *The Power and the People Paths of Resistance in the Middle East.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) p.6

argues that the entwined relationship between a past of dispossession, and a present of marginalisation have forged trans-regional collective identities that recognise themselves into the same subordinate category. Whilst the strong presence of this past and this memory might, to some extent, constitute a trap of pain and immobility for the individual, this study highlights also how this parallel collective past and asymmetric identity have paved the ground for new trajectories of resistance.

Through this prism, the study interprets the 2011 revolution as the rearticulation of collective subjectivities prompted by the recognition of one's self into a transversal collective identity, grounded on exclusion and dispossession. In doing so, the study of memory allows us to add a layer of complexity to the contestation of 2011. Specifically, this study roots the ontology of the revolution in a collective contestation of a wider overarching system of power, that encompasses acts of injustices and inequalities within the political and economic realms, as much as the social and cultural ones. As such, this study tries to pierce the veil of the top-down political narrative of the revolution, which, as the study will show, is also the result of memory manipulations, and constitutes a clear strategy to safeguard the uneven distribution of socio-economic power within the country. Therefore, we could say that this thesis analyses the interaction between socio-economic processes of dispossession and cultural hegemonic dynamics of memory formation from two opposite yet complementary perspectives. One is a top-down imposition by the hegemonic group, and the other is a bottom-up form of resistance by the subordinate one.

The remainder of this thesis is made up of six chapters that can be divided into three sections. The first section of the thesis presents the theoretical framework and the empirical context of the project. Chapter 1.1 offers a general literature review on memory and the main debates around it. Chapter 1.2 contextualises the role of memory within the theoretical Gramscian framework of this work, and finally, chapter 1.3 shortly anticipates the way the theoretical arguments relate to the Tunisian case-study.

Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of the empirical context of the revolution in Tunisia. Furthermore, it traces central national processes of uneven socio-economic development of the Tunisian regions and of power centralisation through two main periods: the post-independence period and the neoliberal period.

The second section of the thesis explores the history of dispossession in Tunisia. These chapters draw on the material gathered throughout the fieldwork. Chapter 3.1 provides a brief history and geography of economic dispossession in Tunisia. It stresses the detrimental effects of dispossession on the population and the way it creates severe conditions of marginalisation

that affects social self-perceptions. Chapter 3.2 highlights the processes of *dispossession of memory*. It describes the top-down manipulations of collective memory through the exclusion of regional histories from the national narrative.

Chapter 4 continues the analysis of dispossession by offering a bottom-up perspective. It engages with the *memory of dispossession*, attempting to gain a more complex understanding of how these processes have affected the social perception of the populations, thereby constructing subordinate subjectivities within the country. It shows how the history of dispossession has forged a collective subjectivity among regions, where people identify with the same history of economic dispossession and exclusion from the national collective memory. It mostly builds on interview extracts that explicate how people have perceived, experienced, and remembered processes of both economic and mnemonic dispossession.

The third and final section of the thesis draws on the preceding set of chapters to enrich the discussion on the 2011 uprising through an analysis of memory. Chapter 5 interprets the revolution as the complex mobilisation of the collective subjectivity that emerged from cultural and socio-economic dispossession. It does so to broaden the roots of the resistance movement, while fundamentally countering the top-down narrative that depicts the revolution as a mere political act, disregarding the social and structural dimension of injustice. Chapter 5.1 offers an overview of the top-down narrative and the way it serves both political and economic interests. Thereafter, chapter 5.2 engages with the material gathered from the interviews to build a narrative from below that is able to show the depth, diversity and heterogeneity of demands put forwards by the interviewees.

Finally, chapter 6 examines the role played by memory in the context of the revolution. First, chapter 6.1 describes the two processes through which memory was manipulated to offer an interpretation of the 2011 mobilisations that could benefit the hegemonic power. The first dynamic is the exclusion from the collective memory of the local revolts in the subordinate regions, and the second is the injection into the revolutionary narrative of the old political and economic elite. This has enabled the survival of the same paradigm of socio-economic exclusion that inspired the mobilisations. This manipulation of memory is framed once again as a clear process of *dispossession of memory*, inasmuch as it denies the agency of subordinate social groups, while serving socio-economic interests. Finally, the chapter ends with the analysis on the bottom-up perception of the dispossession of revolutionary memories, or *the memory of dispossession,* and discusses the extent to which this dispossession has constituted both a shock and an alternative locus of resistance for the interviewees.

Analytical Framework

The project aims to merge a plurality of disciplinary perspectives in the attempt to bridge the gap between memory studies and political economy. On the one hand, in the field of memory studies many have addressed the so-called *politics of memory.* In other words, the ways in which collective memory has been mobilised from the top to serve political interests. Among the main scholars who have addressed this issue we could mention Peter Burke[3], Alon Confino[4], Charles Tilly[5] and Andreas Huyssen.[6] This literature, however, has not considered how those same processes of memory mobilisation contribute to sustain relations of socio-economic domination and subordination. On the other hand, the scholars of political economy have not explored the ways memory could reproduce socio-economic relations of power. Matthew J. Allen[7] addresses this gap and explains that whilst there are some attempts to bridge these two fields,[8] such confluence remains critically understudied. To address this gap, the proposed theoretical framework is grounded on three main components. First, the study draws on a structuralist literature on the relation between economic and political power. This is helpful to take the politics of memory literature deeper towards socio-economic structures and processes. Among the main scholars I drew on are Adam Hanieh[9], Robert Nichols[10], and Bertell Ollman.[11] Second, the Gramscian literature serves as the main theoretical terrain for developing my work. This literature has provided the foundations for developing the relationship between economic and political power by means of memory, and therefore**,** to better understand processes of othering. Hence, Gramsci's work *Prison Notebooks[12],* but also

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[3] Burke, P., (1997) *Varieties of Cultural History,* (Ithaca; New York: Cornell University Press)

[4] Confino, A., (1997) "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method", *The American Historical Review* 102 (5): 1386-1403

[5] Tilly, C., (1994) Afterword: Political Memories in Space and Time, in Boyarin, J. (ed.) *Remapping Memory: The Politics of Timespace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press)

[6] Huyssen A., (1995) *Twilight memories: marking a time in a culture of amnesia,* (New York [etc.]: Routledge)

[7] Allen, M.J. (2016) The Poverty of Memory: For Political Economy in Memory Studies." *Memory Studies* 9, (4): 371-375

[8] Jameson, F., (1991) *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso); Fisher, M. (2009) *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero Books); Stiegler, B., (2010) *For a New Critique of Political Economy* (Cambridge: Polity Press); Allen, M., (2015) The Labour of Memory: Memorial Culture and 7/7. (London: Palgrave Macmillan).

[9] Hanieh, A., (2013) *Lineages of revolt: issues of contemporary capitalism in the Middle East,* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books)

[10] Nichols, R., (2020) *Theft Is Property! Dispossession and Critical Theory* (Durham; London: Duke University Press)

[11] Ollman, B., (2003) *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method* (Urbana,IL:University of Illinois Press)

[12] Gramsci, A., (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* Hoare Q., Nowell Smith, G., (Eds & Trans) (New York: International Publishers)

scholars who have engaged with his concepts, such as T.J. Jackson Lears[13], Cecilia Green[14], John Chalcraft[15] Gilbert Achcar[16], and Asef Bayat[17] have offered me the necessary insights to understand memory as intimately linked with capitalist processes of subordination and hierarchisation. Third, the study is grounded on existing memory studies literature in the Middle East. In the last years, a body of work has emerged to interrogate how memory and collective remembering affects the politics of the region. This literature has enriched my understanding of the particular functions of memory within wider hegemonic systems in the MENA region. Among the main authors that I refer to in my work are Jocelyne Dakhlia[18], Ussama Samir Makdisi[19], Sune Haugbølle[20], Roberto Roccu and Sara Salem. [21]

My work is positioned at the conjunction between these three bodies of literature. Through the Gramscian theory of hegemony that explores the multiple influences on human thought, this thesis is able to position the body of work on the politics of memory in direct dialogue with the political-economy literature, thereby highlighting how the mechanism of collective formation often intertwines with socio-economic processes. In order to analyse these linkages, the first chapter of this thesis will offer a detailed review of the literature on collective memory. Following this, it will move to discuss the relationship between collective memory and socio-economic processes of dispossession from a Gramscian prism.

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[13] Jackson Lears, T.J., (1985) "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities, *The American Historical Review,* 90 (3): 567-593; Lears, T.J.J., (1988) "Power, Culture, and Memory", *The Journal of American History,* 75, (1): 137-140.
[14] Green, C., (1993) "Advanced Capitalist Hegemony and the Significance of Gramsci's Insights: A Restatement", *Social and Economic Studies,* 42, (3):175-207.
[15] See Chalcraft J., March A., (Guest Editors), (2021) "Special Issue: Gramsci in the Arab Word", *Middle East Critique,* 30, (1); Chalcraft, J., (2016) *Popular politics in the making of the modern Middle East,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
[16] Achcar, G. (2016) *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising* (London: Saqi Books).
[17] Bayat, A., (2017) *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford: Stanford University Press)
[18] Dakhlia J., (2002) *Forgetting History: The Motifs and Contents of Collective Memory in Southern Tunisia,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press)
[19] Makdisi U., & Silverstein P., (eds), (2006) *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press)
[20] Haugbølle, S., (2005) "Public and Private Memory of the Lebanese Civil War", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 25, (1): 191–203.
[21] Roccu, R., Salem, S., (2019) "Making and Unmaking Memories: The Politics of Time in the Contemporary Middle East", *Middle East Critique,* 28, (3): 219-226.

Methodology

The study at hand is grounded on qualitative methods of research. Specifically, it builds on ethnographic work, made up mainly of online interviews. The methodology applied is oral history.

Researching memory comes with a specific set of methodological challenges. Notably, guidelines for an oral history project are quite vague and very broad. Procedures, choices, and structures are strictly contingent on the specific needs of each project. In my case, the international travel restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic have enhanced those challenges. Undoubtedly, this unprecedented situation has affected the nature, scope and extent of the piece at hand. It is therefore necessary to take into account this set of challenges to better contextualise the methodological decisions made in the course of this research project.

In an oral history project, we can broadly recognise four main phases: research design, data collection, data analysis and data interpretation.

Concerning the first two steps, I have applied a combination of snowball samples and stratified samples, to build a solid network of interviewees. This means that once I identified the first interviewees, I asked them to collaborate in finding other participants from different social and geographical strata. Overall, the empirical side of this work is made of a geographically based sample with a good social balance. My thesis draws mostly on 21 in-depth interviews that I carried out in the regions which were mostly affected by processes of economic and mnemonic dispossession, namely Gafsa, Tataouine, Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, Jendouba, Kerkennah, Bizerte and Ben Guerdane. However, this analysis was deeply shaped by the additional 30 conversations that I had with activists, professors, journalists, and scholars, who were not necessarily from one of these regions but who had an informed and enriching perspective on the topic nonetheless.

Despite the geographical nature of the sample, the arguments made within this dissertation do not constitute an exhaustive description of each region or a representative account of the country — nor is that the goal of this study. As the fundamental purpose of this work is to analyse how the formation of a collective memory intertwines with processes of economic dispossession across diverse geographical settings, this thesis should be read thematically, following the bottom-up and top-down trajectories of dispossession in different geographical and historical settings.

With respect to the methodology of interviews, I have opted for in-depth interviews of two sessions each. The decision to carry out long interviews arose from several considerations, pertinent to the practical and theoretical needs. Practically speaking, the diffidence emerging from the lack of face-to-face conversations, as well as the limitations related to interviewing online – e.g. unstable internet connection, or in some cases the fear of speaking by phone – made me realise that one session was not enough to both gain the confidence of the interviewee and run through the questions. Therefore, what I did was to schedule a first small introductory call, and after that, two sessions for the interview. At the second session, most interviewees appeared more relaxed, better prepared for the conversation and more confident with the topic, since they had had the chance to think about their answers in-between the interviews.

Concerning the interview guidelines, I followed the example of Herbert Rubin and Irene Rubin in building a semi-structured interview. In other words, a structure that allows one to make plans, yet provides for the possibility to alter "the course of the interview to go where the informant wants to lead".[22] I built my guideline based on the four main points of my project which are: the analysis of resource dispossession; the phenomenon of geographical and social marginalisation; the bottom-up trajectory of memory; and the top-down memory dynamics of selective remembering, and exclusion from the collective memory. For each point, I prepared between 3 and 7 questions. This design allowed me to maintain a clear vision of what my goals were in terms of gathering information. It enabled me to analyse the data more easily by identifying patterns, drawing comparisons and seeing relevant differences, while also being flexible with the questions. Once the interviews had been completed, I proceeded to the analysis and interpretation of data. In the transcription of interviews, I followed the direction of Patricia Leavy. As such, I kept all the informalities, laughs, and hesitations, to represent the interviewees' voices as realistically as possible .[23]

Concerning the limitations, I found it difficult to find a balanced position between history and memory. In other words, it is a risk to be dragged into a narrative made exclusively of personal memories without inscribing it into the historical reality. As Confino noted, without creating the right connections, studies on memory run "the danger of becoming an assemblage of distinct topics that describe in a predictable way how people construct the past."[24] Hence, a rigorous review of secondary sources always preceded the work on the empirical material, so

[22] Rubin H., Rubin I., (1995) *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data,* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications Inc.) p.42

[23] Leavy, P., (1975) *Oral History, Understanding Qualitative Research,* (New York: Oxford University Press)

[24] Confino A., "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method." p.1387

as to properly inscribe the individual memories into wider contexts. Therefore, oral history has resulted in an extremely valuable methodology for the goals of the research when put in correlation with other methodologies and disciplines, in this case, with detailed studies of history and political economy.

Chapter 1. Theoretical Framework

This chapter aims to understand the main functions and social effects of the processes of dispossession. Shifting from a more superficial level of governmental politics to a deeper and systematic level of capitalist structures, this chapter offers an analysis of capitalist power arrangements where each element is studied insofar as it is embedded within a wider system of power relations. Therefore, economic processes and social power arrangements are not studied in isolation. Specifically, this chapter studies the dual identity of dispossession: the intrinsic economic and the consequential social one. Following along the lines of scholars such as Green, Fraser, and Hanieh, the chapter argues that processes of dispossession create specific social hierarchies within the population, thereby manufacturing socially subordinate classes. Within this theoretical premise, I aim to incorporate memory within structural patterns of entwined exploitative economic processes and relative social relations of power. In order to do so, the chapter contextualises debates on the political power of memory within a wider Gramscian prism. Specifically, it draws on the Gramscian theory of cultural hegemony to address the hidden power relations between culture and capitalist domination.

First, this chapter will engage with the theoretical debate within memory studies by outlining the main schools of thought concerned with memory, exposing the theoretical and methodological tensions within this field. It engages specifically with two bodies of memory studies literature, namely the *politics of memory* and the Popular Memory Group's studies of memory from below to emphasise the duality of memory in its top-down and bottom-up mobilisations.

Second, the chapter will move to a presentation of the concept of cultural hegemony, where the emphasis will be laid on the subjective dimension of dispossession. Specifically, the chapter argues that economic dispossession triggers a process of *othering* of the dispossessed, thereby defining them as subordinate; and that this process of othering is also perpetuated within the realm of memory.

The aforementioned connection will lead to the final argument of the chapter, namely that the act of memory dispossession is part and parcel of wider processes of economic dispossessions. Finally, the last part of this chapter will outline the convergence between this theoretical framework and my case-study.

1.1 Literature Review

The goal of this subchapter is to offer an overview of the theoretical debate among the main different schools of thought in memory studies, most specifically about collective memory. It does so to shed light on the aspects of memory that have the potential to enrich social-economic analysis, namely its power in being mobilised both from above and from below as a means of power and resistance.

The first to introduce the concept of collective memory to the sociological vocabulary was Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945). According to Halbwachs, memories are always socially framed. It is the individual who remembers, but it is social groups that determine what is worth remembering and how it will be remembered.[25] In Halbwachs's terms, individual memory does not stand on its own, rather is considered as "the intersection of collective influences."[26] Thus, Halbwachs's attempt is to prove that there is no agency or independence in what we individually remember, and that individual memory is always linked to conceptual frameworks that are determined by social groups in the process of remembering. In his words, "People usually believe that they are free in their thoughts and feelings, when in fact they draw on the same part of common thinking and understanding."[27]

Many scholars have been influenced by Halbwachs's social frames. One of the most predominant waves in memory studies of the 20th century that followed Halbwachs's determinism is the presentist memory approach. The presentist approach follows the paradigm of a top-down memory, pre-determined by structures over individuals, and further argues that the past is always designed and produced in favour of political interests. The main work in this trend is *Invention in Tradition* (1983) by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger.[28] They define social memories as inventions of the past, with the goal to create narratives that highlights the common past of a social group in order to legitimise a shared destiny.

Collective memory, and its mobilisation, is imbricated with power dynamics. Several scholars have argued and demonstrated how dominant powers have tried to encourage

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[25] Halbwachs lays the foundation for sociology memory through three of his main works: Halbwachs, M., [1925], (1975) *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, (Paris: PUF); Halbwachs M., [1941] (1971) *La topographie légendaire des évangiles en Terre Sainte,* (Paris: PUF); Halbwachs M., [1950] (1968) *La mémoire collective*, (Paris: PUF)

[26] Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire,* p.44.

[27]*Ibid.,* p.45.

[28] Hobsbawm E. Ranger T., (1983) *Invention in Tradition,* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press)

collective forgetting about certain specific events[29] or to celebrate others to legitimise and strengthen their rule.[30] To quote Peter Burke, it is necessary when studying memory to pose questions as "who wants whom to remember what, and why"[31] and analyse in-depth the so-called *politics of memory*.[32]

In this regard, a vast array of literature has been written on how collective memory and historical narratives have often been shaped and manipulated from the top-down for political interests. However, extremely little has been written about how these same processes of memory manipulation may be applied to economic processes.

Memory, indeed, can be beneficial also to legitimise, or at least obfuscate, socio-economic processes of capital accumulation and organisation within institutional relations. As the next section will discuss, memory can be used as a further tool of power to mould the social organisation and hierarchisation of classes.

Nevertheless, we should not be lulled into the idea that memory is mono-directional, always imposed from the top on the bottom. On the contrary, its appeal and richness in utility resides precisely with its duality. As many other scholars have demonstrated,[33] the memory of a social group cannot be reduced to the political goal of maintaining relations of power. Confino argues that sacrificing memory to a mere political analysis often means neglecting the social dimension of it, and the effects of the memory building and moulding on the system.[34] Furthermore, by sanctifying the political, and underplaying the social, another unfortunate result is often the lack of exploration of power outside the political areas. Confino asserts:

> Consequently, a search for memory traces is made mostly among visible places and familiar names, where memory construction is explicit and its meaning palpably manipulated,

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[29] See Edkins J., (2003) *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Finney P., (2002) "On memory, identity and war", *The Journal of Theory and Practice* 6, (1): 1-13; Huyssen A., (1995) *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia,* (New York [etc.]: Routledge)

[30] Anderson B. (1991) *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and the spread of nationalism,* (rev. ed. London: Verso); Olick, J.K., (1998) "Social Memory Studies: From 'Collective Memory' to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices", *Annual Review of Sociology* 24, (1): 105-140.

[31] Burke P., "History as a Social Memory" in *Varieties of Cultural History*, p.56.

[32] The theme of 'politics of memory' has emerged as a leading issue within the memory literature, and it refers to memory as a subjective experience of a social group that sustains a relationship of power. For a reflection on the politics of memory see Confino A., "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method", p.1393. For a study of the politics of memory in the Middle East see Haugbolle S., Hastrup A., "Introduction: Outlines of a New Politics of Memory in the Middle East." For a broader study of power relations and the politics of memory see Said E.W., (2000) "Invention, Memory, and Place", *Critical Inquiry* 26, (2): 175-92.

[33] See Schudson M., (1989) "The present in the past versus the past in the present", *Communication* 11, (1): 105–13; Osiel M., (1997) *Mass Atrocity, Collective Memory and the Law.* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers); Schudson M., (1997) "Lives, laws and language: commemorative versus non-commemorative forms of effective public memory", *The Communication Review* 2 (1): 3–17.

[34] Confino, "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method".

while in fact we should look for memory where it is implied rather than said, blurred rather than clear, in the realm of collective mentality. We miss a whole world of human activities that cannot be immediately recognized (and categorized) as political, although they are decisive to the way people construct and contest images of the past.[35]

The criticism towards the presentist approach and the increasing interest into a bottom-up memory, has given rise to a rich academic debate within the field of memory studies. Specifically, in 1983 several academics at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies decided to form a group known as the Popular Memory Group, with the goal to propose a new approach to study memory and history, known as popular memory.[36] This approach stresses the possibility of the construction of memory from the 'bottom up', that starts with the local and then builds outwards toward an overall narrative. It takes its earlier inspiration from Michel Foucault's concept of counter-memory or popular memory. The Foucauldian popular memory is a form of collective knowledge of people who have no tools to draw up their own historical accounts and is seen in opposition to the dominant memory.[37] Building on the idea that "where there is power, there is resistance"[38] Foucault assumes a connection between memory and popular resistance. Through these lenses, memory becomes a political force of people "whose knowledge has been located low down in the hierarchy."[39] Hence, popular memory has direct political implications because it opens the space for subordinated voices from the past, thereby constituting a site of struggle between different narratives.

In this sense, a bottom-up approach of memory provides unique opportunities when employed in political economic analysis. Specifically, it enables one to grasp the extent to which the reconstruction of memory from below can constitute an act of resistance against hegemony. As Kyle Smith urges, "If hegemony operates at many levels of personal life, then it is important that we consider that resistance can take place here as well."[40] The act of

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[35] Confino, "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method", p. 1395

[36] The group consisted of Michael Bormes, Glary Clarke, Graham Dawson, Jacob Eichler, Thomas Fock, Richard Johnson, Cim Meyer, Rebecca O'Rourke, Rita Pakleppa, Hans-Eric Poser, Horten Skov-Carlsen and Patrick Wright. For further information see CCCS Popular Memory Group, (1982) "Stencilled Occasional Paper", *History Series,* 67

[37] See Foucault, M.,(1978) "Politics and the study of discourse"*, Ideology and Consciousness* 3, 3-26; Foucault, M., (1977) *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press)

[38] Foucault, M., "Politics and the study of discourse" p.95-96

[39] Misztal, B., (2003) *Theories of Social Remembering. Theorizing Society,* (Maidenhead, Philadelphia: Open University Press), p. 62

[40] Smith, K., (2010) "Gramsci at the margins: subjectivity and subalternity in a theory of hegemony", *International Gramsci Journal*, 1(2): 39-50, p.45

remembering one's past can constitute an act of resistance insofar as it challenges the formation of a dominant collective memory from above. In this sense, the study of memory from this perspective allows us to broaden our understanding of the possible forms of human agency and resistance to power.

To conclude, by shuttling back and forth from top-down to bottom-up trajectories of memory we can find subtle, yet essential, manifestations of power negotiations between different social strata, which come to mould socio-economic realities. The next section will showcase, in detail, how memory is integrated into these economic and social processes of social differentiation and hierarchisation.

1.2 The Convergence of Dispossession and Memory through a Gramscian Prism

To better position memory within the field of political economy and more specifically to showcase its convergence with the discussion on dispossession, I will draw on the Gramscian theory of cultural hegemony which illuminates the relation between culture and power under capitalism.

According to Gramsci, the world of economic production and capitalist domination is never only economic but embodies aspects of cultural, ideological, and social domination. For Gramsci, the state is not a mere dictatorship or some other coercive apparatus to control the masses in conformity with a given type of production and economy. Modern states need consent to strengthen their coercion.[41] Consent is gained through a wider ensemble of hegemonic practices. Among them, Gramsci includes the practices of cultural hegemony. Cultural hegemony refers to domination or rule maintained through ideological or cultural means. Thus, Gramsci sheds light on the often-hidden power mechanisms behind culture by broadening the scope of capitalist domination.

He offers suggestive insights on what kind of social relations are established under cultural hegemony, and how they shape the development of social classes. Gramsci sees cultural hegemony not as a closed system, rather as a system in constant development. He views society as a complex interaction between different cultural spheres. The process could be described as the spontaneous and natural creation of what Jackson calls "symbolic universes"[42] or in Gramsci's words "spontaneous philosophy."[43] The terms refer to a specific set of beliefs, opinions and views that help us interpret the world around us. Those systems survive from generation to generation and ultimately crystallise into articulated social cultures. Whilst acknowledging the spontaneous character of this development, Gramsci does not fail to grasp the connection between cultural systems and hegemony. In fact, he notes that if one

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[41] To see in more details the concept of consent of Gramsci see Joseph Femia, V., *Gramsci's Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981)

[42] Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities", p.573

[43] According to Gramsci, the spontaneous philosophy is contained in: (1). language itself, which is a totality of determined notions and concepts; (2). 'Common sense' and 'good sense', 3. popular religion and, therefore, also in the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which are collectively bundled together under the name of 'folklore'. See Gramsci, A., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks.*

cultural system becomes hegemonic, it can and will directly serve the interests of the hegemonic groups.

It does so by legitimising the hegemonic views while dismissing the subordinate's narratives. The connection between capitalist social domination and cultural hegemony lies in the fact that, according to Gramsci, the state strives to "raise the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level, a level (or type) which corresponds to the needs of the productive forces for development, and hence to the interests of the ruling classes."[44] The political relevance of ideas and the means of cultural domination are bound up with the subjective dimension of hegemony. In fact, Gramsci conceived hegemony beyond the mere domination of an organised group over another. Instead, he saw it as a process of conflict that often took place at the level of the subjective and consciousness. In his note on the "Problem of Collective Man", for example, he wrote that the aim of the state is always to adapt "the civilization and the morality of the broadest popular masses to the necessities of the continuous development of the economic apparatus of production: hence of evolving even physically new types of humanity."[45]

It is in this manner that Gramsci interprets popular culture as a central means to establish hegemony on a subjective level, thereby serving a wider system of politico-economic domination. This is also how Gramscian academics often frame the social domination of capitalism. Specifically, within a capitalist system, social identities are developed based on their active incorporation into the orbits of capital and state. In Green's words, capitalist domination carries out an "aggressive and incessant rearrangement of the social landscape "in its own image."[46] According to Green, social subjectivities are forged through a double dialectic based on objective and subjective social relations. The subjective social relations refer to the relations as they are subjectively experienced on a group basis. By contrast, objective social relations refer to "systemic social relations which take effect (partly) behind the backs of individuals," independent of the perception of one's own subjectivity. Green explains how, in capitalist societies, the dislocation between objective and subjective is the result of alienating and objectifying processes that construct the social identity of subordinate groups "externally" to them.

Processes of economic dispossession function following these exact mechanisms. To identify these dynamics, we should be wary of Ollman's argumentation regarding what he

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[44] Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* p.258
[45] *Ibid.* p.242
[46] Green, "Advanced Capitalist Hegemony and the Significance of Gramsci's Insights: A restatement", p.172

defined as Marx's "philosophy of internal relations."[47] According to Ollman, the relationships in which elements and processes are embedded do not exist externally, rather they should be considered as integral elements of their essence. In Hanieh's words " Objects, in other words, are not self-contained; they are constituted through the relations they hold in their stance with the whole".[48] From this standpoint, dispossession needs to be understood as both an intrinsically economic process, as well as its consequential social dimension.

First, dispossession is intrinsically an economic process defined by Nichols as a "distinct logic of capitalist development grounded in the appropriation and monopolization of the productive powers of the natural world."[49] Both Nichols and Harvey offer a clear explanation on how dispossession works to solve the problem of overaccumulation of capital, by releasing a set of assets, including lands, and creating a class of wage-dependent workers.[50] Indeed, without direct access to the land and other natural means of production, individuals are not able anymore to maintain their material reproduction. Hence, they are obliged to contract themselves into waged employment.[51]

Beyond the intrinsic dimension, however, dispossession has a consequential social dimension. According to Nichols, the concept of property, which is at the base of dispossession, is nothing more than a kind of social relation itself. Nichols explains this by saying that "making' property refers not to the creation of a new material object but to a new juridical and conceptual object—an abstraction—that serves to anchor relations, rights, and, ultimately, power."[52] Thus, both property and dispossession can be understood as social relations of power, which shape the development of social classes. Along these lines, dispossession is defined here as both an economic process and by reference to its social ramifications.

Specifically, processes of dispossession have the power to trigger intersectional levels of geographical marginalisation and forge subaltern social classes. Indeed, severe processes of natural dispossessions tend to lead to environmental destruction, through the exhaustion of resources that alienate the geographical area, creating what Naomi Klein defines "sacrifice zones", which are "places that, to their extractors, somehow don't count and therefore can be poisoned, drained, or otherwise destroyed, for the supposed greater good of economic

[47] Ollman, B., *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method* p.202
[48] Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: issues of contemporary capitalism in the Middle East.* p.8
[49] Nichols, *Theft Is Property! Dispossession and Critical Theory*, pp.83-84
[50] See specifically Harvey D., (2005) *The new imperialism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press), Chapter 4 "Accumulation by Dispossession", pp. 137-182
[51] See Thompson, E.P., (1963) *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz)
[52] Nichols, *Theft Is Property! Dispossession and Critical Theory,* p.31

progress."[53] In other words, the socio-economic and environmental injustices related to processes of dispossession are structural, and legitimised by notions of superiority and subordination. As Klein points out, to create sacrifice zones "you need to have people and cultures who count so little that they are considered deserving of sacrifice".[54]

Looking at marginalisation through these patterns of dispossession reaffirm the capitalist structurality of this social order. Ray Bush, in his edited book, *Marginality and exclusion in Egypt,* explains that the economic marginalisation of certain segments of the population is a systemic consequence of the capitalist organisation. In his words "People are necessarily unevenly incorporated within capitalist relations of production and social reproduction."[55]

It is through the uneven incorporation of different social groups within the system that capitalism creates social hierarchies, or to rephrase Fraser: "structurally and functionally primed to divide populations in ways that correlate with, and fabricate, *others*."[56] Or in Harvey's words, "capitalism necessarily and always creates its own 'other.'"[57]

In this sense, dispossession, 'intrinsically', is the process through which this logic is enacted. Therefore, once the 'other' is identified (in this case, unexploited lands, or natural resources) it is dispossessed following a clear capitalist logic. At the same time, dispossession is also its consequential nature, since it gives a face and a name to that 'other' by subordinating those social classes to the greater good of economic development.

In this context, talking about socio-economic processes while broadening the reach of capitalist power beyond the sphere of production allows us to notice how the social dynamics of othering have also been perpetuated in the realm of culture, and more specifically the one of memory. Strategies of social amnesia and exclusion of certain local collective memories must be deemed as a crucial means to legitimise the socio-economic wider system of domination of the hegemonic group. I argue that this exclusion should be considered as a process of *dispossession of memory.* I believe that the same concept of dispossession offered by Nichols as a "form of violence" is reproduced in mnemonic dynamics of exclusion and amnesia. Indeed, the manipulation of collective memory, to use Gramsci's vocabulary, constitutes the cultural hegemonic plan that legitimises the brute coercion of the state. The mnemonic dispossession

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[53] Klein, N., (2014) *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, (New York: Simon & Schuster) p.371
[54] *Ibid.,*p.372
[55] Bush, R., Ayeb, H., (eds.) (2012) *Marginality and Exclusion in Egypt,* (London; New York: Zed Books), p.8
[56] The original quote is "structurally and functionally primed to divide populations in ways that correlate with, and fabricate, *race.*" Fraser, N., (2018) "Roepke Lecture in Economic Geography-From Exploitation to Expropriation: Historic Geographies of Racialized Capitalism" *Economic Geography*, 94, (1): 1-17, p.2
[57] Harvey D., *The new imperialism*, p.141

of certain social groups becomes the official and cultural expression of their exclusion, which creates additional trajectories of subordination. Following the same intrinsic and consequential dialectic, we can further understand how the dispossession of memory consolidates the capitalist social hierarchies.

Intrinsically, the exclusion of individuals from collective memory should be deemed dispossession because, to rephrase Nichols, it is a process that entails "divesting me of the [mental] objects that mediate my relation to the world."[58] Jones defines memory as the vase which "encapsulates individuals' inner resources for interpreting the world around them."[59] In this sense, erasing someone's memory means dispossessing them of their dossier of experiences, their language to interpret the reality around them. Furthermore, the interplay between what we remember and what we come to think is the central element of becoming. As noted by Jones "We don't just live in the moment, but in a progressing compendium of interacting lived moments."[60] The scope of action in our present and, therefore, the potential of us imagining a different future is intimately tied to our memories and our interpretation of the past. In this sense, memory is a key aspect of the transformative power of an individual or a social group. By undermining someone's past one undermines their future, by weakening their agency and their legitimate right of belonging.

On the consequential dimension, dispossession of memory inevitably affects the development of subordinate social subjectivities within the social system. Marya Schechtman argues that developing a sense of self depends on the capacity of memories to change as we age and accumulate experience. She notes that memories play an important role in self-constitutions since they provide relations to one's life as a whole.[61] Hence, memory affects the perception of self and others that leads to the formation and negotiation of identities within society. In this sense, our memory constitutes an important layer of the identity we construct of ourselves, and therefore what we perceive as our social position within the system. In this context, the creation of a hegemonic collective memory, that celebrates the past of the hegemonic class, while denying the existence of alternative narratives, becomes instrumental

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[58] The original quote from Nichols is "They are divesting me of the material objects that mediate my relation to the world", in reference to the dispossession of land, or natural resources. See Nichols, *Theft Is Property! Dispossession and Critical Theory,* p.82

[59] Greenfield, S., (2012) *The human brain: a guided tour,* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson) p.146

[60] Jones, (2011) "Geographies, Memories and Non-Representational Geographies, *Geography Compass* 5, 875-885, p.880

[61] Schechtman, M. (1994) "The truth about memory", *Philosophical Psychology* 7, (1): 3-18

in defining the boundaries between different social classes. In sum, mnemonic hegemony is the cultural contribution to the creation of social subordinate exploitable "others."

Nevertheless, Gramsci sees the cultural and material realms in a circular interaction that needs to be studied at both ends. Therefore, as previously mentioned, to holistically understand the top-down dynamics of hegemony, we need to analyse the dynamics of how they have been socialised, received, interpreted, and responded to from below, defined here as the *memory of dispossession.* With the expression memory of dispossession*,* I refer to how individuals have experienced and remember the long process of dispossession they have endured. The reception from below of both the economic and mnemonic dispossession can be defined, in Gramscian terms, as a complex mental state, a "contradictory consciousness." In Gramscian words, the contradictory consciousness is the result of the encounter between the implicit consciousness, made of activities and habits of the individual, and explicit consciousness, namely the ideas and cultural values of the dominant class that were "inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed".[62] This state of consciousness is able to influence "moral conduct and the direction of will"[63] and make the individual oscillates between approbation and apathy, resistance and resignation.

The study of the memory of dispossession is then an attempt to understand this complex state of consciousness and how it affects the individual's interpretation of the system around them. As Confino would say, "the whole world of activities that cannot be immediately recognized (and categorized) as political, although [..] decisive to the way people construct and contest images of the past."[64] For example, what does it mean for a farmer to be dispossessed of their land? It cannot be reduced to the dispossession of the means of production alone, rather it should be understood as a deeper process of dispossession that touches upon inner traits of identity, the generational heritage of collective values, and a holistic interpretation of their life. By moving beyond a unique focus on the dispossession of the means of production we will see how individuals bring with them a rich and painful memory of the dispossession they have suffered. In turn, this experience affects the development of subjective identities and social groups within society. Furthermore, the memory of dispossession allows us to see how, against the hegemonic grain, a counter-memory can flourish from below, becoming an alternative site of political and cultural resistance.

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[62] Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* p.333
[63] *Ibid.,* p.326-27,333
[64] Confino, "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method", p.1395

In conclusion, the dispossession of memory, and the memory of dispossession, are two sides of the same coin, reflecting the dual trajectory of memory from below and from above. Only by studying both, will we be able to have an idea of the extent to which memory truly contributes to maintaining or challenging socio-economic processes within capitalist hegemonic systems.

1.3 The Relevance of Theory to the Case

The dynamics of capitalist domination discussed by Gramsci, as well as by those who engaged with his writings after him, are very similar to the mechanisms enacted by the historical hegemonic groups in Tunisia. Dispossession is undoubtedly one of the processes that have most strongly shaped Tunisia by affecting the development of classes, creating wide geographical and social spaces of marginality, and thereby paving the way for an intensely exploitative and unequal system. This thesis will explore these processes in greater detail in the next chapter, but for now, some brief reflections will suffice.

It is important to note that the topology of marginalisation in Tunisia is fragmentary and heterogeneous because each case of dispossession creates its own internal dynamic. A relatively uniform element is nevertheless observable with regard to the mnemonic dynamics. The key spaces of accumulation, extractivism and dispossession, correspond to the social groups that appear to be somehow cut out of the Tunisian collective memory. As shall be discussed at length in the sections to come, the Tunisian regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali, and to some extent the post-2011 government, have enacted long-standing strategies of erasure and exclusion of certain local collective memories, which appeared to be both politically and economically inconvenient and served to legitimise the wider socio-economic system of domination. Therefore, I argue that the process of dispossession in Tunisia is a system of capitalist domination that embraces political, economic, and cultural dimensions in an inter-penetrative way. Widening the discussion on dispossession by studying its economic dimension as well as its social and cultural one, as three fundamental and co-dependent elements, allows us to add a layer of complexity to the wider debate on marginalisation in Tunisia by offering new insights into memory dynamics of power. It is to this task that the next chapter turns.

Chapter 2. Dispossession and Resistance – A Historical Overview

This chapter aims to provide historical context regarding the 2000s and 2010s cycle of protests in Tunisia, including the protests in Gafsa in 2008, the ones in Ben Guardane in August 2010, the revolts in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine in 2010, as well as the 2011 revolution. Moreover, the chapter describes the post-revolutionary mobilisations in the country, including the sit-ins and demonstrations in Kerkennah in 2015, as well as the Al Kamour movements in Tataouine from 2017 until 2020. The discussion on post-2011 protests will enable us to identify wider patterns of dispossession and contestation to it.

Following the steps of scholars, such as Amin Allal and Habib Ayeb, this chapter traces back the roots of the 2000s and 2010s cycle of mobilisations to the history of post-independence, up until the transformation that the country underwent with the introduction of neoliberal policies ranging from the 1970s until the 2000s. This story is narrated here following a very specific premise: dispossession has been and still is at the core of the political and economic processes that have resulted in socio-geographic marginalisation and regional inequalities. The chapter has a circular structure. It starts by engaging with the cycle of contestations, then moves to the post-independence phase of the country through to the neoliberal era, and finally back to the 2000s-2010s revolts.

2.1 The Tunisian Cycle of Mobilisations

Over ten years have passed since Muhamad Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, self-immolated in Sidi Bouzid. The suicide of Bouazizi, on December 17th, 2010, is considered by many as the impetus for a longer revolutionary moment in the country. The indignation broadly felt throughout the population spurred collective action. Therefore, the 2011 Tunisian uprisings are seen as part of a longer cumulative process of local actions, underpinned by the will to contest a structural system of exclusion. According to Ayeb, this cycle has developed at two speeds[65] (described herein as two phases). The first phase starts on January 5th, 2008 in Redeyef, in the region of Gafsa. The spark that ignited the social tensions was the announcement made by the CPG[66] (Phosphate Company of Gafsa) to offer jobs to candidates from outside of the region.[67] Undoubtedly, that spark arose from a wider bed of coals, consisting of a long history of high rates of unemployment in the region, lack of investments in new industries, and an economic and social overreliance of the government on the CPG (practically the only source of jobs in the region).[68]

After the CPG announcement, unemployed graduates in Redeyef went on hunger strike at the local centre of the UGTT to claim their right to employment. The next day, hundreds of students, along with trade unionists, and unemployed people with their families joined for a peaceful demonstration across Redeyef. From that day onwards, the movements grew at an unprecedented speed, reaching the other large mining towns, namely Moularès, M'dhila, and Metlaoui. On April 6th, Ben Ali's regime started a long series of repression. According to Gobes, the police action took on the shape of collective punishment that aimed "at generating

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[65] Ayeb, H., (2011) "Social and political geography of the Tunisian revolution: the alfa grass revolution" *Review of African Political Economy*, 38,(129): 467–479, p. 473

[66] For a detailed description of the CPG and its role in the 2008 revolts see Tibani, H., (2012) انتفاضة الحوض المنجمي بقفصة 2008. (Tunis: Tunisian House for Book). For a descriptive study on the structure of the CPG see Boubaker, S., Majidi, H., (2016) "La Compagnie des Phosphates de Gafsa (CPG): "État des lieux de la gouvernance et recommandations" (Tunis: IACE - Instauring an Advocacy Champion for Economy)

[67] Since 1986, following an agreement concluded with the Regional Union of the UGTT, the CPG has been recruiting workers from the Gafsa region, based on a contest. In 1993, the arrangements expected the CPG to hire a quota of 20% of people originating from the mining basin. For a more detailed study see Gobe, E., (2010) "The Gafsa Mining Basin between Riots and a Social Movement: Meaning and Significance of a Protest Movement in Ben Ali's Tunisia", 1-21

[68] See Allal, A. (2010) "Réformes néolibérales, clientélisme et protestations en situation autoritaire. Les mouvements contestataires dans le bassin minier de Gafsa (2008)", *Politique africaine* (117): 107-125; Hibou, B., (2015) "Le bassin minier de Gafsa en déshérence: Gouverner le mécontentement social en Tunisie", in Bono, I., Hibou, B., Meddeb, H. and Tozy, M. (eds.) *L'État d'injustice au Maghreb. Maroc et Tunisie*. (Paris: Karthala)

terror and breaking the ties of solidarity within the population."[69] The region remained beset by social turmoil until December 2008, when the trial against key figures from the movement terminated this period of protests. The trial ended with extremely heavy sentences delivered against the emblematic leaders of the movement: seven of whom were sentenced to ten years and one month in jail.[70]

Only one year later, riots broke out in Ben Guardane. These collective movements constituted another important phase of intensification of the protests in Tunisia. The uprisings were connected to the Libyan decision to close the Ras Jdir border post between the two countries. The apparent reason was to hinder the transnational contraband passing through the border every day. According to many Tunisian scholars and journalists, the border was closed because the Trabelsi family planned to transfer these informal activities to the coastal region by opening a direct maritime line between Tripoli and the port of Sfax.[71] Informal trade is at the crux of the regional economy in Ben Guardane, ensuring the survival of huge portions of the population. It is estimated that in Medenine 20% of the working-age population works in the informal trade, and approximately 83% of them come from Ben Guardane.[72] Hence, the closure of the frontier understandably resulted in a wave of protests that extended throughout the whole region. Despite the brutal repression of all the pacifist demonstrations, the movements seemed to progressively escalate. Ultimately, Tunisian authorities were forced to negotiate the re-opening of the border post with the Libyan authorities.

Only four months later in Sidi Bouzid, Mohamed Bouazizi, a street fruit vendor, would go on to take his own life after the authorities confiscated his wares and slapped him publicly in response to his protests. This gesture inflamed the souls of the people from the interior regions, who started a myriad of local movements throughout the month of December. On the 4th of January, the UGTT union declared its support for the demonstrations. After that, the movements spread across the big Tunisian metropolises – first, through the popular neighbourhoods of Tunis, then to the whole of Sfax and Tunis by the first half of January 2011. On January 14th, after weeks of strong police repression, a huge wave of protests reached the

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[69] Gobe, "The Gafsa Mining Basin between Riots and a Social Movement: Meaning and Significance of a Protest Movement in Ben Ali's Tunisia" p.13

[70] Ayeb, H., "Social and political geography of the Tunisian revolution: the alfa grass revolution"

[71] See Ayeb, "Social and political geography of the Tunisian revolution: the alfa grass revolution"; Amin, A., (2012) "Revolutionary trajectories in Tunisia. Processes of Political Radicalization 2007-2011" *Revue Française de Science Politique,* 62, (5-6): 821-841.

[72] Meddeb, H., (2017)"Peripheral Vision: How Europe Can Help "Preserve Tunisia's Fragile Democracy", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, https://ecfr.eu/archive/page/-/ECFR202_PERIPHERAL_VISION2.pdf [Accessed 28/11/21]

main avenue in Tunis. The slogan was: 'Ben Ali, degage!' (Ben Ali, get out!). The same night, Ben Ali left the country to seek refuge abroad.[73] From January to October 2011, an interim government took the lead among protests and demonstrations. On October 23rd, Al Nahda, a moderate Islamist party, won the national elections and formed a coalition government with two secular parties.[74]

Despite the unprecedented democratic and civil rights gains made as a result of the 2011 revolution, these accomplishments did not translate into radical social and economic change. Consequently, waves of riots and uprisings continued to spread around the country to protest the bleak and unchanged socio-economic conditions that constituted the root cause of the revolution.

In 2016, Ridha Yahyaoui killed himself after being refused a job in Kasserine.[75] The suicide sparked another national wave of protests across the country that reclaimed the right to secure employment. At the forefront of this demonstrations there was the population of Kerkennah, predominantly unemployed youth. Specifically, social turmoil in Kerkennah started after Petrofac,[76] the energy corporation exploiting oil on the islands, announced its willingness to stop funding the employment scheme established after 2011.[77] Thus, the local population repeatedly interfered and stopped the production of oil in the islands through roadblocks, protests and social mobilisations. The movements were repressed with brutal violence and the struggle over the distribution of revenues and the social responsibility of Petrofac remains unsettled to this day. [78]

A similar dynamic took place in Tataouine. In 2017, demonstrations broke out in Ksar Ouled Debbab. The movement was led by El Kamour, a group of local young people, who felt frustrated by their unemployment and demanded that the region's wealth and natural resources be equitably distributed among the population. The movement took on a new shape when it began targeting the production of oil. It brought oil production to a standstill by blocking the

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[73] For a detailed timeline see Ayeb, "Social and political geography of the Tunisian revolution: the alfa grass revolution"

[74] For a detailed study on al-Nahda and the Tunisian transition see McCarthy,R., (2018) *Inside Tunisia's al-Nahda: Between Politics and Preaching*. (Cambridge Cambridge University Press)

[75] Beji Okkez, M.S., (January 2016) "After Kasserine, protests break out in 15 governorates", Nawaat, , https://nawaat.org/2016/01/22/after-kasserine-protests-break-out-in-16-governorates/[Accessed 15/10/21]

[76] Petrofac Limited is a British provider of oilfield services to the international oil and gas industry. It is registered in Jersey, with its main corporate office on Jermyn Street, London

[77] On the 20th of May 2011 the UGTT in Sfax, together with the Kerkennah CLPR managed to agree with Petrofac to provide 600,000 dinars per year to boost employment and enhance the development in the islands. See Feltrin, L., (2018) "The Struggle of precarious youth in Tunisia: The Case of the Kerkennah movement", *Review of African Political Economy,* 45 (155): 44-63

[78] For a detailed study see Feltrin, L., "The Struggle of precarious youth in Tunisia: The Case of the Kerkennah movement"

access points to the wells with sit-ins and attacking pumping stations. In doing so, the movement forced the employees of the oil companies to leave the oil sites. The protests escalated so quickly that on May 10th, 2017, President Beji Caid Essebsi, in public discourse, officially ordered the national army to protect the oil camps and to impede any blockages of the routes. In June 2017, an agreement was signed between the government and El Kamour with the intermediation of the UGTT, which guaranteed its implementation. This agreement provided for the creation of jobs in the region and allocated a budget for its development.[79] In return, the protesters agreed to lift their sit-in, unblock the roads, allow the reopening of the valve and the resumption of oil activities. However, the timeline of the implementation on which the two parties agreed was not respected, and El Kamour went back to protest. The uprisings did not stop until July 2020.[80]

Gafsa, Kerkennah, Tataouine, Sidi Bouzid represent only some of the main protests that unsettled Tunisia in the last 13 years. Although each of them has distinct local articulations, they are intertwined with each other. Each of these revolts stems from a common array of feelings that consist in the interaction between practical hardships and psychological distresses. This social malaise follows precise geographical patterns. As Allal notices, there is a correlation between the map of the recent cycle of contestations and the geography of marginalisation in Tunisia.[81] This correlation is the fruit of long-lasting historical processes of continuous impoverishment of social groups and active marginalisation of whole regions. As Walsh notes, these processes cannot be studied but in a consequential relation with the contentious national politics over natural resources (that have enabled dispossession on a multiple levels).[82] This process stretches back to the post-independence phase and was consolidated during the neoliberal era. It is to this historical background horizon that we now turn.

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[79] Specifically, for the creation of 3,000 jobs in environmental companies between 2017 and 2019 in addition to 1,500 jobs in oil companies before the end of the year. A budget of 80 million dinars should also be allocated for the development of the region

[80] For a detailed study of Al Kamour see McCarthy,R., (2021) Transgressive protest after a democratic transition: The Kamour Campaign in Tunisia", *Social Movement Studies,* https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2021.1967128
For a detailed timeline on the Kamour movements until 2020 see Inkyfada, El Kamour: Cronologie d'une lutte", https://inkyfada.com/fr/2017/10/06/webdoc-tataouine-el-kamour-timeline/ [Accessed 15/10/21]

[81] Allal, A., Geisser, V., (2011-2012): "Tunisie: 'Révolution de Jasmin' ou Intifada?" *La Découverte: Mouvements,* (66): 62-68.

[82] Walsh, A., (2021) "The contentious politics of Tunisia's natural resource management and the prospects of the Renewable Energy transition" *K4D Helpdesk Report*. (Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies)

2.2. Post-Independence History

Today's struggles against dispossession can be traced back to the process of state formation in Tunisia after independence in 1956. The newly independent state exploited the lessons learnt from colonial domination to create a centralised top-down power layout. To do so, the state set in motion two main political-administrative mechanisms aimed at the functional redistribution of power in the country: (1) the reformulation of the administrative model of the territory and (2) the accumulation and centralisation of political and economic power.[83] The first process intended to shape the administrative organisation by dividing the territory into municipalities and governorates, in order to break the patterns of identity and solidarity among local populations (particularly in the Centre and the South).[84] By doing so, the government aimed to fight any political threats by undermining potential alternative centres of power and authority among the population, first among all tribalism.[85] The new state made its intention to dismantle tribal affiliations clear, suggesting that the construction of a unified national identity was among the top priorities of the new leadership. This can be inferred from the speeches made on different occasions by Habib Bourguiba, the nationalist leader of the Neo-Destour party and first president of Tunisia (1957–87). According to him, Tunisia's disease, that led to colonisation, was a "strong propensity for anarchy and division."[86] Therefore, he argues that in the nationalist phase:

> A plurality of parties, generating fratricidal conflicts, destructive competition, demagoguery and sabotage, would be a luxury that would render impossible the necessary mobilization of all our people; that would harm the austerity, work and discipline without which we would never be able to achieve our objectives.[87]

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[83] For a detailed study of the processes of centralisation and administrative reformulation see Kherigi, I., (2021) "Who Decides in Today's Tunisia? Analysing the Construction of Decentralization Reforms in Post-Revolution Tunisia" (PhD Dissertation, École Doctorale de Sciences Po). This chapter has drawn mostly on Chapter 2: Historical Trajectories of Center-Periphery Relations: Mapping the Mechanisms of Local Governance, pp. 97-159

[84] The Decree of the 21st of June 1956 abolished the *qiyadat,* replacing them with 97 *délégations.* See Belhedi, A., (1989)"Le découpage administratif en Tunisie", *Revue de Géographie du Maroc,* 13, (2): 3-25

[85] For detailed studies on the administrative layout in Tunisia see Yassin Turki, S., Loschi, C., (2017) "Chantiers de reconstruction politique en comparaison: la 'décentralisation' en période post-révolutionnaire en Tunisie et en Libye." *L'Année du Maghreb* (16): 71-88; Belhedi, A., (2012) "Le Développement Régionale. Approches géographiques, in *La dimension spatiale de la révolution tunisienne.* (Tunis: Wasiti Editions); Belhedi, A., (2016) "Maillage administratif régional et régionalisation en Tunisie. Continuité et Rupture" *Revue Tunisienne de Géographie,* 51-88.

[86] Sayah, M., (1982) *Histoire du mouvement national Tunisien. Le Néo-Destour à l'épreuve du pouvoir. Le Nouvel État, aux prises avec le compot yousséfiste 1956-1958* (Tunis: Dar El Amal), p.304

[87] Camau M., (1987) *Tunisie au présent: Une modernité au-dessus de tout soupçon?* (Paris: CNRS Éditions) p.193

Hence, to counter the risk of power dispersion among local tribes, the nascent regime embarked on a plan to erase fragmentary local values and beliefs and supplant them with a homogenous national culture. In this context, ideas such as modernity and progress were associated with nationalism, and were openly positioned against the past local cultures, which were depicted as backward. As Martinez noted, "If the colonial state aspired to 'civilize the natives', the post-colonial state sought to refashion mentalities considered as archaic."[88] As a corollary of this mindset, symbols of the past were considered to hinder the advancement of modernity. Therefore, not only tribes but also other historical subjects, such as the peasantry, were interpreted as "the residue of a shameful past".[89] This ideology authorised a political and cultural process by which these groups were territorially dismantled, materially dispossessed, and culturally obscured. Hence, the role played by the peasants during the independence cycle of struggle (organised into the resistance group known as *fellaghas[90]*) was completely excluded by the historiography of independence. This same historiography saw Bourguiba as the political strategist and the untiring warrior that led Tunisia out of the dark era of colonialism.[91]

It can be affirmed that this cultural manoeuvre was the first step of a long history of memorial dispossession in Tunisia, which will be further analysed in the next chapter. On a territorial level, this discourse led to suppression of any kind of 'primitive' forms of local solidarity, replacing them with modern concepts of welfare and national organisation. The same Bourguiba asserted at a conference in Aix-en-Provence in 1967 that "we have to violate the countryside and force taboos to fall."[92] One of the most devastating consequences of this strategy was certainly the massive project of land dispossession at the hands of the state. In the years following the independence the Tunisian lands changed hands from the colonial power to the national one.

Through a combination of repurchase, appropriation and nationalisation with compensation, the Tunisian state took possession of 600.000 hectares of previously colonial lands, and later 160.000 hectares from the privatisation of collectively managed tribal lands

[88] Martinez, L., (2009) *L'Afrique du Nord après les révoltes arabes,* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po) p.30

[89] Bush, R., et al., (2018) "Radical political economy and industrialisation in Africa: ROAPE/Third World Network-Africa Connections workshop, held in Accra, Ghana, 13–14 November 2017", *Review of African Political Economy*, 45, (156): 267-334, p. 301

[90] For a detailed study on the role of the fellagha in the Tunisian national liberation process see Ajl, M., (2019) "Farmers, Fellaga, and Frenchmen: National Liberation and Post-Colonial Development in Tunisia" (PhD Dissertation, Cornell University)

[91] For a detailed study of the reformulation of the peasantry see Akkari, A., (1993) *La modernisation des petits paysans: une mission impossible?* (Tunis: Ed. Education & Cultures)

[92] Abdelwahab, B., (1973) *À la Recherche des normes perdues.* (Tunis: Maison Tunisienne de l'édition) p. 39

lands, known as *habous*.[93] The dispossession of thousands of farmers was necessary to dismantle the local communities that could pose a threat to the new state. Moreover, this dispossession sought to centralise a transversal power among social sectors under the semi-corporatist and productivist orientation of the leading Neo-Destour party.[94] Indeed, the accumulation of capital through land enabled the regime to control a set of social sectors, thereby shaping the development of social classes in Tunisia. For example, by selectively approving and denying claims to land the state forged the new Tunisian bourgeois class. Simultaneously, it left the rest of the landless population directly dependence on the regime. Another source of social leverage and patronage was the access to public sector jobs and political positions, which was also managed by the ruling party. Larif-Béatrix's extensive study of the post-independent leadership notes that more than 90% of ministers and 55% of governors were from the Neo-Destour. The majority of heads of public and semi-public enterprises, members of parliament, senior-level bureaucrats and ambassadors were also drawn from the ruling party. This process of political-economic power concentration also follows clear geographical patterns. As a matter of fact, the Neo-Destour ruling party was characterised by a majority of members from the coastal regions. Consequently, there was an over-representation of those specific regions in state structures, which undoubtedly brought more benefits to that area. Hence, as Ayari states:

> Between 1956 and 1964, a new class of officials emerged, a little more than 500 individuals, mainly from the ranks of the Neo-Destour, which had as many Tunisois and Sahelians[95] (three-quarters compared with one quarter from other regions), constituting a 'composite elite.[96]

Accordingly, the centralisation of power also involved a new configuration of the regions in the country. Specifically, the geographically uneven distribution of power was attained by creating municipalities as a way to channel support and investment to the region from the ruling party.[97] Not only this, but it appears that also the affiliation of certain

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[93] For a detailed study on the colonised terrains and the dispossession trajectory see Elloumi, M., (2013) "Les terres domaniales en Tunisie, histoire d'une appropriation par les pouvoirs publics" *Études Rurales* 192,1-18.

[94] Bush et. al, "Radical political economy and industrialisation in Africa: ROAPE/Third World Network-Africa Connections workshop, held in Accra, Ghana,13–14 November 2017" pp.301-302

[95] With *Tunisois* and *Sahelians* Ayari refers to groups coming from Tunis, the capital and the surrounding area, as well as the *Sahel*, namely the Tunisian eastern shore, from Hammamet in the north to Mahdia in the south, including the governorates of Monastir, Mahdia and Sousse

[96] Ayari, M., (2016) *Le prix de l'engagement politique dans la Tunisie autoritaire,* (Paris: Karthala Editions) pp.37-38

[97] See Baron, M., et al., (2017) "Complexité et enjeux des mailles territoriales. Variations à partir du cas tunisien." *L'Année du Maghreb* (16): 109–126, p.17

geographical areas and social groups to Ben Youssef might have played a role in the administrative status of certain geographic areas.

Ben Youssef was in the beginning Bourguiba's protégée. He began his political career as the Secretary General of the Neo-Destour Party. However, in 1955, Ben Youssef and Bourguiba fell out over their divergent visions regarding the modes of decolonisation. Bourguiba accepted an autonomy agreement offered by the French, while Ben Youssef, closer to the political direction of Nasser, advocated for continuing armed resistance until complete territorial independence of the country. Ultimately, Bourguiba condemned Ben Youssef to death. In 1958, Ben Youssef managed to escape abroad, however; and in 1961 he was assassinated in Frankfurt by two alleged hit men of Bourguiba. After his victory, Bourguiba started a strategy to purge Youssefists and weaken all the institutions and social groups that were affiliated with Ben Youssef. Because the peasantry and the tribes had been tendentially allies of Ben Youssef, Bourguiba nationalised public land and confiscated land from large landowners on the grounds of alleged affiliations. This process prompted many landowners to sell their lands out of fear of confiscation, which contributed to the shift of agrarian power from local owners to large bourgeois owners affiliated with the Neo-Destour power.[98]

In conclusion, through a mix of formal and informal power dynamics, including land dispossession, cultural manipulation, and administrative reformulation, the new elite has paved the way for the new power layout in Tunisia. This mix of "control and social ascension, surveillance and wealth creation"[99] has allowed the elite to consolidate both their economic and political power. The dispossession of land allowed the Neo-Destour to accumulate enough capital, and at the same time, allowed them to legitimise their political position by stripping inconvenient social groups of their power. Owing to the concentration of certain social groups in specific areas, this process has also fundamentally reconfigured the social and economic status of the Tunisian regions. This is the first step towards contemporary regional inequalities. This process was accelerated by the country's neoliberal transition, as will be discussed below.

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[98] Kherigi, I., "Who Decides in Today's Tunisia? Analyzing the Construction of Decentralization Reforms in Post-Revolution Tunisia" pp.100-102

[99] Hibou, B. (2011) *Le moment révolutionnaire tunisien en question: Vers l'oubli du mouvement social?* Sciences Po CERI. https://core.ac.uk/reader/35308472 [Accessed 27/10/21] p.11

2.3 Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism gained widespread popularity during the global crisis of the 1970s, intensified during the mid-1980s and continues until today.[100] The economic current reached the Middle East starting from the early 1980s. Through several reports and studies, the major international financial institutions (IMF, World Bank) began to warn leaders in the Middle East of an impending social and economic crisis, due to the expansion of the labour force in the region and the lack of employment growth. In this context, the solution proposed by the IMF was to accelerate economic growth through a market-driven approach. This approach sought to open the private sector to the global market, under the guise of creating more employment opportunities to "absorb the new entrants to the labour force."[101]

All the IMF reforms from that moment onwards consisted mainly of privatisation drives, reduction of barriers to capital flows, and the imposition of "market imperatives throughout all spheres of human activity."[102] Tunisia was one of the Arab protagonists of this process. According to Hanieh, from 1988 to 1999, Tunisia's privatisation receipts amounted to $0.59 billion.[103] Connected to privatisation was another crucial element, namely the deregulation of labour conditions. The argument was that lower wages and the almost complete absence of social protection measures would attract more investments to the private sector. Especially from the early 2000s, Tunisia, alongside other Arab countries such as Egypt, Jordan and Morocco, promoted policies and passed laws to casualise work by introducing temporary contracts, removing limits on the repeated use of these contracts, and easing the procedures to fire workers.[104]

Not only did this process have an uneven impact on different geographical areas, but it required the nation's regional development strategy to be entirely rethought. Indeed, right before the beginning of the neoliberal transition the government had issued several documents

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[100] For a detailed study on Neoliberalism see Harvey, D., (2007) *A brief history of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); For a detailed study of the neoliberal reforms in the MENA Regions, see Chapter 3: Hanieh, A., Mapping the Neoliberal Experience" pp. 47-75 , in Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: issues of contemporary capitalism in the Middle East*

[101] World Bank, (2003) *Trade, Investment, and Development in the Middle East and North Africa: Engaging with the World* (Washington, DC: World Bank) p. 19

[102] Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: issues of contemporary capitalism in the Middle East.* p.14

[103] *Ibid.* p.49

[104] World Bank, (2010) *Loan Document for Economic Development Policy Loan* (Washington, DC:WorldBank, May 26), 40–41. www.worldbank.org. [Accessed 16/11/21]

acknowledging regional equilibrium as a guiding developmental principle and encouraged investments in interior areas to facilitate the emergence of regional industrial poles. However, with the shift towards export industries, this idea was soon abandoned. The interior regions were seen as disadvantageous, due to their distance from the coast, natural constraints, weak urbanisation, lack of infrastructure and "insufficient comparative advantages".[105] This justified the decision to focus the state's investment only on export-oriented industries and promote large cities on the coast. As Kherigi points out "this process saw a shift from 'regional equilibrium' to a new territorial paradigm of "integration and differentiation".[106] In other words, it was inconvenient to invest in underdeveloped regions and convenient to renounce to their development, and instead strengthen "those places best situated to face up to international competition"[107] as "a necessary condition for the success of the economic project of the country."[108] The regional policy shift, along with the new emphasis on export-based production, paved the way for a new phase of dispossession. First, agriculture was at the core of the neoliberal project in Tunisia.[109] According to the strategy of the World Bank, the agrarian sector should also be linked to the world market on an export-based model. To do so, rural development required "competitive agriculture and agribusiness as the main engines of growth"[110] in which "rural people are linked to well-functioning markets for products, inputs, and finance."[111] Thus, the neoliberal plan dealt the final blow to the small farmers in Tunisia by perpetuating and intensifying the process of land commodification, thereby turning the state land into a privately owned commodity that could be sold on the market. From 1970 to 1986, the Tunisian government began selling state lands to private owners under the direction of the World Bank.[112] Additionally, the government provided credit to less than 20% of the largest

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[105] Dlala, H., (1999) "Nouvelle littoralité industrielle en Tunisie, mondialisation et aménagement du territoire" *Espace géographique*, 28, (1): 49–58, pp.56-57

[106] Kherigi, I., "Who Decides in Today's Tunisia? Analyzing the Construction of Decentralization Reforms in Post-Revolution Tunisia" p.123

[107] Ministère de l'Equipement et de l'Amenagement du Territoire, (1997) *Schéma Directeur d'Aménagement du Territoire National. Etude Stratégique. Dirasset- Groupe Huit- IGIP. Bilan-diagnostic—Rapport de première phase. Plus vol. Deuxième phase*, p. 6

[108] *Ibid.* pp. 32-33

[109] For a detailed study of neoliberal agrarian reforms in North Africa see Hanieh, A., Chapter 4: Capitalism and Agrarian Change in North Africa, in Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt*; *issues of contemporary capitalism in the Middle East* pp.75-99. For a detailed account of the World Bank agrarian strategy see McCalla, A., (1997) *Rural development: from vision to action - a sector strategy paper* (Washington, D.C: World Bank Group); *"World Bank, (2005) Agricultural Growth for the Poor : An Agenda for Development. Directions in Development.* (Washington, DC: World Bank)

[110] World Bank, *Rural Development: From Vision to Action*, p.4

[111] *Ibid.* p.5

[112] World Bank, (2006) *Tunisia: Agricultural Policy Review,* Report no.35239-TN (Washington, DC), p.58

landowners to develop machinery.[113] This led to what Hanieh calls a capitalist class formation in agriculture,[114] where 3% of landowners own 37% of the land, while 53% of farms make up for only 11% of the land.[115] Thus, the agricultural market came to be dominated by large agrobusinesses with strong links both to the regime and to the international market. On the other hand, dispossessions of land, resource scarcity, and rural unemployment levels progressively increased. This process of land dispossession reached its peak in the early 2000s throughout the whole Arab region, so much so that in 2004 the MENA region was the second most unequal region for land ownership in the world.[116]

By the same token, neoliberal reforms have encouraged the dispossession of a wide range of natural resources. Indeed, the shift of market strategies towards an export model affirmed the role of North African countries as suppliers of oil, gas, and other minerals such as phosphate. Thus, extractivism became the cornerstone of the Tunisian economic developmental model. In the literature, extractivism usually refers to the activities that overexploit natural resources for export, such as minerals, but also land and water .[117]

The interior regions were deemed too geographically disadvantageous to be turned into industrial poles, yet rich enough in natural resources to be transformed into exclusive sites of extraction (or as previously defined, sacrifice zones). Throughout three decades of neoliberalism these areas underwent a disproportionate amount of resource pillaging and further environmental degradation, which also led to harsh processes of marginalisation. In this context, public local resources were gradually transferred under the ownership of private organisations, while the local community paid the social and ecological price. As we will see in the next chapter, these kinds of processes are a reality in most of the Tunisian regions, such as Gabés, Tataouine, Jendouba, Gafsa, Kerkennah, Sidi Bouzid.

To conclude, looking at the political-economic development of Tunisia based on rurally-focused historiography allows us to see how in different historical phases of Tunisia dispossession was at the crux of processes of capital accumulation and redistribution of

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[113] Radwan, S., Jamal, V., Kumar Ghose, A., (1991)*Tunisia: Rural Labour and Structural Transformation* (London: Routledge), p.40

[114] Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: issues of contemporary capitalism in the Middle East,* pp.86-90

[115] *Ibid.* p.83

[116] Nomaan, M., (2004) *Reaching Millennium Goals: How Well Does Agricultural Productivity Growth Reduce Poverty*? Employment Strategy Paper no. 12 (Geneva: International Labor Organization), p. 17

[117] For detailed case-studies on extractivism see Merino, R., (2020) "The cynical state: forging extractivism, neoliberalism and development in governmental spaces, *Third World Quarterly,* 41, (1): 58-76; Petras, J., Veltmeyer, H., (2014) *The New Extractivism: A post-neoliberal development model or imperialism of the twenty-first century?* (London: Zed Books LTD)

political power. First, throughout the post-independent phase, the dispossession of lands was instrumental for the Neo-Destour elite to accumulate enough capital, and at the same time to legitimise their political position by weakening specific social groups. Then, with the arrival of neoliberalism, the process of land commodification intensified and turned state-owned land into a market commodity. Likewise, neoliberal reforms have also encouraged the dispossession of minerals and fossil fuels, which led to the structural marginalisation of the extraction sites.

One of the main outcomes of these processes has been the reconfiguration of the status of each region in Tunisia and the developmental plan they have been bound to. Throughout this process, a system of geography-based subordinate social classes has emerged, where environmental, social and economic rights have been sacrificed on the altar of capital accumulation and political consolidation.

Chapter 3. The Top-Down Processes of Dispossession

This chapter analyses the economic and cultural aspects of dispossession in Tunisia. Specifically, the first section will demonstrate what was already highlighted in chapter 1. Namely, that the dispossession of resources in Tunisia sets in motion a process of marginalisation. For example, the pillaging of natural resources and the subsequent environmental devastation adversely affect the health and prosperity of the regions and their people. As a consequence, this process triggers the social and economic alienation and subordination of these social groups. Ultimately, this chapter argues that dispossession contributes to the othering of social groups, thereby creating social hierarchies across the social and economic realm.

The second section of this chapter will detail how the process of othering is perpetuated and legitimised within the cultural sphere. More specifically, subordinate identities are culturally constructed through harsh stigmatisation and systematic exclusion from collective memory and national historical accounts. Hence, the second part will engage with the top-down dispossession of memory in these geographical areas.

3.1 Resources Dispossession

The processes of dispossession take fragmentary and very diverse forms — from privatisation to land expulsion, to the overexploitation of natural resources— and each manifestation creates its own dynamic. Therefore, it is important to explore the internally complex and heterogeneous system of dispossessions in the specific Tunisian context.

One of the clearest manifestations of dispossession in Tunisia is the exploitation of fossils, specifically oil and phosphate. The geography of this dispossession is wide. The exploitation of oil predominantly concerns the region of Tataouine and the Kerkennah Archipelago. Regarding phosphate, the main producer is the region of Gafsa, while the region of Gabès is known for its role in the refining of the fossil fuel. Capitalist modes of extractivism bind these regions to a structural "development of underdevelopment"[118] where the accumulation of capital is perpetuated through the collision of ecological violence and resource dispossession. These two elements compounded forge transverse processes of marginalisation, thereby affecting several spheres of human life. Economically, the degradation of the environment prevents other kinds of sustainable economic developments or investments in the area. Socially, these areas are progressively cut out of public investments and initiatives, visible by the lack of public infrastructure, from schools and healthcare, to roads.

In the case of Kerkennah, for instance, the acceleration of climate change is driven by the choice to continue exploiting and burning fossil fuels, which threatens the survival of the archipelago. Kerkennah is indeed one of the most vulnerable places in the Mediterranean related to climate change. It has a semi-arid climate with a long dry summer season, high temperatures and water evaporation. The rise of sea level due to global warming is endangering the archipelago.[119] It is estimated that the coastline is retreating more than 10 centimetres a year. Therefore, the soil is increasingly becoming more saline, due to sea water entering groundwater reserves. Furthermore, the overexploitation of oil has also led to large oil leakages in the sea, which have had a deleterious impact on the quality of water, and therefore on ecosystems, biodiversity, and fishing activities. These two phenomena exacerbate potable

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[118] Hamouchenn, H., (2016) "Kerkennah: on the frontline of resistance to the fossil fuel industry in Tunisia", *Open Democracy*, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/kerkennah-on-frontline-of-resistance-to-fossil-fuel-industry-in-tuni/ [Accessed 29/11/21]

[119] *Ibid.*

water scarcity, drought, lack of arable lands, and ultimately food and economic vulnerability of the population.[120]

Another tragic example is Gabès, known as the only coastal oasis in the Mediterranean, and recognised as a natural heritage by UNESCO. In 1972, however, a chemical industrial complex was constructed on its shores to process the phosphate from the mining basin of Gafsa. The complex is responsible for transforming phosphate in phosphoric acid. Today, the industry produces 57% of the national production of phosphoric acid and other acids used in the metal industry or for the manufacturing of fertilisers or detergents.[121] The complex is affiliated with the Tunisian Chemical Group, which is also responsible for extracting and washing the phosphate in the mining basin, and then transporting it to processing units in Gabès. Both the phosphate processing units and the units to produce phosphoric acids have detrimental environmental ramifications.

First, the plants that process phosphate have increased water exhaustion in the area. Second, several studies have documented the impact of the chemical activities on the environment. For example, SOS Environnement Gabès found that the number of marine species has decreased from 250 in 1965 to only 50 today.[122] The impact relates also to emissions and waste. According to a UNEP report, the regulations to control and monitor the emissions and waste of the complex are not upheld, causing the GCT to exercise its own self-control.

It is calculated that 42,000 m³ of gypsum sludge, that is a mixture of water and phosphogypsum, are dumped into the Gulf of Gabès without treatment. According to the Tunisian legislation, phosphogypsum is a hazardous waste due to the presence of heavy metals and radioactive materials. Nevertheless, the GCT does not adequately comply with waste regulations. It is for this reason that today Gabès is known among Tunisians as "the Tunisian Chernobyl".[123] The Gabèsians I met have a strong attachment to the once natural paradise of Gabès. Mabrouk is a retired teacher and one of the most prominent environmental activists in the area. He believes that the effects brought about by the chemical complex constitute a serious

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[120] See Hamouchenn, "Kerkennah: on the frontline of resistance to the fossil fuel industry in Tunisia"; Knaepen H., (2021)"Climate Risks in Tunisia. Challenges to Adapation in the Agri-food System" ECDPM.; Étienne, L., Dahech, S., Beltrando, G., Daoud A., (2012)"Dynamiques Récentes des Sebkhas littorales de l'archipel des Kerkennah (Tunisie Centro-Méridionale): Apport de la Télédétection", *Hal: Science Ouverte.* Editions des Archives Contemporaines / Editions scientifiques GB / Gordon and Breach Scientific Publishers 11 (1): 273-281
[121] Vernin, Z. (2017) "Lutter contre les injustices environnementales en Tunisie." *Un Journal des Mobilisations en 2016 et 2017.* FTDES. Département Justice Environnementale, p.71
[122] See Vernin, Z., (August, 2017)"Gabès : « La petite Tchernobyl de Tunisie » revendique son droit de vivre", FTDES, https://ftdes.net/2654-2/ [Accessed 20/10/21]
[123] Vernin, "Lutter contre les injustices environnementales en Tunisie" pp.71-73

form of dispossession, both in terms of water exhaustion and sea and environmental pollution. As he points out:

> 20 years ago, they just took our water, our source of life, just to wash the phosphates that came from Gafsa to make chemical industries and chemical fertilisers. This is not fair. Moreover, go and see the waste that is poured into the Gulf of Gabès because of this. Even the sea is polluted, the fish are more intelligent, they have left, and we are still here. I don't know why, but we remain. It's true, they took our resources, they took our wealth.[124]

The case of Gafsa evidences similar environmental dynamics. The treating of phosphate requires a considerable amount of water. It is calculated that the general consumption of the Gafsa Company of Phosphate (CPG) in 2008 was 18.5 million m³ of water per year, which is equivalent to twice the quantity of drinking water consumed by the entire Gafsa governorate.[125] This water comes from the non-renewable fossiliferous continental aquifer that covers all southern Tunisia, where a significant drop in water levels has already occurred. In 2017, the inhabitants of the Basin region reported 114 water cuts to the Tunisian Observatory of Water.[126] The SONEDE[127] estimates that they need 110 litres per second to meet the needs of the population, while in reality, they could ensure only 40 litres per second.[128]

In August I met Wassim, a 39-year-old activist and researcher from Redeyef, whose personal experience of dispossession adds an emotional weight to his social and economic analysis. Thus, he explains to me the issue of water:

> And to have water is to talk about life. This is also characteristic of the Redeyef aquifer, it is a non-renewable aquifer. [..] We are pumping water, which is already the property of future generations. So, the main problem is the right to life. [...] it's what future life is possible in one, two or three decades, given the current situation.[129]

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[124] Mabrouk, retired activist from Gabès, July 26th, 2021
[125] Boubaker, S. Majidi, H., (2016) "La Compagnie des Phosphates de Gafsa (CPG): État des lieux de la gouvernance et recommandations", pp. 33-34
[126] The Observatory has a platform online, available at https://www.watchwater.tn/fr/ [Accessed 25/10/21]
[127] The Sonede is the National Company of Water Distribution, to which the government has assigned the water distribution between 1975 and 1985
[128] *Ibid*. p.122
[129] Wassim, activist and researcher, from Redeyef, August 13th, 2021

Here, as well, the dispossession is multifaceted. The population in Gafsa is irremediably dependent on the production of phosphate for wages and employment.[130] Although the high volume of phosphate extraction is detrimental to the health of the population, stopping or slowing it would have other social implications. The remuneration of workers depends on production bonuses, as their basic salary is low. Therefore, the less phosphate is produced, the fewer people are hired. Paradoxically, the local population becomes dependent on the perpetuation of their own dispossession. Here lies the hidden contradiction of the economic miracle of Tunisia, the systematic sacrifice of local wealth for the sake of national development. Once again, Wassim's words epitomise the general feelings of the interviewees from the region of Gafsa.

> In the name of development, humanity is being asked to make sacrifices in terms of freedom, in terms of the right to natural resources [...] development is a way of systematic impoverishment, of resource grabbing. It is a violation of the basic rights to life.[131]

These types of processes are a reality in most of the Tunisian regions.[132] For instance, the central and northern regions of Tunisia have witnessed another type of dispossession process, concerning the agricultural sector. As introduced in chapter 2, the neoliberal philosophy of uneven access to resources, land dispossession and water displacement is still at the crux of the agrarian system in Tunisia. Specifically, in the northern regions of the country, where the economy is still based on agriculture, irrigation is used as a tool of dispossession. Ayeb notes the strong inequality in access to irrigation among farmers. He explains that more than half of the irrigated lands are covered by farms of more than 10 hectares, while 44.8% are for owners of less than 10 hectares and only 16% is for farmers with less than 5 hectares.[133]

I spoke with Khaled, a young farmer from Ras el Jabal, a small town in the Bizerte Governorate. He explains to me the dynamics of water dispossession in his region:

> The small farmers invest their money on the seeds and everything to plant their potatoes. They will be waiting for the period when they have to irrigate. When the period of irrigation arrives, the state gives us

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[130] Indeed, the region has not witnessed any other economic development or investment to create work opportunities. The CPG has been for a century the sole economic engine of the region. For further information about the development of the CPG in the region see Tibani, انتفاضة الحوض المنجمي بقفصة 2008, pp.1-23

[131] Wassim, 2021

[132] For detailed study on other cases of Tunisian locations of extractivism see Vernin, "Lutter contre les injustices environnementales en Tunisie", *Un Journal des Mobilisations en 2016 et 2017*

[133] Ayeb, H., "The marginalization of the small peasantry: Egypt and Tunisia", in Bush, R., (2019) *Food Insecurity and Revolution in the Middle East and North Africa*. (London: Anthem Press), p. 97

[small farmers] one day of water per week for each of us, which is nothing, [..] the authorities say there is water scarcity in all of Tunisia, but they are lying because in the meantime, the big investors, like in the surrounding areas, they all have water. [..] The farmers say to the authorities, if you know that you don't want to give us water after we plant, why do you sell the seeds at the beginning. If you know that you don't have water, don't sell seeds and we won't invest the money.[134]

These different processes of dispossession are enabled by the silence of institutions. In all these areas, the interviewees have felt the absence of the state in several situations. I had the chance to speak with the local coordinator of the Union de Diplômés Chômeurs[135] in Kerkennah. His name is Ahmed, and today he dedicates his time mostly to fishing. We discuss the role of the state in the struggles with Petrofac in Kerkennah. His view on the issue is that the state has always taken the side of the oil industries. One example is the Chergui case, namely the concession acquired by PETROFAC on the Chergui gas field in Kerkennah to start the production of natural gas and condensate production in 2008. In 2011, Moncef Trabelsi, President Ben Ali's brother-in-law, confessed during trial to having given the concession on Chergui to Amjad Bseisu, then executive director of Petrofac Energy Developments International Ltd, in return for a commission of 2 million dollars.[136] Despite this, the British company has avoided investigation in both the UK and Tunisia. In the light of this, Ahmed asserts:

The state only intervenes to keep the interests of these companies, quite simply. Concerning the relationship between the island and the state, I don't think that there is really a great interest for the state towards the island.[137]

Another case is Gafsa, where since the foundation of the mining cities, the CPG was the main company responsible for providing social services to the population, such as electricity, water, infrastructure etc. According to Wassim, the social presence of the CPG, and the structural absence of institutions led people to have different concepts of state. As he explains:

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[134] Khaled, farmer from Ras al Jebel (Jendouba), and official wounded of the revolution, July 9th, 2021

[135] Union of unemployed graduated. A non-governmental organisation founded in 2005 in Tunis. Currently the association is not active anymore

[136] IWatch, (2016) "Unaoil Leaks: Petrofac Tunisie rattrapée par un scandale de corruption", https://www.iwatch.tn/ar/article/240 [Accessed 4/12/21]. I Watch is a Tunisian non-profit, independent watchdog organization that aims to flag financial and administrative corruption and promote transparency.

[137] Ahmed, fisher and ex chair of the Union de Diplômés Chômeurs (Union of graduated unemployed) from Kerkennah, August 11th, 2021

There was one main idea: where was the state? The welfare state, the state that assumes social [responsibilities], the economic state, and I think that until now, this state is an illusion [..]. People also developed this idea that the state was the equivalent of the Gafsa Phosphate Company. [..] The phosphate company, with the popular pronunciation, it's called 'Kobbania'. At the time of my father [..] they said Kobbania was our mother.[138]

To conclude, this section has shown the wide and heterogeneous mobilisations of the concept of dispossession. From land privatisation to overexploitation of resources, or displacement of water, dispossession can appear in different forms, and have different ramifications. In this section we have seen how the compounding of economic exploitation, together with ecological pillages, create transversal conditions of marginalisation, which are able to reach wide spheres of human life, from health, to employment, to environmental sustainability. On a general note, we can assert that in the Tunisian case, the act of dispossession has implied the sacrifice of geographical areas that "can be poisoned, drained or otherwise destroyed"[139] and the sufferance of the populations, considered almost as a necessary sacrifice for economic progress. The second part of this chapter will delve into how memory dispossession and cultural othering are part and parcel of processes of dispossession.

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[138] Wassim, 2021
[139] Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, p.382

3.2 Dispossession of Memory

The manipulation of memory in favour of political interests is not something new. As stated in the first chapter, many scholars have considered how hegemonic powers and states have drawn on the manipulation of collective memory to consolidate their power.[140] Nevertheless, the relation between memory manipulation and the economic realm is often missed.

Yet, if we look at the Tunisian case, we will see a clear correlation between the map of resource dispossession, and the one of historical erasure of collective memories. I argue that the dispossession of memory, together with cultural stigmatisation, must be etched into patterns of capital accumulation, inasmuch as they contribute to the holistic marginalisation of the regions. It does so by creating culturally subordinate identities, whereby social groups internalise their socio-economic marginalised position.

That being said, we should not fail to acknowledge the fluidity of the cultural systems at the base of this memory dispossession. As demonstrated in chapter 2, in the Tunisian case, the emergence of the bourgeoisie Neo-Destour class, characterised by a strong Sahelienne majority, was accompanied by the standardisation of their cultural system. This, together with the need to culturally homogenise the country, led to a unified historical narrative that inevitably saw the glorification of the leading class, to the detriment of the other social groups. The imposition of one historical narrative led to the discarding of divergent historical accounts regarding Tunisian liberation.

I had the opportunity to speak with Mehdi, a representative of International Alert in Tunisia, a non-governmental organisation that deals with different cases of regional and social marginalisation. In our conversation, Mehdi explained to me how hegemonic memory was constructed after the conflict between Bourguiba and Ben Youssef. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Ben Youssef was mostly affiliated with tribes and farmers, while Bourguiba had a strong urban, bourgeoise preponderance. For Mehdi, these circumstances led to the creation of a historical narrative grounded on the exclusion of specific social groups. His perspective maintains the balance between understanding the spontaneous dynamics of

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[140] Some examples are Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*; Finney P., (2002) "On memory, identity and war", *The Journal of Theory and Practice* 6, (1): 1-13; Anderson B. *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and the spread of nationalism;* Olick, J.K., (1998) "Social Memory Studies: From 'Collective Memory' to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices", *Annual Review of Sociology* 24, (1): 105-140

memory formation and acknowledging the power relations implied in processes of history-making.

> The 50s and 60s, and this conflict [the Bourguiba-Ben Youssef conflict], is a kind of civil war. There is one group that won that war. It imposed its narrative, its vision, and these regions [referring to the internal and southern regions] were seen as regions that supported the other group. I'm not saying it's black and white [...] but it's clear that the group that won imposed its vision and its narrative on the discourse in relation to liberation, in relation to the conflict, and that really marked the very construction of the post-colonial state.[141]

This new narrative was entirely centred on the image of Bourguiba and his pivotal role in liberating the country. Laurence Pierrepont-de-Cock speaks in this regard of "a veritable tyranny of history and memory that is being put in place in Tunisia."[142] Indeed, Bourguiba presents himself as the protagonist of the decolonisation enterprise and the creator of the nation, as the birth of the Tunisian nation allegedly began with his arrival on the political scene. Thus, the regime embarked on a cultural campaign with the aim to convey and consolidate this myth on a national level. To do so, the regime relied on the use of media, the establishment of commemorations and the control over the production of knowledge. First, Bourguiba's speeches were broadcasted on television and radio on a daily basis, through which he conveyed to the population the myth of the "supreme fighter".[143] Scholars have argued that such broadcasts and monodramas established a sort of fusional link between Bourguiba and his people that was decisive in the nation-building project.[144] Second, the commemorations that were set also reflected this tendency. June 1st, the date of Bourguiba's return from exile in 1955, was declared a bank holiday, as was August 3rd, the date of his birthday. Finally, school textbooks and the writing of history were other instrumental vectors to build the Bourguibist myth. Hichem Djaït specifies that "in the 1960s, President Bourguiba had assigned to historians (of which Hichem Djaït is a member) a very important role: that of being the awakening of the national [...] intellectual consciousness of the country, by giving this nation in formation its historical specificity.[145] Hence, the story of the Tunisian independence was depicted as a

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[141] Mehdi, from International Alert (Tunisia), August 19th, 2021
[142] Pierrepont-de-Cock, L., (2004) "Projet national bourguibien et réalités tunisiennes", in Camau, M., Geisser, V., (eds.), *Habib Bourguiba, la trace et l'héritage,* (Paris : Khartala) p. 35
[143] For a detailed analysis see Abbassi, S., (2006) *Entre Bourguiba et Hannibal : identité tunisienne et histoire depuis l'indépendance*, (Paris, Khartala) p. 16
[144] See Zalila, I., (2012) "Ambivalence des images d'Actualités", *Maghreb Magazine*, 7; Zederman, M., (2015) "Construction nationale et mémoire collective: islamisme et bourguibisme en Tunisie (1956-2014)", *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps*, 3-4, (117-118): 46-56.
[145] Djait, H., (1988) "Le métier d'historien en Tunisie", in René Rémond (ed.), *Être historien aujourd'hui*, (Paris, Editions Eres) p. 85

unitary and largely non-violent national struggle led by the Neo-Destour party, with Bourguiba at its head. Consequently, all groups claiming to have some legitimacy for having participated in one way or another in the struggle for independence are discredited: this is the case, for example, of the fellaghas, the religious elites, and the trade unionists of the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT).[146] Particularly, many interviewees stress the way national history has disregarded the role played by the armed resistance in the South in the context of the Tunisian liberation. Wassim, for instance, refers to the role of his region, Gafsa:

> I also think that the example of the national resistance against French colonialism and the great names of the resisters, it gives a superb illustration of the work of memory and refreshing the memory. There were great names in Gafsa. Except that, of course, there is no interest in valuing this memory. [...] They suppressed memories, especially collective ones, [..] In the 60s, there were hundreds of fellaghas imprisoned for the liberation of the Tunisian cause. Unfortunately, nobody talks about them. [..] The liberal state, the rule of law. It has no interest in keeping the memory.[147]

Additionally, Dhawi, a retired teacher from Tataouine, and author of several books about Tataouine's local history, shares with me the history of the 1956 massacre in the mountains of Tataouine.

> The French left the South of Tunisia in 1962 and stayed in Bizerte until 1963 [..] And so the young people of Tataouine revolted; they were young people of 18 or 23 years old who went into the mountains. They took up arms against the French. There were massacres in the region. For example, on 29 May 1956, there was a massacre, something like 75 young people who were killed on the Tataouine mountains [...] Unfortunately, we felt a bit on the side lines, the young people of Tataouine revolted against the French, people lost their loved ones here, [there was] pain, in this war against France. But despite that, we didn't have the interest from the state, unfortunately, and we felt marginalised.[148]

The memory of the historical struggle against colonialism, and the reiterated affirmation of this historical role as liberator, is of such power that 'national sovereignty' draws its strength from it. In fact, as Hichem Djaït notes, Bourguiba "governed the country more by a historian's discourse, consisting of recalling the high points and the struggle for national independence,

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[146] See Bras, J.P., (2008) "Introduction : la mémoire, idiome du politique au Maghreb", *L'Année du Maghreb*, (4): 5-26
[147] Wassim, 2021
[148] Dhawi, retired teacher from Tataouine, August 9th, 2021

than by a discourse of a purely legislative or political type."[149] Crucially, the myth of the fighter, the saviour and the liberator provided Bourguiba with a dogmatic right to rule the country. It is telling that on March 19th, 1975, Bourguiba was proclaimed President for life by the National Assembly "in consideration of the eminent services rendered [...] to the Tunisian people, whom he liberated from the yoke of colonialism and of whom he turned into a United Nation and an independent, modern State enjoying the fullness of its sovereignty"[150] Simultaneously, such "hegemony of the one"[151] was also deeply linked with the concept of modernity. Modernity was indeed presented as a unifying value, producing real national cohesion that notably excluded several social groups from the Tunisian political and social scene. Indeed, according to the discourse of Bourguiba, modernity belongs only to the Bourguibist heritage and is necessarily extrinsic to the history of social groups such as the peasantry and the tribes.[152]

The Bourguibist discourse did not miss the opportunity to make this exclusion clear on several occasions. Aymen, an agro-engineer and researcher from Gafsa, tells me that he read through eight books reporting all Bourguiba's public speeches, and he felt shocked by the way tribes were culturally targeted and shamed. He also explains how those political speeches remained embedded in the collective understanding of tribes, crystallising into linguistic discriminations.

> What Bourguiba did is to stigmatise a lot [of the tribes]. Tribe in Arabic is ʿash. And the noun from it is ʿUrrushia, [..] the connotation of the word is very negative. When you say ʿUrrushia, it's to talk about fights between people, or groups of people who are not civilised [..] When people from the North hear about a fight between random people, from the South, for example, they would say it's a thing of ʿurrushia, which is coming from tribes and that kind of identity, which is very uncivilised, very Barbarian. And that's what Bourguiba did. There was huge propaganda on stigmatising the peasants and the tribes.[153]

In time, the social exclusion drawn between modern and retrograde, between Bourguibists and Youssefists, morphed into real geographically-based discrimination, coming to target the regions that were associated with these groups, and defining them as retrograde. These regions

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[149] Djait, "Le métier d'historien en Tunisie", p. 86
[150] New amended Article 40 of the Tunisian Constitution, cited in Zederman, M., "Construction nationale et mémoire collective: islamisme et bourguibisme en Tunisie (1956-2014)
[151] Dakhlia, J.,(2011) *Tunisie. Le pays sans bruit*, (Paris:Actes Sud)
[152] A remark to be made is that another key target of such discourse were the Islamists and religious élites. For a detailed analysis on this regard see Zederman, M., "Construction nationale et mémoire collective: islamisme et bourguibisme en Tunisie (1956-2014)"
[153] Aymen, Activist and Researcher from Gafsa, August 24, 2011

are also the richest areas in natural resources; the very same areas that became extraction sites because they were too 'inconvenient' to invest in at the beginning of the neoliberal era.

To truly understand the correlation between mnemonic and economic dispossession here, it may be useful to rethink of the first wave of dispossession in Tunisia described in chapter 1. At the beginning, the nascent regime's dispossession of lands enabled both a steady accumulation of assets – and therefore the centralisation of economic power – and the political legitimisation of the new power, that was based on the dismantling of tribal affiliations and other political enemies of the state. The cultural discrimination and exclusion consolidated this ambivalent process of dispossession and accumulation. Following Nichol's argument of the "ratchet effect"[154], this first cycle of compounded economic dispossession and cultural discrimination enhanced the conditions for additional rounds of these mechanisms "in a self-reinforcing manner".[155] Hence, the shift towards geographical discrimination builds on the previous economic and mnemonic dispossession, in the sense that it adapts the same mechanisms to a different strategy, which is the accumulation of capital by resource dispossession.

As a matter of fact, almost every interviewee from internal regions expressed the feeling of historical exclusion. Below, I present selected extracts from the interviews carried out in different regions, to show the extent to which this feeling is shared on a wide scale in Tunisia. I spoke with Muhammed, a journalist from Regueb, currently based in Jendouba. He talks about his regional history being "suppressed from national history."[156] He continues, "when I was at school, when Sidi Bouzid was mentioned, it was just in geography class."[157] Likewise, Dhawi criticises the programs of history in schools:

> In Tataouine, if I take the example of history, which is taught to pupils and students in schools and universities, there are no subjects relating to the Tunisian South. So, they don't give any importance to this subject. And yet, for example, we study the history of Italy, but we are not interested in principle. Young people must be attached to their land, to their local history.[158]

These examples seem to be not simply isolated cases, rather the interviewees perceive them as systematic processes of recuperation and erasure.[159] For Wassim this process is

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[154] Nichols, *Theft is Property! Dispossession and Critical Theory,* p.92
[155] *Ibid.*
[156] Muhammed, Journalist from Regueb (Sidi Bouzid), July 29th, 2021
[157] *Ibid.*
[158] Dhawi, 2021
[159] See also Béji, H., (1982) *Désenchantement national. Essai sur la décolonisation*, (Paris:François Maspero)

"systematic and it's very well worked out in a perspective of ignoring, overcoming, trivialising [their local history] making it *malade*, without any depth."[160] Yasser, a young man from Kasserine takes this sentiment a step further, stressing the geographical patterns of these structures.

> The good thing or anything from those interior regions, is automatically recuperated by the authorities and then they change the narratives, so you don't see what happened. [..] Every time, something happens in the interior regions, the state tries to steal that and to push more to the coastal areas.[161]

Second, a rich ensemble of regional stereotypes was consolidated and fed in different trajectories of the discrimination of these regions until today. According to Dhawi (and many others) Bourguiba himself encouraged the regional discrimination. He states, for example, that many of Bourguiba's speeches targeted the South.

> If we go back to the Bourguiba era, he said in a speech that he found the people of the South, as dusty individuals, there is this contempt, in Bourguiba's head, in the government, the Tunisian state the South is a bit of a backward people who can't do anything, they should be left like that.[162]

From the interviews carried out within this project, two main levels of discrimination have emerged: a discrimination between regions, and a discrimination between the interior regions and the authorities. First, the discrimination between regions has manyfold directions, and encompass both the physical and cultural traits of an individual, based on their region of birth. Here, the effects of dispossession and the mechanism of othering are perhaps the most visible. Talking with Wassim, he explains to me how dispossession marked him physically, and how these scars have become a reason to be discriminated against.

> And of course, from the mining towns, we have very specific characteristics, namely the colour of the teeth. Because the degradation of the water quality affects the quality of the teeth, they are always yellow, not white like human beings. And that's an indication if you come from mining towns or not. [...] I was a victim, a victim for the colour of my teeth for example.[163]

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160 Wassim, 2021
161 Yasser, from the Tunisian Water Observatory, from Fyrianah (Sidi Bouzid), July 14th, 2021
162 Dhawi, 2021
163 Wassim, 2021

This discrimination starts from physical traits but encompasses wider aspects of the individual.[164] Most specifically, it tends to undermine their skills, considering them less capable, and stereotyping them into more physical professions such as farmers for men, and caregivers for women. I spoke with Hayet, an environmental activist from Ghardimaou in the Governorate of Jendouba. She describes her personal experience of regional discrimination:

> When I studied in Tunis, they were surprised that I came from a mountainous region and that I was excellent in studies. [...] Between students, people of the same generation as you, they think that you come from a marginalised region, they are surprised if you enter a discussion with them. [..] Even young people who are well educated, let themselves be taken in, they really believe that a Sfaxian is better than a Jendoubi or the other way around. These are social beliefs that have passed from one generation to the other.[165]

The second level of discrimination is between the interior regions and the authorities. Perhaps the most violent representation of this discrimination can be found in the relationship with the police. In my conversation with Yasser, we touch upon the topic of discrimination, and he explains to me that when he moved from Kasserine to Tunis, he immediately felt discriminated against through his relationships with the police.

> The time I feel discriminated against the most is when I am in Tunis with the police. Because in your personal papers, there is written where you were born and where you live. It's a very common thing that the police if they see that, for example, you are coming from Kasserine or other internal cities, they directly ask you "What are you coming to do in Tunis? "So, it's very obvious discrimination against people coming from the outside.[166]

Despite the intensification of this phenomenon in the last decades, regional discrimination in Tunisia is not recognised within the fundamental law against discrimination passed in 2018.[167] Muhammed told me how he felt after the government decided not to include regional discrimination within the law.

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[164] See also IFOP, (2014) "Baromètre sur la perception des discriminations au travail", Vague 7, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_235006.pdf [Accessed 06/01/22]

[165] Hayet, activist from Ghardimaou (Jendouba), August 4th, 2021

[166] Yasser, 2021

[167] Fassatoui, O., "Tunisia's Law against Racial Discrimination: The Mixed Results of a Pioneering Legislation", *Arab Reforme Initiative,* (2021) https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/tunisias-law-against-racial-discrimination-the-mixed-results-of-a-pioneering-legislation/ [Accessed 15/01/22]

In Tunisia, discrimination based on religion is forbidden, skin colour, race etc. I don't know why, but you can always insult me because I come from Sidi Bouzid, [saying to me] that I am an uncivilised barbarian. It's a bit of a stereotype against people. At university, I was treated like that. And that is not forbidden. And that's real discrimination. The point that upset everyone in Tunis, [..] Do you approve of calling someone a terrorist because he comes from Kasserine or someone from Tataouine Bedouin [..] I felt 'ok,' this country is not mine; I stop looking for a place in this country. I consider myself a fair man and I don't consider this my country maybe. I felt a bit like the Martin Luther Dream, you know. Like one of these days, someone from Sidi Bouzid is going to have the right to be respected.[168]

Hence, through the creation of a modernist and Bourguibist myth, which was legitimised by a historiography that applauded Bourguiba for his role in saving the country, the hegemonic class managed to veil its political and economic authoritarianism. In this sense, dispossession of memory and cultural stigmatisation reinstated the economic hierarchy of regions, that saw those regions as *dispossessable*. Therefore, these complementary processes result in a systematic and holistic marginalisation, which ultimately triggered a process of othering of those social groups. This othering is reinstated first by the fact that they are excluded from national history and collective memory. Second, it is consolidated through the structural discrimination against them, that depicts them as naturally subordinate, with fewer skills, and less intelligence (almost as a way to naturalise the right to dispossess them). Although in principle the processes of cultural hegemony were rather political, with time and the capitalist development of the country, those same techniques became embedded into the capitalist system, and re-established the subordination of those social groups. The next chapter will elaborate more on these processes from a bottom-up perspective.

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[168] Muhammed, 2021

Chapter 4. The Memory of Dispossession

No one is going to stay calm without their story. It's a bit like beliefs. You can't sit still without believing in something, whatever it is you believe in.[169]

In the previous chapter, I discussed the top-down processes of dispossession and their multifaceted nature that penetrates various spheres of human life, such as the economic, social, environmental and cultural. These processes create intersectional marginalisation and the "othering" of social groups.

In this chapter, I will discuss how these processes affect the individual from below. It will first detail the way dispossession engenders an identity dislocation within the individual, between their inner perception, and the external projection of their identity. Furthermore, the chapter demonstrates how memory plays an important role in this process. On the one hand, memory stresses the continuity of dispossession, therefore accommodating the individual within a temporal continuity of dispossession and marginalisation. On the other hand, it will also show how memory can play a role in fighting that same subordinate identity.

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[169] Muhammed, 2021

Long-lasting processes of dispossession strike deep psychological cords in individuals and have implications for the development of subjective identities and social groups within society. As also Green highlights, subjective identities develop within the intimate circuits of experience and are constructed through "the subject's own routine practices and face-to-face relations with others."[170] The position of an individual within a system of production or self-reproduction, and the processes entailed in that collocation are often internalised, becoming a crucial element in the development of one's subjective social self. As Bourdieu also points out, the presence of a routine, which is respected by the collective, defines "not only the group's representation of the world but the group itself."[171]

To explain this dynamic, Bourdieu uses the example of farmers. Collocating dispossession within this framework means acknowledging the devastating psychological consequences that it bears beyond the economic realm. Sticking to the case of farmers, land acquires a "symbolic capital,"[172] and confiscating it means stealing the element that holds together the wider ensemble of routines, interactions and heritage that is at the base of the farmer's subjective identity.

In this regard, discussing how dispossession remains within the collective memory of people can help us make sense of the extent to which this trauma has impacted the development of collective subjectivities in Tunisia. In my interview with Aymen, we spent some time discussing the story of the land dispossession his family has experienced. He explains that his family was dispossessed of their land in the outskirts of Gafsa, beginning in the 1960s. His father and uncles started a legal process to reclaim the land some months after the revolution in 2011. The situation remains unresolved to this day. In the interview he tells me that his grandmother remained attached to the thought of regaining her land for her whole life.

> My grandmother was literally every day saying to my father, 'if you don't get back the land, I will never forgive any of you.' It's a trauma for her. [..] When they were dispossessed, she left for the city, and she had no place to go. She lived all her life as a peasant. And then she was in the city trying to survive with five children. Her thought was always oriented to the land because it's the only thing that makes her a person."[173]

[170] Green, "Advanced Capitalist Hegemony and the Significance of Gramsci's Insights: A Restatement", p.177
[171] Bourdieu, P., (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 163
[172] *Ibid.*
[173] Aymen, 2021

The trauma here is double. First, it is conceived as the abrupt need to switch to a different system of social reproduction and production. In other words, being expropriated from a reproductive routine and transferred into a dependency-based system of production. Second, as Aymen points out, the land was also deeply linked to the family's tribal and farmer identity.

> [The land] It's a way of saying that you as a person or as a group of people exist because if you don't have it, you literally just don't exist. [..] It's a matter of dignity, a matter of identity.[174]

Farmers around Tunisia today are still faced with these same traumatic processes, due to the prolonged multi-layered dispossession made by the displacement of water and the scarcity of resources, as described in chapter 2. These economic hurdles obstruct the reproduction of the processes of agrarian self-reproduction. In my interview with Khaled, he made the connection between these obstacles and the threat they represent to the farmers' identity. He tells me, for example, how humiliating it was for his brother to be a farmer without a lamb to sacrifice for Eid al-Adha.[175] In other words, according to him, when the elements that define the farmer's identity are missing, in this case, animals, water, or crops, it is hard to remain attached to that same identity.

> He's a farmer and he doesn't have a sheep. My brother asked my other brother and my mother to help with some money to buy a sheep for 'Eid. [..] (small laugh) imagine a farmer who is asking for money to buy what? To buy a sheep. Like normally you have your own sheep. [..] Today it is not easy to call us farmers, because we are not farmers anymore. That's how we can talk about dispossession [..] we are losing a part of ourselves, a part of our person.[176]

The social group of farmers is one of the categories that have been most exposed to dispossession and where its memory is still very lucid. In this case, the process of subjective identity is compromised by the abrupt demolition of the system that was holding it. People are obliged to reallocate themselves within the new economic system, while facing the loss of a part of their identity and making sense of its intrinsic injustice.

Another story of dispossession imbued in the collective memory is the one of miners. In this case, we do not witness the abrupt confiscation of a resource, rather it is a steady process

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[174] Aymen, 2021
[175] Eid al-Adha is a holiday celebrated within Islam. It honours the courage of Ibrahim to sacrifice his son Ismail, as an act of obedience to God, and is celebrated with the sacrifice of a lamb.
[176] Khaled, 2021

of exploitation that runs across entire generations. As such, the exploitation of phosphate, with its consequential social and environmental dispossession, is embedded within the individual memory to such an extent that it becomes one of the defining elements of the collective subjectivity. The harshness of phosphate exploitation and the experiences of miners remain impressed in the memory of Wassim, who talks about it in these terms:

> As far as shared memory is concerned, I will never forget, for example, the unknown work accidents in the mines, there were hundreds of dead and injured miners who experienced very serious accidents. [..] When I was little, my neighbour had a serious accident at work. [..] and we also have a cousin of mine who died in the mines. These are sparks. They are images tattooed in my personal memory. That is to say. I can't, I can't marginalise all this misery. You see the difficulty of life.[177]

In this case, the memory of dispossession causes the pain to stay with the individual throughout the years. In cities like Redeyef, which emerged specifically as extraction site, every spatial element relates to phosphate. As a result, for Wassim, Redeyef becomes the spatial symbol of a long history of dispossession. Different parts of the city embody a particular side of this memory. He describes this feeling in this manner:

> So, you see the memory, that's what memory is, it's all the streets, [..] the doors of the house in the old mines, the old mines that are closed down because the underground exploitation was stopped in 2001. [..] And the mines, you see there sometimes the jargon used by the old miners. [..] Redeyef is not a town, it's a memory.[178]

Thus, the individual remains trapped in an indefinite historical continuity of dispossession, where the environment around them constitutes a *lieu de mémoire* that continually stresses the state of subordination in which they live. The collision between the subjective self (based on familiar heritage, self-esteem and respect, internal routines, and habits) and the objective imposed self (made of dispossession, cultural stigmatisation, but also a marginalised environment to live in) makes it seemingly impossible to recognise oneself's identity in an externally constructed image which dictates one's destiny. This state of consciousness engenders a complex array of feelings, such as anger, coming from the harshness of having to accept the imposed label of marginalised or dispossessed, as the extracts of Hishem, a young activist from Redeyef, demonstrates:

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[177] Wassim, 2021
[178] *Ibid.*

Life is unbearable, [..] you feel that you don't belong to the place you are in [..] The only thing you can think about is to leave. You hate the state and you also, at some point, you hate yourself and even the idea of living in the situation of marginality and being marginalised.[179]

Likewise, Hayet adopts a language of hate to describe the moment when she first realised her status of marginalisation by visiting the city of Monastir, on the Tunisian coast.

The first time I took the plane from Monastir airport, I really thought I was in Frankfurt on the Main. When I saw the city of Monastir, I hated Bourguiba, I hated everything, I said yes really, we are marginalised. That's it.[180]

Finally, Wassim's words show another feeling, the one of tiredness, of exhaustion, coming from the refusal to desist and the willingness to resist.

You also have a responsibility to this country and its people. I feel the responsibility. [..] to change. And to have the responsibility towards the underprivileged strata of Tunisia is a burden, and I am a human being in the end. At the age of 37, I am still unemployed. [..] I want to live decently in terms of living my life, doing my life, everything freely, I think I have the right to a break.[181]

Thus, capitalist domination is capable of contaminating the subjective self by imposing external identitarian projections on the basis of an individual's economic collocation within the system. We may understand these feelings as the violent negotiation of one's social self, between subjective and external imposed social identity. Hence, as described in chapter 1, the complementary processes of economic and mnemonic dispossession, creates an identity dislocation within the individual, between their inner perception, and the external projection of their identity.

Whilst the dispossession of memory plays a crucial role in such dislocation, a remark to be made is that memory has also appeared as a tool to counter that same process. Several interviewees, indeed, have explained the way that the remembering of a collective memory, that diverges from the imposed Bourguibist myth, has constituted a tool of resistance against processes of subordination.

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[179] Hishem, activist from Redeyef, July 30th, 2021
[180] Hayet, 2021
[181] Wassim, 2021

Wassim, for example, explained to me how through the study of regional history he could reconcile with his region and his identity, and overcome the cultural discrimination against him by unveiling the truth about his region. He states:

> For a Tunisian from Sousse, the South for him is Sfax. After Sfax, he doesn't know. [..] Tozeur, for example, we have an imagination of dates, palm trees and oases. Tataouine, the desert. Except that it's not true. There were civilisations. There was life for thousands of years. [..] I am in a state of reconciliation with my history, with my identity, with my family and with my region [..] I'm in a comfortable state. Why? It's because I really know the history of the country. [..] I can defend myself. It doesn't bother me because I'm sure of myself. And finally, I'm proud.[182]

For Wassim, history offers a way of defending one's own subjective identity against the process of cultural othering. In this sense, the simple act of remembering history becomes a way of resisting. As he points out "To keep the memory is to keep dignity, and to keep resistance, is to keep life, is to hold on to life, to humanity, and to resist. Finally, memory is equivalent to resistance."[183]

Another interesting phenomenon that emerged from some of the interviewees was to recur to the manipulation of history, in order to manufacture collective memories that are perhaps easier to understand. In my conversations with people around the interior regions, I noticed that people in southern and interior regions had a specific popular narrative of their marginalisation and dispossession. Mehdi tries to explain this phenomenon to me. According to him, these regions have conceptualised their dispossession and marginalised state as political punishment. The social groups inhabiting these regions feel they have all been punished by Bourguiba for something they did. From this perspective, the national economic strategies were very much based on this idea of historical punishment. According to Abd el Rasak, a retired teacher in Tataouine, Bourguiba decided not to build industries to produce oil in Tataouine because of his hate for the region. Specifically, he tells me that Bourguiba's nephew was murdered in Tataouine, and according to him, Bourguiba in a public speech asserted "I will make the people of Tataouine cry, as they made me cry". By the same token, Wassim argues that Gafsa was politically punished because of its support for Ben Youssef. Finally, Mounir relates the socio-economic disadvantages of Tataouine to the fact that many Islamists were based there, and that Bourguiba wanted to punish the city. It is beyond the scope of this study to define which of these narratives have historical truth and which ones do not. The goal is to

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[182] *Ibid.*
[183] *Ibid.*

showcase how collective memory can be manipulated and mobilised from below to create alternative bottom-up historical narrative to interpret and explain top-down hegemonic strategies. Memory is interpreted here as a possible tool to decipher the processes that are affecting their individual and collective identity. A way to translate painful and complex political and economic strategies into something understandable, made of feelings, revenge, and humanity. In this manner, memory can support the individual by lessening the effects of top-down processes of hegemony, thereby helping the individual to resist marginalisation. Furthermore, talking with Mehdi, he explains me that such individual acts of mnemonic resistance allow for the creation of real parallel patterns of collective history, that challenge the hegemonic one, whereby individuals are able to better identify themselves:

> The history that is not written down is perpetuated at the family level, at the local level [..] And all this history, especially the question of violence, is very present in this history. Marginalisation is also experienced as a form of violence [..] And this history, these historical facts are expressed in forms of culture from one generation to another. [..] People identify themselves with a common history [..] and this gives a kind of common identity which is marked both by social and economic marginalisation, [..] a history of natural resources, the question of agriculture and peasantry, but also of dispossession at the level of history and at the level of the national narrative.[184]

Hence, the memory of the past together with the consciousness of the present marginalisation become a defining aspect of people's identity. In this manner, dispossession becomes the narrative in which different social and geographical groups identify, and that, become an alternative, counter-hegemonic narrative. The existence of such narrative constitutes an act of resistance *per se*, inasmuch as it challenges the hegemony of the Bourguibist historiography and collective memory.

To conclude, this chapter has shown how processes of holistic dispossession shape individuals' subjectivities from within. The example of farmers epitomises this process. The dispossession of elements such as water or land constitute a threat to the farmer's identity, which is based on routines, habits, experiences and relationships embedded within the activity of farming. Furthermore, looking at these processes through a prism of individual and collective memory makes us see dispossession as a cumulative process, wherein the past and the present continuously overlap.

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[184] Mehdi, 2021

In the case of miners, the chapter has shown how the remnants of past dispossession still live in the dust of phosphate, in the silence of marginalisation, in the repetition of that same dispossession. In this context, memory seems almost like a double-edged sword. The one side is embodied in symbols, natural elements, entire cities, that continuously evoke marginalisation; while the other offers a sense of relief, an alternative truth, that represents the last stronghold of a collective subjectivity that is built from within.

Both the memory of imposition and of resistance become the two facets of shared life experience, that eventually crystallise into a new sort of parallel collective memory. Individuals recognise themselves into this history, whereby new transversal collective identities and frames are forged. In the next chapters, the study will show how this collective rearticulation is at the core of the 2011 mobilisations in Tunisia, where "subordinated subjects can transform themselves into collective actors."[185]

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[185] Tripp, C., (2012) *The Power and the People Paths of Resistance in the Middle East,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) p.132

Chapter 5. The Narrative of The Revolution

In the previous chapter, I discussed how long-lasting historical processes of memory manipulations legitimised processes of dispossession thereby shaping the development of social classes and power distribution in Tunisia. I showed how memory allowed for the constitution of alternative trajectories of social identities, grounded on a past and a present of marginalisation. This chapter will show how these patterns of collective identities can inform the analysis of the 2011 revolution in manyfold directions.

Specifically, following the lines of scholars such as Dobry, Tripp and Chalcraft this chapter argues that the revolution can be interpreted as the recombination and alignment of collective subjectivities in the internal regions, seeking to protest a more fundamental system of exclusion and subordination imposed on them for decades. In this sense, by widening the scope of power, we can also widen the scope of resistance to it. Therefore, these acts are interpreted in this chapter as forms of protest on a more fundamental level, thereby addressing an overarching power structure that alienated and exploited people on a social, economic, political, and cultural level.

The narrative presented here counters the top-down narrative, which depicts the revolution as a uniquely political mobilisation centred in Tunis. This chapter begins by discussing the pillars of the top-down narrative. This narrative operates at the international and national levels. First, Western media and institutions 0framed the revolution as a political act against authoritarianism, considered as an enemy of the free market, which, instead, favoured the development of democracy. Second, the national media and institutions have excluded or downplayed the role of the internal regions in the revolution, obfuscating the social dimension of the revolution, and replicating the same dynamics of dispossession of memory discussed in the previous section.

The second section of this chapter will examine the memory of dispossession, namely the way the interviewees have experienced and made sense of the top-down manipulations of collective memories. Before starting the discussion, we should be wary that this narrative does not want to be presented as a representative account of the revolutionary experience. Whilst this chapter acknowledges wider patterns of unequal power relations, it stresses the need to frame the revolution within internally stratified communities, with different levels of access and exclusion, that inevitably shape the experience of the protest.

5.1 The Construction of a Top-Down Revolution

The escape of Ben Ali in January 2011 marked a historical victory in Tunisian history, albeit the aftermath has shown that the main elements of the old power system are still well entrenched. Indeed, those in power, including the old political administration, as well as the national and international economic elite, have structurally attempted to undermine the process of transitional justice that could ensure radical change in Tunisia. This campaign sought to construct a top-down narrative of the revolution, capable of creating a schism between political and economic demands. According to Ayeb, two main narratives emerged during the 2011 revolution: one political, the other social.[186] The first one framed the revolution as a fundamentally political act against authoritarianism, almost completely disregarding the social dimension and focusing mostly on the urban centres of the country. The second one, however, paid more attention to the social demands of the rural regions. As a result of this schism, social struggles have been depoliticised and transitional justice processes (necessary to address cases of exclusion and marginalisation as systematic results of the Tunisian political-economic model) have been hindered. As such, this dichotomy does not lie in contingency, but is rather, as Laclau and Moufffle state, a "structural effect of the capitalist state"[187] and a way to guarantee its survival against the demands for a radical transformation of the system, as in revolutionary transitions. Abdelrahman shows the dynamics applied in the context of the Egyptian revolution, where he defines the creation of a double political-economic narrative as:

> Central to the elite's tactic of reducing Egypt's revolutionary process to an 'orderly transition to democracy'. Thus, the free market will be protected and neoliberal policies can flourish in return for occasional, limited political representation through elections.[188]

Hanieh takes this notion a step further. Within the literature on the Middle East, he argues, there is a tendency to view authoritarianism as the outcome of the weak presence of capitalism. From this perspective, it is precisely economic freedom that can create favourable conditions for the betterment of democracy. In this manner, not only the political and the economic appear disaggregated — thereby denying the existence of an overarching power

[186] Ayeb, "Social and political geography of the Tunisian revolution: the alfa grass revolution"

[187] Laclau, E. and Mouffe, C., (1985) *Hegemony and socialist strategy: towards a radical democratic politics*, (London: Verso) p. 9

[188] Abdelrahman, M., (2012) "A hierarchy of struggles? The 'economic' and the 'political' in Egypt's revolution", *Review of African Political Economy*, 39, (134): 614-628, p. 626

structure — but also capitalism is idealised as the instrument to attain stable political conditions.[189] These arguments are a useful entry point into our discussion on how the legitimisation of social classes and power relations within memory is interlocked in several ways with economic and political questions. In the Tunisian case, there have been a variety of direct and indirect ways to solidify political power and to allow capital accumulation through the manipulation of memory and the construction of narratives.

As already mentioned, we should distinguish between two different levels of narrative construction. The first one is the international one. Between 2011 and 2012, Western policymakers have endorsed the idea that authoritarianism results from the lack of free market. This assumption largely explains why Western institutions and media have framed the revolution as a fundamentally political act against authoritarianism. Whilst it is true, that on the coast, especially urban centres such as Sfax and Tunis, the protests of the middle class had a strong political identity, demanding human rights, democracy and freedom, the Western media and institutions have presented this revolutionary dimension as a standardised version of the movements. As such, international media coverage focused primarily on the events in the capital, showing images of only Tunis's streets to the public, and avoiding the discussions of any other part of the country, except perhaps for Sidi Bouzid where it all started.[190] This narrative perpetuated the idea that the revolution was an urban-centred movement. Instead of analysing the structural exclusion of individuals engendered by the capitalist system, it identified the exclusion of the country from the free market as the underlying cause of social discontent. The speech that was given by the president of the World Bank, Robert Zoellick, in the World Bank meeting on the Middle East in mid-April 2011 exemplifies this shift of narrative. Referring to Mohammed Bouazizi, he asserts:

> The key point I have also been emphasizing and I emphasized in this speech is that it is not just a question of money. It is a question of policy... keep in mind, the late Mr. Bouazizi was basically driven

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[189] Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: issues of contemporary capitalism in the Middle East,* pp.4-6
[190] For some examples see "Dans la rue comme sur la Toile, la mobilisation des Tunisiens ne faiblit pas", *France24,* (19/01/2011), available online https://www.france24.com/fr/20110119-tunisiens-mobilises-depart-rcd-ben-ali-exil-revolution-tunisien-manifestations-internet-facebook; [Accessed 28/11/21] "Turmoil in Tunisia: As it happened on Friday", *BBC,* (14/01/2011), available online http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/9361546.stm [Accessed 28/11/21; Cohen, L., *"In the Heat of the Tunisian Revolution", The New York Times,* (19/ 01/2011), available online https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/21/opinion/l21tunisia.html [Accessed 28/11/21]; Editorial, "The Guardian view on Tunisia's transition: a success story", *The Guardian,* (26/12/2014), https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/26/guardian-view-tunisia-transition-success-story [Accessed 28/11/21]

to burn himself alive because he was harassed with red tape...one starting point is to quit harassing those people and let them have a chance to start some small businesses.[191]

In other words, Zoellick identified the absence of free-market and capitalism in the country as the reasons for the revolution. By the same token, in May 2011, US President Barack Obama, in a discussion on the development plans in the Middle East, asserted:

America's support for democracy will therefore be based on ensuring financial stability, promoting reform, and integrating competitive markets with each other and the global economy. And we are going to start with Tunisia and Egypt.[192]

Thus, on an international scale, this narrative also enabled the depiction of Western governments and international financial institutions (IFIs) as benevolent actors and allies, willing to support the 'transition' to democracy and to provide the necessary technocratic expertise to construct open economic markets. This narrative was echoed by national media and institutions in Tunisia.

Overall, the creation of a national revolutionary narrative sought to enable the transition and the integration of the old power distribution in the post-revolutionary layout of the country. The economic-political elite, indeed, was strongly aligned with the deposed government, and fiercely opposed any attempt of radical systemic change, including the project of transitional justice overseen by the Truth and Dignity Commission (TDC). [193] There have been several attempts to sabotage the process of the TDC. For example, the Ministries of Interior and Defence refused to cooperate and did not respond to summons, appear in court, and even denied the commission access to the state archives.[194] Media have also played a crucial role in trying to sabotage the process by delegitimising the head of TDC, the political activist Ben Sedrine, while supporting the old elite.

Ridha Kazdaghli, an expert in communication sciences, asserts that "there is a kind of connivance between the media and politics after the revolution, which alerts us to an

[191] World Bank Group, "Remarks at the Opening Press Conference", Robert Zoellick, April 14th, 2011, http://go.worldbank.org/92JDBZXKL0. [Accessed 28/11/21]

[192] White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa," White House Office of the Press Secretary, (19/05/2011), www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa. [Accessed 20/11/21]

[193] Instance Verité et Dignité was an independent tribunal established by law in Tunisia on December 23rd, 2013, and formally launched on June 9th, 2014. The final report was published on June 24th, 2020.

[194] Mullin, C., Trigui, N., & Shahshahani, A., (2019) "Decolonizing Justice in Tunisia: From Transitional Justice to a People's Tribunal", *Monthly Review,* 71, (1): 22-39

unpromising reality. The media is now subject to the dictates of politics."[195] This was the case because, in most media, there had been no real change in the management and editorial teams. The former defenders of the Ben Ali regime became revolutionaries and pioneers of change, but the old system's press did not disappear.[196] Ultimately, in 2017 the "administrative reconciliation law" was adopted, that granted complete impunity to public servants who were implicated in corruption under the regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and allowed them to return to positions of power.

According to Mullin, Trigui and Shahshahani the transitional justice project failed to address that structural dimension.[197] They explain that on a general basis, modern transitional justice is tied to the neoliberal project of governance, a subtle power strategy for maintaining and extending capitalist agendas, and the TDC was no exception. In Tunisia, the process failed to tackle the systemic roots of injustices in Tunisia, underpinned by a capitalist system of accumulation by dispossession. As explained by the authors, the TDC did not acknowledge the systematic underdevelopment of some regions as the underlying cause of local revolts. Instead, they "systematically depoliticizes, atomizes, and appropriates social struggle while deflecting attention from the structural causes of violence and inequality."[198] The treatment of the 2008 revolts in the mining area is emblematic in this case.

As explained in chapters 2 and 3, the revolts in Gafsa were reactions to a century-long process of dispossession, overexploitation, social marginalisation, and environmental injustices. The repression of these movements was brutal. As evidenced by the memories of some interviewees in the previous chapter, it was an event that concerned the whole local population. Nonetheless, according to Mullin, Trigui and Shahshahani, the TDC focused only on sporadic crimes committed by groups of individuals in 2008, rather than treating the oppression endured by the population in Gafsa in its holistic dimension. In this way, it contributed to the depoliticisation of state violence and ignored the role of authoritarianism in facilitating systematic capitalist oppression. They note that "despite the importance of the testimonies presented, this collective, regional experience was transposed into individual suffering."[199] The shift from collective and structural, to individual and contingent, has been a

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[195] See Saanouni, M., (January, 2019)"Huit ans après la Révolution : Quels enjeux pour la presse en Tunisie?", *Agence Anadolu,* available online https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/huit-ans-après-la-révolution-quels-enjeux-pour-la-presse-en-tunisie/1365458 [Accessed 28/11/21]

[196] Abid, N., Aouadi, M., Ben Mohamed, M., et al., (2011) "Le rôle des médias et des TIC dans les 'révolutions arabes': l'exemple de la Tunisie", *Chimères*, (75): 219-235.

[197] Mullin, C., Trigui, N., & Shahshahani, A., "Decolonizing Justice in Tunisia: From Transitional Justice to a People's Tribunal" p.25

[198] *Ibid.*

[199] *Ibid.*

leitmotif of the work of the TDC and has ultimately allowed it to direct attention away from the role of neoliberal and capitalist structures in perpetuating dispossession and marginalisation that triggered the protest.

In sum, the top-down narrative of the revolution is grounded on a dislocation between political and economic spheres. This narrative was built both on national and international levels. Internationally, the narrative offered by Western policymakers is based on the assumption that authoritarianism emerges from the lack of capitalism. Hence, the revolution was depicted as a fundamentally political act, disregarding the economic roots of inequalities and injustices. The media followed this direction, mostly covering the events that occurred in Tunis, more political in nature, and avoiding the discussion of what was happening in internal regions. Nationally, the attempts to boycott the transitional justice process from the political elite, together with the negative media coverage on the TDC, have certainly limited the efficacity of the TDC. One example was the adoption of the 2017 reconciliation law, which has managed to reintegrate the old political elite in positions of power. Furthermore, by atomising events of protests and violence, the TDC has failed to acknowledge and address more systematic structures of injustices, notably of a capitalist matrix. The result of this failure was the maintenance of the systematically uneven distribution of power among social and regional groups that favoured the survival of capitalist economic structures. The next section will analyse how top-down memory manipulations were crucial to developing these narratives.

5.2 The Mobilisation of Collective Subjectivities

Chapters 3 and 4 showed how the collective memories related to dispossession and marginalisation developed into new traits of identity, thereby enabling the emergence of new lines of collective belonging. I argue that it is within the fabric of this sense of belonging, that social alliances arose in the context of the revolution. Specifically, in 2011 an ensemble of collective memory identitarian traits, social demands, and feelings of resentment bind together the movement and clearly inform the goals and demands of the mobilisations. In these terms, I argue that the revolts in 2011 represent the peak of a process of othering that involved several social and geographical groups. Hence, different atomised local fights joined forces to contest the wide overarching system of inclusion and exclusion on which their social subordination was fabricated. The system is meant here as all the different expressions of power within the country, including cultural hegemony, political tyranny, and capitalist structures of exploitation. As Tripp points out:

> The protests and the attacks on symbols of power were acts of resistance against the systems of inclusion and closure that had denied most of the population the chance to decide their own lives. This is a politics of contention on a more fundamental scale. It goes to the heart of a system of power over others, its principles and the ways that people experience it.[200]

Framing the revolution through these lenses gives space for a more organic conception of power, where the political arrangement of the country and the economic system are directly reflective of each other. Following Hanieh's argument, the political authoritarian guise is nothing but "a particular form of appearance of capitalism in the Middle East context."[201] Indeed, as Hanieh points out, the consolidation of dictatorships and authoritarian regimes was necessary to allow neoliberal and capitalist processes to take place, and specifically to fight any kind of resistance against the economic liberalisation. In Tunisia, the coming to power of Ben Ali in a 1987 coup marked the real commencement of neoliberalism. Indeed, foreign governments across Europe and the United States backed his long rule in large part for this reason.

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[200] Tripp, *The Power and the People Paths of Resistance in the Middle East,* p.4
[201] Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt, issues of contemporary capitalism in the Middle East,* p. 9

Although the mainstream media have primarily focused on the political dimension of the revolution in Tunis, Tunisian villages and towns of all sizes across the country have protested in the name of a collective cause against the representations of a system grounded in exclusion. Therefore, the first step towards understanding the complexity of the revolution and its demands is to acknowledge the existence of a plurality of local revolutions outside the big cities, that are embedded within different stories of exploitation, and different intensities of exclusion. As Abd el Rasak told me in his interview, Tunisia is characterised by a sharp "inequality of exclusion".[202] While the patterns of power dynamics are after all similar, their local articulations and intensities differ greatly. As a result, the scope of demands, and the beliefs underpinning the movement also vary. In this sense, these revolts contested injustice at different depths. The diversity in depths leads to different nuances in social demands. I had an interview with Gaddour, an agronomic engineer coming from Regueb, and thinking of his words, made me think of the revolution almost as an attempt to draw attention to the existence of their community and to win the recognition of their dignity. He says "So for me, the first step is to convince the state that we are human. We are searching to prove our humanity to the State"[203] Gaddour explains that in Sidi Bouzid, demands were concerning roads, hospitals, schools. Basic human needs, so basic, that Gaddour struggles to conceptualise them as even human rights.

> These demands didn't exist in Tunis and the big cities. For example, hospitals, electricity, drinking water, or access to schools. People need to walk 5 kilometres from the mountains to find the first school or 17 kilometres to find the first hospital. [..] Here people going to the hospital die on the road before reaching the hospitals. [..] These things are not human rights. The state treats us as if we are not human. [..] In Europe, this can be normal, but for us, it's a luxurious way of life.[204]

Accordingly, the slogans for freedom and democracy were far away. Before then, there was the urgency to create liveable conditions, to invalidate the system that othered those communities. Muhammed's words are quite representative of this difference in depths. Specifically, he describes the way he related the revolutionary slogans at the time.

> The first slogans I started to say were freedom and dignity. But the word freedom, for me, had no meaning. At the moment, honestly, I couldn't see it. It was something that didn't exist for me. I'm free,

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[202] Abd El Rasak, 2021
[203] Gaddour, Agronomic Engineer, from Regueb. March 13th, 2021
[204] *Ibid.*

I can go to a café or a restaurant. That was freedom for me. So, I don't have any trouble with freedom, [..] It was not freedom or a human rights thing.[205]

In most of the interviewees, the revolution was conceptualised as a revolt against a system that had denied them respect, and dignity, before anything else. Perhaps one of the most crucial aspects of respect was the everyday violating practices of authorities, mainly police, that included humiliation, abuse, violence, and offences. From the interviews carried out, the police treatment and discrimination recur as one of the central elements that triggered the 2011 mobilisations. It was for many the most real and painful expression of that lack of human respect. The repression of movements from 2008 to 2010, described in chapter 2, was the final blow that created flashes of recognition around the country, thereby catalysing a strong resentment towards the brutal exercise of police power. Muhammed, for example, considers the revolt against the police as the first reason to protest.

> The whole revolution for me was two factors. [The first was] to protest against all the police oppression. I had problems with the police. There were times when I was a bit tortured. For me, that was my opportunity to take a stone and throw it at the police. So, for me, that was the first reason to be there.[206]

The centrality of the police violence is demonstrated also by the fact that the memories connected with police were in many cases the first to be brought up in the conversation, the ones that the interviewees remembered more vividly. The interview with Yasser is a good example of this phenomenon. At the question "When you think of the revolution, what memories come to your mind?", he gives me this answer:

> The main thing I remember is when in Firyanah they burnt the police station. The first thing they did in the revolution in Firyanah was to burn that police station. Even if there were a lot of other institutions that represent the state, they didn't touch it, but they went directly to the police station. They asked all the people there, all the policemen who were in the station to remove their uniforms and to leave the police station and leave their uniforms inside. [..] It's the main memory and the thing I wished would happen every day, burning a police station.[207]

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[205] Muhamed, 2021
[206] *Ibid.*
[207] Yasser, 2021

Beyond this mistreatment by the police, the concept of dignity was mobilised in a wider sense, encompassing various aspects of social justice. Dignity was often linked to the right to employment. Throughout the interviews, the lack of opportunities is often translated into another type of social exclusion between those who are connected with the network of power, and those — the vast majority of the citizens — who had to suffer through unemployment and systematic precarity. This situation hit Youssef particularly hard. He has committed most of his life to his education, yet finds himself working in a cafe in his city of birth, Ben Guardane.

Ben Guardane is one of the furthest cities from the capital geographically, and according to Youssef, also socially. It is a city at the border between Libya and Tunisia, in the region of Mededine, where the social and economic marginalisation leaves people with few choices in terms of self-sustenance. As explained in chapter 2, the main activity is indeed informal trade between Libya and Tunisia, especially of fuels.[208] Youssef talks about this situation in these terms:

> People here, at some point people felt so hopeless [..] if it wasn't for Libya, people would never have other jobs [..] I've been telling you that 90% of the people here work mainly on the Libyan borders. If this closes, I can tell you that 90% of the families here would starve, because we are neglected from the Tunisian state, we don't have other jobs.[209]

Overall, the interviews carried out show how the revolution put forward a mosaic of demands that encompassed a wider and deeper human revindication, related to respect, dignity, and social justice. This bottom-up perspective counters the top-down narrative of the revolution. In my interview with Mehdi, he also highlights this divergence of narratives.

> In a way, [there is] a multitude of visions of the revolutionary process. This romantic vision of what's going on about the role of the middle classes in society, that's a bit romantic and a bit 'Post Card.' In fact, there is an appropriation. To talk about renovating Tunisia, the elections, civil society, the Tunisian middle classes, etc. This is perhaps dedicated to foreign interlocutors. If I may, that is a simple postcard. But on the other hand, there is this struggle. There are social movements, for example. [..] It is not a question of elections only or of political institutions only, but much more important. It is a question of social justice. A balance of power in favour of a social citizenship, if we can say dignity. The question of access to rights and especially to social rights, economic rights, health, education, employment, etc.[210]

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[208] For a more detailed study of informal trade between Tunisia and Libya, including the case of Ben Guardane, see Gallien, M., (2020) "Smugglers and States: Illegal Trade in the Political Settlements of North Africa" (PhD Dissertation, London School of Economics)

[209] Youssef, unemployed graduated from Ben Guardane, August 6th, 2021

[210] Mehdi, 2021

The discrepancy between the two narratives is also shown by the feelings of interviewees concerning the outcomes of the revolution. Although Tunisia made progress concerning civic and political rights, people experienced it as a bitter victory. Ahmed, for example, has a very precise idea of what a revolution means, but it does not correspond to what happened with the mobilisations in 2011:

> What happened between 17 December 2010 and 14 January 2011. It was a revolutionary act. It was a revolution. But a revolution, by definition, changes the functioning of the state. [..] We have to talk about a change in the system. Except that in Tunisia, there was not a change of the system. There was a change of the head of the system that had escaped the day before in January.[211]

Likewise, based on what he perceives as the goals of the revolution, Yasser does not feel that this process has yet ended.

> The revolution will be finished when the goals of the revolution are fulfilled. Because the revolution happened to fulfil some goals, and we are waiting, and we are still in the process of realising those goals.[212]

To conclude, the chapter has framed the revolution within a wider process of subordination and alienation, that contemplated different levels of power exercise, and respected the heterogeneity and incoherency of its demands. This has allowed us to understand the holistic dimension of the revolution, which is one against a wider system of power.

In Chalcraft's words, the revolution is presented here as a revolt "to overcome subordination and fragmentation."[213] In this way, a more complex narrative emerges that has the power to counter the top-down one; and thus, to unmask the root causes of injustices in Tunisia, connected with an overarching system of power grounded in economic exploitation and subordination.

Undoubtedly, the chain of events triggered by dispossession has created a pattern of identitarian traits, and collective memories. Nevertheless, this chapter has stressed how the local and even personal articulations of those demands, ideas and identities are inherently heterogeneous and should be studied not trying to overcome that feature, but rather to valorise

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[211] Ahmed, 2021
[212] Yasser, 2021
[213] Chalcraft, J., *Popular politics in the making of the modern Middle East,* p.32

it. Hence, acknowledging the geographical, temporal, and social diversity of the Tunisian cycle of mobilisations can let a truthful and inclusive narrative of the revolution emerge.

Chapter 6. The Role of Memory in the 2011 Revolution

The previous chapter has shown that the revolution should be understood as the expression of a long-lasting and holistic exclusion and marginalisation of geographical and social groups. Although the protest managed to mobilise large groups within society, it did not manage to break the pattern of exclusion and build a more inclusive system.

This chapter argues that, in the context of the 2011 revolution, top-down manoeuvres of selective remembering have consolidated the manufacturing of the top-down narrative concerning the revolution, which, in turn, was instrumental to maintaining the same economic and political power arrangement of the country. The section argues that the manipulation of memory enabled political framings of the revolution that constructed radical revolutionary change as unnecessary. Specifically, the chapter explains how the top-down political narrative is the result of the exclusion of the struggles in the interior regions from the picture. By focusing mainly on the urban centres' struggles and separating political and social struggles, the top-down narrative of the revolution managed to depoliticise and atomised the struggles in the margins of the country. Thus, it also denied the existence of an overarching power system that has been developing throughout the Bourguiba and Bel Ali regime, thereby contributing to the preserve the old political and economic power distribution in the post-revolution era.

The first section will analyse the *dispossession of memory* from the top, hence the way the manipulation of collective memory denied the agency of subaltern social groups while serving socio-economic interests. Then, the second section will discuss the *memory of dispossession*, namely the ways the interviewees have experienced, interpreted and reacted to the top-down manipulations of collective memories. In order to do this, the section will draw on the interviews carried out to offer a perspective of the revolution from below. The section will show how this is inscribed into the wider processes of othering against these regions, and how it is able to preserve the necessary structures of power to maintain the subordination.

6.1 The Dispossession of Revolt

The previous chapter has shown how the construction of a specific top-down narrative was instrumental to allow the maintenance of the pre-revolutionary political and economic system of power. This chapter will show how collective memory manipulations fundamentally underlined the construction of the top-down narrative. Specifically, collective memory was manipulated by the following two logics: the exclusion of key geographical areas and social groups from the revolutionary memory, and the supplantation into the narrative of symbols and discourses that could better position the old elite *vis a vis* the new national layout.

To truly understand the memory exclusion, the chapter builds upon the answers given by the interviewees concerning how they think their revolutionary memory was treated in the aftermath of 2011. Overall, the interviewees view the development of a national revolutionary narrative as a systematic process of exclusion towards their collective memory and role.

In respect to the revolution, several details added or excluded from the narrative made it possible to downplay the role of the interior regions in the revolution. On the one hand, the urban political articulations of the movement were emphasised. On the other hand, the revolutionary memories coming from the internal regions were erased. In doing so, the protests targeting the social and economic side of the system were disconnected from the main urban movements, thereby downplaying the structural processes of dispossession and marginalisation that were at the crux of the revolution.

One of the manipulations that epitomise this exclusion is the date chosen by the authorities to commemorate the beginning of the revolution. At the beginning of May, I had several conversations with Sghaier, an engineer and a specialist in the history of uneven regional development in Tunisia. He is the author of one of the most in-depth analyses on the topic, namely the book *Internal Colonialism and Uneven Development. The Example of the system of marginalisation in Tunisia*.[214] In one of our conversations, he explains to me how the decision to commemorate the revolution on the 14th of January, is a clear attempt to invalidate the December mobilisations in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine.

> The state of Tunisia decided to pick the date of 14 January, the date that Ben Ali left the country. They did not take the day of 17th December. [..] That means there is no acceptance to say that some major events can take place in marginalised regions, and this affects memory. [..] When you talk with

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[214] Sghaier, S., (2019) ، منظومة 'التهميش' في تونس الاستعمار الداخلي والتنمية غير المتكافئة (Tunis: Arabic Edition)

someone, from Kasserine, or Sidi Bouzid they will feel frustrated about this. For a long time, they have been asking to have a date of the revolution on the 17th of December, not the 14th of January.[215]

He continues in the same direction, explaining how the language used to describe the revolution in the top-down narrative has contributed to the exclusion of the internal regions. He refers particularly to the decision to name the mobilisations as "jasmine revolution", pointing out how the concept of jasmine implicitly creates misleading associations.

> They invented the jasmine revolution. This is just to cover, to bring the revolution away from Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, because there is no jasmine at all [in the interior regions], jasmine does exist near the system, on the coast. The reference is given to be associated with the central power.[216]

Another case of exclusion is the one of Gafsa in 2008. To some extent, Gafsa follows the same dynamic of memory manipulation as Sidi Bouzid, grounded on the temporal exclusivity of the revolution. Asserting that the Tunisian revolution started on the 14th of January, means excluding from the narrative everything before that, including the movements of three years before. A good example of this exclusion is the decision to not consider the people who died in the 2008 protests as martyrs of the revolution. As explained in the previous chapter, the TDC did not manage to create a solid connection between the violence endured by the mining basin and the wider pattern of state violence events, including the ones of 2011. The decision did not stay unchallenged. The area had started a strong movement for the recognition of the 2008 martyrs, supported by the UGTT. In the beginning, the movement obtained wide consent and support from civil society and the population. However, the movement has been fading throughout the last years. Wassim notices how this movement is slowly forgotten and blames the authorities for willingly letting such foundational moments of Tunisian modern history fade into oblivion.

> There was a whole protest movement to include the 2008 martyrs in a list of official martyrs of the revolution. And they didn't add those names. I think it's an act of erasing memory, diminishing memory, it's a representative example. The 2008 movements were the first step towards the revolution. And if we believe in accumulation, in a so-called cumulative history, to arrive at the right moment of the revolution, the mining basin was the first step, the first dream. [..] The ceremonies celebrate the events

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[215] Sghaier, Author of *Internal Colonialism and Uneven Development. The Example of the system of marginalisation in Tunisia*, April 17th, 2021
[216] *Ibid.*

of 2008 on 6 June each year. [..] At the time there were a hundred people who moved there [to the cemetery]. I saw photos this year or last year, we can count 10 people.[217]

Likewise, Hishem associates this decision as an attempt to exclude the revolutionary history of Gafsa from the official narrative.

> There's no recognition of what happened in 2008 in Redeyef. The general discourse the state adopts is only about 2010-2011, and it excluded completely what happened in 2008, even if there were also martyrs in that period, people who were killed by the police, they weren't recognised as martyrs. [..] For me, it's a very clear exclusion from the revolutionary process.[218]

Narrowing down the revolutionary scope to January 2011 in Tunis, and excluding from the narrative the internal regions and their longer-term trajectory of resistance, allowed for a reinterpretation of the demands at the core of the revolution. As stated already, not talking about the rural revolution on the margins obscures the capitalist truths behind the revolution.

In August I spoke with Hammadi, a young journalist from Nawaat, particularly fond of the thematic of collective memory. According to him, ignoring one revolutionary version, while continuously repeating the other, encouraged social amnesia regarding the real who's and why's behind the revolution. First, he maintains that, by excluding the places where the revolution started, the top-down narrative has erased the protagonists of the movement.

> All the figures of the revolution, everyone, people who were in prison, people who were militants, we don't see them. And that's how the change even of the political or media elite has influenced a lot, people have forgotten who the revolutionary is. Now we don't know who made the revolution, who the revolutionary figure was.[219]

Second, he argues that the media and political elite together have distorted the issue of the real why's underpinning the revolution, through acts and discourses that could establish subtle connections between the old regime and the revolution, smoothing their political transition. The example he offers is the decision of Beji Caid Essebsi to move the statue of Bourguiba to the city centre of Tunisia. He points out:

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[217] Wassim, 2021
[218] Hishem, 2021
[219] Hammadi, Journalist from Jebeniana (Sfax), July 19th, 2021

The old regime becomes part of the narrative of the revolution, how? by attacking the revolutionary memory. [..] And imposing symbols of the memory of the events in the collective memory that is related to the old regime and the revolution. I give an example. Béji Caïd Essebsi, when he was elected president of the state, he brought the statue of Bourguiba to the heart of the capital. And that was the narrative as if Béji Caïd Essebsi had freed the statue of Bourguiba who had been excluded by Ben Ali who had removed him from the capital, and that was as if the revolution had given Bourguiba's status its value, had enhanced Bourguiba. There, the question of memory. Essebsi injected Bourguiba into the narrative of the revolution, it created a relationship between Bourguiba and the revolution, and people forgot that the revolution was even against the Bourguiba regime, not only against Ben Ali.[220]

Bringing the statue of Bourguiba to the centre of Tunis symbolically contradicts the reality of the existence of an overarching, structural system of power that has been consolidating in a historical continuity from French colonialism, to Bourguiba, until Ben Ali. Instead, saving Bourguiba means depicting the regime imposed by Ben Ali as one unfortunate and isolated case of authoritarianism. Additionally, this act invalidates the processes of economic dispossession and cultural stigmatisation that started precisely with Bourguiba, thereby implicitly discrediting the process of othering and marginalisation endured by the interior regions and taking these processes out of the revolution's demands. In turn, denying the existence of such a system corresponds to absolving the old elite from their role in perpetuating that same system, thereby legitimising their integration into a new democratic country. To quote Muhammed:

It's a kind of transition where people, all the people who worked under Ben Ali, who benefited from the Ben Ali regime, have to find a way to move to the new Tunisia. So, they did this through this narrative, in this narrative, the only bad one is Ben Ali, and all the rest, the leader of the resignation who whitewashes Ben Ali on 13 January is a national hero. [..] All those groups made the transition through that.[221]

To consolidate the crosscut between memory and socio-economic processes, it is important to stress how the dynamics of collective memory manipulation directly served the interests of capitalist processes. The exclusion of the memories of the internal region from the main narrative allowed to deflect the attention from those processes, thereby allowing their survival. Additionally, by dispossessing the agency of the enemies of the system and inducing a social forgetting of their demands, the manipulation of memory once again entrenched the

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[220] *Ibid.*
[221] Muhammed, 2021

process of othering and exclusion of the interior regions, thereby safeguarding the social hierarchy needed for the accumulation of capital. As seen in chapter 4, the legitimacy of the subordinate relationship — constituted by one agent and one victim of dispossession — is consolidated by a project of cultural hegemony, that structurally downplays or erases the agency and the role of the subaltern classes in the country's history.

In a way, there is a strong historical continuity with the dynamics employed by Bourguiba and the Neo-Destour party regarding the national liberation narrative. Yasser is the one who first makes me notice this continuity. He clearly recognises the role that memory's erasure plays in the maintenance of a social and political subordinate relations between two parties, and he recognises the dynamics applied to the revolution identical to the ones used by Bourguiba at the outset of the independent state.

> If you erase each time those kinds of memories, you keep the margins as the margins. Is like removing and erasing those kinds of memories which could be like profiting for the margins. So, the state tries to remove them from the stories to keep them as marginalised. [..] Now for example the revolution doesn't have that much effect because it's 10 years after the revolution. [..] But, the point is that for example, in 13 or 14 years from now, [..] it will be the narrative and it will affect the people in all of Tunisia. They will just have the part that describes that revolution, that the state wants them to know. I come back to the official narrative created around Bourguiba the saviour [..] Back then, in the 40s-50s, people were aware of what really happened and had their version. But now the narrative of the state became the only official version. This is happening now with the revolution.[222]

To conclude the discussion of the two-down memory dynamics in the revolutionary context, we can assert that collective memory and its manipulation has been experienced as having an instrumental role in enabling the construction of a narrative that served political and economic interests. The social amnesia and exclusion of marginal areas have "served to limit who is going to speak for the revolution",[223] by delegitimising the power and the agency of the dispossessed and reiterating the social hierarchy of the citizenry.

Furthermore, the exclusion of the interior regions, where the demands addressed systematic and long-standing processes of exploitation and dispossession, allowed the regime to ignore the existence of an overarching structure of power, that combined neoliberal violence, together with a historical continuity of authoritarianism from Bourguiba to Ben Ali. In this way, the problem of capitalism is conceptualised away and the power structure is

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[222] Yasser, 2021
[223] Muhammed, 2021

disaggregated. Thus, Ben Ali becomes the only usurper and the structure within which he was embedded can be forgotten. This conceptual manoeuvre is a central aspect of the strategy that smoothed the transition of the old administration into the new political system, along with the maintenance of the economic capitalist organisation of the country, based on exclusion and structural dispossession.

6.2 The Memory of Dispossession: the 2011 Case

To conclude the discussion on the revolution, it is important to understand how the revolution and its consequential memory dispossession has been remembered, processed and how it affects the re-articulation of power and resistance in the country. After all, the revolution has been one of the strongest collective popular ambitions and actions for years. When achieved, it created a boost of hope, faith, and excitement. When it ended, without the hoped-for achievements, it turned into a collective shock. The reactions vary from one interviewee to another. Many of them decided to distance themselves from social and political activism, others coped with this shock by unconsciously removing revolutionary memories from their minds, others by simply avoiding recalling the event. Muhammed, for example, has inadvertently lost the memories connected to the revolution:

> Now I've lost all my memories, there's not much left. I remember, there was police repression. There was solidarity between everybody [..] But there's not much left in my head. [..] Honestly, it's like [if] someone is telling me about the revolution. It's like I'm not there. That's kind of it, I think I remember things that happened way earlier [in my life]. I don't know, about games we played in high school, these things, I remember that a lot more in detail than the revolution.[224]

Wassim, on the other hand, still has his memories about the revolution, but he prefers not to recall them, since also for him, those are painful memories:

> I kind of left political work, you know. In 2011, after the elections and after the big defeat of the Tunisian left, I gave up, that's also part of my memory. But a memory that I don't like. That's it. It's the part of my memory that I don't like, and I don't love it and I don't want to share it. It was the defeat, the defeat after all. Besides that, I don't know, I wish the best for Tunisia. You see, I am a bit optimistic and sometimes I fall into pessimism. I even had the desire to quit [civil society]. […] I have no more hope.[225]

Throughout the conversations, I noticed that people would adopt a linguistic register related to pain, in some cases even of trauma, when talking about the revolution. To be more precise, I could recognise four different levels of pain. First, the event per se constitutes a

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[224] *Ibid.*
[225] Wassim, 2021

daunting thought in relation to the harsh memories of violence, police repression, and tense political climate, especially before January 2011. Wassim's memories of the conditions of Redeyef in 2008 are a good example of how the revolution can somehow mark people's memories through images of violence and desolation.

> At the time we were isolated in Redeyef, bombed by police forces, [you had] the feeling of [being a] victim because it was very difficult. I still remember the last images. You see a city, a burnt city, you see black. Black is the colour of the police officers' clothes, and then the army arrived with their battalion, with their equipment. It was a bit difficult, you know. [226]

The second layer of pain is related to the disillusionment that invaded the spirits after the revolution. The after-revolution landscape made of unchanged systems of power, and ongoing social injustices compel individuals to face the defeat of a movement that sacrificed the years, feelings, energies, and lives of an entire population. Hammadi, for example, talks of a "collective depression", and "national trauma" to refer to the extent to which this disillusionment hit the collectivity.

> The people gave everything for the revolution, it created a big disappointment. It's a disappointment that is almost a continuation of historical disappointments. Everyone here gave everything for the revolution. Time, money, years of their lives. And after the revolution, nothing was given. [..] But I think it's a collective depression.[227]

The third layer of pain is associated with the dispossession of that same "trauma". Going back to chapter 5, the top-down memory manipulations appeared to create dispossession of agency, that undermines the value of the collectivities' action. The manipulation of the revolutionary memory is interpreted as reappropriation or in Muhammed's words, "a theft" of the collective memories. The collective sacrifices, the deep act of courage in contesting an unjust system, the martyrs, and the wounded of the revolution, all of this has been erased, together with the unsuccessful demands, whilst the merits have been transposed to a different social class. Muhammed comments on his feelings related to the construction of the top-down narrative based on the events in the capital. This is one of the cases where the violence of memory dispossession and appropriation, is most visible, together with the way it shapes individual perceptions. Muhammed felt disappointed and hurt by the manipulation of the

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[226] *Ibid.*
[227] Hammadi, 2021

revolutionary narrative, so much so that he felt disgusted by mere mentions of the word revolution:

> At the time, in 2011, I remember how I wanted to shoot some videos. I had a laptop, I didn't have a phone with a good camera, so I brought my computer with me. And now when I find full HD pictures I wonder about these people. You know you were on the street, you took some nice pictures. And then you used all your beautiful pictures to crush all the other regions, [the revolution] happened in Tunis and that's the story. [..] I think it was stolen from us [..] all we kept was the revolution in front of the cameras, it's a bit of everything that tells the story around the revolution are the people of Tunis. Not even from the working-class areas of Tunis, but the closed circles of international cooperation, the TV activists; and I'm so disgusted by it that every time I hear the word revolution I *bleah*. [vomiting gesture] The revolution was robbed by some cops and that's kind of it.[228]

He lingers on this point, trying to make me visualise the way his revolution has been appropriated by different social groups, with different demands.

> It's two levels because, I mean, we, in the street, there is the risk, you who are at home you wait for the moment when you think that things can go well in front of your heater there, you have an appointment with the European media. You know, we smelled smoke until two months after everything, the walls were black, until two months after the revolution. And I thought it was a bit unfair. Imagine all the people who said 'Ah yes, it was for the freedom in the sense of expressing oneself, organising oneself, freedom of association' I was imagining it, like an image of a good person under his duvet during the winter. [..] I run and you take the medal. That's a bit like it.[229]

Furthermore, a last level of pain is connected with the vacuum of recognition that the dispossession of memory creates by erasing the existence of the pain itself. As symptoms without a diagnosis, the shock of the revolution is collective, yet invisible, undiscussable, hidden behind the political success of the country. Acknowledging that pain would mean putting in discussion those narratives that empowered the elite and safeguarded the economic paradigm of dispossession on which the country is grounded. Thus, the violence, and harshness of the revolution, systematically neglected and supplanted by a rather bourgeois revolution, rubs salt in the open wound of the people and heightens the feeling of exclusion, defeat, and disappointment. In this context, Hammadi adopts a language of "collective trauma" to talk

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[228] Muhammed, 2021
[229] *Ibid*.

about the revolution, of a society that perhaps has not yet discovered how to live in the disappointment of the revolution:

> Trauma problems can be found all over Tunisia. Because the revolution has created traumas when the fact that nothing has changed for ten years, is a trauma, it is a disappointment. [..] We can't talk about an equilibrium which is what is clear, that society is unbalanced. That's why we talked about disappointment, collective disappointment, collective depression. Problems like irregular and serious migration, suicide attempts. Symptoms of a society that is unbalanced and that is the result of 10 years of revolution. Because people have lived through these moments, they have lived through the question of change, they really believed in change, they expected a lot of change, but nothing has changed.[230]

Looking at this last aspect of trauma, we could say that the mechanism in place resembles what Nichols defines as the recursive structure of dispossession. Reframing his argument, we could say here that the dispossession of memory is a process where collective memories are transferred and shaped, and then retroactively attributed to different social groups. What it comes to be is not property, as in the case of Nichols, but a counternarrative, a sense of ownership of memories and indirect internal agency. Through these lenses, the experience of dispossession is the expression of the clash between history and memory.

The corollary of this argument is that also within trauma, there is resistance, expressed through the attachment to a counter-memory. Parallel to the discussion in chapter 3, also here, all the interviewees were characterised by the presence of a counternarrative, of an attempt to resist the top-down manipulations of memory. Hammadi specifically describes the dual role memory plays, between offering a hegemonic means of control, and a tool to push forwards truthful and bottom-up narratives.

> The conclusion is that it is true that the question of memory has been recuperated by the old regime. But the question of memory is also still there. The dynamo to create new revolutionaries or the thinking of the revolution or the narrative of the revolution remains. Memory plays both roles. It is true that for the old regime it is stronger since they have a lot of means and access, but it also plays the counterpoint, one day the counterpropaganda. One day also, the question of the revolution.[231]

Subjective memories enable individuals to remain still in their political position, through withdrawing and holding to individual memories and agency. Indeed, the unyielding

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[230] Hammadi, 2021
[231] *Ibid.*

faith of the interviewees in their own narrative appears to equip them with the capacity to lucidly criticise and reject the top-down narrative, and ultimately to recognise the difference between truth and exercise of power. In the case of Tunisia, there is a clear determination to cling to those memories and fabricate new histories from below that can resist the hegemonic narrative. In this way, memory represents once again an intimate, yet collective alternative locus of political and cultural contestation to rescue people and their agency from the neglect of chroniclers of the elites. Wassim's way of employing memory as an ally is a striking example of the political potential of the memory, even of defeat:

> Except that, as always, and I guarantee you this, optimism comes from memory. You see, when you go back into the forgotten pages of Tunisian history, you discover. The Tunisian people in all its depths, the great resistances, the great victories and even the great defeats. This is because defeat is also part of the memory. So, I hold hope.[232]

To conclude, this chapter has shown the far-reaching potential for employing memory in analysis of the 2011 revolution. First, the chapter has shown how the top-down mobilisation of memory has once again legitimised the uneven distribution of power in the country. Indeed, by excluding the memories concerning the internal regions within the revolution narrative, the hegemonic power is able to undermine the agency of those social groups, while ignoring the root causes that have informed the mobilisation, mostly visible in those areas. As a result, a top-down narrative grounded on the political-economic dislocation, and the disaggregation of power is conceived as a strategy to safeguard the political and economic power layout of the country.

Second, by analysing the way top-down manipulations of memory and construction of narratives are perceived and socialised, we are able to identify hidden patterns of resistance. In this case, resistance is represented by the willingness and the strength with which the interviewees hold onto their narrative from below, and therefore are able to reject a top-down imposed narrative. To borrow from Tripp, these forms of resistance:

> It forms part of the narratives of everyday life that give meaning to encounters with power. It is for this reason that the kinds of practices described as forms of 'everyday resistance' cannot be dismissed as of little relevance to larger, more visible resistance projects. Whether or not they are intended to contribute

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[232] Wassim, 2021

to such a larger project, their very existence, as the accepted everyday practices of the marginalized and excluded, can prepare the ground in ways that the authorities are unable to detect.[233]

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[233] Tripp, *The Power and the People Paths of Resistance in the Middle East,* p.6

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined the role of memory in maintaining and challenging processes of economic dispossession in Tunisia. It has done so through the analysis of both the top-down and the bottom-up mobilisation of memory. As such, this work has advocated for the need to broaden the economic scope of dispossession to encompass wider mechanisms of capitalist subordination, which are perpetuated within the realm of memory.

First, the study has focused on the consequential social dimension of economic dispossession, which functionally divides the populations in a way that fabricates "others". In other words, by carrying out severe processes of dispossession, these geographical areas become purely sites of extraction, and therefore "places that, to their extractors, somehow don't count and therefore can be poisoned, drained, or otherwise destroyed, for the supposed greater good of economic progress."[234] Consequently, the subordinate relationship with the social groups of those areas is constructed, by deeming their human, environmental, and social rights expendable in the name of capital accumulation. Chapter 3.1 has analysed the environmental and social brunt borne by the populations in interior regions because of capitalist modes of extractivism and dispossession.

Second, the study has demonstrated that memory perpetuates the process of othering on an intrinsic psychological dimension. Indeed, chapter 2 has offered the theoretical grounds to show how the legitimisation of social classes and power relations within memory are interlocked in several ways with economic and political questions. Both the process of land dispossession under Bourguiba, and the construction of a top-down narrative of the revolution, constitute two exemplary cases of this interconnection.

The dispossession of land enabled both the rapid accumulation of assets – and therefore the centralisation of economic power – and the political legitimisation of the new power that was based on the dismantling of tribal affiliations and other political enemies of the state. Land was indeed a central element for tribes, but it was not the only strategy at play.

Specifically, chapter 3.2 has showcased how the state stripped rural communities of their power through a strong campaign of cultural stigmatisation and memory exclusion. Specifically, the historiography that emerged was one that completely denied the role played

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[234] Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, p.382

by tribes and peasants in the conflict for Tunisian independence, while emphasising Bourguiba's gestures in leading Tunisia out of the darkness of colonialism.

The same chapter then moved to demonstrate how the memory manipulations laid out by Bourguiba became embedded within wider capitalist structures of economic subordination and dispossession, ultimately crystallising into systems of geographically based discrimination, targeting the regions that were historically associated with political enemies and are economically richer in natural resources. Thus, the top-down mobilisation of memory becomes an important resource with which to legitimise the process of othering and normalise the process of dispossession.

Through an exploration of *the memory of dispossession,* chapter 4 explains how cultural and memory manipulations enhanced the social alienation and marginalisation of these areas. Following Green's theory, the chapter argues that top-down manipulations of collective memory, in this case, are capable of forging subordinate social subjectivities from within. Indeed, the manufacturing of a hegemonic collective memory becomes a part of the process of exclusion of social groups, thereby internalising their socio-economic subordination within the socio-economic hierarchy. In other words, the creation of a hegemonic collective memory is the cultural contribution to the creation of the socially subordinate exploitable "others." Furthermore, in the Tunisian case, such othering is consolidated by the active socio-geographical discrimination that depicts these social groups as naturally subordinate – people who are less intelligent, with fewer skills – almost as a way to naturalise the right to dispossess them. Therefore, processes of economic and memory dispossession trigger complex and deep processes of othering, forging a transverse and holistic marginalisation, which seamlessly moves from the economic to the social, cultural and finally political spheres.

In this dissertation, I have argued that this state of holistic marginalisation and exclusion can illuminate the discussions on the 2011 revolution. Indeed, chapters 5.1 and 6.1 have shown how a top-down narrative of the revolution has been fabricated both nationally and internationally, using the same strategies of memory manipulations seen earlier. Specifically, on a national level, the exclusion of the interior regions from the revolutionary collective memories was instrumental in enabling the construction of a narrative that served political and economic interests. By erasing the memories connected to the interior regions, the hegemonic power could once again delegitimise their agency and reiterate the socio-economic hierarchy of the citizenry. Furthermore, the exclusion of the interior regions, where the demands addressed systematic and long-standing processes of exploitation and dispossession allowed them to ignore the existence of an overarching structure of power that combined neoliberal

violence with a historical continuity of authoritarianism from Bourguiba to Ben Ali. In this way, the problem of capitalism was conceptualised away and the power structure was disaggregated. This conceptual manoeuvre appears to be one of the strategies that smoothed the transition from the old administration into the new political system, along with the maintenance of the economic capitalist organisation of the country.

In order to counter this narrative, the study has paid close attention to the way capitalist processes of subordination were perceived and internalised by interviewees. Specifically, chapters 4 and 5.2 have shown the violence of processes of memory dispossession and holistic exclusion. This is defined in the chapters as the *memory of dispossession*, so the way the individual understands, interpret, and ultimately react to dispossession. Furthermore, this analysis has unveiled the connection between memory, agency, and resistance. First, chapter 4 identified silent patterns of individual resistance through memory. In this case, memory enabled the emergence of a specific modality of resistance. By allowing the individual to withdraw into internal spaces of individual and collective heritage, the attachment to one's memory is used as a way to safeguard one's historical subjectivity, thereby countering the othering process. Furthermore, memory has allowed the interviewees to create alternative historical versions that helped them make sense of their dispossession and marginalisation, thereby lessening its harmful effects.

Second, chapter 5.2 has shown how, if embedded within studies on a wider scale, collective memory can add enriching angles to the studies of social mobilisations. Specifically, I argued that the collective memory of dispossession and marginalisation enabled the emergence of new lines of collective belonging, where social alliances of mobilisation arose in the context of the revolution. In these terms, the revolts in 2011 are interpreted here as the peak of a process of othering through the collectivisation of resistance. Viewing the revolution through the lenses of collective marginalisation and dispossession has allowed me to present a more complex formulation of the protests. Specifically, the protests and mobilisations are conceptualised here as acts of resistance against an overarching power system of inclusion and exclusion, which engendered social subordination. The system is meant here as all the different expressions of power within the country, including cultural hegemony, political tyranny, and capitalist structures of exploitation. The issue of inequality and injustice refers to economic and political aspects, as much as it refers to a system of social dominance that touches upon cultural heritage, collective history, and personal dignity.

In sum, to answer the research question, this study has shown that memory played a role both in maintaining as well as challenging processes of economic dispossession in Tunisia,

respectively through its top-down and bottom-up mobilisation. Specifically, the internalisation of exclusion and subordination through memory can constitute either a bottom-up form of maintaining the existing order or an alternative space for resistance.

First, the top-down mobilisation of collective memory has directly served the interests of the capitalist system by establishing specific social relations of subordination, and therefore shaping the development of social classes. Specifically, the dissertation has demonstrated how strategies of collective memory manipulation can establish a net cultural exclusion of certain groups from the rest of society. In this manner, the mechanisms of memory alienation can extrinsically manufacture subordinate subjectivities and perpetuate processes of othering within the realm of memory. When embedded within capitalist systems, strategies of hegemonic memory have consolidated social hierarchies, thereby strengthening the processes of dispossession and capital accumulation. These same mechanisms have accompanied Tunisian history, from the campaign against tribes to the application of memory exclusion to geographical areas for economic interest, and finally the delegitimisation of the revolution's agents through the erasure of their collective memories.

Second, the bottom-up mobilisations of collective memories have constituted an important front of individual and collective resistance against the system of exclusion. On the one hand, for the wide majority of interviewees, the creation of a counter-historical narrative, and therefore the simple act of remembering one's own memory constitutes an act of resistance. On the other hand, the study has demonstrated that, in an interpretation of the revolution from below, grounded on patterns of holistic marginalisation and exclusion, collective memories and subjectivities are one important aspect of what binds together a united front in the movement.

To conclude, the ongoing oscillation between the passive reception of a memory from the top, and the active processes of interpretation and contestation of that same memory result in a silent, yet crucial, process that can tip the scales between hegemonic domination and counterhegemonic reactions.

On a more general note, this study has ultimately demonstrated the value in contemplating the role of memory in discussions on socio-economic processes. Indeed, I believe that studying memory gives the possibility to carry out trans-temporal socio-economic and political analysis. Following Roccu and Salem's arguments the past is not "a static set of events that is far gone, but rather a living, breathing 'thing' that is drawn upon to legitimise the

political present."[235] It is by approaching events and processes through this kind of temporal fluidity that we can really understand the transformative power of memory. To develop new socio-economic analytical paradigms, we are called upon to read history against the grain, and memory can constitute an important tool in doing this. Through memory we are capable of exposing and questioning the historical narratives that constitute the foundations of socio-economic power expressions. In these terms, the study of memory *vis a vis* political economy can offer a new roadmap for contesting hegemonic socio-economic systems in their historical continuity.

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[235] Roccu, R., Salem, S., "Making and Unmaking Memories: The Politics of Time in the Contemporary Middle East", p. 223

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