THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE TUNISIAN REVOLUTION
Social groups versus crony capitalism
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MOBILISATIONS SOCIALES ET POLITIQUES : LES SOCIÉTÉS EN MOUVEMENT

MOBILISATIONS COLLECTIVES À L’ÉPREUVE DES CHANGEMENTS AU MAROC

Bouchra Sidi Hida*

Le changement lié au processus de modernité et aux réformes portées par la politique de libéralisation économique engagée par le Maroc, s’accompagne de l’émergence de nouveaux acteurs sociaux qui s’approprient Internet, Facebook, en tant qu’espace virtuel de liberté d’expression pour une nouvelle socialisation des mobilisations collectives. En investissant l’espace public par de nouvelles stratégies et un nouveau répertoire d’action, ils tentent de renverser les conventions, les coutumes et les croyances pour des droits plus subjectifs. La nouveauté de ces actions se situe dans leur extraversion. Ces mobilisations collectives seront pensées et analysées par la sociologie du sujet, une démarche traitant l’acteur à travers son rapport social à l’autre. Ce rapport reflète une tension dynamique qui semble génératrice de conflits permanents, voire de changement. L’article se base sur l’observation, des entretiens et une analyse documentaire.

Mots clés : Mobilisations collectives, Internet, Facebook, espace virtuel/public, activisme numérique, Maroc.

Dans un contexte mondialisé caractérisé par l’accélération, l’encouragement et l’intensification des flux d’investissement, d’échanges et d’informations provoqués par l’ouverture économique et culturelle que connaît le Maroc actuellement – notamment par le biais de traités de zones de libre-échange avec l’Union européenne, les États-Unis et des pays arabes, mais également par


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Baccar Gherib*

The Tunisian revolution has economic and social causes. It was carried out against exclusion and crony capitalism. We thus show that it can be apprehended by a political economy approach, which alone can explain the collapse of authoritarianism. The latter was able to remain in place thanks to compromises that linked the State to the poor classes, to labour and to capital. Nevertheless, the insertion of the Tunisian economy into globalization “from the bottom”, its inability to absorb graduates and the unjustified enrichment of the clans, upset the equilibrium of the system, and especially the social contract based on ascendant social mobility and the ideal of meritocracy. These ruptures helped social groups to unite in calling for the departure of Ben Ali and his family.

The Tunisian revolution, because of its originality and its unique and a priori highly improbable nature, presents multiple challenges to the social sciences. Indeed, it was original and unique because it took the form of a sudden “spontaneous revolution,” without any leaders or political and/or ideological framework. It was highly improbable as well, if we consider the academic literature written on the Tunisian political system, which asserted the resilience and durability of this system. The literature evoked the concept of a stable authoritarianism (Camau and Geisser 2003) that had the consent of society (Hibou 2006b), and that was, therefore, apparently removed from the issue of transitology and democratization. In other words, faced with the longevity and stability of authoritarianism in Tunisia, no one could have imagined “that a movement would, at lightning speed, explode all the regulations, frameworks, and coercive forces, and impose itself on society, institutions, and government with such forcefulness” (Ben Romdhane, 2011, 256).

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When we consider this sudden and unexpected collapse of the authoritarian system, we are encouraged, based on the logic of political sociology, to try to identify the difference or imbalance that probably formed and developed between the social structure and the political formulation that came to light in the winter of 2011. And yet, to understand the nature of this rift that appeared within the authoritarian system, a good method would be to return to the series of events which, in less than a month, lead to the fall of the regime.

This fall began with the immolation, on December 17, 2010, of the young Mohamed Bouazizi. It continued with angry demonstrations by young people who had been neglected by development, particularly in the regions of Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine. They carried banners protesting their economic status in society, and demanded, primarily, the right to work. This continued with demonstrations of solidarity across almost the whole country, and ended with two general strikes called by the UGTT, in Sfax and then in Tunis, on January 12 and 14, 2011. These were the opportunity for large demonstrations uniting all social groups demanding freedom and dignity. They also called for the departure of Ben Ali and his family.

Thus, the series of facts, the nature of the social movement behind the fall of the regime, sets us on the trail of an economic development which helped to break up the authoritarian government arrangement that had been in place until then. In other words, these aspects make it legitimate to conceive of the political economy of the Tunisian revolution; that is, an approach which favors the analysis of interactions between economic and political elements in explaining the durability of a system or, in this case, its collapse. It goes without saying, however, that a political economy of the revolution is not designed to explain what triggered it. This remains the remit of political commentators examining the appearance of moments of fluidity and multisectoral mobilization. It would therefore be methodologically risky, as Béatrice Hibou (2011, 8) rightly notes, after Weber, to suppose that there is a causal relationship between an economic situation and popular revolt, since it is obvious that, if economic conditions are to have an impact on political behavior they must derive their meaning from social interactions. Thus, by revealing the economic developments which affected the relationship between the social structure and political arrangements, the political economy can at least show what made the revolution possible.

Consequently, in this article we propose to show, in the first section, that the Tunisian revolution lends itself perfectly to an analysis in terms of political economy, not only because of the general relevance of this approach in explaining social change, but also because of the special nature of Tunisian political history and, above all, the economic and social character of the demands of the revolution.
However, since the concept of political economy does not refer to a unified paradigm, and at best is only a “flexible label” (Camau 2008, 508), in the second section we must return to the main “political economies” which were produced in relation to authoritarianism in Tunisia, and to assess them in the light of the revolution. In this regard, we identify three principal approaches which – each in its own way – connect economic and political issues. First, there is the Anglo-American political economy, which links the possible escape from authoritarianism to the economic reform that promotes liberalization and privatization. Then, there is the political economy of the mobilization of consent, as developed by Béatrice Hibou, who reveals organic links between economic and political issues in replicating authoritarianism and the permanence of obedience. Finally, there are all the studies that propose to explain authoritarianism through the explicit or implicit agreements linking the state to different social groups (mainly representatives of capital and labor), and who are the source, if not of their allegiance, at least of their acceptance of the authoritarian order.

It is precisely this approach which we will adopt in order to try to analyze a revolution that crowned a social movement triggered by the “lumpenproletariat.” This revolution also sheltered the stabilized workforce and was then supported by them, and in the end, it was joined by all social groups. The third section will therefore be devoted to an analysis centering on the relations between the main social classes and the state in the context of a system whose rationale is that of crony capitalism, particularly in the last decade of Ben Ali’s reign. We will conclude our reflections by emphasizing an economic analysis inspired by its classic heritage is of interest, and will portray the difficult relationship between the social classes in the production and distribution of the social product.

FOR A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE TUNISIAN REVOLUTION

In a leading methodological article, Jean Leca discusses the fundamental theoretical question regarding the appropriate way of addressing the problem of social change, that is, either through the economy, or through culture. While recalling that “in every study on change, attention should be on the processes and their actors” (Leca 1988, 19), he considers that it is “legitimate to assume that a causal, functional, or systematic type of relationship exists between the ‘social constellation of interests’ (...) and ‘the moral order of authority’” (Leca 1988, 19). He also emphasizes that if “the simplest political economy (...) consists in making the economic situation the main variable, which individuals or groups will react to and decide on their strategy” (Leca 1988, 24), then cultural
analysis, for its part, “can present culture as a lasting organizational plan, extending into history in the form of a recurring tradition” (Leca 1988, 34).

Yet it is interesting to note that this alternative we encounter when thinking about change is also useful when considering the resilience of authoritarianism in some countries of the Third World, and that many people have explained this by resorting to the flattest essentialism, identifying its source, for Tunisia, as certain characteristics of its Arab-Islamic culture. Others, while trying to give a historical dimension to their analysis, and to thus distance themselves from this essentialist treatment of the question, have identified its source in *Tunisianity*, which “should be treated, not as the dregs of history, in the culturalists’ sense, but first as a political plan” (Camau and Geisser 2003, 20). Nevertheless, despite these precautions in stating its content, Tunisianity – like its predecessors Iberity, Hispanity, and other identities that are supposed to resist democracy – is a concept which evokes essentialism, clearly recalling the idea of “a lasting organizational plan extending into history in the form of a recurring tradition.” And like its predecessors, it is also at the heart of demonstrating authoritarianism’s stability and the lack of prospects for a democratic transition.

Furthermore, even if the culturalist approach is able to consider social change, the fact remains that it has proven to be more appropriate to think about a political system’s permanence or durability, as the examples quoted above suggest. This is not the case with the economic approach which, more in tune with history, is able to account for both the economo-political dialectic, which “maintains” the authoritarian system, as well as the dialectic that might be the source of the system’s collapse.

However, approaching the Tunisian revolution through a political economy is also justified by the specificities of the country’s modern history. Indeed, it is obvious that economic and social demands were at the heart of the National Movement (Hibou 2006b, 225), that Tunisians made strong demands for social recovery (Ben Romdhane 2011, 275), and that most of the major political crises which shook the country from 1969 to 2010, including 1978, 1984, and 2008, had an economic and social element, to varying degrees, and resulted from the breach of a clientalist contract linking society to the state.

Thus, in an article on authoritarianism in 1985, Guy Hermet identified, among the generic types of political resources of modern governments, “the allocation of economic or material advantages to specific categories, or to the whole population,” and he emphasized (already!) that Tunisia is a country where political resources are based on “economic performance and granting substantial benefits to sectors that are infinitely broader than a small group of privileged people” (Hermet 1985; italics added).
But the special nature of the political arrangement in Tunisia has historical roots, as the economic and social question was at the center of the National Movement, not only because this had a combative social wing (the UGTT), but also because after independence the new leadership opted for a modern political position, putting “the economy in the place of religion, in rebuilding national solidarity and unity” (Ayari 2003, 33).

This favored place for economic issues in relations between the state and society would grow during the Ben Ali era. Since he had neither the historical legitimacy or the charismatic legitimacy of his predecessor (Ben Romdhane 2011, 258), he had no option but to aspire to strengthen the legitimacy that economic growth offers, especially when it benefits all social groups more or less equitably. So much so that, as H. Redissi notes, the main source of the Tunisian state’s legitimacy has today become “the legitimacy of achievement, based on good economic performance” (Redissi 2007, 115).

Consequently it is not surprising that, from the society’s point of view, the relationship with the state is mainly focused on this economic question and, through this, on expectations of a social recovery it was more or less successful in securing this recovery after independence). This expectation and these economic demands are so rooted in Tunisian society that they are the source of a particular relationship between nationality and social citizenship (Hibou 2006b, 225). There is a symbolic representation of this relationship every time that people living near the border – who have been discriminated against and believe that they have been forgotten by the state – highlight their lack of citizenship by pointedly giving back their national identity cards, or by crossing the borders to the neighboring state.

Nevertheless, it is above all the major slogans and demands shouted since the beginning of the social movement – clearly focused on economic and social questions – that point us toward a political economy of the revolution. This is because, although it is true that the revolution was sudden and did not have a political framework, it nonetheless did not remain silent and quickly found the right words to describe the faults in the system (Ayari 2011). We should, however, take seriously the meaning the actors sought to ascribe to their involvement, and the words that they used to express their demands, as these words entered into history with great fanfare. They hit the mark with the use of short slogans, and were not only able to break taboos and to say the unsayable regarding the authoritarian and security order, but also knew how to summarize the difficulties that broad fringes of society were experiencing. One slogan, which made a loud entry on the scene from the earliest days, caught our attention here: “Work is a right, gang of thieves.”
In this short phrase we find, in addition to the demand for the right to work, the condemnation of corruption at the higher reaches of the state. There is also here the link between the poverty and despair of some people and the abuses and excesses of others, between unemployment (in particular of university graduates), and the unearned enrichment of the “clans,” between the inability to create jobs and the problems of governance, between the “losers” and “winners” of a system, the system of crony capitalism.

This slogan, focused, on the one hand, on the demand for the right to work and conditions for a dignified life, and on the other hand, on condemning corruption and the undue enrichment of the “families,” is incredibly modern. It is regrettable that some people have wanted to see in this revolt, in part, the consequence of archaisms, in particular of tribal honor (Ayari 2011, 212). More profoundly, this slogan contains the implicit denunciation of breaching the contracts between state and society. This was not a simple demand for inclusion. The social contract is that of a meritocracy. (It had already been derided for some time, and because it was being challenged, Tunisian society had been undermined.) It promised upward social mobility through a university degree, and yet this society is now facing the new phenomenon of mass unemployment amongst university graduates (more than 160,000 on the eve of the revolution, according to official figures).

It is not a coincidence, moreover, that the slogan in question was probably that of the Union des diplômés chômeurs (UDC) [Union of Unemployed Graduates], that it was so forward-looking, and that Mohamed Bouazizi was himself taken for an unemployed graduate. It is also not a coincidence that the revolution first began in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, which are, with the adjacent governorates of Kairouan and Gafsa, the regions where the rate of unemployment among university graduates reached national records (almost 50%). This situation, incidentally, raises a question concerning the designation of “lumpen proletariat” (Ayari 2011) to refer to the originators of the social movement’s outbreak. Although it manages to evoke the living conditions of the graduates, it fails to capture their acute political awareness.

A political economy of the Tunisian revolution should therefore start from this point, but above all it should not be limited to this, since, by so doing, it would prevent the understanding of the multisectoral mobilization that defeated the Ben Ali regime in less than a month. It should, then,

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1. In Arabic: al-tachghîl istihqâq ya iisabat al-sorrâq. Of course, other slogans in a similar vein later enriched the rhetoric of the social movement, such as Ya Trabelsi ya faqîr khallî houija lil faqîr (oh Trabelsi, oh despicable ones, leave something for the poor). Yet even though it has the advantage of naming the thieves heckled in the first slogan (the name of the family of the wife of Ben Ali serves as a generic term referring to all the allied families immersed in business and profiting from their proximity to decision-making centers) and raises the issue of unfair distribution, this slogan does not have the analytical richness of the first.
analyze the relationships which linked the deposed regime with other social groups in order to understand why and how the system collapsed. In other words, a good political economy of the revolution assumes a good political economy of authoritarianism. First, however, we need to define the approach this idea conveys.

**POLITICAL ECONOMIES OF AUTHORITARIANISM: FROM THE MISUNDERSTANDING OF REFORM TO ANALYSIS OF THE CORPORATIST ALLIANCE**

Under the designation “political economy,” there are in fact different approaches which, each in its own way, propose to identify a type of determiner to link economic factors to political ones. They were applied to analyzing the permanence of authoritarianism in Tunisia or its chances of achieving a democratic transition. These approaches range from the liberal political economy (Murphy 1999; Zartman 1994), to the analysis of the political system in terms of a *modus vivendi* between the state and the main social classes (Bellin 2000). They also include understanding Tunisian authoritarianism through a “historical sociology of the economy” (Hibou 2006b, 22). We will review these different political economies of Tunisia before the revolution, by analyzing their approaches and results, while trying, in our critique, to identify the characteristics of the political economy that is best equipped to explain the collapse of the authoritarian system.

The first political economy to have been applied to Tunisia is the liberal political economy. This issue was established following the implementation of the PAS [SAP: Structural Adjustment Program], under the auspices of the IMF in July 1986, and was supposed to reform the Tunisian economy in the direction of liberalization and privatization. According to this approach, economic liberalization and the strengthening of its private sector would eventually lead to pluralism and political liberalism, particularly as the strengthening of the private sector, and thus of the middle classes, should have automatically lead to its liberation from state control and to support for the democratic cause.

However, this approach leaves itself wide open to two major criticisms: its ideological nature and its naivety. This is due to the fact that, first of all, these theories are structured by metatheories which are not explained or queried (Camau 2008, 509). Secondly, these authors too quickly take at face value the idea that the state would withdraw on the occasion of the aforesaid liberalization, and the separation that it was supposed to imply between power and economy, between public and private.
Let us begin with metatheories, of which there are three: democracy is brought by capitalism; it has organic links with the market economy; and the middle classes are able to impose it on authoritarian states. The first is old and not discussed much, but the facts show that the relationship between capitalism and democracy is more problematic because, although all democratic societies are capitalist, every capitalist society is not *ipso facto* democratic. From this viewpoint, capitalism that is not democratic is not at all paradoxical (Camau and Geisser 2003, 56)!

Perhaps we could say that what is decisive for the establishment of democracy is not so much capitalism (which can have authoritarian versions), but rather a market economy, which is itself based on freedom. C. Waisman (1992) used this distinction between capitalism without a market economy (protected) and capitalism with a market economy (open) to study the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the state. In the first case, the bourgeoisie is protected by the state. In the second, having cut the cord which linked them to the state, and by becoming tougher through exposure to competition with other members of the bourgeoisie, they are able to begin the fight for democratization. Yet it is obvious that, 24 years after the SAP and 15 years after the signing of the Free Trade Agreement with the European Union, which was supposed to extend the regime’s liberal option, the democratization of political life did not happen until a revolution took it. This also poses the problem of the nature and the degree of liberalization the state actually undertook.

The third metathecy states that the move from an authoritarian order to a democratic order can only be carried out by the bourgeoisie. On this point, though, not only should we be wary of simple mythologies which attribute the emergence of Western democracy to the conscious action of one social class, but we should also question whether the Tunisian “bourgeoisie”, entirely created by the state, would be able to take on such a historic mission by confronting it.

Beyond the questionable metatheories which are the basis for the *political economy*, two questions remain: to what extent has the economic liberalization implemented involved a real withdrawal of the state from the economic sphere? And is it really designed to entail a change in the political regime? Concerning the first question, Béatrice Hibou managed to show how, in the Tunisian case, liberalism in no way means the end of interventionism, but signifies rather the reorganization of methods of governing (Hibou 2006a, 9). With the second question we can confirm, after Camau and Geisser, that “economic liberalization can adapt itself to any political regime. Far from, constituting, by itself, a factor of political change, during its development it is exposed to market manipulations by a bureaucratic state, and to compromises...
between state and private actors in the form of *crony capitalism or copinage*” (2003, 21). In short, as we conclude this critique of the *political economy*, we can confirm that its inability to understand the Tunisian case can be explained (along with the ideological bias that undermines it) by a misunderstanding regarding the content of the reform and an error of judgment concerning the characteristics of the bourgeoisie.

The second type of political economy demonstrating authoritarianism in Tunisia was developed by Béatrice Hibou, in her book *La Force de l’obéissance: Économie politique de la répression*. This approach develops another analysis of authoritarianism, by being less concerned with the positioning of social groups than with the analysis of the political and social impact of individual economic practices. This is a political economy which it would thus be more appropriate to call a “historical sociology of the economy” (Hibou 2006b, 22).

This sociology succeeds in showing how authoritarianism manages to mobilize consent, and that, as such, it persists not only through coercion, but also through the entanglement of government and economic relationships. In the end, small “painless” arrangements and compromises between citizens and government are imposed, making opposition to the system extremely rare. Except that, while it does well in examining obedience or “voluntary servitude,” Hibou’s meticulous sociology unfortunately risks being of little help to us when considering the social movement of winter 2011 and the revolution which crowned it, except to ask by what magic the power of obedience was suddenly transformed into the “power of disobedience”! Especially since Hibou reminds us, after de la Boétie, that the first reason for voluntary servitude is habit (Hibou 2006b, 221).

Finally there is a third type of the political economy of authoritarianism, which addresses it by looking at the relations linking the state to the main social classes of capitalism: capital and labor. This is an approach which sees political science following in the footsteps of the classic political economy, which considers the protagonists of capitalist industrialization (capital and labor) to be genuine agents of democratization (Bellin 2000, 176). But as we have different contributions on the issue, we propose to present them below according to a sequence which shows how thoughts have evolved on the relationships between social groups and the state, which underlie the permanence of authoritarianism.

To begin with there is the work of Barrington Moore that attempts to uncover the historical conditions (in terms of the balance of power between social groups) which, as part of the transition from an agrarian society to an industrial society, preside over the emergence of democratic, authoritarian, or totalitarian systems (Moore 1966). One of the main results of this pioneering work was to show that, in western Europe, the bourgeoisie is the main agent
of democratization, but that this scenario is not necessarily valid for the rest of the world, particularly when industrialization is achieved with a weak bourgeoisie.

A. Gerschenkron (1962) showed, moreover, that this European scenario could not be valid for Third World countries, precisely because of the constraints of late industrialization. In fact he says that in these countries, the bourgeoisie is highly dependent on the state, which it asks for help in the process of accumulation and, above all, for protection against competition from the bourgeoisie in already industrialized countries. Since their survival depends on the state’s benevolent attitude, the bourgeoisie of developing countries cannot therefore be the agent for the democratization of the regime.

This line of thought was extended and refined by E. Bellin, who sought to understand why, in late development countries, neither capital nor labor supported the democratic cause. Based on the hypothesis that democracy is the product of a struggle in which social forces play a central role, she adds that these would only lead the fight for democracy if this coincides with their material interests. These are, therefore, “contingent democrats” (Bellin 2000, 179).

Yet often in these countries, capital and labor find themselves configured such that they have a lot to lose by opposing the authoritarian system. Thus capital needs to ensure the state’s protection against competition by foreign capitalists, but also against the desire for redistribution or, worse, the revolutionary impulses of the poor in its own society. It has no interest, therefore, in attacking its protector. As for labor, it can also find itself dependent on the state as part of a corporatist relationship in which the state gives it financial and organizational support, in return for political loyalty and a certain restraint.

This configuration, favoring an alliance between capital and labor, on the one hand, and the authoritarian state, on the other, and thus limiting the chances of a transition to democracy, is quite a good representation of the Tunisian case. It also has the advantage of not believing in the inevitability of these alliances and, consequently, in the authoritarian regime in Tunisia since – because the alliance of capital and labor with authoritarianism is not set in stone – changes in political and economic conditions can ensure that interests change and that alliances are renegotiated (Bellin 2000, 205).

The unquestionable progress made by Bellin in analyzing authoritarianism is, however, handicapped by two limits. First, she considers capital and labor to be contiguous actors, in particular including labor at the top of the union apparatus (Camau 2008, 514), which prevents her from perceiving the heterogeneous elements of capital and labor, and to thus understanding the tensions which pass through them. Next, her analysis of the corporatist alliance between the authoritarian state and labor, although relevant, remains short of the theoretical breakthrough begun by P. Schmitter in 1974, which concerns
neocorporatism and explains the relationship between the Tunisian workers, the government, and the democratic question even better (Ben Romdhane 2011, 97).

For Schmitter, in fact, neocorporatism is a method for the social and political management of workers through its elites, and its vitality depends on the hegemony which these exert on the mass of union members. This is quite a good description of the compromise between the state and the UGTT, and explains why, in conditions of tension, it can explode when the union grassroots challenge the consensus (Ben Romdhane 2011, 99), as was the case in the Tunisian revolution.

It is, therefore, through this kind of political economy – focused on analyzing the relations between the authoritarian state and the main social groups – that we will try to understand the development which prevented a system that seemed destined to endure from continuing. To do this, we will adopt the main contributions from the approaches submitted above to critical analysis, while emphasizing the fact that in Tunisia, especially in the last decade, the existing economic and political system has unquestionably acquired the features of crony capitalism, namely capitalism based on favored relations between businessmen and the state. Here, success is not determined by free-market competition or by respecting the rule of law, but by favoritism and the degree of proximity to decision-making centers.

CRONY CAPITALISM, STATE AND SOCIAL GROUPS

Understanding the Tunisian Revolution thus necessarily involves comprehending the relationships which link the main social classes (labor and capital) to the state. The logic of these relationships and the positioning of each actor cannot, in turn, be understood outside the specific socio-historical context in which they develop. Since independence, there has been a capitalist economy with a strong state presence, that has opted, since the SAP, for integration into the global economy in accordance with the Washington Consensus and, which has deviated, for at least a decade, to a system of cronyism. We believe, then, that no relevant understanding of the revolution is possible if we omit one of these three characteristics of Tunisian capitalism: the massive presence of an autonomous state (1) responding to a diffuse demand for inclusion and protection in Tunisian society, (2) promoting, with the SAP, a development model based on “bottom-up” integration in globalization, and (3) recently being itself the target of “privatization.” In what follows, we will return to each of these fundamental stages in the development of Tunisian capitalism, by trying to show the positions that they occupy in the main social classes, particularly through their established representatives.
No one, in fact, will understand Tunisian capitalism if they disregard the place and the role of the state within it, as the Tunisian state is, above all, autonomous, due to the weakness of the main social classes after independence. This led to the fact that it was “the state, and only the state, which, faced with the enormity of the task, took charge of the plan to modernize the country” (Ayari 2003, 95). For a while this initiative even took the form of state control of the economy and society. Of course, this phase was followed by another, which gave rise to social differentiation and favored the appearance of a corporatist arrangement, in which organizations representing established interests were meant to play an important role in political and social regulation. Yet, although it gave prominence to these organizations, the state always and clearly remained the sole master.

This autonomy of the state, which makes it seem as though the state dominates society, should be distinguished from state autonomy as it can exist in democratic capitalist societies. Although in these societies, “state autonomy is a function of the compromise between social classes which is the basis of democracy,” for the Tunisian state, “it measures the inability of social groups to organize themselves independently of the state” (Camau and Geisser 2003, 54). It is related to a characteristic of the elite in power in several countries of the Third World after colonization, which ensured that the state could not be linked to one class or to a group of classes.

We understand, therefore, why none of the fundamental social classes was able to challenge the state’s hegemony, and appreciate that, on the contrary, they tried to improve their positions by trying to find favor with it. Yet even though, from this point of view, capital and labor are in the same boat, an important distinction should be made between the two. Although the bourgeoisie and its representatives were created by the state, this is not the case for the labor union, which can claim to have participated, alongside the state elites, in the fight for independence, then for the construction of modern Tunisia. Its relationship with the autonomous state does not, therefore, come under total allegiance, but rather, according to Redissi’s expression, and at least until the adoption of the SAP, under “divisive cooperation” (Redissi 2007, 107).

In fact the adoption of the SAP was the second pivotal moment in the development of Tunisian capitalism. Its implementation, from the summer of 1986, represented a real turning point in the country’s economic and social history, through the changes it brought to the development model. This was characterized, first, by a certain disengagement of the state from the economic sphere, and by the promotion of the privatization and liberalization of the economy. But this disengagement in no way meant the liberation of the economy from political control and/or the liberation of the business world from the control of, and interference by the government, since it is clear that the Tunisian state
sought “liberalization without liberalism” (Hibou 2006a, 26). This “liberalization” was in fact understood to be the necessary abandonment of any industrial strategy or policy by the state (Ben Romdhane 2011, 132). This abandonment represented a major break compared with the 25 years prior to the SAP.

This abandonment of any industrial – and even developmental – ambition, meant that the state has, since then, settled for a development model based on specializing in low-technology exporting industries. They mainly gain their competitiveness on international markets from their abundant use of low cost, unskilled labor. And yet this kind of integration in the global economy has harmful consequences on the world of labor, as its competitiveness is mainly based on wage pressure and the erosion of social rights, particularly in free trade areas, which are supposed to attract foreign investors (Ben Romdhane 2011, 134-135). It is far from being labor friendly.

But this change in Tunisian capitalism was not fought by the UGTT, which, in its relationship with the state, thus goes “from divisive cooperation to a kind of ‘historic compromise’” (Redissi 2007, 107). Moreover, it is obvious that this turning point, which corresponded, to within a few months, to Ben Ali taking power, was favorable to employers, some of whom were pleased that “Ben Ali did at least one good thing: breaking the union” (Hibou 2006b, 192). In this context, it is not at all surprising that several authors confirmed that, during this second phase of the development of the Tunisian economy, the UGTT went from the position of a politicized union that was against authoritarian order, to a simple managerial union now dedicated, more or less successfully, to defending its material demands (Zeghidi 1997; Zghal 1998) and accepting the terms of the neocorporatist contract.

But this development model, together with a policy of mass higher education, would be behind another phenomenon that is fundamental for a good understanding of the revolution: that of the explosion in the number of unemployed university graduates. In fact, it is remarkable that in the mid-1990s, shortly after opting (as a result of the SAP) for growth driven by the private sector (particularly by exports) the State decided to move from an elitist education system, with rigorous selection at the different levels, to excessive mass education by establishing very weak selection at the levels of access to higher education.2 But given that, contrary to the public sector, the private sector has a very low level of senior managers, and that it mainly demands low skilled labor, it becomes obvious that the economic fabric, as shaped by this development

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2. The economic or political reasons which motivated such a policy still remain obscure. Has the aim been to delay the critical moment of unemployment by making universities into large areas to confine these young people? Was the aim to live under the illusion of a better future for tens of thousands of students and their families? Or was it intended to obtain, cheaply, an improvement in Tunisia’s Index of Human Development and its place in the international rankings (with the strong increase in the proportion of young people from 19 to 24 pursuing their studies, which this implies)?
model, is not at all able to absorb the tens of thousands of university graduates who now arrive every year on the labor market.

This separation between the logic of producing graduates, on the one hand, and the characteristics of the labor market, on the other, would lead to a new phenomenon in Tunisian society with serious political consequences: the mass unemployment of university graduates. In fact, in a society which, for more than a century, proclaimed the value of education and which, since independence, has developed a model of social mobility based on the acquisition of degrees, particularly university degrees (Ben Romdhane 2010), graduate unemployment has a destructuring impact and even takes on the appearance of a counterrevolution because, although access to jobs is no longer linked to a degree, and therefore to merit, it is inevitably linked to the parents’ social capital, thus favoring the replication of a society of inheritors. Graduate unemployment, far from being socially neutral, thus implies that social inequalities will become worse. It breaches a contract that has structured Tunisian society since independence. It is the source of frustration and revolt among the weakest social groups and, consequently, it represents a fundamental element in the revolution.

For a good understanding of the special features of Tunisian capitalism on the eve of the revolution, however, we must also evaluate a third dimension, which has continued to be asserted over the last decade: the development of unbridled cronyism at the highest level of the state. This profited, first of all, members of the President’s family and, secondly, their allies in the private sector, through marriage or business. This gave rise to the appearance of a new section of the bourgeoisie: the integrated business class, which “developed extremely quickly because of its integration into different formal and informal channels, its proximity to the centers of power and the neopatrimonial use of public institutions, as well as the partial or total takeover of assets granted in a discretionary manner by the state” (Ben Romdhane 2011, 104-105). By the speed in which it spread, its scale and its spoils, this cronyism undeniably represents a new phenomenon in the Tunisian economy, and it is in this sense that we can confirm that “the Ben Ali decades are a ‘deviation,’ compared to the previous course” (Camau 2008, 519).

Confronted by an economy of predation, large parts of the private sector were obviously the direct victims of the appearance of an “integrated business class” which showed such greed. However, since the employers were incapable of uttering anything negative with regard to the government, and because, despite all the abuses, they were not ready to “join the resistance,”3 the only

3. According to the expression used by B. Hibou (“We will never join the resistance”), to illustrate, in an article devoted to the relations between business and politics, the attitude of Tunisian employers faced with the politico-economic system then in effect (Hibou 2008).
possible reaction to this phenomenon was, logically, the decline in private national investment. During this period, it fell to historically low levels, thus indirectly creating other victims, through the slowdown in growth and the loss of jobs.

Moreover, this shameless use of close relationships to the high levels of power for private enrichment, aimed at the quick creation of enormous wealth, aroused the anger of all Tunisians, well beyond the business world, and from all kinds of social groups. In fact, in a society in which the state is a central player, and where there is very strong demand on the state (with calls for inclusion, wellbeing and/or protection), the “privatization” of the state, in which the state itself becomes the subject of a private circle (Redissi 2007, 105), was perceived as an enormous, intolerable holdup. And here we find the entire meaning of the slogan at the start of the revolution and the beginning of our reflection: “Work is a right, gang of thieves.” The ultimate theft was doubtless that of the state itself!

Thus was born a social movement triggered by those left behind by development. Their revolt, however, would most likely not have succeeded (as was the case three years earlier in the mining basin), had it not been relayed by local, then regional labor unions, and finally by the National Executive Office of the UGTT. This was as if to show that, under the guise of a managerial union, the UGTT kept alive the memory of the union as a “center of political and social protest” (Zeghidi 1997). The UGTT, true to its patriotic and social ideology, could not remain deaf to the cries of the revolt for long, which demanded the right to work and to dignity, and rose up against the state’s appropriation by a clan and the carving-up of its economy. The revolution thus confirmed the idea that the UGTT was “the weak link in the network of government agencies” (Camau and Geisser 2003, 224).

Throughout this sequence, we notice a key absentee: employers and, through them, the bourgeoisie. “Why is your daughter silent?” is the question M. Camau used to present the issue of authors linking democratization to the bourgeoisie (Camau 2008, 512). And yet, given the middle classes’ total and unchallenged allegiance to the authoritarian state, it did not risk saying anything. On the contrary, it tried right to the end to save the regime by endorsing it, by trying to give it a semblance of credibility, one last attempt by the regime to bounce back: the presidential promise to create 300,000 jobs!

4. Although led by local trade unionists (particularly from the town of Redeyef), the revolt in the mining basin was not able to benefit from the open support of the UGTT because it was also opposed to its regional branch (Gafsa), which was accused of being involved in a corrupt and nepotic system that governed access to jobs in the phosphates company, the region’s main employer.
CONCLUSION: RETURN TO THE SOCIAL CLASSES?

Thus, in the end, this revolution contradicted, besides the culturalist approaches defending the theory of stable authoritarianism in Tunisia, the political economies which presuppose that democratization follows economic liberalization, a democratization apparently supported by the bourgeoisie and, despite its meticulous and understated sociology, the political economy of consent for authoritarianism. This revolution once again places on the agenda a political economy focused on conflicts or class alliances to understand the logic behind the replication of the system. Of course, in Tunisia, the academic world, no more than the political world, does not think about the social classes, for historical and political reasons (Gherib 2011). And yet the logic underlying the revolution forces us, like L. Chauvel (2001), to pose the question concerning the return of the social classes and, consequently, of the relevance of the return for the foundations of a classic political economy that would seek to study the distribution of the social product between the classes who participated in its formation.

In fact we have seen how, paradoxically, political science, and not economics, has revived the issue regarding the classic political economy. It begins with the consideration that classes exist, then, that they have interests (particularly material ones) to defend, and, finally, that their different positions (alliances or conflicts) help demonstrate how economic factors are related to political ones. We should certainly bear in mind that “the word class will never be neutral as long as there are classes,” that “the question of the existence or the nonexistence of classes is a power struggle between the classes” (Bourdieu 1993, 35) and that, consequently, the return to an issue of political economy centered on the social classes not only depends on its analytical relevance, but also on a favorable ideological context. The fact remains that the disappearance of the question of social classes from the analytical horizon of economists is highly damaging. Social classes are needed to understand the dynamic of the last two centuries, such that, “once again today, the persistence of structured inequalities, linked to positions that are hierarchical and which contain conflicts of interests in the productive system, continues to pose a question” (Chauvel 2001, 316).

This invitation to return to a political economy based on a consideration of the social classes does not necessarily mean the promotion of a Marxist approach, for at least three reasons. First, and as some analyses of the Tunisian revolution have shown (Ayari 2011, 210), this does not correspond, either in its spontaneous nature or in the identity of its actors, to the plan of the revolution as described by Marxist theorists. The second reason is that the Marxist idea of social class is very demanding and characterized by very radical conflict (Chauvel 2001, 317), and, to exist, a class should have a clear awareness of itself, which is not really the case in the sequence of the Tunisian revolution.
The final reason is because the contemporary analysis is no longer trapped by ideas such as class war or historical necessity.

A return to the social classes is particularly necessary because there cannot be a direct causal relationship between economic factors and political ones: there is inevitably a need to pass through the social aspect, which alone is able to give political meaning and significance to economic conditions. And the Tunisian revolution is doubtless the opportunity, for economists mindful of the institutional changes in particular, to re-examine their interpretations and their analytical framework. It is certainly probable that “when the paradigms change, the world changes with them” (Camau 2008, 507), but we can also hope that, when the world changes or surprises us, it is also the moment to examine our interpretations and, perhaps, to change the paradigm.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Baccar Gherib


