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Youth in Tunisia:
Trapped Between Public Control and the Neo-Liberal Economy

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Abstract

"Youth" has been a category of public action in Tunisia ever since the country achieved its independence, although the discourse, values and policies associated with it have changed following the different phases of the country's political economy. The paper provides an analysis of relevant youth policies in four interrelated domains of public action, with a focus on the period since the 90s: family, employment, migration and spatial planning policies.

1. YOUTH POLICY IN TUNISIA: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

"Youth" has been a category of public action in Tunisia ever since the country achieved its independence, although the discourse, values and policies associated with it have changed following the different phases of the country's political economy.

In post-independence Tunisia, "youth" embodied the new spirit of modernization and social progress embedded in the national building project. Youth, meaning educated urban youth, had a positive role to play in the transformation of society.[2] In this respect, education represented the supreme value and the main vehicle of social mobility (Ben Romdhane 2011:177). Public efforts focused on enhancing and expanding public education and creating new jobs, as well as encouraging a "demographic revolution" through a progressive family code (promulgated in 1956) and active family planning policies, in the attempt to address the high levels of illiteracy, unemployment, the phenomenon of early marriage and high birth rates in the country (Charrad 2001, Ben Romdhane 2006 and 2011:153, 157).

In the 50s and 60s, Tunisia developed a labour-centred social system that is a social security system jointly financed by employers and employees through payroll deduction (Catusse et al 2010, Ben Romdhane 2006). The system worked well as the salaried population increased rapidly after independence, mainly through public sector expansion.

The welfare system was also central to the strategies of political legitimation of the new elites and regime consolidation. In an attempt to neutralize dissent, then President Bourguiba made use of repressive measures, but also co-opted political mobilization in state-sponsored organizations such as, for youth, the *Union générale des étudiants de Tunisie*. In the context of

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[2] Similarly to what happened in other countries. For more information, see Neyzi (2005) and Bennani-Chraïbi and Farag (2007).

a single party system and state corporatism, the social pact based on the state's commitment to full employment for educated youth was instrumental to limit social conflicts and youth political dissent: in exchange for regime loyalty, youth were provided with education, employment opportunities and social mobility.

However, starting in the 70s – and more so in the following decades – the regime gradually began to change its macroeconomic policies in line with the global neo-liberal orthodoxy, thus undermining the post-independence social pact (Ben Romdhane 2006). Especially after the first Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1986, the regime resolutely pursued market-oriented policies by expanding trade agreements and implementing privatization programmes (which underwent an acceleration in the 2000s when they were extended to the telecommunication and bank sectors). As in other countries, the new macroeconomic policies were aimed at attracting foreign investments by also pushing competitiveness through lowering the cost of labour and increasing employment flexibility. In addition, with the progressive withdrawal of the state from social welfare provisions, the prospects for stable employment in the public sector declined significantly since the mid-1990s, causing a slowdown in public sector hiring and the widespread of contract-based jobs in the Tunisian economy (Destremau 2010:160, Hibou 2006, Meddeb 2012).

The reorientation of the economy toward a neo-liberal free market model and the significant decline in the offer of stable employment in the public sector owing to cuts in state expenses, had the cost of an exponential growth of unemployment, especially for first insertion in the job market (more than loss of jobs). There was also a general increase of informal temporary and low-paid jobs, coupled with growing social and regional inequalities especially with respect to access to employment and public services.

In this second phase of the country's political economy, the regime pursued different strategies to mitigate and conceal the negative social effects of its new economic course besides the well-known repressive police state expanded by Ben Ali (Hibou 2006).

For instance, with respect to other countries under SAPs, Tunisia maintained – or even extended – its social policies until the beginning of the first decade of the 2000s, which continued to be the backbone of the regime's political legitimacy, although at the price of a deterioration of quality.[3] Moreover, to mitigate the social costs (and potential political conflicts) of increasing inequalities, a number of new social programmes were also launched in the 1990s and 2000s, mainly as poverty-alleviating measures with the identification of special social categories in need of intervention (such as poor women and youth living in poor regions). In 1992, the National Solidarity Fund (*Fonds de solidarité nationale* known as 26-26, the number of the bank account) was created to lead the fight against poverty, aimed at both the ''*zones d'ombre*'' (dark zones) and the part of the population not covered by the social security system (Hibou 2006).

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[3] Social security was expanded to include most categories of salaried and non-salaried workers (see, for instance, the law on social security in 2002 (Destremau 2010). In 1991, major education reform (also aimed at eradicating Islamist ''culture'') coincided with sustained public funding compared to other countries, albeit at the cost of deteriorating quality (Ben Romdhane 2011).

The apparent strength of the Tunisian welfare system, combined with the widespread public discourse of a Tunisian "economic miracle" in the 1990s, created the myth of a Tunisian "exception", or of an adjustment "*à visage humain*", also shared by Tunisia's international donors and main trade partners (World Bank, IMF, European Union, etc.), which greatly contributed to regime sustainability.

Starting in the 90s, there was a renewed attention to the category of youth in public discourse and action, as revealed by the relatively large amount of public resources devoted to job creation programmes for youth and by the proliferation of national tools and institutions in charge of implementing such programmes.[4] In 1995, the National Council of Youth (*Conseil national de la jeunesse*) was created to assist the Ministry of Youth and Childhood in coordinating youth programmes, evaluating the conditions of youth in the country, dealing with all questions concerning youth and preparing a national strategy for the promotion of youth (Sraïeb 1997:803). In 2002, the National Youth Observatory (*Observatoire national de la jeunesse*, ONJ) was established with the aim of carrying out studies on youth and charting development plans through regular consultations (every 5 years) with youth-led and youth-targeting associations.

While, in comparison to other countries (see, for example, Morocco), the Ben Ali regime tried to avoid public alarmism on the issue of youth unemployment and migration, which would have contrasted with the Tunisian "economic miracle" and success story, *youth* and youth-associated problems (delinquency, marginalization, graduate unemployment) increasingly became axioms of public discourse when dealing with the country's social problems. As in other contexts, the youth category had the advantage of portraying social marginalization as a residual consequence of the demographic bulge, rather than, for instance, as a product of concrete economic policies carried out by the regime, inasmuch as the undifferentiated category of youth helped to conceal issues of class inequalities and social conflict.

In official documents and discourse, the natural response to youth unemployment among graduates was the acceleration of the country's integration into the international market and the promotion of a larger role for the private sector. The "presidential youth programme" of the 11th Development Plan (2007-2011),[5] which was centred specifically on employment, proposed to build partnership between companies and universities, encourage Internet business and self-employment, and facilitate youth access to work through associative networks (Tunisia 2007). The growing stress on the need to increase youth education and skills, and on youth self-entrepreneurship, also had the advantage of placing the burden of youth labour market insertion on the youth themselves, rather than on the state.

At the same time, always in line with the state's growing disengagement from its post-independence social and economic regulatory functions, the regime adopted a tolerating

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[4] In 2006, the budget devoted to employment creation represented about 0.8 percent of GDP, an indicator which is said to be near the upper limit of OECD countries in terms of active employment policies (from 0.2 to 1 percent) (Haouas et al 2012). Among the major institutions in the field of employment, there were: the *Agence nationale de l'emploi et du travail indépendant* (ANETI), the *Direction générale de l'inspection du travail*, the *Banque tunisienne de solidarité* (BTS), the *Fond national de l'emploi* (FNE 21-21) and the *Agence tunisienne de formation professionnelle* (ATEP).

[5] See also 10th Development Plan (2002-2006) and 12th Development Plan (2010-2014) (Tunisia 2002 and 2010).

attitude toward informal economic activities and illegal migration (at least until the early/ mid-2000s), which were playing a key labour-absorbing function *vis-à-vis* youth, particularly in poor urban areas and marginalized regions of the southwest and the centre west (Elbaz 2009, Hibou et al 2011, Meddeb 2012).

Seen against the backdrop of the state's neo-liberal macroeconomic policies, the proliferation of youth employment and social programmes carried out since the 90s represented at best mitigating or propaganda moves – or, as argued by Hibou et al. (2011), "dilatory policies" aimed at diminishing the number of unemployed youth in official statistics by registering youth for underpaid internships and programmes. In addition, these measures had the advantage of providing new modalities of control over the unsupervised young population, who were less and less attracted to join the youth section of the regime party. Access to youth employment programmes was thus conditional on political loyalty, as in the post-independence period (Hibou et al 2011:57), but the "carrot" provided by the regime in exchange for political acquiescence under Ben Ali was not a secure public employment job; instead, it was an underpaid temporary internship.

Notwithstanding the regime's efforts, the myth of a successful Tunisian economic model capable of granting a constant growth, a diversification of the economy, constant job creation, the attraction of foreign investments and an increase in exports was more and more questioned in the 2000s (see Hibou 2006, Hibou et al 2011), as also demonstrated by the persistent flow of illegal migration among youth toward Europe, by growing popular unrest in the poorest regions (such as in the southern mining region of Gafsa, in Skhira in the southeast, and in Ben Gardane) since 2008 (Allal 2010) – and, of course, by the 2010-11 revolt which led to the fall of Ben Ali.

The 2010-2011 Tunisian "revolution" apparently represents a watershed in public discourse on "youth", or better a real explosion of the category of youth at all levels of the public debate. It was, in fact, unanimously labelled as "youth revolution", both domestically and internationally, and the day of Ben Ali's departure from the country, the 14th of January, became the "revolution and *youth* day". Youth became the keyword to understand both the root causes and the dynamics of the revolution, as well as the priority of the post-revolutionary political transition. A number of academic works and international agencies' reports were published on youth-related issues including the revolutionary role of youth, youth creativity and youth needs and exclusion.[6] In the political debate, "youth" came to embody dynamism and positive change, and the lively part of society that was repressed and mistreated under authoritarian rule. As an illustration of this, Article 8 of the new Constitution states:

> Youth are an active force in building the nation. The state seeks to provide the necessary conditions for developing the capacities of youth and realizing their potential, supports them to assume responsibility, and strives to extend and generalize their participation in social, economic, cultural and political development.[7]

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[6] For example, the World Bank and the ILO, in partnership with Tunisian local authorities, carried out youth surveys for the first time in, respectively, 2012 and 2013 (World Bank 2014, ILO and Minister of Employment 2014).
[7] An unofficial translation of the Tunisian Constitution adopted on 26 January 2014 is available here: http://www. constitutionnet.org/files/2014.01.26_-_final_constitution_english_idea_final.pdf.

In the post-uprising euphoria, the category of youth has been significantly stretched to include not only teenagers and people in their twenties, but also the population in their thirties and beyond; the revolutionary role of adults and adult-led organizations was generally downplayed in Tunisia and other "Arab spring" countries (Sukarieh and Tannock 2014:107). While "youth" became a synonym for the "marginalized" including not only (as in the pre-revolution period) "unemployed graduates [male]" but also "other socio-economic groups of youth" such as "young women and men from different backgrounds, especially from marginalized regions." "Youth exclusion", presented as a multidimensional concept embracing "economic, social, political, and cultural dimensions," became the buzzword in official policy documents requiring the development of a "multidimensional youth inclusion policy" (World Bank 2014:xiii, x and xix-xx).

All of this enthusiasm for youth since 2011 brought a further multiplication of youth-targeting programmes and initiatives, mainly carried out through international cooperation and national NGOs. However, policy solutions to youth problems appear in full continuity with the past as they propose to reinforce neo-liberal policies that have proven to have negative implications in terms of raising inequalities and quality job creation. The persistence of protests in marginalized regions such as Sidi Bouzid, particularly by unemployed youth, as well as the phenomenon of irregular migration, show that structural problems are far from being addressed.

Also, parallel to the renewed positive narrative on youth, another discourse emerged in the post-revolutionary period, resonating with the previous regime's discourse on unsupervised youth as a fertile ground for extremism and violence. This time, the negative construction of youth is applied to those Tunisian young volunteers to the Islamic State (Soufan Group 2015), and those who support local terrorist groups (such as the ones who attacked the Bardo Museum on 18 March 2015), and more broadly to the continuing mobilization of unemployed youth in the marginalized regions. From revolutionary heroes, "excluded" youth are thus potential terrorists and troublemakers undermining national cohesion and the prospects for a bright future, reflecting the need of public authorities to restore order, stability and security. Again, the explosive social conflict caused by rising inequalities and a failed development model is reduced to a question of juvenile extremist nature and to the Islamist/non-Islamist cultural divide, which can be dealt with using a mix of repression and the preaching of tolerance through educational programmes.

The following paragraphs are devoted to a more in-depth analysis of youth-relevant policies in four interrelated domains of public action, with a focus on the period since Tunisia's insertion in the neo-liberal economy: family, employment, migration and spatial planning policies. The first two domains more directly contribute to produce and define the category of youth, whereas the latter two interfere in a more subtle way in youth policies. However, all of them strongly affect "youth", both in concrete terms and as a constructed category.

2. YOUTH AND FAMILY

In Tunisia, as in the rest of the Arab world, the category of youth is constructed in relation to the institution of the family, which has gone through important transformations in the last 50 years as result of a series of family policies. Reforming the Tunisian family was after independence part and parcel of a larger state-building programme that aimed at developing a modern centralized state and at marginalizing patriarchal kin-based communities in local areas (Charrad 2001). At the heart of this ambitious project has been the Tunisian Code of Personal Status (CPS). Promulgated on 13 August 1956, in the aftermath of independence from French colonial rule, and amended in 1993,[8] it constituted a radical shift in the interpretation of Islamic laws with regard to the family (Charrad 2001). It abolished polygamy and the husband's right to repudiate his wife while it allowed women to get a divorce. Furthermore the CPS raised the minimum marriage age to 15 years for women and 18 for men, thus reducing significantly the phenomenon of early marriage. According to the 2011-2012 Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey (MICS4), only 0.4 percent of women aged 15-49 were married before the age of 15, and 5.1 percent were married before the legal age of 18 (UNICEF 2013).

In addition to the CPS, the Tunisian government launched in the 1960s an intense family planning programme, which was a forerunner in the region (Robinson and Ross 2007, Ben Romdhane 2011). It included the spread of contraceptives, an abortion law (1965 for health reasons, 1973 for woman's choice) and a network of family planning centres. The fertility rates lowered accordingly from 7.5 children per woman in the second half of the 1950s to 2 in 2005.[9]

Family planning policies and the CPS still regulate Tunisian society,[10] representing the backbone of family policies. The Code represents in fact an element of continuity from Bourguiba to Ben Ali and also to the "post-revolutionary" period 2011-2014. The revolutionary process and the emergence of the Islamist party, al-Nahda, on the Tunisian political scene has not actually altered the logic behind family policies notwithstanding different – more conservative – narratives emerging on gender relations.[11] Article 21 of the Constitution approved in January 2014 states the equality between men and women without any discrimination.

However although the family structure has strongly changed since independence and although Tunisian women have undergone significant social improvements in terms of access to education, health and lower fertility rates, the "cultural meaning of adulthood is still defined

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[8] In 1993, for the first time a Tunisian woman could pass her nationality to a child born abroad, regardless of the nationality of the child's father.

[9] However recent studies testify a counter demographic transition after the Arab uprisings in Tunisia. Since 2014 Tunisia, as other countries in the Middle East and North African region, has experienced a marked increase in the birth rate. However Youssef Courbage, research director at the National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED), does not foresee this growth as being sustainable and believes that the countries in the region will eventually return to limited fertility in a short time. See Mohsen-Finan (2015).

[10] It's worth underlining that outside Tunis and the big cities in the North the CPS had minor impact. According to Andrea Khalil, in the southern regions of Tunisia many women live according to a set of customary laws that are distinct from the CPS (Khalil 2014:53). Under Ben Ali this reality was neglected and dissimulated by the discourse of women's liberation depicted by "state feminism", which used women's rights as a tool for political legitimacy.

[11] See, for instance, the proposal by some members of Ennahda in August 2012 to insert in the Constitutional text the issue of "complementarity" between men and women rather than "equality".

by marriage" (Singerman 2007:8). Marriage is still considered the moment of transition from youth to adulthood, both for women and men, even if for the latter getting married requires first finding employment. However, currently a delay in marriage characterizes the life of many youth.

Since the 1990s-2000s, the progressive reorientation of the Tunisian economy toward a neo-liberal free market economy, incapable of creating job opportunities for young people and generating low-paid and precarious employment, has contributed to the delay of marriage and family formation, thus questioning the normative model of adulthood transition. A survey carried out by the *Office national de la famille et de la population* (ONFP) under Ben Ali confirms that the economic dimension is central to explaining the postponement of marriage: among the reasons mentioned by young people were wedding fees (34 percent), unemployment (22 percent) and difficulties in finding accommodation (22 percent) (ONFP 2010). Many young people in Tunisia, as in the rest of the Middle East, remain single for long periods of time while trying to save money to marry, but with poor labour market outcomes the financial investment in marriage takes years to accumulate (Singerman 2007, Dhillon et al 2009).

Today, the age at which an individual is first married has undergone a significant and often involuntary delay, both for women and for men, resulting in an expansion of youth status until 30 years and beyond. According to a population census of 1966, the average marriage age for Tunisian women was 19.5 and 26.3 for men, which increased respectively to 27.1 and 32.4 in 2007 (ONFP 2010) in a social context in which celibacy has become more and more important (see UNICEF 2008 and 2013). According to data provided by the ONFP (2010), in 2001 15 percent of women between 35-39 and 20 percent of men of the same age group were not married. For women aged 40-44, celibacy was higher than for men (9 percent compared to 5.7 percent for men).

While youth have increasingly delayed marriage and family formation, public discourse and action in Tunisia have continued to sustain the normative model of adulthood – according to which forming a family within legal marriage signals the passage to adulthood – with negative consequences on the lives and expectations of young people.

The postponement of marriage has prolonged the material dependence of youth on their family of origin. The period of time before being able to marry can be even longer for young people dependent on poor families. It is worth mentioning that the family is taking a new centrality at a time when neo-liberal policies are threatening state support toward this institution. In fact, under Ben Ali, family allowances saw a decline and were only provided to members belonging to the social security system, thus excluding poor families with dependents (Ben Romdhane 2006, Destremau 2010:162). At the same time, the growing importance of the family of origin in youth transition to adulthood provides a minimum safety-net, and allows authoritarian regimes to preserve the status quo and exercise control over young people by containing their anger against the regime. However, this comes at the cost of exacerbating frustration and intergenerational resentment, increasing illegal migration or drug abuse (Singerman 2007:37).

Moreover, in a social context requiring that the individual marries and constitutes his/her family in order to be considered a full adult citizen, involuntary delayed marriage is a barrier to full inclusion in the normatively defined system (Khoury and Lopez 2011:24, Dhillon et al 2009), particularly for women. As families outside of the marriage bond are not recognized, there is no space for forms of families that occur outside legal marriage. Those who fall outside the dominant model of family (such as unmarried heterosexual couples or LGBTQ individuals) have been subject to sanctions and other negative consequences. The case of the growing number of single mothers, mostly young women, who are often abandoned even by the family of origin, is a case in point (Sbouaï 2012). In this regard, Tunisian authorities under Ben Ali did not provide any kind of support for these women and their children, even if by law the potential father has to submit himself to a test to establish paternity and, once recognized as the natural father, has to pay a cheque to support the child. In the post-uprising period, the social stigma continues to be very high, and is reinforced by some political parties. In November 2011 for example, Souad Abderrahim, Ennahda deputy in the Constitutional Assembly, called single mothers a "disgrace" and declared that they "do not have the right to exist."[12]

While public and private discourses have strongly condemned and deplored sexuality outside of marriage, premarital sex has been quite widely practiced among Tunisian youth, at least partly in consequence of the postponing of the age of marriage. According to a national survey on sexuality carried out in 2009 by the ONFP and the *Association tunisienne de lutte contre les maladies sexuellement transmissibles et le SIDA* (ATL MST/SID),[13] 13.5 percent of girls and 52.5 percent of boys in the 15-24 age group have had at least one sexual intercourse. The ONFP survey revealed that the average age for the first sexual intercourse is 16.4 for girls and 17.4 for boys. The same survey also highlights that 60 percent of youth having had a sexual encounter did not use any type of contraceptive. Voluntary abortions among unmarried women are estimated at 2,500 per year since 2004, but this number should at least be multiplied by three, as many gynaecologists do not disclose the exact data to public authorities.[14] Although a national programme on young people's sexual and reproductive health was developed under Ben Ali, it had very minimal effects because it was limited to restricted categories and lacked programmes for sex education in schools (Khoury and Lopez 2011:32).

Since the 2011 revolution, the problem of marriage postponement has become a public issue mostly on the initiative of Islamists, even if the debate has not yet translated into specific policies. The 2011 Ennahda programme has, in fact, underlined the necessity of adopting policies and taking measures to help young people to have a family, explicitly addressing the problem of delayed marriage.[15] The issue was also raised by the party on several occasions. For example, in August 2014, in a recording broadcast on private radio station *Mosaique FM*

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[12] The recording of the interview with Souad Abderrahim at Monte Carlo Doualya appears in *Tuniscope*, 9 November 2011, http://www.tuniscope.com/article/10155/actualites/tunisie/souad-184612. However, the Ennahda party has not taken a common and clear position on the subject of single mothers.
[13] Quoted in "Sexualité des jeunes tunisiens: Les comportements à risque explosent", in *Tunisia Today*, 16 March 2010, http://www.tunisia-today.com/?p=59034.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Point 205 of the 2011 Ennahda electoral programme. A French version is available at http://www.businessnews.com.tn/pdf/programme-ennahdha0911.pdf.

during the annual holiday commemorating the 1956 CPS, Rached Ghannouchi drew attention to the rise in age of first marriage, along with the imbalances in family life and the rising divorce rate. As a solution to these problems, Ghannouchi called on young men to marry divorcees and women over 30: "Today, 30, 35 and 40 is still young."[16]

For their part, Salafist groups are instead promoting the spread of *urfi* marriages as a remedy to high wedding costs and premarital sex.[17] Not requiring an official contract, nor parental consent, the purpose of this union is to secure the recognition of a couple before God, even though the marriage has no value in the eyes of the law. This custom was once particularly common in poorer segments of Tunisian society, but it is strictly forbidden by the CPS, and since the 1970s it has generally disappeared. After the uprising, *urfi* marriages have once again spread in poor neighbourhoods of Tunis, and it seems that they are also becoming more common on university campuses where Salafist groups are emerging.[18] Through *urfi* marriages, young people are finding alternative ways to have "sanctioned" sex. These non-conventional marriages, also called *halal* marriages, are considered legal by some from a religious point of view, even if they are not recognized by the state. However, the growth of *urfi* marriages poses particular problems related to family law and the economic welfare of women entering these relationships as well as the children that may be born to them (Dhillon and Yousef 2009:27).

3. YOUTH AND EMPLOYMENT

After a decade of structural adjustment policies, in the second half of the 1990s youth unemployment among graduates began to increase dramatically, while a large majority of Tunisian youth, particularly from poor and marginalized regions, were more and more forced to accept jobs in informal and illegal activities with no legal/social protection and with insecure/underpaid forms of labour (Elbaz 2009, Meddeb 2012).

While public authorities were seriously concerned with growing youth unemployment, they tried to minimize the problem in an attempt to sustain the official rhetoric of Tunisian economic miracle at the heart of the regime's stability (Hibou 2006, Elbaz 2009). It is indicative of this attitude, for example, that the 10th Development Plan (2002-2006) optimistically claimed that the unemployment rate had experienced a decline from 15.6 percent in 1994 to 15 percent in 2001 as a proof of the positive results of the employment policies pursued by the government (Tunisia 2002:88). Similarly, the 11th Development Plan (2007-2011) applauded the success of economic and social policies, announcing that unemployment had declined to 14.3 percent

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[16] See "Ghannouchi to Tunisia youth: Marry divorcees and women over 30", in *Middle East Online*, 14 August 2014, http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=67599; AFP, "Tunisia Islamist chief urges men to wed women over 30", 13 August 2014, http://news.yahoo.com/tunisia-islamist-chief-urges-men-wed-women-over-235300476.html.

[17] *Urfi* or common-law marriage is a "customary" Sunni Muslim marriage contract that is not registered with state authorities. This form of marriage does not require witnesses, but it is often performed before two witnesses. Nevertheless, the relationship is often kept secret from family members and community. When women become pregnant they are unable to prove they are married and it is not possible to get a divorce, because the marriage contract is not registered. For an analysis of the urfi marriage in Islamic law, and in particular of its spread in Egypt, see Paonessa (2012).

[18] See Bensaied (2012), Baldé (2012), Tajine (2012), Belhassine (2013).

in 2006 from 15.1 percent in 2001 (Tunisia 2007:14). Public authorities very seldom referred to the unemployment of graduates as a problem, preferring more neutral expressions such as "the question of the employment of graduates" (Hafaïedh 2000). Alongside enthusiastic claims, public authorities either avoided mentioning alarming data on youth unemployment or publicized lower figures.[19] Data revealed after the 2011 uprising confirm that unemployment rates were kept artificially low by public authorities: in 1999 youth unemployment among graduates had reached a rate of 22.1 percent (versus the official rate of 4.7 percent), while in 2009 this figure had doubled to 44.9 percent (versus the official rate of 22.5 percent) (Haouari 2011).

Although the government was concealing the real figures, starting in the second half of the 1990s public action increasingly prioritized employment creation, as can be seen in the numerous initiatives and job creation programmes tailored to the educated unemployed. In 1994, Ben Ali brought together more than 20 *Conseils ministériels restreints* (CMR) to review employment, youth and job training (Hibou 2006), and in his discourse on 7 November 1997 announced the first National Conference on Employment (held in the summer of 1998). In 2000, the urgency of job creation led to the creation of the *Fonds national pour l'emploi* (21-21 from the bank account) whose main target was young people. The 10th and 11th Development Plans put employment as absolute priority to absorb the rising number of educated people entering the labour market. In early 2008, a *Comité national d'organisation de la consultation nationale sur l'emploi*, called for by Ben Ali in his discourse of 7 November 2007 and regrouping numerous experts, was formed to examine solutions to accelerate job creation in the country, particularly for graduates.

In spite of the numerous employment programmes established by public authorities, labour market problems among youth continuously and tremendously worsened in the 2000s. The neo-liberal model of development pursued under Ben Ali, which was presented as the natural response to the employment problems of the country, put employment flexibility and low-cost labour at its core. Taking advantage of the vast and disposable reserve of unemployed youth, this model pushed many of them into precarious and insecure employment conditions. With the acceleration of Tunisia's integration into the international market based on low-cost outsourcing in unskilled activities, young uneducated female workers from lower classes came to constitute the largest proportion of the workforce in export-oriented clothing industry and agriculture, at the expense of wage pressures and the security of working conditions. In the 2000s, under pressure to bring labour costs down, the tourist industry, mainly dependent on foreign tour operators, and the off-shore regime in the service sector (particularly the call centres) became major sources of low-paid and precarious jobs for unemployed youth (Ben

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[19] In 2004, for example, a report by the World Bank (2004) mentioned that the unemployment figures in the country had reached 37 percent for ages 15-17, 32 percent for ages 17-19, 29 percent for ages 20-24 and 22 percent for ages 20-29, soaring to 40 percent for graduates aged 20-24, but these figures were not circulated by Tunisian authorities (Hibou 2006:232). In the 11th Development Plan, there was no mention of the problems of "youth unemployment" and of "unemployment among graduates" (Tunisia 2007). Similarly, in September 2008, the *Consultation nationale sur l'emploi* (2008) published a diagnostic report on employment, claiming that young people (below 29 years) represented about 80 percent of all unemployed, that in certain regions unemployment among those aged 18-24 reached above 50 percent and that there was a strong gender gap. However, one month later, the official press publicizing the national conference on employment held at the end of the Consultation completely omitted any mention of these figures. See, as an example, Sellami (2008).

Sedrine 2000, Meddeb 2010, Hibou et al 2011).

Neo-liberal policies also exacerbated inequalities, particularly between young people in poor, marginalized areas of the interior and those living in the big coastal cities, where the majority of job creation was concentrated. Export-oriented agricultural policies promoted in the interior regions led to marginalized local food-producing agriculture to the advantage of big farmers/agribusiness, thus largely contributing to the rural exodus of many young men. The latter offered a low-cost manpower on which firms on coastal cities could draw, increasing labour insecurity conditions (Ayeb 2011, Hibou et al 2011), while women, including young women, increasingly took the place of young men working on family farms and in agro-business companies at very low wages.

The Gafsa Phosphate Company (GPC) in the southwest of Tunisia provides a good illustration of the dramatic impact of privatization policies on young people of the interior. Until 1975, the Company held control over the whole of social and economic life in Gafsa Governatorate (transportation, schools, electricity, and so on), and therefore was the major – and only – source of employment in the region. However, in the 20 years following its restructuring in 1985, 10,000 jobs were suppressed with dramatic effects on youth and job creation in the region (Allal 2010). The 2008 Gafsa revolt was sparked by the fraudulent recruitment procedure organized by the GPC of Gafsa in January 2008, which offered jobs to young candidates from outside the region to the disadvantage of the local population.

Public action worked to reduce the security of labour relations. To formalize labour flexibility, the regime adopted amendments to the Labour Code in 1994 and 1996 that ensured freedom of hiring and firing and allowed the use of fixed-term contracts (*contrats à durée déterminée*, CDD) and part-time work. Since then, various sources confirm that the proportion of fixed-term contracts has significantly increased, and they are now the most common type of contracts among young people (Meddeb 2010, Hibou et al 2011, World Bank 2014, Angel-Urdinola et al 2015). Within the policy agenda endorsed by major international agencies to increase global employment flexibility (Sukarieh and Tannock 2008), in 2010 Tunisia also authorized private international placement agencies to operate in the country, thus contributing to the spread of temporary and seasonal labour migration programmes among educated youth (Fargues and Martin 2010).

The plethora of employment programmes implemented in the 1990s-2010s under Ben Ali were also functional to promote the neo-liberal free market model in various ways, contributing to exacerbating precariousness and insecurity among youth. They were based on two main pillars aimed at incorporating educated youth into the market economy and promoting a business-friendly agenda: a strong impetus to self-employment (through the use of micro-credit loans, and other public incentives to youth entrepreneurship),[20] and the improvement of the employability of graduates through training and professional internship programmes.[21]

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[20] This was mainly done through the *Banque tunisienne de solidarité* (1997). The 10th and 11th Development Plans stressed the importance of encouraging private initiative and self-employment (particularly among graduated people), giving a special role to micro-enterprise creation.

[21] The first Professional Internship Programme was launched in 1987 (*Stages d'initation à la vie professionnelle*, SIVP) and was then followed by SIVP2 in 1993. After 2004, the government also launched PC50 (*Prise en charge*

These solutions were directly tied to the dominant official discourse that explained the rapid increase in unemployment among the educated labour force as simply resulting from the imbalance between the actual skills of graduates and the needs of the Tunisian labour market (World Bank 2008). This discourse completely omitted the structural factors behind the labour market problems of youth, and reflected the neo-liberal prescription "to help youth to help themselves, through providing them the skills of 'employability'" (Sukarieh and Tannock 2008:309).

In line with the neo-liberal discourse and the official rhetoric of the Tunisian miracle, the rising expansion of self-employment observed since the second half of the 1990s was thus portrayed as a signal that the employment and economic policies implemented by the government were successful in spreading the entrepreneur spirit (Tunisia 2002:34), missing the point that most "entrepreneurship activities" led by young people generate low incomes, are not covered by health insurance and operate in the informal economy.

Moreover, these employment programmes failed to provide long-term, stable and sustainable solutions to youth unemployment, and were biased against the regions of the interior. Training and professional internship programmes paid young people wages below the minimum wage and had very low rates of job insertion after programme completion. The contracts, which lasted for a short-term period (from 6 to 12 months), could be terminated unilaterally at any time and were seldom transformed into long-term contracts.[22] Regarding micro-credit loans and the promotion of self-employment, these initiatives mostly generated low profits and remained in the informal economy, thus failing to create business activities that were financially sustainable over time. Yet, all these programmes were accessible through clientelist practices under the control of the regime party, the RCD (Allal 2010, Catusse et al 2010, Destremau 2010, Hibou et al 2011).

The post-uprising period has generated a reframing of the discourse on youth and employment. While job creation for youth, particularly in marginalized regions, has continued to be claimed as the major policy priority by all governments and political forces,[23] the category of "youth as a problem" has been extended to include not only the educated unemployed, but also young people working under precarious conditions with temporary and seasonal contracts (World Bank 2014, Angel-Urdinola et al 2015, ILO and Minister of Employment 2014), and the so-called NEETs, namely discouraged young people who are not in education, employment or training (World Bank 2014). It may be indicative of this changing discourse that a recent World Bank publication on Tunisia was entitled "Labor Policy to Promote *Good Jobs* in Tunisia" (Angel-Urdinola et al 2015). Similarly, a report jointly published by the ILO and the Minister of Employment argued that it does not suffice that a young person gets his/her first job to transit to active life, but this job must satisfy the criteria of decent work, namely personal satisfaction and permanent employment (ILO and Minister of Employment 2014).

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par l'Etat de 50 pourcent des salaires versés) and PC75. In 2009, after a reorganization of the employment schemes, main internship programmes were: the Labour Market Access and Employability Programme (CAIP) for graduates and non-graduates; the Voluntary Civil Service (SCV) that subsidized the costs of hiring university graduates in civil society organizations; the Employment Programme for Graduates of Higher Education (CIDES) and the Youth Back-to-Work Programme.

[22] See Ben Sedrine (2000), Barrouhi (2006).

[23] See, for example, the electoral programmes of Ennahda (2011, 2014) and Nida Tounes (2014).

In spite of this changing discourse, however, the post-uprising analytical and policy framework appears to be in strong continuity with the past, remaining firmly based on the neo-liberal agenda. The Deauville partnership, as well as the loan agreement finalized with the IMF in May 2013, essentially commit Tunisia to pursue, and even push forward, the same economic policies as in Ben Ali's regime. Rather than rethinking the Tunisian development model, the Jebali, Larayedh and Essid governments have thus confirmed their full support for a free market economy.

The education gap rhetoric remains central to explain "youth exclusion" from the Tunisian labour market. For educated youth, like in the past, the problem primarily lies in the mismatch between the competencies required by the labour market and what young people study in higher education (World Bank 2014). Similarly, low education in rural areas is presented as the key driver of labour market informality among youth (World Bank 2014, ILO and Minister of Employment 2014). Although there is a general recognition about the predominance of youth employment in the informal sector, the prevailing reading is that job informality is driven by inflexible labour regulations, associated with open-ended contracts, high income taxes on wages and the social security contribution (World Bank 2014). A positive view prevails with regard to self-employment and entrepreneurship, which continue to be invoked by political parties and international agencies as the main solution to youth unemployment.[24] In fact, instead of questioning the past economic policies, public authorities and international agencies share the view that the major problem with previous employment projects, including entrepreneurship promotion programmes – alongside the fragmentation of interventions – is their focus on university graduates in coastal/industrial regions, and therefore the exclusion of disadvantaged youth without a secondary education (see World Bank 2014, ILO and Minister of Employment 2014).

As a result, post-uprising governments have responded to youth unemployment with the same employment programmes as in Ben Ali's era.[25] There has been an intensification of professional training programmes aimed at responding to employer demands and labour market needs,[26] as well as youth entrepreneurship programmes that have now been extended to marginalized regions.[27] As public resources in Tunisia are under stress, most of these programmes appear

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[24] See World Bank (2014) and the electoral programmes by Nida Tounes (2014) and Ennahda (2011, 2014).

[25] See, for example, the five priorities set by the new government during its first 100 days with regard to job creation: "Rencontre avec la presse autour des 5 priorités du ministère de l'Emploi", in *DirectInfo*, 6 April 2015, http://directinfo.webmanagercenter.com/?p=226959; "Lancement du programme chèque emploi", in *DirectInfo*, 26 December 2014, http://directinfo.webmanagercenter.com/?p=205065.

[26] See the AMAL programme, established under the first Ghannouchi government and renewed under the Jebali government, which took inspiration from a previous programme implemented under Ben Ali; the *Programme d'encouragement à l'emploi* launched in August 2012; the programme "*chèque d'amélioration de l'employabilité*" on December 2014 ("Lancement du programme chèque emploi", in *DirectInfo*, 26 December 2014, http://directinfo. webmanagercenter.com/?p=205065); the PEJTUN project "*Emplois décents pour la jeunesse tunisienne*" signed in May 2015 between Tunisia and ILO.

[27] See *Intilak* started in October 2011; the national programme for micro-project financing in November 2012; the *Fonds d'amitié tuniso-qatari* launched in 2013; the programme *Fonds d'accompagnement et de financement des PME* in 12 governatorates including Médenine, Tataouine, Gabes, Kébili, Tozeur, Gafsa, Kasserine, SidiBouzid, Kairouan, le Kef, Siliana and Jendouba launched in May 2015; the project in Medenine and Tataouine (see "Programme suisse à la BFME: Lancement de 100 projets et création de 800 emplois", in *DirectInfo*, 28 May 2015,

to be largely financed and promoted by joint efforts of international and private regional actors. It is worth mentioning the growing role played by Qatar-based organizations such as the *Fonds d'amitié tuniso-qatari*, which was launched in 2013, and Silatech, which, in addition to financing numerous youth entrepreneurship programmes in Tunisia and throughout the Arab world, also offered generous financial support for the preparation of the Word Bank's 2014 report on Tunisian youth.

4. YOUTH AND MIGRATION

As labour market conditions have deteriorated since the mid-1990s, the share of young Tunisians that have intentions to leave the country has dramatically increased. The desire among Tunisian youth to emigrate permanently seems to be the highest in the region (Silatech 2010:211, Khoury and Lopez 2011:36). Migration affects both real life and the imaginary of young people in Tunisia. Consequently, in the public discourse, the category of youth is strictly associated to the migration phenomenon.

Motivations to migrate are strongly determined by gender, and the majority of migrants are young men (ILO 2013, Institut national de la statistique 2013).[28] Employment is the main driver for both men and women, but at very different levels: 85.6 percent of men and 38.4 percent of women migrate in search of better employment perspectives. For 36.3 percent of women, family reasons (reunification and marriage) trigger migration, while this is the case for only 3.8 percent of men. Educational purposes apply to 16.9 percent of women and only 5 percent of men (ILO 2013).

Under Ben Ali, migration was a strategic axis of Tunisian public action to cope with the failure of the country's economic model and the consequent growth in youth unemployment, although officially this strategy was followed in a discreet and ambiguous manner (Hibou et al 2011).[29] If, until the early 2000s, the migration issue was openly addressed within national economic plans, as it was in the 10th Development Plan (2002-2007), then the migration of educated Tunisians was no longer presented, at least publically, as a tool for coping with employment problems.[30] As a security-based approach to migration became a priority in Euro-Mediterranean relations from the end of the 1990s, the Tunisian official discourse and policies changed drastically, particularly with regard to illegal migration. Migration policies in Tunisia started being characterized by the fight against irregular migrations as required by the EU and its member states. With the Euro-Mediterranean partnership (alias Barcelona Process), launched in 1995, economic cooperation between the two shores of the Mediterranean became strictly linked to the involvement of governments of third Mediterranean countries in controlling illegal migration (Pepicelli 2004). Co-operation and assistance became subjected to the conditionality of "good" co-operation with EU in terms of border controls and migration flow monitoring.

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http://directinfo.webmanagercenter.com/?p=238494).

[28] Migrant women are still a minority compared to men. However, the percentage of Tunisian women who prefer to migrate is considered the highest in the Arab world. See Silatech (2010:212).

[29] Irregular migrations were in fact punished by national laws approved in the 1960s and 1970s.

[30] See, for example, the 11th Development Plan (Tunisia 2007).

From the late 1990s and early 2000s, in order to foster its international recognition as "a privileged partner" or "*bon élève*" (Hibou et al 2011:76), Tunisia signed several bilateral and multilateral agreements with Southern European countries and the EU concerning border controls, entry and readmission of Tunisian nationals and third-country nationals. On 3 February 2004, three months after its Moroccan neighbour and two months after promulgating a new law to combat terrorism, Tunisia reformed its migration law, reinforcing penal sentences against irregular migration.

The reinforcement of border controls by the Tunisian government and the 2004 migration law were instrumental not only to show compliance with EU expectations, but also to allow the regime to strengthen its control over society at large and youth in particular, the latter forming the majority of actual and potential migrants. Negating the delivery or renewal of passports to Tunisians who were not members of the ruling party, or were suspected of opposing the regime, was aimed at discouraging social protests, particularly among unemployed youth in poor marginalized regions (Cassarino 2014:105). Given the discretionary power of the judiciary and the ambivalence of the 2004 migration law, those left behind could also be easily accused of "participating in" or "preparing for" illegal border crossings if they were not acquiescent to the regime (Cassarino 2014:106).

Moreover, while *vis-à-vis* the EU (in official talks and negotiations) the Ben Ali regime showed itself to be taking seriously the fight against unauthorized migration, domestically "illegal migration" was seldom portrayed as a major security issue, continuing to be tolerated as safety valve for youth unemployment (Cassarino 2014:107). At the end of the 2000s, it became clear that migration policies based on the attempt at organizing legal migration in exchange of Tunisia's commitment to struggle against illegal migration were not producing the expected results. With the acceleration of neo-liberal policies, illegal migration did not decrease at all and the brain drain of educated youth coming from the middle and upper class continued to increase (Ben Romdhane 2011:168), while the percentage of unemployed and inactive youth in the country continued to grow (Hibou et al 2011).

The fall of the Ben Ali regime in January 2011 represented, at least at the beginning, a turning point in the migration policies and in the management of migration flows. In the absence of domestic security controls at borders, an unprecedented outflow of Tunisian migrants tried to reach Europe. In less than three months (January-March 2011), 20,258 Tunisians arrived on the Italian island of Lampedusa (Frontex 2011:29, Boubakri 2013:5). Huge flows continued even during the following months, doubling the average presence of Tunisian migrants on Italian shores. It is estimated that more than 40,000 of the 51,000 Tunisians who emigrated abroad between May 2011 and May 2012 were young and mostly male (IOM 2014). In the attempt to escape from Tunisia, hundreds of migrants disappeared in the Mediterranean Sea. As a consequence, one of the first issues faced by the post-Ben Ali government was to deal with the still open dossier of the "missing migrants" lost during sea crossings between March and May 2011 (Smith 2012).

In the first months after the revolts, a new discourse on migration emerged, and in 2011 the position of State Secretary for Immigration and Tunisians Residing Abroad was created under the Ministry for Social Affairs, in charge of coordinating the governmental structures responsible for migration and building a comprehensive political strategy in order to integrate

migration in development strategies of Tunisia. Part of this new strategy towards migration was aimed at strengthening the link with the Tunisian diaspora, and thus political participation of Tunisian residents abroad became a priority. For the first time in the history of Tunisia, out of the 217 National Constituent Assembly members, 18 MPs were elected to represent the Tunisian diaspora. Some of these elected members had migrated with their parents at a young age and had grown up abroad, mostly in Europe (see the case of Italy and France). Moreover the creation of the *Haut conseil des tunisiens à l'étranger* was also planned, to sustain links with Tunisian expatriates and to ensure that the new government would take into consideration the demands and aspirations of its children abroad; but it has not yet been established.

Thus, the new discourse on migration in the post-revolutionary Tunisia focused on two main goals: on one side strengthening the link with Tunisian citizens living in European countries, and on the other transcending a security-based perspective in the management of irregular emigration in favour of a human-rights-based policy. The new political parties openly criticized both the role of "guardian" of European borders imposed by the EU and the double standards of EU in dealing with the concept of human rights. "We do not have to be soldiers or policemen of Europe. This role-play should be stopped," said a member of the Democratic Pole (Boubakri 2013:19). Rached Ghannouchi, the leader of Ennahda, in December 2012 stated: "We say to Europe that illegal immigration will no longer bother you. We will no longer give you our graduates as a gift. Tunisia needs all its sons and, in a few years, it will be a country which attracts talent rather than turning talent away."[31]

However, four years after the regime change, the security-based approach continues to be dominant, as required by the new European migration policy project, the Mobility Partnership.[32] Indeed, although the 2014 Constitution guarantees the right for "every citizen" to leave the country (Article 24) and to return (Article 25), the current legal provisions constrain this right and criminalize "irregular exit" and subsequent return of Tunisian nationals. Moreover, while the tone of criticism towards European migration policies by political parties in power has become weaker, the issue of migration has not been central in the internal political programmes and activities.[33] At the same time, campaigns to advise youth against illegal migration that are mainly funded by international organizations, such as the IOM project Salemm (Solidarity with the children from Maghreb and Mashreq), are gaining a certain visibility (Sayadi 2014). Illegal migrations – although there is no reliable data – are in fact characterized by a very high percentage of young and single men under 30, who have low education levels (not above secondary school)[34] and are unemployed, coming from the low-middle class (ILO 2013).

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[31] Quoted in Boubakri (2013:19). See, for example, Chennoufi (2011).
[32] European Commission, *EU and Tunisia establish their Mobility Partnership*, 3 March 2014, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-14-208_en.htm.
[33] For example, despite the requests of NGOs and civil society, a ministry to deal with the migration issue has not been created, only the position of State Secretary for Immigration under the Ministry for Social Affairs, which was reconfirmed even in the Essid government (2015). See Ferchichi (2015).
[34] However, it should be underlined that the new generation of Tunisian migrants show higher education levels than the previous generation, in which 85 percent had primary school education. More than half of migrants today have achieved secondary education or more, and among them 15 percent have a university degree (ILO 2013).

5. YOUTH AND SPATIAL PLANNING

Tunisia is a country of great spatial inequalities. Probably the most well-known of such inequalities is the regional imbalance between the big cities of the coastal area and the mainly agricultural regions of the interior. But also within the mainly urban and most dynamic region of the coast, there are fundamental inequalities between the popular and largely "informal" urban and suburban areas and the middle to upper class neighbourhoods. Spatial inequalities affect the life of youth and youth transition to adulthood in many ways as they imply great differences in access to and quality of public services, employment and housing, as well as in patterns of mobility. Inasmuch as the place of residence is also associated to different and gendered patterns of youth leisure and sport activities – as witnessed, for instance, by the many accounts of "Western style" cafes and other leisure places where upper-middle class girls can easily spend time by themselves or with their friends – and, by contrast, the exclusively male milieu of "Arab" cafes in lower class neighbourhoods where unemployed boys spend their days away from overcrowded parent homes while waiting to migrate (Sebastiani 2014). In sum, the experience of being young is deeply affected by the region and/or neighbourhood one is born into.

Tunisian regional inequalities – a heritage of colonial times, only partially addressed after independence[35] – were greatly exacerbated by Tunisia's gradual insertion in the neo-liberal global economy that further concentrated economic, political, administrative and cultural power in the coastal cities, while increasingly delegating local development to market forces.

At least since the 90s, in fact, Tunisian spatial planning policies have aimed at promoting a *selective* and *differentiated* development directed at improving the productivity and competitiveness of those regions offering comparative advantages with respect to the global market.[36]

The "underdevelopment" of the interior regions was acknowledged by the Ben Ali regime, although – in line with the myth of a Tunisian "economic miracle" – it was presented as a residual consequence of the development process and largely underestimated. The assessment of the developmental deficits in these regions was made on reductive criteria, namely access to water and electricity or need for better connection with the country's road networks (Hibou et al 2011:39). In official documents, the mantra was the promotion of economic growth by a competitive insertion into the global market, while at the same time preserving a minimum of spatial and social cohesion through alleviating the most perverse consequences of the pursuit of the first objective. Regional development programmes were thus implemented starting in the 90s. The main vehicles for regional "development" were for instance the already mentioned poverty-alleviating programmes directed towards the "*zones d'ombre*" (dark zones), such as the 26-26 and the Employment Fund 21-21, the latter aimed at educated youth in underdeveloped regions. These solidarity funds collected "private" donations to be distributed to a selected number of beneficiaries on the basis of political loyalty or connections, thus extending the regime's political control through patrimonial distribution of

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[35] For more details on the post-independence spatial planning approaches, see Ben Letaief (2008), Dhaher (2010), Belhedi (2011).
[36] See, for example, the 11th Development Plan, 2007-2011 (Tunisia 2007).

small benefits to a selected number of individuals in areas in which the state had in practice fully disengaged from a social and developmental role.

The same necessity of social and political control in the framework of neo-liberal policies and state disengagement as a services provider guided the regime's urban policies under Ben Ali. Today, a near-majority of urban households cannot afford to purchase a modest housing unit, a problem that is likely to worsen due to rising housing costs and increasing land scarcity, while informal housing continues to expand (UN Habitat 2011). Housing costs coupled with employment problems greatly affect the youth of middle to lower social strata, leading to a delay in marriage and late cohabitation of parents with their children, creating intergenerational tensions and complicating the transition to adulthood.

The dimension of the problem was minimized under the Ben Ali regime, and Tunisia was presented as a positive example of successful housing policies and urban planning (compared to other countries in the region). Official data pointed to more than 80 percent of households owning their house, and to a residual number of households without services such as water, electricity and sanitation (Chabbi 2012).

Massive urbanization and the overextension of the great Tunis urban area have been mainly presented as determined by the rural exodus and by the demographic transition.[37] At a closer look, however, urban disparities do not seem to be the product only of residual factors associated with the development process. Rather, they are mainly produced by the increased reliance on market forces in urban planning, by selective housing policies that were aimed at the middle salaried class while neglecting lower social strata and by the tolerating attitude of the state with respect to informal or illegal solutions to rising housing costs.

Since the 70s, in fact, housing policies have produced an urban exodus from the overcrowded city centre to the periphery and the sub-periphery, with the consequence of greatly enlarging the urban space and reducing the population density.[38] The lower social strata excluded from public housing policies found ''spontaneous'' private solutions in what came to be known as *habitat spontané péri-urbain* (suburban informal housing). Suburban informal housing is made of brick and cement, rather than adobe and makeshift materials. However, it still represents a form of urban marginalization without any urban development planning and services. Furthermore, the urban overextension caused other problems, such as increasing the distance from home to workplace, limiting access to the city centre for the affected population and creating urban ghettos.

Again with the aim of mitigating the most perverse effect of urban marginalization, in 1991-92 the regime launched a National Programme for the Rehabilitation of Poor Neighbourhoods

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[37] According to official data, in fact, as highlighted by Chabbi (2012:5), both rural exodus and demographic growth have been substantially reduced since the 1980s-1990s. Great urbanization mainly provoked by the rural exodus was a phenomenon of the 1960s that lasted until the early 70s as witnessed by the ''*gourbivilles*'' and by the growing urban population density in that period (Ben Letaief 2008, Dhaher 2010, Chabbi 2012).
[38] At the beginning of the 1970s, different housing policy tools were created, such as the *Agence foncière d'habitat* and the *Caisse national d'épargne-logement* aimed at building residential areas for the middle class with facilitated access to credit. Tunis went from 110 inhabitants per hectare in 1970 to 85, 15 years later (Chabbi 2012:18).

(*Programme national de réhabilitation des quartiers populaires*, PNRQP).[39] The programme covered road, sanitation and house improvements (but not urban development). A conspicuous amount of public resources was involved in the rehabilitation project (Chabbi 2012), also with the aim of contrasting deviant behaviour among youth associated with marginalization (delinquency, drug abuse and religious extremism). The effects in terms of improving the living conditions of the population were unimpressive and the programme led to corruption and speculation on the land to be covered by the national programme, as well as to the creation of more illegal settlements (Chabbi 2012).

As in other domains of public action, the main aim of the urban rehabilitation projects – which at best were palliative measures to the most extreme situations – was in fact the reinforcement of public control through co-opting measures. The informality of popular neighbourhoods and the nearly complete absence of the welfare and development state did not imply the absence of the political hand of the regime. Informal neighbourhoods never lacked the presence of local offices of the regime party or local administrators acting as mediators between the inhabitants and the political apparatus (Legros 2005:98).

Tunisian spatial inequalities came to the spotlight thanks to the popular revolts of 2010-11 that originated precisely – as other protest cycles before them – from the poorest interior regions before reaching the capital (Ayeb 2011). Following the revolts, the discourse on spatial inequalities as the main driver of revolts became mainstream in the public debate and in the broader production of knowledge. The "revolution" was also unanimously proclaimed as a youth-led re-appropriation of the public space. Many accounts of the days of the revolution underlined both a re-appropriation of the public sphere with the end of "fear", which permeated the life of ordinary Tunisian citizens under Ben Ali (Hibou 2011), and also the feeling of unity and equality in the liberating side-by-side presence in the street of people from different backgrounds converging in the central boulevards of Tunis from the poor interior region, informal and popular urban areas and upper-middle-class neighbourhoods.

As the revolutionary momentum of the first months gradually fatigued, people slowly discovered that inequalities and misunderstandings where still there, rooted as they are in resilient power relations. Public discourse once again put forward the narrative of youth in marginalized areas as a breeding ground for all sorts of extremist behaviour and deviance, as the heroes of the revolution – unemployed youth – turned again into thugs (Allal 2011).

This notwithstanding, faithful to the general revolutionary discourse, spatial disparities are at the top of the agenda for the main political parties, without any major difference in approach. The post-revolution Constitution enshrines the state's commitment to sustainable development and regional equity (Articles 12 and 129), and even guarantees the allocation of Tunisian natural resources to advance this aim (Article 136). President Essebsi, elected in 2014, has vowed to address economic problems to "realize the promises of the revolution: dignity, employment, health and regional equality."

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[39] In fact, already in 1981 the Urban Rehabilitation and Renovation Agency (*Agence de réhabilitation et de rénovation urbaine*, ARRU) had been set up with the aim of providing services to poor urban areas in various parts of the country, also following the crisis provoked by the 1978-79 wave of protest.

The public discourse, however, has not yet translated into any concrete policy change, while the uncertainty of the transition phase further worsened socio-economic conditions, especially in underdeveloped areas. Also, owning to lack of government control, there has been an augmentation of illegal settlements (Chabbi 2012). Supposedly, a new housing strategy is to be launched after a period of consultation, as recently announced by public authorities,[40] but the post-revolutionary measures seem dangerously similar to the pre-revolutionary ones.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis of the four selected domains of public action reveals common patterns of policies and concerns when dealing with youth.

The main determinant of changing socio-economic conditions for the entire population (as well as for youth) has been, since the late 80s, neo-liberal macroeconomic policies. In this context, the state has increasingly renounced its social regulating functions in many different aspects of citizens' life, including transition from childhood to adulthood, which was gradually left to market forces at the cost of rising inequalities and social conflict as an increasing number of youth could not follow the normatively prescribed path traced by the previous generation, such as finding a decent job, having a home and starting a family. Unsupervised and "lost-in-transition" youth then started to represent a threat to social order in the eyes of the regime, which reacted with a mixed set of policies aimed at concealing the problem, somehow mitigating it and, most of all, at controlling the "excluded" through a mix of co-optation measures and repression. At the same time, the regime had a tolerating attitude towards informal and illegal activities such as informal black-market jobs, informal housing, illegal migration and so on, which acted as a relief valve to youth social malaise.

Since the 2011 "revolution", the unanimous adoption – by the different transition governments, the main institutional political parties and international agencies – of *youth* as the most relevant analytical framework for the diagnosis of Tunisia's social and economic problems, has had the effect of obscuring and undermining alternative analytical frames such as class, thus downplaying broader (and potentially disruptive) social and economic conflicts. This is quite evident in official documents and policy literature in which the concept of "youth exclusion" is completely detached from a systemic analysis of the interplay between class, status and political power. As the pre-revolutionary, neo-liberal system is not questioned at the official level, policies of "youth inclusion" focus almost exclusively on education, formal and informal training and generally expanding youth skills to integrate youth into the market-regulated system. Under these conditions, "youth inclusion" could – if and when successful – represent for many youth integration in the current market-regulated system under conditions of exploitation. In this sense, it is precisely through the category of youth that normative ideas about duties and rights from the previous welfare and development state era are continuing to be renegotiated with the entire population.

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[40] See the document for a new housing strategy (*Nouvelle stratégie de l'habitat 2014*) on the Ministry website, http://www.mehat.gov.tn/index.php?id=330&L=1.

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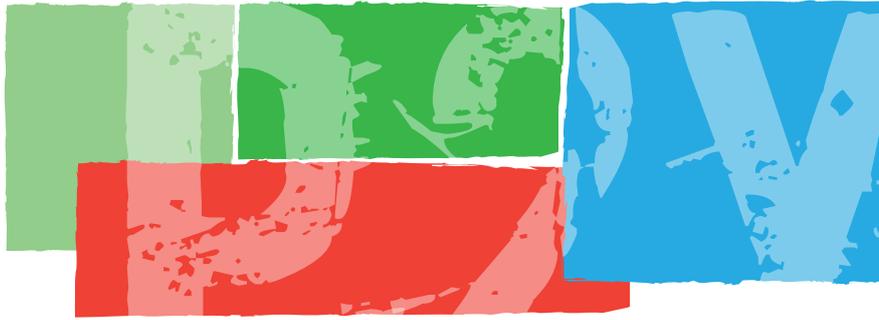
POWER2YOUTH is a research project aimed at offering a critical understanding of youth in the South East Mediterranean (SEM) region through a comprehensive interdisciplinary, multi-level and gender sensitive approach. By combining the economic, political and socio-cultural spheres and a macro (policy/institutional), meso (organizational) and micro (individual) level analysis, POWER2YOUTH explores the root causes and complex dynamics of the processes of youth exclusion and inclusion in the labour market and civic/political life, while investigating the potentially transformative effect of youth collective and individual agency. The project has a cross-national comparative design with the case studies of Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Occupied Palestinian Territories and Turkey. POWER2YOUTH's participants are 13 research and academic institutions based in the EU member states, Norway, Switzerland and South East Mediterranean (SEM) countries. The project is mainly funded under the European Union's 7th Framework Programme.