

UNIVERSITY AND SOCIETY
WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF
ARAB REVOLUTIONS
AND
NEW HUMANISM



edited by Mohsen El Khouni, Mouldi Guessoumi,
and Mohamed-Salah Omri

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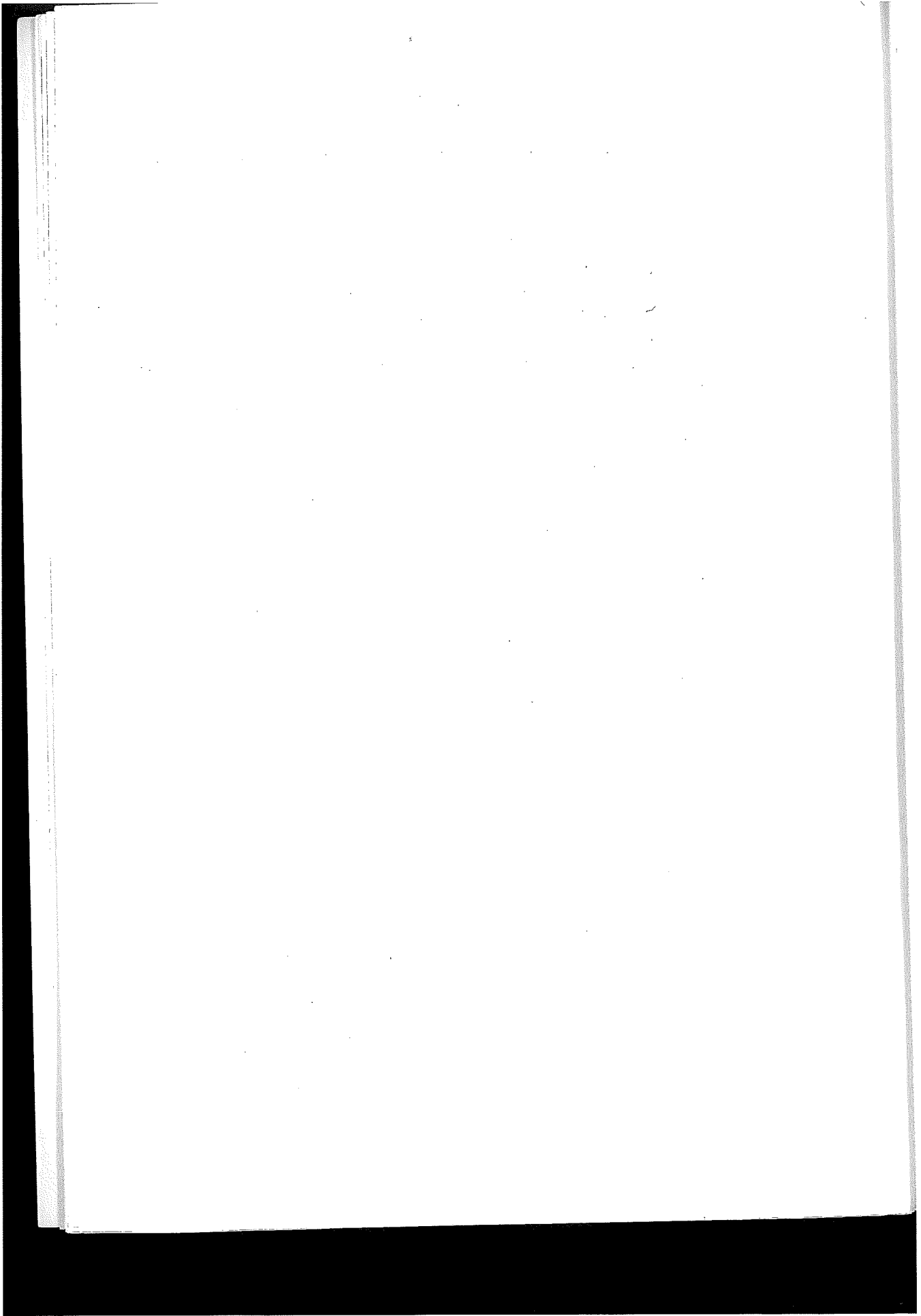
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Introduction

Mohsen El Khouni, Mouldi Guessoumi, Mohamed-Salah Omri

Ending what proved to be his most enduring treatise on colonial repression and revolution, Frantz Fanon urged his readers to look beyond self, nation and colonial enemy to a new humanism, which must hold Europe and the empire accountable for their abuse of parts of the human species but does not hold them hostage to that past as long as they were ready to recognise its legacy and embrace this humanism. He wrote at the time: "Come, brothers, we have too much work to do for us to play the game of the rear-guard. Europe has done what she set out to do and on the whole she has done it well; let us stop blaming her, but let us say to her firmly that she should not make such a song and dance about it. We have no more fear; so let us stop envying her".¹

Fanon's call has continued to reverberate with renewed hope with each revolt or uprising in the colonies and former colonies in particular. It should also reverberate with movements of radical change in Europe and America as well, despite an aversion to Fanon's message in the metropole, no matter how strong was J-P. Sartre's endorsement of Fanon's vision, which he expressed in his 1961 preface to the book. Fanon called for inventiveness and creativity: "The Human condition, plans for mankind, and collaboration between men in those tasks which increase the sum total of humanity are new problems, which demand true inventions" (312-13). He rejected all imitation or replanting of European institutions. For while European thought contained the germs of solutions, her actions did not follow. She has become "motionless" and therefore cannot move the world forward (314). "Let us reconsider the question of mankind. Let us reconsider the question of cerebral reality and of the cerebral mass of all humanity, whose connections must be increased, must be re-humanised" (314). That re-humanisation should be a historical task not an idealised "return to nature" or to an idealised past. This is how we should understand Fanon's definition of national culture as a work in history not a return to primordial identity or repetition of "glorious" pasts. That is why he ties national culture to freedom from colonial rule and considers it the "very heart of the struggle for freedom" (233). The dialectic between the two is what accounts for renewal and inventiveness of a national culture: "The fight for national existence sets culture moving and opens up to it the doors of creation" (16). This way it does not only liberate itself but also takes part in

1 - Frantz FANON, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, New York, Grove Press, 1963, p. 355.

the liberation and reinvention of the coloniser's culture as well.

Likewise, Fanon dismisses the rat race of "catching up" with Europe, often used to exploit and crush human beings. "No, we do not want to catch up with anyone. What we want to do is to go forward all the time, night and day, in the company of Man, in the company of all men", (315) careful not to leave anyone behind. The future lies, not in the past of Europe or in its present "imitations" in former colonies. For "if we want humanity to advance a step further, if we want to bring it up to a different level than that which Europe has shown it, then we must invent and we must make discoveries" (215). The people of Europe themselves seek not their reflection but new ways and forms of salvation from those very ways. "For Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man" (316). In the essay "Concerning violence", Fanon stresses that the role of Europe is no longer to lead, since it lead humanity to the disasters we all know, but to support this new direction for humanity: "What it [the third world] expects from those who for centuries have kept it in slavery is that they will help it to rehabilitate mankind, and to make it victorious everywhere, once and for all" (106). In his contribution to the present volume, R. A. Judy writes: "In other words, Fanon called us to struggle with achieving a new conceptualization of the human, of what it means to be human in modernity, and to make that struggle the basis for working toward a truly inclusive world of social justice and freedom. That this new humanism is radically revolutionary and is coming out of Africa was, for Fanon, a certain realizable possibility." Daniel Mosquera's discussion - in the present volume as well -, of agency among what is thought to be counter-historical categories of *lumpenproletariat*, gives a glimpse of the types of inventiveness Fanon was talking about.

I.

It is this call that the project on New Revolutions and New Humanism heeded and endeavoured to revive at a time marked by the renewal of aspirations for the restoration of human dignity and social justice in former colonies as in former metropolises, inaugurated in the first by the variously labelled revolutions and in the latter by the Occupy and the *indignados* movements. Both mass movements put human dignity at the centre of their demands. The 2011 revolutions, in Tunisia and Egypt in particular, spurred a number of analysts to the urgency to revise their analytical tools but also to stand in solidarity and in support of these movements from their various positions and locations. Soon after the Tunisian revolution, the collective overseeing the periodical *boundary 2*, on the initiative of R. A. Judy, took upon itself the task

of listening to how Tunisians made sense of their own revolution through a pioneering dossier, *The Tunisia Dossier*, (*boundary 2*, vol. 39, no 1 2012) put together by R. A. Judy and Mohamed-Salah Omri. In the introduction, Judy writes: "The Tunisian writings collected here intimate the emergence of a collective intelligence and imagination along the lines of something else, the new humanism Fanon detected in the revolutionary moments of Africa some sixty years ago" (16.) Judy's more extensive elaboration on this point is the subject of his paper in the present book. He also links this with what Edward Said calls "democratic humanism" (Said's views are treated more extensively in Turki's paper in the present volume). The global lesson Judy draws from this is an important one, and concerns the Arab world as much as it does the United States and Europe. "How can we witness such a struggle for our combined humanity without asking ourselves: What are we doing to repair the world?" (16).² Judy and Omri decided to reach out to collective thinking on the meaning of all that. There was a need to start a global conversation and Tunisia was an apt place for it. A collaboration was launched between academics from Tunisian, Arab, European and American universities, notably the universities of Tunis, El-Manar, Oxford and Pittsburgh represented by R. A. Judy, Mohamed-Salah Omri, Mohsen El Khouni and Mouldi Guessoumi.

The first significant exploration of the theme took place in the symposium *New Humanism and Arab revolutions* (Tunis, 30-31 October 2014) - the continuation of preparatory work led by the research laboratory "Recherches sur les lumières, la modernité et la diversité culturelle (LMDC)" - a multi-disciplinary conference which brought together researchers working in the fields of philosophy, sociology, economics, media studies, history and cultural and literary studies. Its ambition was to focus on theoretical questions and to conceive of hypotheses whose validity could be tested in the long term. There, gathered academics from the Americas, Europe, India, Africa,

2 - In the dossier, Omri spoke of a poetics of dignity and revolution through the iconic poet Mohamed Sghaier Ouled Ahmed who has since left us (he died 5 April, 2016); Guessoumi analysed the social grammars of the revolution, which he would later develop into an important book in Arabic (*The society of the revolution*, Tunis, Faculté des lettres et des sciences humaines, Mannouba, 2015); Abdelajlil Temimi introduced Anglophone readers to his unparalleled observatory of the Tunisian revolution, which would develop in time to a multi-volume publication (*Observatoire de la révolution tunisienne*); young men and women, several of whom would become politicians, talked about the unchartered future to which they felt entitled for the first time in their lives; the historian Ahmed Jdey analysed the enduring pain caused by historical inequalities among the country's regions and its sporadic eruption into popular revolts since the 19th century; Mounir Saidani analysed revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces in the country and Mustapha Aloui provided an eyewitness account of his experience as a Kasserine-based activist.

the Arab World, and of course Tunisia, to debate the meaning of what had happened in the Arab region and think of its global significance.

The call for the symposium contended that it would be difficult to draw theories about the nature of Arab revolutions at that stage. The observer was limited to diagnosis, description and asking questions. Yet, it was obvious that these revolutions have shaken up the political, social, cultural, and value systems, and stirred up what seemed stagnant in individual and communal consciousness. It thus pushed those who foretold the death of the subject and of the values of freedom, dignity, and equality to rethink these values before issuing premature final pronouncements. For those who were misled by neo-liberalism, those who relegated the peoples of the South to the "swamp" of history or announced the end of history, the revolutionary crisis which swept through the Arab world brought back politics, history and active social subjects to the fore of the global sphere. What then needed to be revised? And what needed to be discovered, to recall Fanon's words?

First of all, attention needed to be directed to the concept. The sparkle which started in Tunisia in December 2010 was soon dubbed "The Jasmine Revolution" by the Western media imaginary; and when it swept through the Arab world, it called it "The Arab Spring" after The Spring of Peoples in 19th century Europe. But is it necessary to adopt the Western modern register to delineate concepts and describe the prospects of what is taking place? (Zeineb Cherni's contribution to the present book is important in this regard). Is this the effect of globalisation and the new imperial order, as Salah Mosbah argues in his paper? Or is it still possible to aspire for an alternative globalisation which would allow us to renounce the presumed conflict of civilisations and open up a new humanist turn? Does the period since the start of the movements allow us to find a more appropriate concept? Is what has taken place indeed a revolution, an uprising or something else in need of definition? Which criteria would the concept of humanism allow us to apply to the "Arab revolutions"? Is it a distant echo of the European humanism and of the Enlightenment or does it usher in a new humanism? Whatever the answer to these questions, it is worth asking: What future awaits a postcolonial state where events are governed by centres of influence which are international and at the service of specific geopolitical interests? The answer to this question is at the heart of the project and finds echoes in all the papers. The new and the future are key words in the Kamel Mahdi paper which wonders what's new in light of the overbearing global political economy dictated by financial institutions; while Mohamed Turki focusses on the future of democracy and humanism with reference to Edward Said and Karray Aouichaoui zeros in on the new form of citizenship ushered in by the revolution. Salah Mosbah deal with these issues

by referring to Fanon while Firoze Manji attempts to refocus debate on the contribution of African thinkers to the debate. Abdeljalil Temimi provides a reiteration of the significance of Tunisian revolution to the Arab world and globally.

Secondly, How can we address the tension between lived experiences and methodological limitations? The study of Arab revolutions has become a key item on the agenda of research. But what are the appropriate methodologies? Should we resort to tools developed in the universities of the Centre and the North which tend to make everything turn around “terrorism” and “political Islam” or those which fall within new Orientalism? At the cognitive level, to what extent do these revolutions prepare us to explore new theoretical horizons for a new vision capable of bringing about a revolution in methodology?

To what extent are we prepared to accept the new collective imaginary born within the Arab culture and expressed in the new slogans? Do these (the new imaginary and the new demands) prefigure new theories and new forms of consciousness? Or are they merely reactions devoid of rational foundation? And if otherwise, what programmes do they have and what effect on Arab culture should we expect? How are we to understand the role of the new social actors, which are mostly young and therefore not “historical” leaders? Should we not consider them the emergent alternative? Which paradigms and which theories should we call into play?

Thirdly, can we speak of the Humanism of Arab Revolutions? Through hypothetical extension, we can suppose that these revolutions open up an unprecedented historical perspective which could serve as the foundation for a new humanism which would express a spontaneous revolutionary content linked to the experiences of humanity and to the values of freedom, equality and dignity. Do Arab revolutions carry the same significance and head towards the same objective or does each one have a different content? In this case, is it possible to apply comparative studies of the revolutions? Can we evaluate them in relation to one another in a normative way, and what would be the theoretical value of such an approach? In addition to Fawaz Traboulsi who deconstructs these revolutions, Gruia Bădescu provides us with the opportunity to compare the Tunisian and Romanian revolutions and the transitional processes, with surprising similarities and searching questions to explore further. Abdeljalil Larbi reflects on the Portuguese revolution as it affected higher education and the “production” of citizenship values. Felix Reátigue traces the humanitarian discourse in Latin America in the aftermath of dictatorships and revolutions and how it relates to a global conception of victim rights and the lessons for other societies. Mohamed-Salah Omri, on his part, looks into

connections between humanism and torture as a global phenomenon.

How do we interpret the hesitations and crises which have become common to the Arab revolutionary experiments: are these counter revolutions or natural evolution inherent to these revolutionary processes? What to make of the struggles opposing the secularizing movements to fundamentalist tendencies and the transformation of civil demands into demands of religious nature? Is this a reversal within the process or a natural evolution?

It was our aim that holding a conference in Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab revolutions, would lead us to devote part of the thinking to the Tunisian revolution, taking it as a model, but also as the outcome of a long historical constructive gestation in which the various social organisations have played a determining role and through which historical specificities are manifested.

II

An important place to start the investigation of how revolutions are expected to be either prefigured or prepared, was the university. For the university is one of the most important institutions in charge of developing human resources and their frames of reference. It also plays a crucial role in the diagnosis of development in local society and in drawing attention to its shortcomings in terms of social equality, regional justice and local development. In partnership with Rosa Luxembourg Foundation, a study day was held at ISAM in Kasserine, Tunisia on 10 April 2015 and three others at Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (24 October 2015; 30 January 2016 and 12 March 2016). All of these events were channelled into aspects of the symposium on "University and society in the context of new humanism" held 12-14 April, 2016 in Kasserine, Tunisia. The colloquium falls within the context of an exploration of the social responsibility of the university and the extent of its openness to the economic, social and political dimensions of the public sphere. This implies the capacity of research and educational institution as a whole to respond to the expectations of society.

In particular, the symposium sought to focus on the fate of the university in societies which underwent transition from dictatorship with a view to exploring and comparing patterns and experiences across the world while keeping focus on Tunisia. Several international experiences were presented and debated, all of which make part of the present volume: Felix Reátigue on Peru; Abdeljalil Larbi on Portugal; Thierno Diop on Senegal, Gruia Bădescu on Roumania and Kenza Sefrioui on Morocco. While the aim here is to account for some experiences and models across the world, it is natural that the Tu-

nisian case occupied centre of interest for reasons which include the fact that symposium took place in Tunisia with a large number of local contributors and in light of the deep crises of the university system in the country. Contributions to this volume by Mannoubia Ben Ghedahem, Imen Kochbati and Mona Tayyechi explore the aspects of the structural crisis of the Tunisian university to day and focus on the values of justice and equality regardless of gender and regional affiliation.

The event was underpinned by three main premises. Firstly, if we accept the traditional view that the university is the product of society and linked to it structurally and functionally, the Tunisian revolution has demonstrated that the concretisation of this relationship on the ground takes place within a landscape determined by the political discourse and its stakes. Secondly, a classical stereotypical reading assumes that local society is governed by the values and norms imposed on it by the social totality, which is in turn prone to be influenced by the global context and interacts with it. If this is the case, then some of the more distinctive features of the Tunisian's revolution have shown that the local is able to recreate its historical existence according to global paradigms and renewed humanist values despite the absence of institutional or concrete ties. The university is a telling instance of that. It seems that the university was unable to absorb the need for change imposed by local society, let alone express it or respond to it. In the present volume, Mouldi Guessoumi and Hedi Timoumi look into the local implications of a global state of affairs while Mohsen El Khouni, Baccar Nizar Ben Salah, explore facets of the gap between the current state of Tunisian universities and what is expected of them, in terms of the gap between the aims of teaching, research and contribution to society on the one hand and the dire conditions in these institutions, on the other. Thirdly, since revolutions require cutting ties to the past and instigating radical change, then it would be necessary to sever ties with all social structures, including the university. Conversely, not cutting with the old era would empty the desire for change from its revolutionary content. This can manifest itself in reproducing pre-revolution structures and conservative and traditional institutions. This diagnosis is applicable to the university if it fails to respond to the society's aspirations at the local and national levels, as we learn from global experiences.

The three variables mentioned above may interact within what we have called new humanist tendency, which constitutes the general intellectual environment and frame of reference we are using to express the values of the Tunisian revolution and to point to the direction of change, regardless of setbacks and interruption caused by local and foreign factors. New humanism in relationship to what has taken place in Tunisia and emerged in the previous

conference mentioned above, can be a productive frame to explore the value system articulated by the slogans, aspirations and aims of social actors.

This conference was the culmination of previous activities and a resumption of thinking about Arab revolutions and new humanism. It brought together researchers from a variety of disciplines including philosophy, sociology, history and cultural and literacy studies by academics based in Tunisian, European, American and African universities. The methodology of the whole project reflected in the programme, opened the door to interaction and debate between researchers, civil society and official institutions. Civil society associations presented their work within this setting (Mention may be made of Amel Association for Solidarity and Development, which coordinated our interaction with civil society; ODESK and Tigar, which focused on women issues, and Ta'limuna, with its interest in promoting education). The project also aimed at integrating local intellectual and cultural production among its activities, and applying the principle of diversity and multiplicity in venues and activities. Among these was the projection and discussion of a documentary on recruiting and radicalisation in prison through the life story of a young rapper, directed by Borhan Yahoui. Holding this conference in Kasserine, one of the bastions of the Tunisian revolution and one of the most deprived interior regions was designed to impel academics to think of the question of university and society from a perspective made possible by the Tunisian revolution, that is, from marginalised regions and centres of contention.

The outcomes of this long and diverse project make up the present volume, which is divided into two main themes:

I-New revolutions in the horizon of New Humanism.

II –University and Society in the context of New Humanism.

For ease of reading and access, papers in each theme are arranged according to the original languages in which they were written, with Arabic papers in one part and those written in English or in French in the other. But regardless of the language, the discipline or the context in which these essays were first presented, they remain the outcome of research which took place within the context of collaboration between research institutions and academics committed to the causes of justice and dignity. The book aspires to be a step, modest as it may be, in a new humanist process.