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2016

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For Ibrahim Fazzeni, in gratitude

Contents

Foreword

R.A. Judy

Scholarly reflection on intergroup or systemic human interaction throughout the twentieth-century and into the first decade and a half of this century has generally been approached in terms of sociology, social anthropology and psychology, or political economy. Each of these approaches, or some combination therewith, has presumed some common environment of interaction where contestation over dominion or power sharing is the paramount issue—most-often this is the modern nation-state formation, in which groups are defined, *a la* Durkheim, as based on either mechanical solidarity (such as kinship ties and familial networks like tribes, or racial, ethnic and religious affiliation) or organic solidarity based on the interdependence arising from specialization of work engendered in the modern political-economy. In any case, the problematic of interaction is political integration, in which diverse groups struggle over their respective relationship to the overarching valence of citizenship; the driving question being: What is the content of viable citizenship? This is a question with two important, often bloody corollaries having to do with individual rights and responsibilities: Does loyalty to one's group trump loyalty to the state as the guarantor of citizenship, or does loyalty to the state supersede that to one's group, ultimately precipitating group solidarity as the basis of individual identity with its attendant prerogatives? In the emergent Post-independence state formations of the second half of the twentieth-century, like Tunisia, there was considerable overlap between caste and class, such that the distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (civil society) is fluid and unstable. It is that very instability that prompted Frantz Fanon to write in

1959 on his way back to Tunisia from Mali that the greatest danger for Africa was the absence of ideology. His concern was that the secularization engendered in the context of colonial and post-colonial struggle, rather than precipitating the decline of tribalism and religion would reinforce and extend their application. Nor is it inconsequential that the social anthropologist, Ernest Gellner, in attempting to formulate a theory of ideology adequate to the task, should do so from Tunisia with it very much in mind as a case. Both these twentieth-century thinkers discerned in the North African context a dynamic of social interaction that was not adequately comprehended by usual conceptions, and saw the urgent need for a new conceptualization of human interaction; what Fanon called, "a humanism that can be considered valid . . . built to the dimensions of the universe." In the light of the momentous events still unfolding in Tunisia since December 2010, the continued relevance of Fanon's call is beyond any doubt. And much of the hard serious intellectual work coming out of the Tunisian Revolution has paid warranted close attention to the role of The Tunisian General Union of Labour (UGTT) in fostering the emergent dynamic of interaction Gellner discerned.

While we have yet to fully understanding the ways in which the UGTT played this role throughout the reigns of Bourguiba, and Ben Ali, the essays Mohamed-Salah Omri gathers in this slim volume make a significant contribution to the writing of that history. Here is a careful elaboration on a practice and theory of sociality still aimed at achieving the liberated individual, whose prospects Fanon saw in the liberation movements of his time. Omri's concept of *tarafud*, with its rich etymological references—*rāfid* (tributary stream); *rāfida* (supporting force, as well as supporting rafter or girder)— provides a suitable analytical concept, *confluency*, for understanding the UGTT's activities in striving to engender and now sustain a sociality of contact and conversation as opposed to that of hierarchical dominance and sectarian violence. In that vein, his insightful analysis of the importance of UGTT's cultural work reveals a sustained long-term project of unionism as a transformative humanizing force of civil society; albeit one that still struggles to address issues of gender and youth. With an eye toward the dangers of the Turkish

model Tunisia is being encouraged to follow, Omri remonstrates us that the continued prospects for such unionism are under increasing contrary pressure, underscoring the urgency of the moment. Much is at stake here, and we would do well to listen carefully and interrogate thoroughly in order to preserve some prospect for the new humanism of Fanon's aspiration.

Acknowledgements

The present work could not have been possible without input from unionists, cultural figures, activists and academics. On the union side, Sami Tahri has been the driving force behind the present publication. He facilitated my access to the archives of *al-Sha'b* newspaper and oversaw the complete publication process. Mohamed Mselmi introduced me to the new cultural project of UGTT and allowed me to attend a key one-day workshop in Sousse. Support from Houcine Abbasi, Secretary General of UGTT, Sami Tahri and Mohamed Mselmi for a study day at the headquarters of UGTT helped foster conversation between academics and unionist from Tunisia and abroad. Anouar Ben Gaddour has been helpful with documents. Karim Saadi set the text to publication and sorted out the images. On the cultural side, Adel Bouallegue made the time to respond to my questions in a frank and thoughtful manner. So did Amel Hamrouni. Salah Zghidi and Hbib Belaid provided important details in a timely manner. Hechmi Ben Fredj, whom I met through my friend Noureddine Messaoud, shared his unparalleled knowledge of the history of alternative music in Tunisia and Cheikh Imam's contribution to it. On the academic side, Mouldi Guessoumi was instrumental throughout the whole research and writing process. R.A. Judy wrote the thoughtful preface despite the last-minute request. Anissa Daoudi and Mohsen Khouni commented on the introduction and conclusion. Parts of the present work have been published by *OpenDmocrcay*; *Think Africa Press* and *Jadaliyya* and *Workers of the World* or given as lectures. UGTT published the present work without questions asked and accepted my criticism in good spirit. But while I am immensely grateful to all those mentioned above, I am entirely and solely responsible for any failings or shortcomings which might have plagued this incursion into the complex intersections between unionism, culture and revolution in Tunisia.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The Tunisian General Union of Labour (UGTT) is located at a rare intersection between civil society, social movements, including those which lead to radical change, and state construction. For this reason, it is very complex to study. This complexity is compounded by history since UGTT has in fact outlasted every political party in the country and every major civil society organisations. That long history spans the colonial and post-colonial periods, a kingdom and two republics. It also covers dramatic changes in the makeup of the union's base as local economy moved from one model to another over 70 years. As such, UGTT found itself, in turns, as an ally to the ruling parties, in the position of a 'responsible' opposition, an arch enemy, an alternative to political parties, and a protector of state institutions. Attendant to these positions are forms of action, which ranged from cooperation and support to antagonism, resistance and opposition, as well as occasional open conflict.

An accumulation of experience in conflict management, negotiating skills and deeply entrenched structures allowed the union to draw on rich resources and credibility to mobilise for a variety of causes, which range from wage increases to improving working conditions and from public liberties to international causes. With a wide remit and large base which have given it the privileged position of monopoly in social negotiations and conflict mediation at local as well as national levels, UGTT has affected all aspects of life in the country, perhaps like no other body. The relationship between the union; protest movements, whether organised or not; intellectuals; artists

and political activists has been close and diverse, as I will demonstrate in the present studies. In my view it was neither one-directional nor marked by a particularly dominant force. It is therefore difficult to characterise it in terms familiar to mainstream social sciences and humanities alike. For this reason, I propose the term *tarafud*, which is coined based on a blending of confluence and *rafd*. Confluence refers to flowing with and *rafd* suggests support and generosity. *Tarafud*, which I translate as confluency since there is no English equivalent, is then a concept which describes relationships which do not privilege hierarchy, domination and one-dimensional traffic. It also describes the ideas of giving and hospitality. In the term confluence, "con" refers to the Latin root "with", but could also recall opposition and tension or contradiction.[1]

Successive governments as well as political entities came and went and UGTT remained. This gave it the aura of invulnerability but also made it target of competing interests. Some loved it and felt entitled to it while others loved to hate it and sought to break its power, perceived arrogance and sense of entitlement to act as sole representative of working people and unavoidable port of call if anything were to get done. For all of this, the 2011 revolution, as a radical social movement against an authoritarian political system and unfair economic policy, has shaken the political establishment, whether in government or in opposition, but played in the hands of UGTT in important ways. The winds of change were in the

[1]I first used the term in relation to World Literature, see "Min ajl nadhariyah fi al-tarafud al-adabi" (Towards a theory of literary confluency) in *The Comparative lesson and the dialogue of literatures* (Tunis: Bayt al Hikma 2015) pp. 13-52.

direction of the union, and largely fanned by it. Part I of the present study demonstrates some of these aspects and claims. But these winds, in turn, challenged the union to change in significant ways, and adjust to a novel situation. This time, it had to navigate a complex field where partners and opponents have not been always clear or stable. And not unlike the early 1950s, UGTT found itself in the driving seat in some ways. The task for the union was no longer how to play politics and gain more say in it, but how to fend off the allure of political power. The 22nd congress of the union held in Tabarka in 2011 would provide some direction and a leadership more attuned to the times. And as a result, it laid down the building blocks on which UGTT would construct its behaviour in post-revolutionary Tunisia. However, two key new developments in Tunisia came to test the union's position and challenge its capacity to adapt.

These are the plurality in the political and the trade union fields, on the one hand, and the ambiguous line between demands of national interest and the interests of the working people and UGTT members on the other. The first ushered in a sort of devolvement in political action by which monopoly on politics was no longer under one party. This was compounded by several tendencies heavily represented within UGTT which have formed political parties of their own. In addition, and closer to home, split unions have gained official recognition. One of these in particular, namely, the Tunisian Organisation of Labour (OTT), stands to have significant effect because of its perceived proximity to the Islamist party Ennahda. I say more on this in Part I and in the conclusion.

The second development has to do with the resilience of neo-liberal economy and even its strengthening through an alliance between the

neoliberal party, Nida Tunis, the Islamist Ennahda and two other business-oriented parties, the National Free Party and Afak Tunis.[2] Pressure from the United States and the EU as well as international financial institutions have dented the aspirations of the revolution for social justice and tipped interest in the direction of freedoms interpreted as personal liberties as well as economic free market. An example of interest in this regard, one which has been hailed as a model for Tunisia to follow, is Turkey. This is because advocates of the Turkish model tend to highlight and promote compatibility between Islam, democracy and economic success almost exclusively, while turning a blind eye to the social and cultural costs of this brand of what might be called Islamic economics. The implications of the Turkish model for unions and labour are singled out in Part I and in the conclusion. In addition, the fact that violence has begun to dominate the national agenda, and in light of a deteriorating economic situation, UGTT has come under tremendous pressure to uphold social peace and curtail its active mobilisation for improving the conditions of working people and maintaining social justice on the agenda. History will judge the conduct of the UGTT during this delicate phase in due course. But one area where the *longue durée* as well as the force of adaptation of the union can be observed is the cultural field, which I take up in Part II. Why culture, one could ask?

First of all, it is surprising how little attention has been given to this area in scholarship related to UGTT and cultural politics in the country in any language. An inquiry into the connections between unionism and cultural production and dissemination is indeed long overdue. For the historical as

[2] The spelling of all Tunisian names of people and places follows French convention. For example, the name of the founding member of UGTT is normally transliterated in English as Farhat Hashad, but is kept as Farhat Hached.

well the sociological picture will remain inadequate without it. Due to social and historical reasons, Tunisia has seen its main orientations, as a colonised nation and later during the early years of independence, drawn by a small, fairly homogenous and closely-knit elite. Reform projects within the broader movement *nahda* (revival), which affected the Arab area as a whole, were spearheaded by people who may have a foot in the educational field, women rights and workers issues at the same time, as was the case with Tahar Haddad in the 1920s and 30s. They may also be involved in literature, political work as well as trade unionism, as was the case with Mahmoud Messadi in the 1940s and 50s. Many did not see these aspects as separate or incompatible spheres of intervention. The cultural field, or what we might call the construction of a national culture in the sense given to it by Frantz Fanon, was a shared goal and had a militant edge to it. This direction fit the wider remit unionism had espoused since the 1920s by Mohamed Ali and his collaborators as I explain in Part II.

Fanon famously defined national culture as "the whole body of efforts made by the people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence".[3] He stressed the deliberate, even militant nature of national culture as well as its centrality to national freedom from colonialism: "The condition of national culture is therefore national liberation and the renaissance of the state. The nation is not only the condition of culture, its fruitfulness, its continuous renewal and its deepening. It is also a necessity. The fight for national existence sets culture moving and opens up to it the doors of creation" (244). That lesson was learnt early on by the generations

[3] FANON, Franz, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1965.), 233.

of Mohamed Ali Hammi and Farhat Hached who set their eyes on the freedom of the nation as the ultimate horizon and a necessary undertaking. Since independence in 1956 and as state institutions began to take shape and fields of activity were remade and reoriented, we began to see what might be called specialisation or relative autonomy of the cultural field. The policy of universal, secular and compulsory education adopted from the early days of independence by no other than the unionist Mahmoud Messadi, would shape the society in distinctive ways, which included humanist education and bilingualism.

Yet, the postcolonial state does not always abide by the logic and ambition of national liberation movements, as history tells us in relation to Tunisia and elsewhere. After active contribution to the early building of the state – the National Constituent Assembly of 1956, the first parliament and so on – and within a decade of independence, the hegemonic tendencies of President Bourguiba and his party became clear. His attempt to bring UGTT in line with, or even under, the ruling party threatened not only social harmony but also the independence of the labour union. This coincided with the rise of leftist opposition to the ruling party and the marginalization of critical voices, especially among students and young professionals. The Movement Perspectives would play a pivotal role in these tensions as well as in the emerging culture of protest, which was largely coming for the Arab East and youth movements in Europe in the late 1960s. Soon, these expressions of commitment to the political and social ideals at the local as well as the global levels, particularly around the Palestinian issue and Latin American rebellions would converge with the needs of UGTT and alignment with oppositional and protest movements. This convergence has not ceased since. Part II of the present book aims to provide a fuller account of this story.

During the 1980s and 1990s, repression took on new scales and a culture of commercial entertainment, fuelled by emerging satellite channels largely funded by the Gulf countries dominated the scene. "Alternative" cultural production had a new mission and a gap to fill. Along with commercial entertainment, the manufacturing of star culture and show business, the Gulf has also supported a strong wave of preaching, based largely on Wahabi ideas and Islamist ideologies through audio tapes at first, then through video and satellite channels afterwards, as I outline in a different study.[4] After 2011, the rise of a new and aggressive identity politics with its attendant methods, which included preaching campaigns, burning of shrines across the country, violence against intellectuals and cultural activists and assassinations, required a new approach and a more deliberate strategy on the part of secular and "civil" (*madani*) culture as a whole. The UGTT Tabarka congress of 2011 would provide important signals and a framework for this action. Since 2013, UGTT set about fleshing out the details of the framework in workshops, seminars and festivals as I explain in Part II.

While the present essays cover the role of UGTT in the revolution and transition (Part I) and the intersections between culture and unionism over a longer period (Part II), they aim to provoke critical inquiry and prospective thinking around the wider contexts of collective subjectivity as a whole, by injecting the labour and cultural dimensions. Four major overarching points

[4] On Movement Perspectives and its roles in the makeup of Tunisian opposition, see M-S OMRI, "The Movement Perspectives: Legacies and representations" in *EuroOrient*, vol. 38 (2012), pp. 149-164. On the re-Islamization of Tunisia, see M. S. OMRI, "Al-thawra wa al-hdhatha: al-amal wa al-intikasa" (Revolution and modernity: the hope and the setbacks), *al-Badil*, no. 4. Vol. 2 (2013), pp. 73-79.

guide this partial inquiry. The first one has to do with an interest in a more satisfactory investigation of the formation of protest culture and working class subjectivity over a long period of time in the face of what was an increasingly authoritarian nation sate. The second is a need to look into ways, other than the well-known resilience of the counter-revolution, which could explain more fully what I call the ceiling of ambition – or the limiting of imagination - which plagued UGTT as well as progressive forces in the aftermath of the revolution. A third point is provocative: it inquiries into the framework which gave rise to what might be called the "unionist intellectual", and the extent to which this has been a main feature of the Tunisian progressive elite. A fourth point is prefigurative: it posits the fate of the labour movement in Turkey as a warning of the shape of things to come in Tunisia should the current course of political and economic alliances continue. None of these points is fully fleshed out in the present essays and much thinking and research remain to be done, particularly in the areas of sociology, intellectual history and social philosophy. But I hope to have made a start.

PART I

UGTT AND THE TUNISIAN PATH TO REVOLUTION AND TRANSITION

Introduction

Taking initial stock of the "Arab Spring" early in 2011, Michael Hudson enumerated five cases of "conventional wisdom" about Arab and Middle East politics before the uprisings: authoritarianism in the region is durable; democratization is an inappropriate goal and is impossible to reach in the Arab world; populations are passive either due to rentier state policies or coercion; Arab nationalism is dead; the Middle East regional system is essentially stable.[5] These assumptions, Hudson suggests, have led analysts and academics to focus on the system as such and on the state, with the consequence that "the strength and durability of protest movements" were ignored.[6] This could be due to "group-think, theoretical tunnel vision, ideological agendas, insufficient attention to the work of Arab intellectuals,

[5] HUDSON, Michael. "Awakening, cataclysm, or just a series of events? Reflections on the current wave of protest in the Arab World" in BSHEER, Rosie and ABU-RISH, Ziad (eds.). *The Dawn of the Arab Uprisings: end of an order?* (London: Pluto, 2012), pp. 26-27. His comments were first published on 16 May 2011.

[6] Ibid., p. 27.

and a lack of multidisciplinary approaches".[7] In addition, one could even speak of *de facto*, and often willing, academic and media collusion with authoritarian regimes in the region and with their supporters abroad.[8] Pascal Boniface goes even further and talks about forgery in his book, *Les intellectuels faussaires: le triomphe médiatique des experts en mensonge*, which analyses the French scene. He shows the bias and the implications of such expertise: "These intellectuals have explained to us how backwardness, which they consider germane to these societies, made them immune to democracy, which justifies the recourse to war to free these peoples from their dictators".[9]

In my view, the lack of attention to local intellectuals underlies a wider point, namely, an assumption that local organized agency is absent from the region, or that agency is limited to political parties or the military. The underlying premise is that the Arab world has been incapable of producing agency, which is not military, tribal, factional, or in the form of exceptional individuals, whether secular or religious, hence the academic and media attention given to issues of identity politics, radicalism, terrorism and political Islam in general. Moreover, it betrays a widely held assumption that Arabs have not produced reflection and analysis or knowledge on their

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[7] Ibid.

[8] See OMRI, Mohamed-Salah. "Arab and Islamic Studies in the Context of the 'War on Terror' in Britain and the United States" in TEMIMI, Abdeljalil (ed.). *Al-jami'a wa la-bahithun al-arab: bayna al-hurriya wa mumarasat al-raqabah* (Universities and Arab researchers: between freedom and the practices of censorship) (Tunis: FTRSI, 2011), pp. 79-98 (in Arabic). See also the comprehensive sociological study: GUESSOUMI, Mouldi. *Mujtama' al-Thawra* (The Society of the Revolution) (Tunis: Faculty of Letters, 2015).

[9] BONIFACE, Pascal. *Les intellectuels faussaires: le triomphe médiatique des experts en mensonge* (Paris: Jean-Claude Gawsewith, 2011), p. 83 (my translation).

societies, which are worthy of consideration. These societies are considered known or knowable rather than producers of knowledge. In addition, there is a well-entrenched belief that democratization can only come to these societies through an outside intervention. For this reason, the much-mediatized label "jasmine revolution", while appearing benign, appeals in fact to a horizon of understanding colored by exotic tourism and neo-orientalist perceptions of this Mediterranean country. It also recalls the "colored revolutions" in Eastern Europe and points to attempts to contain the emerging radical social movement in the country and in the wider region at the time. What we are dealing with in fact was a failure of well-funded think tanks and centres of expertise in accurate reading of the region. This failure was also due to prevalence of research and expertise funded by, and serving the interest of, dictators under narratives which rehearsed the myths of the Oriental despot or the Arab strongman as the appropriate form of governance of a people judged to have lost any presence in history for a while.

Yet, it is striking how local academics have had a very different view of the events.[10] And much of the current essay is in fact based on local analysis and sources, mostly written in Arabic, and on interviews of key figures in Tunisia. Part of the relevant archive of UGTT is still at the Ministry of the Interior confiscated by the police during various occasions in the confrontational relationship with the state. Some of the archive may never be

[10] See, for example, the special issue of *boundary 2* where Tunisian scholars and activists assess the revolution in their country: http://boundary2.dukejournals.org/content/39/1.toc.pdf [more from the issue were ugtt is mentioned]

recovered because it has been either lost during raids by the secret police or destroyed in the chaotic weeks after January 2011.[11]

A number of mysteries and question marks surround the Arab Uprisings in general and the Tunisian revolution and its outcome, or the so-called "Tunisian exception", in particular. Before 2011, Tunisia was in fact the rule rather than the exception in the thinking outlined above in a number of ways: Tunisia was perceived – and presented to global financial institutions as well as political major players – as stable, growing steadily, homogeneous, functioning well, and a hot tourism destination. What made Tunisians rise up then? Why was the Tunisian path to transition different from Egypt, Syria, Libya and Yemen? Why has it been hailed as a "success story"? Would it not be more appropriate to ask: a success story for whom? For the march of the market economy and liberal democracy – hence the immense interest from the United States in particular? For the revolting

[11] These local sources include: Temimi's numerous works, most notably *marsad al-thawra al-tunisiyya* (Observatory of the Tunisian Revolution) in 3 volumes (1500 pages); TIMOUMI, Hedi, *Khud'at al-istibdad al-na'im fi tunis; 23 sanah min hukm bin Ali* (The Deception of Soft Dictatorship in Tunisia: 23 years of Ben Ali's rule) (Tunis: Dar Mohamed Ali, 2012). For the events themselves and chronologies, see, for example: WESLATI, Salah. *Democracie ou guerre civile* (Tunis, Nirvana, 2012). This book chronicles in detail 90 days (January 14- March 14, 2011), with background to the 2011 revolution. I also interviewed Sami Tahri, the director of *al-Sha'b* newspaper and spokesperson of the UGTT, 17 April 2014 at *Al-Sha'ab* newspaper. Some ideas in the present paper have been published in my previous media articles, see in particular: "Trade unions and the construction of a specifically Tunisian protest configuration". *OpenDemocracy*, 13 September 2013. Retrievable at https://www.opendemocracy.net/mohamed-salah-omri/trade-unions-and-construction-of-specifically-tunisian-protest-configuration; "This is not a jasmine revolution". *Transnational Institute*, January 2011. Retrievable at http://www.tni.org/article/tunisia-revolution-dignity-and-freedom-can-not-be-colour-coded

masses? For political Islam? Whatever the direction of analysis, it seems that an important but seldom-asked question remains: what does the labor movement have to do with it all? Only a nuanced, well-informed analysis of pre-2011 society and its politics would provide a proper understanding of the revolution and its aftermath.

In a paper titled, "Why the Tunisian path was singular and why does it matter", I argued for a number of factors which could account for this singularity. These are mainly three: the movement of protest was from country to city, the role of the military was limited and the labor movement was strong. The character of the army is a key element in any argument about the Tunisian path since, unlike elsewhere in the Arab world, it was never in government and was never powerful politically. Its role since 2011, namely, to be neutral and even protective of the revolution, proved to be a key factor in the way things turned out.[12] Unlike the Egyptian revolution, which was mostly urban, in Tunisia one can speak of a rural revolution. It started in the interior and moved towards the Northern cities, prompting local historians to talk about the invasion of the city by the country, in a recall of the 1864 revolts.[13] By rural, however, I mean towns located in rural areas, with a mainly agricultural economy but which share with big cities the same problems as well as similar structures of resistance due to the specificities of

[12] OMRI, Mohamed-Salah. "In What Ways is the Path of the Tunisian Revolution Singular? And Why Does this Matter?*"* Paper presented at the conference "The Arab Springs: How do we understand the popular movements and political changes in the Middle East" at Sophia University and The Japan Institute of International Affairs, Tokyo, Japan, 29-30 January 2012.

[13] JDEY, Ahmed. "Pour une histoire de la Tunisie du 14 Janvier 2011: la fin d'un dictateur et l'amorce de la construction démocratique." in *La Tunisie du XXIème siècle: quel pouvoir pour quels modèles de société*. *EurOrient*, no. 38, 2012.

nation building in Tunisia and compulsory and universal education. Along with these reasons, there was the well-known story of an early activation of social media, particularly in terms of circulating information. Mobile telephone became the main medium, reversing the regime's success in cutting off and isolating the 2008 rebellion in the mining basin of Gafsa from public view. Social media enhanced the speed and extent of information circulation within the country at first, and then to a wider audience.

As a result of this, by January 14, most world media, including al-Jazeera, France 24 and even the BBC had already been to and reported on the killings which took place January 8-10 in Kasserine, Regueb,Thala and elsewhere in the interior. Jeremy Bowen, the BBC Middle East Correspondent at the time, notes in fact how complacent and inattentive major media outlets had been to Tunisia specifically because of the success of the image promoted by the Tunisian state and the uncritical acceptance of it around the world. He says: "I realized the significance of what was happening in Tunisia only when I was prompted by an email from a Tunisian academic at Oxford University in early January asking why the BBC was not taking the uprising seriously." [14]

[14] BOWEN, Jeremy. *The Arab Uprisings: the People want the fall of the system*. London, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012, p. 38. He was in fact responding to an email I sent him on 10 January 2011, which included: "The BBC remains a trusted source in the country and I believe it has the responsibility to report fairly and extensively on this grave situation. You will also know that there has been a brutal suppression of voices in Tunisia, including ban on reporters. Local people are in desperate need to have their stories heard. As I write, local reports show the number of those killed by police is in excess of 30, mostly in the isolated region of Kasserine and Sidi Bouzid, the place where this revolt started about a month ago. This tragic situation will certainly benefit from your incisive reporting and the wide reach of the BBC."

The participation of women and lawyers, an important and historically active body of resistance in Tunisia, led the way in many parts of the country, and articulated – and even raised – the demands of the people to a more political level. Much of this is well known. What is less known is that activists in The Tunisian General Union of Labour, better known by its French acronym, UGTT (*Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail*), Tunisia's main trade union organization, played a leading role in spreading information and participating in the early responses to the Bouazizi self-immolation.[15] They were the first to organize campaigns of support and the point of call for international media.

All the elements mentioned above, taken together, have been determining factors in the revolutionary process. In addition, the elements of the transition were, in my view, embedded in the dynamics of the revolution itself. This is in contrast with Egypt where such demands and thinking about a post-revolution transition were, in a way, controlled, not by the protesters or civil society, but by the army. In the present essay, I would like to zero in on what might be called the labor union factor, which is truly an exception as well as ubiquitous over decades, but was surprisingly overlooked by Tunisia observers and analysts until recently.

One of the key features of independent Tunisia has been an organized labor movement that is unique in its history and social dimension. The UGTT, I argue, has been the most influential *structured* and *structuring* force of resistance and social contention in the country. And while social contention

[15] Bowen notes that the first information on the self-immolation was passed to the international media by local UGTT activists, who also organized the first demonstration to protest it the next day. Ibid., p. 38.

has been neither the most vigorous nor the most radical in the region (Algeria has far more riots for social demands than Tunisia, and several other Arab countries – Yemen, Libya, Sudan - have had more radical movements in recent history), the organized labor movement sets the country apart and explains much of the way things have unfolded in 2011 and since.[16] In part two of this book, I develop an argument for the intersections between the labor movement and the culture of dissent as whole.[17] Here, I pursue the argument by revisiting the history and the dynamics before and after 2011, with a view to this character and role of UGTT, that is, as a *structured* and *structuring* force. I will note as well the ways in which such a force may have contributed – paradoxical as it might seem - to curtailing revolutionary ambition. In light of the regressions registered in the revolution, for a complex set of reasons which range from the disruptive rise of identity politics, to violence, foreign intervention and the weakness of the progressive parties, I ask: in what ways and to what extent has the weight of UGTT or what I call the Tunisian unionist ceiling of ambition, contributed to regulating, even taming, the revolutionary process? In other words, was the revolutionary process *structured* at the image of the UGTT in a way?[18] Likewise, the undeniable gains since 2011 would not have been possible without the capacity to shape events and even lead the political actors that UGTT has had.

[16] For a view of the role of workers and unions in the Egyptian revolution, see, ALEXANDER, Anne and BASSIOUNY, Mostafa. *Bread, Freedom and Social Justice: workers and the Egyptian revolution* (London: Zed Books, 2015).

[17] See Part II of the present book.

[18] The legalization of the revolutionary process led by the Ben Ashour committee, which would result in the National Constituent Assembly, was sponsored and protected by UGTT.

1. From incubator of protest and refuge for dissent to powerbroker

Trade unionism in Tunisia goes back to the early twentieth century and has had both local and international aspirations since its inception by Mohamed Ali al Hammi (1890-1928), founder of the General Federation of Tunisian Workers in 1924.[19] But it was with the charismatic and visionary Farhat Hached (1914-1952) that a home-grown strong organization would emerge. Hached learned union activism and community organizing within the French CGT for 15 years before splitting from it to start UGTT in 1946.[20] His union quickly gained support, clout and international ties, which it mobilized in order to pressure the French for more social and political rights for Tunisia, and to consolidate the union's position as a key component of the national liberation movement. And it is specifically because of its birth in the midst of the struggle against French colonialism that the union had political

[19] Mohamed Ali Al-Hammi was self-educated, travelled extensively, including spending some time in Germany where he studied political economy. Upon his return, he called for the establishment of workers' cooperatives across the country. The details of the founding were recorded by al-Hammi's friend and collaborator, Tahar al-Haddad in his book *al-Ummal al-Tunisiyun wa dhuhur al-harakah al-naqabiyyah* (The Tunisian workers and the rise of labor unionism) (1927) (Tunis: Dar Bouslama, 1987).

[20] A sizeable number of studies document and analyse Farhat Hached's legacy. See MANSOURI, Salim. *Risalat al-Ittihad al-Am al-Tunisi li al-Shughl, 1946-1956* [The Mission of the Tunisian General Union of labour: 1946-1956 (Tunis: Dar Mohamed Ali, 2013). This publication gathers the editorials of the newspaper *Sawt al Amal* written by Hached from 1947 and 48 and by Ahmad Ben Salah in 1955 and 1956; MOKNI, Abdelwahid. *Farhat Hached: al-mu'assis al-shahid wa al-qa'id al-shahid* (Farhat Hashed: The founding witness and the martyred leader) (Tunis: Samid, 2012). This publication makes extensive use of Hashad's speeches. See also BEN HMIDA, Abdessalam. *al-harakah al-naqabiya al-wataniyya li al-shighghila al-tunisiya, 1924 to 1956* (The Nationalist labour movement of the Tunisian working class), vol. 1 (Tunis: Dar Muhammad Ali, 1984).

involvement from the start, a line it has maintained throughout its history and guarded vigorously since. The unions' charter reflects this orientation. Its aims include: "building a socialist and nationalist economy, independent and free from all forms of dependency; calling for fair distribution of national wealth in a way which guarantees the aspirations of all workers and lower sections of society; defending individual and public liberties, and reinforcing democracy and human rights; supporting all people struggling to reclaim their sovereignty and determine their destiny and standing in solidarity with national liberation movements across the world".[21] One of the main tools in defending these goals is the right to strike. The Charter states: "The strike is a legitimate right in union struggle and is part and parcel of union rights included in the constitution".

These aims were articulated, among others, in Hached's address to workers on 16 May 1947, to mark the Bardo agreement of 1881, which surrendered the country to French rule. He says: "The workers' struggle to improve their material and moral conditions is then tightly linked to the higher interests of the country, because such improvement requires a social change which cannot be obtained as long as the nation is subjected to the colonial system".[22] There are global resonances to this strategy, as he explains: "If union movements in free nations fight big capitalism and the governments

[21] UGTT. *Al-Nidham al-dakhili* (Internal Regulations) (Tunis: UGTT, 2007), p.100. The new Tunisian constitution stresses this point in article 36, stating that union rights, including the right to strike are guaranteed. *See Dustur al-jumhuriyyah al-tunisiyyah* (The Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia) (Tunis: Official Press, 2014).

[22] MANSOURI. *Risalat al-Ittihad al-Am al-Tunisi li al-Shughl, 1946-1956. Op.Cit.*, p. 81. Hached also stresses, in the second newspaper of UGTT, *sawt al-'amal* [Voice of labour], that while the union does not intervene in party politics, it assumes its responsibility in matters of public concern.

which support it, it is incumbent upon the workers of colonized nations to combat that system which is really the exploitation of an entire people for the benefit of foreign capitalism".[23] In an address to the United Nations on 1 February 1952, a day of national and international action for independence, Hached spoke like a political leader, not a unionist: "The entire Tunisian nation vigorously demands this right [right to self-determination]. For many years they tried to secure it through persuasion…. They are today compelled to bring this debate before the international tribunal in order to obtain the just solution for which they are waiting" (39).[24]

With such early credibility and closeness to the interests of the wider population, UGTT has enjoyed continuity in history and presence across the country, which paralleled and rivaled the ruling party at the height of its power under President Bourguiba and his successor Ben Ali, that is, from 1956 to 2011. With 150 offices across the country, an office in every governorate and district, and over 800,000 current members, it has constituted a credible alternative to this party's power and a locus of resistance to it, so much so that to be a unionist became a euphemism for being an opponent or an activist against the ruling party.[25] This geographical reach and popular presence carved out a breathing space and provided institutional structuring for dissent more widely. And it is in this sense that

[23] Ibid.

[24] A number of tributes, especially by American unions where he had strong ties and support, as a well as speeches by Hached, were published in English as early as 1953. See *Farhat Hached: Tunisian labor leader, patriot, martyr* (New York: Tunisian office for national liberation, 1953), ed. Bahi LADGHAM.

[25] From 1956 until 2011, the ruling Neo-Destour party and its successor, RCD, dominated completely political life in the country with a structure which penetrated even the smallest of towns and lowest sections of society. The party became synonymous with the state.

one can argue that UGTT has been the outcome of Tunisian protest and resistance movements and their incubator at the same time.

For example, in 1984 the union aligned itself with the rioting people during the bread revolt; in 2008, it was the main catalyst for the disobedience movement in the Mining Basin of Gafsa; and, on December 2010, the UGTT, particularly its teachers' unions and local offices across the country, became the headquarters of revolt against Ben Ali. The fit between the revolution and UGTT was almost natural since the main demands of the rising masses, namely, jobs, national dignity and freedom, had been on the agenda of the union all along. The union was also very well represented in the remote hinterland, such as in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine where the revolution began. Events, which started as spontaneous, were soon framed by local trade unions. This became a strategy by which sectorial strikes, particularly by teachers, soon turned into regional general strikes, starting from the South and moving northwards. An extremely important one was that of Sfax on 13 June 2011 where the largest demonstration until then was organized and articulated political claims, peacefully, in front of the UGTT local office. The culmination of such series of protests was the 14 January strike in Tunis at which point the head of the regime collapsed.

For these reasons, successive governments tried to compromise with the union, co-opt its leadership, repress it or change its character, depending on the situation and the balance of power at hand at any given moment. In 1978, UGTT went on general strike to protest what amounted to a coup perpetrated by the Bourguiba government to change a union leadership judged to be too oppositional and too powerful. The cost was the worst setback in the union's history since the assassination of its founder in 1952. The entire leadership of

the union was put on trial and replaced by regime loyalists. Ensuing popular riots were repressed by the army, resulting in tens of deaths. The ruling party attempted to install a parallel trade union under the pretext of "rectifying the direction" of a UGTT whose leadership was judged to be openly hostile to the ruling party and government policies, and a nest for left-wing dissent. One justification for this move was put forth by an important leader of the government loyalist group, Abdessattar Al Chennawi: "[the UGTT leadership] turned the Union into an open field for the opposition of all orientations except Destouri unionists, for the Destour Party is not represented in the union while known and prominent opposition figures hold high offices in UGTT. For this reason, 90% of 'the honourables' come from the Destour party".[26] More recently, in 2012, UGTT sensed a repeat of 1978 and an attempt against its very existence. On 4 December 2012, as the union was gearing up to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the assassination of its founder, its iconic headquarters, Place Mohamed Ali, was attacked by groups known as Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution. The incident was ugly, public and of immediate impact.

These leagues originated in community organisation in cities across the country designed to keep order and security immediately after 14 January 2011, which were later disbanded, and became dominated by Islamists of various orientations. On 26 August 2013, a group of trade unionists founded the Tunisian Labour Organization, which aims according to its leaders at correcting the direction of UGTT. To the attack on its offices, UGTT responded by boycotting the government, organizing regional strikes and marches, and eventually calling for a general strike on Thursday 13

[26] AL-HADDAD, Salim. *al-ittihad al-am al-tunisi li al-shukghl wa al-nidham al-burguibi* (The Tunisian General Union of Labour and Bourguiba's Regime: Between Harmony and Confrontation) Vol. 2 (Tunis: UGTT Documentation and Research Unit, 2011), p. 286.

December, the first such action since 1978. To the founding of a parallel union, Sami Tahri, UGTT spokesman, reacted with dismissal, arguing that this was no more than the reaction of losers who could not win elected offices in UGTT and failed to drag the union into the "house of obedience", referring to the new organization's ties to the Enahda party.[27] Tahri's confident tone and political statement are backed up by history, which demonstrates that the UGTT has warded off several attempts at takeover, division or weakening over the past sixty years or so, as I mentioned above. There was wide support for UGTT, particularly by the cultural elite and leftist parties. And this time, too, it prevailed.

Despite antagonistic relations with governments before and after the revolution, or perhaps because of them, UGTT remained arguably the only body in the country qualified to resolve disputes peacefully, but also to offer mediation albeit with a view to defend its own positions. After January 2011, it emerged as the key mediator and power broker in the initial phase of the revolution, when all political players trusted and needed it. And it was at the initiative of the union that the committee regulating the transition to the elections of 23 October 2011 was formed. The so-called Ben Achour Committee named after its president, the constitutional scholar Iyadh Ben Achour, was called initially the Higher Political Reform Commission, set up on 17 January 2011. UGTT was instrumental in its expansion and constitution as a body to control the interim government and run the transition to the election of the National Constituent Assembly, under the new name, The Higher Authority for Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform and Democratic Transition as an amalgamation

[27] On the attack by the Leagues, see Tahri's response: http://elaph.com/Web/news/2012/12/779396.html.

between the original commission and the Council for the Protection of the Revolution set up by UGTT, political parties and civil society organizations.[28] UGTT's role was crucial in framing debate, steering decision-making during the chaotic period, starting the Council for the Protection of the Revolution, and serving as meeting place of all the parties at a time when parties were either small, insignificant politically or newly formed.[29] At the same time, UGTT used its leverage to win historic victories for its members and for workers in general, including an agreement to secure permanent contracts for over 140,000 temporary workers and pay rise for several sectors, including teachers, as well as an increase in the minimum wage for the agricultural sector.

As early as October 2011, and keen to have a major say in the country's future, which was being redrawn, UGTT proposed its own constitution, which stressed both "political freedom and social justice (43). This is clearly a project based on the interests of workers and aimed at enshrining the aims of the revolution, namely freedom, dignity and social justice, into law. Made of 124 articles, it provides reasons why the union must have its own project submitted to the public, both because of its historical role and its contribution to the revolution, and to preserve the perspective and interests of workers and popular classes. "The long militant record, effective and significant role in struggling against dictatorship and in bringing down its system justify, and indeed make it the union's responsibility, to make an effective contribution to the continuation of the transition process and the drawing of the features of the new political, economic and social system, based on its principles,

[28] See testimony by Ben Achour dated 30 April 2011 in Temimi. *Observatory Vol. 1*, pp. 181-208.

[29] UGTT called for this council on 15 January and hosted it. Ibid. p. 258.

through a draft constitution" and to work towards convincing the deputies who were about to be elected to of the NCA to adopt it.[30] Articles 26 and 27 stress the right to collective bargaining and trade union activity, including strike action, while article 25 specifically focusses on work conditions and fair wages. But overall, the political system proposed is the same as the one included in the country's constitution adopted in January 2014. The right to union activity and to strike was maintained in the constitution adopted by NCA and mediated in part by UGTT and its Quartet partners.

As Tunisia moved from the period of revolutionary harmony in which UGTT played host and facilitator, to a political, and even ideological phase, characterised by a multiplicity of parties and polarisation of public opinion, the union was challenged to keep its engagement in politics without falling under the control of a particular party or indeed turning into one. But, due to historical reasons, which saw leftists channel their energy into trade unionism when their political activities were curtailed, UGTT remained on the left side of politics and, in the face of rising Islamist power, became a place where the Left, despite its many newly-formed parties, kept its ties and even strengthened them.[31] For these reasons, UGTT remained strong and decidedly outside the control of Islamists. But they, in turn, could not ignore its role and its status, nor could other parties, particularly the newly formed, centrist party, Nida Tunis. At the grassroots level, Islamists kept their

[30] Published 19 October 2011, together with preamble and explanatory notes. (58).

[31] The Executive Bureau of the UGTT emerging from the Tabarka congress held on 25-29 December 2011 was dominated by the forces which make up the Popular Front (specifically, the Patriotic Democratic current; the Pan-Arab nationalist parties and the Workers' Communist Party and pan-Arab nationalists).

membership and took part in UGTT-led labour action, and continue to do so today. At the level of leadership, and after attempts to weaken the union by supporting a parallel union, as I mentioned above, they were compelled to settle with the fact that the organization held the key to social peace in the country and the stability of the government. They needed it in order to govern. But they rarely hid their displeasure at its power and orientation, often accusing it of undermining the work of their government.

It is remarkable, but not surprising, that during the crisis of 2013, which resulted from the assassination of the Leftist leader Chokri Belaid and the pressure on the Ennahda-led government to resign, the balance of power and much of the rational management of the deep political crisis depended on the UGTT and its partners, the Tunisian Association of Human Rights, the Lawyers' Association and the UTICA (the Tunisian Union of Industry, Commerce and Traditional Crafts), known collectively as the Quartet. The head of the Bar Association at the time, Chawki Tebib stresses that the idea of creating a forum for national dialogue was initially proposed by the late Chokri Belaid and was to be led by three of the Quartet members; and UGTT took the idea forward.[32] All parties spoke through the union and on the basis of its initiative which consisted in dissolving the government, the appointment of a non-political government, curtailing the work of the NCA (National Constituent Assembly), reviewing top government appointments and dissolving the UGTT's arch enemy, the Leagues for the Defence of the Revolution.[33] Union leaders are known to be experienced negotiators and

[32] In an interview with Radio Mosaique on 10 October 2010.

[33] MHENNI, Mrad. "Fa'aliyyat al-mujtama' al-mahalli wa al-thawrah al-tunisiyya: qira'ah fi tajarib al-lijan al-mahalliyyah li himayat al-thawrah" in Temimi, Abdlejalil (ed.). *Al-thawra al-tunisiyya wa al-rabi' al-arabi: ahammiyat al-tahawwulat al-juyusiyasiyya* (The Tunisian

patient and tireless activists. They honed their skills over decades of settling disputes and negotiating deals. For these reasons, they were able to conduct marathon negotiations with the opposing parties and remain above accusations of outright bias.

The climate of dialogue and consensus led the UGTT to work out a Social Contract with the private business association UTICA and the government, and sign it on 14 January 2013. It appeals to the historical links between the two civil society organisations, and their large constituencies and capacity for mobilisation to create a framework for peaceful implementation of the "objectives of the revolution" in the areas of economic growth and regional development, employment policies and vocational training, professional relations, decent work, and social protection. It also calls for the establishment of National Council for Social Dialogue to oversee and monitor related matters. The overall rationale is this: "The Social Contract represents one of the mechanisms favouring the democratic transition and is both a key factor to achieve social stability and economic development, and a framework for organizing and managing social dialogue."[34] This is not an isolated initiative or a new one by UGTT. In fact as early as 1951, the union served as leader and convenor of Tunisian civil society against French rule. On 12 May 1951, it invited the General Union of Tunisian Farmers, The

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Revolution and the Arab Spring: the importance of geopolitical changes) (Tunis: FTRSI, 2012), pp. 171-192.

[34] See "Social Contract". 14 January 2013. Tunis: UGTT publications. On the rationale and implication of the contract, see Guessoumi, Mouldi's "Reflexions sur le contrat social, son contexte, ses origines et ses finalités" in *Reflexions sur le contrat social, son contexte, ses origines et ses finalités* (Tunis : UGTT DED, 2015).

Tunisian Craftsmen's and Tradesmen' Union and the Neo-Destour Party to help set up The Committee for the Defence of Constitutional Guarantees and Representation of the People, which organized a wide campaign for constitutional reform and free elections at the national and local levels .[35] Hached also represented colonised Tunisia at the United Nations when it presented its case against French rule in 1952, months before his assassination. It was the first time a North African trade unionist established ties with North American unions.

2. UGTT between post-revolution dynamics and limited ambition

With a labour movement engrained in the political culture of the country, and at all levels, a culture of trade unionism has become a component of Tunisian society. Yet, there has not been a proper sociology of this despite the important implications to Tunisia as a whole.[36] Protest culture in Tunisia has been deeply affected by labour unionism, which has been tenacious, issue-oriented, uneven and mostly organized. But UGTT has also been affected, in turn, by the political left, the student movement and women's movement, as I will demonstrate below. The unevenness runs largely along the degree of unionisation and militancy. For example, the education sector tended to be the most vocal and most organised. Agricultural workers and white-collar workers are also unionized, and even intellectuals had to work

[35] See the manifesto issued by this meeting in the Tunisian Office for National Liberation in New York in *Farhat Hached: Tunisian labor leader, patriot, martyr*., pp.30-31.

[36] It was remarkable how during my field work in *al-Sha'b* newspaper and the UGTT local offices, people came to the union to look for jobs, financial aid, or even to solve personal disputes. This was no new trend, UGTT officials assured me.

within the confines of or in synch with unions. For the political Left, one challenge after 2011 has been in fact how to move away from being trade unionists and become politicians; in other words, how to think beyond small issues and using unionist means in order to tackle wider issues and adopt their attendant methods. This meant finding different and broader bases for political alliances and laying out projects for society at large, rather than for sectors or sections of it. Yet, it is remarkable how post-2011 alliances have broadly kept the same patterns operating within UGTT before the revolution. The Popular Front, which is made up mainly of the parties that have affiliation within the executive bureau of the UGTT, has not had much success in recruiting members from outside its union bases.[37] Even their interlocutors in Nida Tunis, which leads the current coalition government, are also trade unionists, most prominently Tayeb Baccouche, a former Secretary General of UGTT from 1981 to 1984.

The interface between UGTT and the student and women movements, both of which have been exceptionally active in Tunisia, has been significant and not without paradoxes. There have been close relations between the main student union, the General Union of Tunisian Students (Union générale des étudiants de Tunisie, UGET) and the wider labour movement, both in activism and in membership, as the university tended to be a training ground, which prepared leaders to be active in UGTT once they leave education. UGET, which was founded in 1952, has worked closely with the UGTT since then and both would gradually move away from the ruling party, albeit

[37] For a full view of the Tunisian Left, see MOULDI, Guessoumi. "The Map of the Tunisian Left". In KLAFAT, Kalil (ed.) *Mapping the Arab Left: Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Sudan, Morocco, Algeria.* [Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2014], pp. 16-42. On the Popular Front and its composition, see the same publication.

at a different pace. The radicalisation and even what might be termed the leftist turn in unionism in fact finds some of its roots in this flow, as the university in Tunisia, particularly in the 1960s, 70s and 80s was a space of radical activism and left wing politics, which was barred from open political organization under successive governments.[38] It supplied the UGTT with its most radical elements at the low and middle-levels of the organization.

With regard to women, a key paradox of the UGTT has been its support of women's causes, but reluctance to promote women to its own leadership. The widespread practice of limiting women's access to the glass ceiling does not truly apply to other aspects of civil society institutions in Tunisia. Women have reached the presidency of UTICA, the Journalists' Association and the Magistrates' Association. While the absence of women in the leadership of UGTT could be explained in part by the very nature of trade union work, which requires time and presence in public places which are not friendly to women, such as cafes, this remains a serious lacuna of UGTT, which is challenged to be at a step with, if not leading, in this area. In Tunisia, this is particularly important as the role of women has been a marking feature of the society at large and of its protest culture in particular throughout the post-independent period, within and outside the labor movement. In terms of membership, up to 48% of members are women. Yet since Cherifa Messadi in 1951, wife of the famous writer and former interim

[38] On the early history of the student movement, see DHIFALLAH, Mohamed. *Al-madraj wa al-kursi: dirasat hawla al-talabah al-tunisiyyin bayna 1961 wa 1981: nash'at antalligensia* (The amphitheater and the chair studies on Tunisian students between the 1950s and the 1970s) (Sfax, 2003); and CHAGROUCHE, Tahar. *Le movement étudiant tunisien, 1961-1981: genèse d'une intelligentsia* (Unpublished thesis, Universite Paris VII, 1984).

leader of the union after the assassination of Hached, no women has reached the executive bureau. The UGTT's National Committee of Women's Workers has been a strong advocate of a quota system.

The union has also been accused of bureaucracy and corruption at the top level, which triggered several attempts at internal reform and even rebellion over the years. There is in fact considerable power and money associated with being a top union official in Tunisia, which, in a climate of rampant corruption led many leaders to collude with business and the government; the discredited former Secretary General Tayeb Sahbbani is an example of this. But this had less effect on grass-root support, local chapters and the middle cadre of the union. Since 2011, UGTT seems to have regained the cohesion it lacked during the Ben Ali period when the gap between the leadership and the grassroots was wide. Despite these lacunae, the practice of democracy and plurality in Tunisia over the past half century was almost the exclusive domain of the university, some civil society organizations and the trade unions. They had electoral campaigns for office, sometimes outside the control of the state, as was the case in the university during the 1970s and 80s. In fact, the state stepped in specifically to quell such practices when the outcome was not in its favour. Two memorable incidents testify to this.

The first one was in 1972, when the majority of students defeated the ruling party lists and secured the independence of the UGET. The second was in 1978 when the ruling party was overruled by the UGTT leadership, as I mentioned above. In both cases, the government proceeded to take over or ban the unions. The type of democratic practice in these two institutions was also in place in the Lawyers' Association and some other minor civil society

associations which were all severely repressed, notably, the Judges' Association, the Tunisian League of Human Rights and the Journalists' Association. It is no surprise that two of these have led the reconciliation effort and that all four worked in concert and at the forefront of preserving the aims of the revolution, particularly freedom, dignity and the right to work. The coming together of these associations has, I argue, mutually affected all of them, not only in terms of widening the field of protest, but also in terms of bringing to the fore the wider issues of human rights and freedoms. Before 2011, democratic practice was therefore linked not to the normal running of society, i.e., as a practice of citizenship, but as an opposition or resistance activity. This gave democracy a militant edge, which it did not lose, but which also affected its character. It was in a sense a democratic act to protect the union against non-democratic dominant forces, including and chiefly the ruling party and its student and labour arms. The practice of citizenship was not possible during the authoritarian rule of the one-party system while elections in the UGTT and other key civil society organizations were not aimed necessarily at producing the leadership most capable of advancing professional interests and demands, but to keep the ruling party at bay and to maintain the broad aims for more freedom and independence. This explains the weak presence, if not outright absence, of ruling party members in most union offices for decades.

The gradual coming together of these strong civil society institutions shaped a critical mass whose weight was impossible to ignore. Attempts to dominate this coalition aimed at shaping the future of the country and its revolution as a whole. Ennahda party, for example, ignored this coalition for a while, but ended up accepting the solution the UGTT and its partners negotiated, when they realized that an open alliance of the UGTT with the opposition in a

coalition would become hard to beat. A key moment was when the UGTT declared a national strike in the aftermath of Belaid's assassination at a time when Ennahda was accused of having a hand in the killing. The Quartet won local as well as international recognition based on net gains in terms of negotiated consensual government change and amendments to the constitution. The Nobel Peace Prize in 2015, following the campaign of UGTT alone in 2014, propelled this Tunisian "path" and UGTT to global attention.

Conclusion

A combination of symbolic capital of resistance accumulated over decades, a solid record of results for its members and the working people as a whole, and a well-oiled machine at the level of organisation across the country and sectors of the economy, made the UGTT unassailable and unavoidable at the same time. It has been a key feature of Tunisian political and social life and a defining element of what some have called the Tunisian "exception" in the MENA region. For this reason, in times of national discord, the UGTT has been capable of credible mediation and power brokering. It also remains a key guarantor that social justice, a main aim of the revolution, would remain on the agenda. Yet, the UGTT faces an unprecedented situation where a separation between politics and unionism is likely. Its own challenges are to remain the strongest union at a time when three other splits unions have emerged, and to maintain a political role now that politics has been largely turned over to political parties. But the realignment between liberals and the main Islamist party in a strong coalition changed the game altogether. The UGTT is now trying to find its feet, especially now that its driving activist force, Leftists, are in a minority political opposition.

There are many who regret the reluctance on the part of the union, which was a powerful king maker in the early months of the revolution, to step in and take control of the country. They argue that by failing to do so it had effectively handed over power to its own enemies, namely neoliberals and Islamist parties. On why the union did not form a labour party, although the moment was ripe for it, Abid Briki, spokesperson of the UGTT in 2011, commented in March of the same year: "This may weaken the UGTT, and may push us to real union plurality. The strength of the UGTT comes from the presence of all political factions within its ranks. If we were to rush into founding a party, the union would turn partisan, which would weaken it and encourage other parties to form their own unions".[39]

So far the union continues to be held together and is active in the on-going social protests, registering historic gains for its members, including a considerable raise for the whole public sector which counts over 700, 000 workers. It also managed to be instrumental in hosting the World Social Forum twice, in 2013 and 2015, and win several international awards for its role. But the political role of the union has been reduced considerably. The balance of political power in the country has not yet been settled, but the latest elections moved it towards the centre in a combination of the old guard, rising Islamists and business. No major economic and social gains have been made to address grievances supported by the revolution and the UGTT, making strong trade unionism much needed today. Whether the

[39] Testimony by Abid Briki, spokesperson of UGTT during the period of the revolution on 26 March 2011. See *marsad al-thawrah al-tunisiyya* (observatory of Tunisian Revolution) vol. 3 (Tunis: FTERSI, 2015).p. 271.

revolution would mark the end of the political dimension of the UGTT, or whether it would consolidate a *de facto* alliance with Leftist parties, remains to be seen.

The UGTT is no ordinary union. It has determined the character and impact of the labor movement and affected Tunisia as a whole since the late 1940s. It impacted significantly the 2011 revolution and the transition period, and is likely to play an important role in the future of the country. In this, it is unparalleled elsewhere in the Arab world. And it is largely because of it that one may confidently say that Tunisia is not Egypt, or Syria or Libya or Yemen. Before 2011, the confluence between a largely secular and humanist opposition and an engrained labour activism have been, I claim, the main bases of a Tunisian formation, which allowed the development of a culture of resistance to authoritarianism with a specific humanist and social justice content. At the same time, the UGTT, and the culture it nurtured, were perhaps not revolutionary enough to provide the leadership and the ambition necessary to turn the 2011 uprising into a workers' revolution. Instead, the union took part, a constructive one, to be sure, in *structuring* the transition to a political phase where it may see its own role curtailed, a phase in which radical politics could be freed from the political limitations of trade unionism. The challenge facing the UGTT is to maintain the independence and appeal of the organization as a sure, and necessary, refuge should neoliberalism or Islamists, or a an alliance of the two, as is the case at the moment, win the day, and should plurality in organized labour follow the fractious political field, resulting in unionism becoming linked in organic ways to political parties. And here, the Turkish example may be most relevant.

Indeed, the so-called Turkish model of economy and Islamist political governance is seen by many as an inspiration to the Tunisian Ennahda party and a favoured path to the country from the perspective of European and American policy makers, and even to parts of the neo-liberal and "secular", Nida Tunis. That story is known. What is less known is the dramatic impact of this model on unionism and the working classes in that country. The statistics tell a sobering story; academic analysis explains the ideological and economic underpinnings which led to such a fate. Over the almost dozen years of Erdogan government unionisation rates regressed from 57.5% in 2003 to 9.68% in 2014, that is from over 12 million unionised workers to a little over 1 million.[40] De-unionization of the economy has been the dark side of the Turkish economic boom, together with the thriving of subcontracting and privatisation of the public sector. Former head of the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions (DISK) has argued that repression on trade unionism has exceeded the "notorious military rule that followed the 1990 coup" (ibid).

[40] Mehmet CETINGULEC, "New Turkish law deals blow to unions, *Al-Monitor* posted 14 November 2014, accessed 2.12.2015). Burhanettin DURAN and Engin YILDIRIM, "Islamism, trade unionism and civil society: The case of Hak-İş labour confederation in Turkey in *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol 41, no. 2 (March 2005), pp. 227-247. See also an analysis of the effect of de-unionization and neo-liberal Islamism policies in the tragic death of 300 miners on 13 May 2014 in a mining site privatized in 2005 in: http://labornotes.org/2014/05/hundreds-miners-die-turkish-government-sides-company

In reality, the relationship between unions and Islamists has not had a happy history. Early on in the Tunisian case, conservative scholars wanted to stigmatise unions as an innovation alien to Islamic work-labour relations, as I mention earlier. In Egypt, the Muslim Brothers tried to use them to its own advantage by having their own labour arm, without much success. But it is in Turkey that we find a more instructive case. First of all, Islamist unions such as Hak-İş, the oldest of them, started as a labour wing of a political party, National Salvation Party (MSP) in the 1970s. They preached harmony between labour and capital based on the idea of Muslim brotherhood and accused its rival unions of being "under the control of masons and Zionits".[41] The overall aim was an Islamic ideal in which both labour and capital have to contribute in reaching by curtailing their demands. The union therefore called for prayer spaces, flexible working hours to accommodate prayer times and such like. When the military took over, the union backed them in their Turkish- Islamic agenda and in weakening the Left. The union eventually took their distance from party politics in the 1980s. But soon the union came head to head against its presumed brothers, known in Turkey as Islamic or Green Capital, such as the business association MÜSİAD (the Association of Independent Industrialist and Businessmen) which vehemently opposed unions and even aggressed activists violently (ibid 239). One Islamic company manager, Duran and Yildirim reports, argued that "the existence of the same culture and same thoughts make trade unions unnecessary. Bosses, managers and workers pray together" (ibid 239).

In the current climate of Tunisia, with the consolidation of a ruling alliance between three neoliberal parties and an Islamist one which is modelling itself after the Turkish AKP, the birth of an Islamist-leaning union, rising

[41] (ibid, 232)

terrorism, and no change in the development model, UGTT is called upon to continue carrying the aspirations for social justice under difficult economic circumstances and supported by a weak political Left. At the same time, it will have to remain a big player on the national and even international scenes as a Nobel Laureate peace maker. Most importantly, however, the challenge facing *al-Ittihad* is to continue its own 70 year-old legacy of shaping Tunisia. Or will the post-2011 Tunisia it has helped shape put an end to a story, which has been, in many ways, quite epic?

PART II

CONFLUENCY (*TARAFUD*) BETWEEN THE LABOUR MOVEMENT AND CULTURE

Introduction

The labour movement in Tunisia can be seen as a productive intersection of the conditions which affected the country and much of the world since the 1920s. It bears the imprints of the colonial and postcolonial periods; the turbulent relationship between state and unions; the complexities of identity politics; and the much-neglected history and dynamics of political subjectivity in postcolonial societies. Because of its longevity, continuity and impact, unionism and the Tunisian General Union of Labour (UGTT), in particular, have affected the character of mobilisation for rights in Tunisia in ways that are integral to the social and political history of the country as a whole. Yet, while the relationship between unions and political actors has been treated extensively, particularly in Arabic and in French scholarship, linkages between the culture of protest and unions remain unstudied. In addition, there are virtually no studies, in any language, on what might be called 'alternative' or 'committed' cultural production in the country, a term which has been contested and unstable before as well as after 2011, as we will see in the present essay.

There are reasons for this neglect, which include traditional aversion to culture and the arts among union members, an uneasy relationship between intellectuals and unions, and a frame of mind which sees both activities as separate, if not competing domains. (All of these aspects were in fact raised at a workshop devoted to the cultural role of the union post 2011, organised by UGTT in April 2015, on which I will say more below). In reality, the interaction between the two is rather solid, rooted in history and is currently being consolidated in a programmatic manner. In terms of politics, by and large, what I will be calling "alternative culture" in Tunisia, has been rather on the Left, in a consistent way, far more than unionism as a whole and the union leadership in particular. And it is with the turn to the Left of the UGTT leadership in its 2011 congress that culture became a focus of the union's strategy at the highest level, as I will explain in more detail. Indeed, Tunisia has witnessed a rare event in postcolonial societies, namely a social and political revolution which overthrew an authoritarian regime which suppressed all aspects of dissent and attempted to co-opt unions as well as alternative protest culture. This revolution itself and its aftermath have been significantly affected by UGTT as I demonstrate in Part I. At the same time, the revolution opened the gates to widespread radical and violent Islamist politics hitherto unknown in the country. Identity politics, long seen as a thing of the past in Tunisia, saw major resurgence, while the Left-leaning UGTT found itself at odds with assertive and powerful Islamism which saw in unions an enemy and in alternative culture either a threat to its projected re-Islamization of society or a deviation from the path it sought.[42]

[42]OMRI, M.S, "The perils of identity politics in Tunisia" (al-Jazeera English, 27 January 2013) http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/01/2013127142856170386.html).

There were indeed strong and alarming signs of what might be called high jacking of the aims of the revolution into the domains of identity politics. Increasing attacks on representations of saints (*awliya'*) and shrines (*zawaya*) up and down Tunisia, defacing and burning of over 30 such sites so far, culminated in the burning of Sidi Bou Said's shrine on the eve of the second anniversary of the 14 January revolution were all part of a wider movement. Whether through attacks on shrines, attempts to insert Sharia into the constitution, the targeting of secular and artistic practices, or violent responses, Islamists have been attempting to drag their opponents to their traditional terrain: identity politics. Indeed, buoyed by victory in the polls and a sudden surge in visibility of religious culture – dress; beards; public preaching; spectacular communal prayers in stadiums and on beaches; colossal meetings, such as the one held in Qairouann's historic mosque; an influx of preachers from the Arab East and the Gulf; an explosion in religious book sales, to name but a few signs – Annahda and other groupings, such as Hizb Tahrir and Ansar al-Sharia, have entered the public sphere and behaved with nothing short of entitlement. The terrain of social justice and freedoms was displaced and new narratives about the history of the country, including how it may have been taken out of the "Islamic revival" under Bourguiba, began to emerge. This identity politics, which dominated public debate as well as the constitution-making, came with an attendant economics, and neither were seen as commensurate with the revolution and are therefore seeds for further unrest and continued protest. In this context, unions saw culture as a battleground they must enter and win, along with the social and political fields.

The present essay takes the long view of a relationship it considers close and significant. It proceeds through tracing key moments of the relationship then zeroes in on alternative music in particular, motivated by the singularity and impact of this tradition in Tunisia since the 1970s. It then devotes some time to the post-revolution orientation of the union in this regard. The argument running through it is that a proper understanding of the configuration of protest and contention in Tunisia cannot ignore linkages between unionism and alternative culture, or rather that this link has contributed to shaping this configuration and giving both areas the impact they have had. In turn, the seemingly unnatural relationship has affected unions as well as culture in ways which remain unaccounted for.

Research on Tunisia and the MENA region as a whole before 2011 has focussed on political actors, identity politics and socioeconomic factors as the prisms through which the region must be understood. Linked to the policy-oriented research on the region, is the attention given to Islamism in politics and society or what I have called elsewhere "terrorology". In the field of music, for example, which is an important part of the present essay, there has been some recent work on what might be called Muslim soundscapes, particularly intersections between Western popular music, piety and Islamist politics.[43] Local alternative subjectivities have been dismissed or overlooked as insignificant.[44] Subjectivities with a labour or Leftist cultural content have remained largely outside this lens altogether. Since 2011, material has become available on line and in public spaces, and

[43] See, for example, Mark LEVINE's *Heavy Metal Islam* and Hicham AIDI's *Rebel Music*.

[44] The arguments put forth by, notably, Michael Hudson and Pascal Boniface are explained in Part I.

access to the archives and cultural actors themselves has been relaxed, providing researchers with the potential to generate deep revision of knowledge about the region and its dynamics, including the aesthetics of contention. This may explain why after an initial wavering among specialists, the complexity of Tunisia has been gradually emerging as the country moved from marginality to a prominent position in MENA studies and more globally. In terms of cultural areas of interest, this direction could potentially allow research to move from its customary focus on mainstream literary culture and music to these marginalized fields of cultural activity.

Earlier on in the Tunisian revolution, I was struck by two narratives: the so-called spontaneity thesis and the jasmine one. The second soon faded while the first proved to be more resilient.[45] This is largely due to lack of foregrounding and sense of detailed knowledge of the society and its history, which characterise media reporting and a certain kind of political science in the West. Attempts to foreground the revolution have largely come from Tunisian historians.[46] Among the most significant features, they single out the labour movement; a significant history of progressive, secular opposition in the political and cultural fields; social and political marginalization of large parts of the country, and a heavy-handed and corrupt police state. In my view, the labour movement, particularly the main trade union, UGTT cannot be ignored in any serious analysis of this contextualisation, and indeed in understanding Tunisia as a whole, at least since the 1940s. In

[45] See M. S. OMRI, "This is not a jasmine revolution" (ibid). http://www.tni.org/article/tunisia-revolution-dignity-and-freedom-can-not-be-colour-coded

[46] See Part I for more on the relevant sources.

earlier interventions and in Part I, I provide glimpses of why this is the case.[47] Here, I present this thinking and research stressing the intersection between culture, understood in its strict sense of literature and the arts, particularly poetry and music, on the one hand, and unionism, on the other. This may seem counterintuitive as trade unionism and cultural practice are not usually seen as natural bedfellows. I argue that the Tunisian case disproves that impression. I will proceed in three interrelated movements, which follow a dialectical historical trajectory, highlighting the mutual effect culture and unionism have had on each other, as well as the social and political contexts which brought about changes in the relationship. I call these movements the **cultural beginnings of unionism**; **the unionist bases of alternative culture** and the **citizenship turn in culture and unionism**.

1. The cultural beginnings of unionism

It is of crucial significance that the founding of unions took place within the context of French colonial rule of Tunisia and amidst resistance to it. In fact, the extended history of unionism in the country goes back to the 1920s and clusters around the founding of the General Federation of Tunisian Workers in 1924 at a time when social reform and cultural revival were topping the agenda. In the areas of reform, culture and labour movement, three names

[47] See M. S. OMRI's two articles on UGTT as a strike force and as powerbroker, respectively: "The upcoming general strike in Tunisia: A historical Perspective" https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/mohamed-salah-omri/upcoming-general-strike-in-tunisia-historical-perspective and Can the labour union come to the rescue" http://thinkafricapress.com/tunisia/can-UGTT-labour-union-ride-rescue.

come to mind: Tahar a-Haddad (1899-1935), Mohamed Ali Hammi (1884-1928) and Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi (1909-1935).[48] Radical reform was theorized by al-Haddad; action on the ground was led by al-Hammi while al-Shabbi poeticised the moment. He did this in conjunction with the prolific group of artists and writers, *jama'at tahta al-sur* (Tahta al-Sur Group) whose work continued throughout the 1930s and 40s.[49] The Tunisian elite at the time was rather small. They knew each other well, debated each other's ideas and acted on them collectively. For example, al-Haddad who is now mostly remembered for his pioneering reformist work on women rights, was founding member of the Federation of Tunisian Workers led by al-Hammi and its historian at the same time. In his book, *Tunisian workers and the rise of the union movement* published in 1927, al-Haddad chronicles the gestation of a movement through discussion and the hard ground work of its founders. He notes how they became convinced of key principles: the need for independence from French unions; opening up to all workers regardless of religion or race; membership in the workers international movement.[50]

[48] Mohamed Ali Al-Hammi was self-educated, travelled extensively, including to Germany where he studied political economy. The details of the founding are recounted by Al-Hammi's companion, the reformer and women rights advocate, Tahar AL-HADDAD, in his seminal book *The Tunisian workers and the rise of labour unionism in Tunisia* (1927) (Tunis: Dar Bouslama, 1987) (in Arabic). Al-Shabbi is Tunisia national poet, and one of the most loved poets of modern Arabic. See, OMRI, M.S., "Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi" in *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography, 1850-1950*, ed. Roger ALLEN (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag), 292-303.

[49] A contemporary take on the period and the group is drawn by al-Duaji himself in his *taht al-sur*, ed. Ezzedine MADANI (Tunis: STD, n.d).

[50] al-Haddad, 103.

But most significantly, the group came to the conclusion that the country was not ready for revolution and what al-Haddad calls, "class warfare". He says: "The idea which settled in minds as the basis for the workers federation was the idea of reform, and it is upon it that the foundations were laid out".[51] The mission of unions was conceived primarily to educate workers about their rights and in literacy more generally. "For there is a task which is greater and more delicate than [salary claims]: it consists in social work inside union institutions. ... [We must] publish books and pamphlets to the public; and help educate the children of workers" (al-Haddad, 116). The first union was therefore not a trade union as we know it: it was intended as a social and cultural reform organization. The content of the reform was of course laid out by al-Haddad himself; by al-Hammi who gained international experience and education in Germany; by the rising rebellious poets and artists of the time, and a number of reformist ulama.[52] The idea of reform, with various degrees of radicalism, is in fact a continuation of the 19th century *nahdha*, which swept across much of the Arab lands, and of which Tunisia was a major site, particularly in education, administration and culture.[53] Al-Shabbi and his generation sought freedom in its widest sense, freedom of creativity and expression as well as liberation from French rule, while unions focused mainly on organizing workers and defending their rights, or strengthening collective action and solidarity, and on education. This idea of radical social,

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[51] (al-Haddad, 115)

[52] On the secular and religious intellectuals of the time, see SRAIEB, Noureddine, *Le college Sadiki de Tunis (1875-1956): Enseignement et nationalisme* (Paris: Les editions de la Méditerrannée, 1995) and GREEN, Arnold, "A comparative historical analysis of the Ulama and the state in Egypt and Tunisia", *Revue de l'occident musulman et de la méditerrannée*, 29 (1980): 31-454.

[53] See HOURANI, Albert, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1879-1939* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983).

political and cultural reform will prove to be a constant feature of protest throughout Tunisia's colonial and postcolonial history. The period was characterised by the complexity of interaction among major currents and new ideas, including a conflicted relationship with the West due to the violent colonial context of an otherwise-attractive modernity, the ideas of freedom which accompanied a turn to Romanticism in literature, spearheaded by the poet al-Shabbi and others, and attempts at reform of religious ideas and the educational system. In addition, unionism and political parties were novel ideas in a society organized along traditional local forms of civil society.

In the 1940s and early 1950s, which witnessed the founding of UGTT and the peak of the nationalist movement, three names come to mind: Farhat Hashed (1914-1952), Mohamed Fadhel Ben Ashour (1908-1970) and Mahmoud Messadi (1911-2005). Ben Ashour was an important figure in the reform of education and religion, Hashed organized the labour movement and Messadi gave literary expression to the determination as well as the trepidations which marked the moment. We would not be surprised to know they worked in synch. Ben Ashour, who was a prominent literary historian and critic, was also founding member of UGTT in 1946.[54] He would also lead in the reform of the Personal Status Code a decade later. Hashad led the organizing and mobilisation effort, and when he was assassinated on 5 December, 1952, al-Mas'adi, who was by then the leading figure in the

[54] Among his literary works, *al-Harakah al-adabiyya wa al-fikriyya fi tunis* (The literary and intellectual situation in Tunisia in the 19th and 20th centuries), first published in 1956 (Tunis: Bayt al-Hikma, 2009).

cultural sphere, replaced him.[55] The latter would dedicate his 1955 seminal play, *al-Sudd* (the Dam), to Hashed's soul. In fact, critics see in the book's protagonist, Ghaylan, a representation of the labour leader in his determination and vision. UGTT was a movement of social reform and of national liberation in addition to being a trade union. This was its mission from the start, and it would become consolidated over time and through close ties between Habib Bourguiba, the leading political figure of his time, and the political movement as whole. The story of this link and the union's pivotal role are well known, but it will not be remembered by the post-independence state when UGTT wanted to reassert its political and social role, as I will explain below.[56]

The 1940s and early 50s combined three strands of action, which contributed to the making of what we might call the construction of a national culture in the sense given to it by Frantz Fanon. There was a sustained effort to debate, produce and disseminate a properly Tunisian culture. The journal *al-Mabahith*, led by al-Bachrouch and then by Mahmoud Messadi is an example of this, acting as what I called in a different study, a collective intellectual.[57] At the same time, journalism witnessed a rise in diversity and

[55] For an extensive study of Messadi the writer and intellectual, see OMRI, *Nationalism, Islam and World Literature: intersections in the works of Mahmud al-Mas'adi* (London: Routledge, 2006).

[56] A sizeable number of studies treat Farhat Hached's legacy including: Mansouri, Salim. *Risalat al-Ittihad al-Am al-Tunisi li al-Shughl, 1946-1956*; Mokni, Abdelwahid, *Farhat Hashed*: al-mu'assis al-shahid wa al-qa'id al-shahid (*Farhat Hashed: The founding witness and the martyred leader)*. See also Ben Hmida, Abdessalam. *Al-harakah al-naqabiya al-wataniyya li al-shighghila al-tunisiya, 1924 to 1956*, vol. 1.

[57] *Nationalism, Islam and World Literature* ((p.39-40.

quality. The demarcation from French and Francophone literature and writing became more pronounced, giving the Arabic language pride of place. This was also the time when the nationalist elite, supported by dynamic action by unions and even an armed resistance, asserted itself as a viable alternative to colonial rule. This convergence of effort and aspiration consolidated the role of UGTT as a key asset to the emerging nation and therefore as a point of attraction for its elite. An instance of this coalescing could be symbolically understood when we know that the founding congress of UGTT, held on 20 January, 1946, seventy years ago, took place in the lecture room of a cultural association, al-Jam'iyya al-Khalduniyya and under the presidency of Ben Achour. The confluence was not seen as odd or unusual. In fact, it was the culmination of joint effort among key actors in the cultural and social fields at the time. Mokni interprets the presence of Ben Achour, albeit in honorary capacity, in this way: The presence of Ben Achour was an act of blessing by the old religious families, the academic wing of the Zaytouna and the enlightened reform movement in Tunisia of trade unions, which were seen by employers as well as conservatives as a heresy (*bid'a*)" (Mokni, 54). For Hached saw the union, in his words, as "a movement of salvation, which came to take [Tunisians] from darkness to enlightenemt" (Mokni 149.[58] His frequent use of lines and metaphors from the poetry of Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi served, in fact, to inspire, and in a sense, poeticise, the daily struggle of workers into an imagined liberation and progress.

A review of UGTT congresses and major statements demonstrates that what we might call the "societal project" of UGTT, which saw its genesis amidst

[58] From an article published 12 October 1949.

this context, did not really change in any substantial way since its founding.[59] These aims were articulated by Hached on 16 May 1947: "The workers' struggle to improve their material and moral conditions is then tightly linked to the higher interests of the country, because such improvement requires a social change which cannot be obtained as long as the nation is subjected to the colonial system".[60] There are global resonances to this strategy, as he explains: "If union movements in free nations fight big capitalism and the governments which support it, it is incumbent upon the workers of colonized nations to combat that system which is in reality the exploitation of an entire people for the benefit of foreign capitalism". All UGTT congresses would stress the nationalist character of their organization as well as its commitment to democracy and to social justice. The practice of its leadership occasionally changed but the union as such has towed this line pretty much throughout its existence. As a result, it stood with liberation movements in the Arab world, Africa and Latin America. An important cultural element was attached to this perspective and promoted by the union. It is often called *thaqafa multazima* (committed culture) or alternative culture (*thaqafa badila*). It offered a response to neo-liberal entertainment and to official cultural production at the same time. It took the form of political poetry, music and other forms of cultural practice as tools for mobilisation

[59]The union's aims in its charter include: "building a socialist and nationalist economy, free from all forms of dependency; calling for fair distribution of national wealth in a way which guarantees the aspirations of all workers and lower sections of society; defending individual and public liberties and reinforcing democracy and human rights; supporting all people struggling to reclaim their sovereignty and determine their destiny and standing in solidarity with national liberation movements across the world'. UGTT. *Al-Nidham al-dakhili.* (Tunis: UGTT, 2007) p.1.

[60] Mansouri, p. 81.

and for raising awareness among the general public, as I will outline in detail.

4. The unionist bases of alternative culture

Soon after Tunisia's independence, discontent with the rule one party over the state began to grow and repression ensued; political opposition groups and individuals were often subdued or co-opted. UGTT remained a zone of refuge, where political dissent was either diverted into labour activism or hibernated. In my view, oppositional cultural production was one of the areas which benefitted most from this social and physical space, which the Tunisians simply called *al-ittihad* (The Union). We would be hard pressed to find an alternative music band, which did not perform in or was sponsored by *al-ittihad*. Amateur Cinema Association was supported by UGTT and named their gold medal after Farhat Hached; key dates in the local, Arab and global protest calendar have been regularly celebrated there (Palestine's Land Day; International Women's Day; International Day against Imperialism, and so on…). But some cultural work was less tied to occasions and calendars. An example is the Regional Union of Ben Arous where literary, cinema and theatre clubs as well as music performances run on a regular basis from 2004.[61] This, despite the fact that UGTT did not really have a cultural strategy and that its pedagogical functions did not go much beyond union education and forming its own cadre. But, like other sectors of the economy, the union had branches in the cultural economy and

[61] Archived by Ridha Ben Hlima in the documentary, "The experience of the regional union of Ben Arous in the cultural field," (Tunis: UGTT – DFSCO, 2013).

administration. My focus will turn to music. But the engagement of the union in the cultural field and its continuity are easily traceable through its archives, partial as these are.[62] When I conducted research at *al-Sha'b* headquarters in Tunis in April 2014, Sami Tahri, Director, the newspaper and spokesperson of the UGTT, expressed his fear that part of the archive may never be recovered because it was either lost during raids by the secret police or destroyed in the chaotic weeks after January 2011.

The Union's newspapers and magazines demonstrate that it's the engagement of UGTT with the cultural field was continuous in time, wide in geographical reach and covered a variety of areas albeit in an uneven manner. It also becomes possible to detect the moments during which the Union took the lead in literature and the arts as well as in philosophical and other intellectual areas going beyond occasional attention or specific cultural forms. A selective overview of the union's publications should illustrate this. The November 1959 issue of the Union's magazine, *al-Sha'b* (The People) carries a poem in celebration of al-Shabbi's anniversary, a short story and an article on educating workers in the history of trade unionism in Tunisia, in addition to a number of interventions assessing and supporting the Algerian revolution on the 6th anniversary of its start [Figure 1: *al-sha'b*, November 1959]. The special issue of 18 April 1967 makes extensive coverage of culture including short stories, poetry, and an essay on socialist realism in Soviet art, which reviews of an exhibit in Tunis at the time. The newspaper *al-Khaddam* (the worker), which replaced *al-Sha'b* in 1966 and early 1967 was written in colloquial [Figure 2: *al-Khaddam* May 1966]. Issue of 11 September 1967 includes colloquial poetry but also a short story in standard Arabic. The move to write in colloquial marks an important alignment

[62] Personal interview with Sami Tahri, on 17 April 2014 at *Al-Sha'ab* newspaper.

between the union and a wider cultural movement known as Tunisianness (*tawnasa*), which is too complex to treat here, but which constituted an important phase in Tunisian cultural history and a constant aspect of Tunisian protest culture, especially in poetry (e.g., Belgacem Yakoubi), music, theatre and cinema.[63] It must be noted that a long tradition of addressing workers and peasants in a language they could understand was the hallmark of the political as well union activists, Bourguiba and Hached are both charismatic public speakers who appealed to these social categories and were tremendously influential among them.

In the 1990s when the state repressed all dissent and spaces for free expression were severely reduced through censorship, closing down newspapers, banning books and tightening control over publishing, the newspaper *al-Sha'ab* issued a regular cultural supplement, *manarat* (light posts), which soon gained credibility thanks to the seriousness of the contributions, the variety of topics, and the richness of content. Throughout its long life (1990 to 2010), *manarat*, attracted key actors in the intellectual and cultural scene. The supplement of June 2004, for example, included articles on philosophy ("Friedrich Nietzsche: from philology to philosophy"); world cultural history ("What is left of 1968?"); an essay on globalization; studies on cultural heritage (Al-Tawhidi's epistle about the

[63] An important intervention in this debate is Bashir BEN SLAMA's *al-shakhsiyya al-tunisyay: khasaisuha wa muqawwimatuha* (The Tunisian Personality: and main features) (Tunis: Abd al-Karim Ben Abdallah, 1974). Of note at this time was *al-tali'ah al-adabiyya* (The literary vanguard), a radical movement which set out to revolutionize literature in the country. See Tahar HAMAMI, *Harakat al-tali'ah al-adabiyyah fi tunis, 1968-1972* (The Literary Vanguard in Tunisia, 1968-1972) (Tunis: Dar Sahar, 1994).

burning of his books); in addition to a report on the first conference of the so-called Unionist Poets and the manifesto emerging from it. This is a significant event in and of itself, and marks institutional alignment between poets and the union[64] [Figure 3: *Manarat* supplement].

Such alignment between poets and unionists, in reality, predates this congress, and can be observed in times of crises and increased repression. Historically, the crisis following the so-called Bread Rebellion of January 1984 was one of the most serious tests to trade unionism in Tunisia since the death of Hached. It also reveals the position of UGTT and the stakes in its survival for the society as a whole. For this reason, it allows us a productive view of a society in rebellion and how the labour movement engaged with it when protest culture was at its most vulnerable phase and repression at its height. The basic story was the attempt by the ruling party to install a parallel trade union under the pretext of "rectifying the direction" of a UGTT whose leadership was judged to be openly hostile to the ruling party and government policies, and a nest for Left-wing dissent. A group of state-sponsored unionists called *al-Shurafa'* (The Honourables), a title conferred on them by the PM at the time, Mohamed Mzali, took over the union by force. One justification for this move was put forth by an important leader of The Honourables, Abdessattar Al Chennawi: "[the UGTT leadership] turned the Union into an open field for the opposition of all orientations except Destouri unionists, for the Destour Party [the ruling party] is not represented in the union while known and prominent opposition figures hold high offices

[64] For a review of the conference and the manifesto resulting from it, see *Al-Sha'ab*, no. 763, 29 May 2004.

in UGTT. For this reason, 90% of 'the honourables' come from the Destour party".[65]

Indeed, the ruling party had little presence in the union. It did not have a foothold in the university either. There was a clear divide between party loyalists and the opposition. During the crisis, support for the UGTT came from all sides of the country's civil society, most prominently the university, lawyers and human rights activists. Repression was meted against everyone, filling up jails, and forced military service camps. The poet Awlad Ahmad, who wrote a seminal poem on the Bread Rebellion of 1984, *Hymn to the six days*, captured this aura of the unionist and unionism at the time in the poem, "The General Trade Union Manifesto", written during his brief spell in jail with unionists and students in 1985.

A trade unionist,

I confess.

Disciplined

And different.

The light of dawn is upon me

And this night is waning.

Enough!

[65] Al-Haddad, Salim, , Vol. , p. 286.

It's enough!

I toured your prisons,

And now I must stand up and confess:

I am the recorded victory in your defeats.

I am the sea shells.

The creaking of the door is my clock,

The face of water my mirror.

And when my brothers take a stand,

"Honourables" and honour come down tumbling. [66]

Convergence between poetry and labour issues was neither new nor restricted to poetry in standard Arabic – several poets espoused the causes of the working class and the poor in form as in the themes they tread. Mention may be made of seminal instances by Mokhtar Loghmani, Tahar Hammami and Moncef Mezghenni. Hached's assassination was immediately recorded in oral poetry while tributes to him and to unionists continue to be the subject of oral poems.[67] But the confluence of alternative culture and unionism saw

[66] (Tunis – Gourjani prison, November 1985). For more on the poet as an index of Tunisian protest culture, see Omri, M. S., "A Revolution of Dignity and Poetry", 137-166.

[67] The news reached us:

God's will took Farhat away from us.

Hached who loved his people was hit

its fullest expression in music and singing where the relationship was close and enduring. At the root of it was the story of the Egyptian icon of protest music, Cheikh Imam Issa.

Imam and his partner Ahmed Fuad Nigm are the deans of Arabic colloquial political and social protest poetry and music.[68] The genre itself and its practice have a longer history, of course, but two related features have remained constant throughout – or until Imam. These have been the local character of the lyrics and the music on the one hand, and the linkages with oral vernacular poetry, on the other. It draws on poetic forms in local dialects, usually raising issues of local interest. Zajal, as a form, is the prototype of this poetry, and in modern times, the Egyptian-Tunisian zajjal, Mahmud Bayram al-Tunisi (1893-1961), was its main figure, particularly before 1950.[69] Exiled in Tunisia, Bayram became part and parcel of the

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Between the eyes and in the heart.

In Na'saan, his body was thrown

Our sorrows have grown.

See the song: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKyLoqG9kbc

The famous colloquial poet, Mohamed Marzouki has written a eulogy and praise of Hached, Mohamed Ali and unionists in epic ways. See http://alilaswad.blogspot.co.uk/2008/12/blog-post.html

[68] "Sheikh Imam: A profile from the archives" http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18236/sheikh-imam_a-profile-from-the-archives.

[69] Byram's *mudhakkirati*, ed. Fawzi ZMERLI (Tunis: Dar al-Janub, 2001) His satirical poem about the city council, "al-majlis al-baladi", remains a landmark in the history of the genre.

cultural movement in the country in the 1930s and a pillar in the cultural production at the time, including satirical newspapers, songs and critical articles. He worked closely with and influenced the group *tahta al-Sur*, mentioned earlier. But in a region characterised by diglossia and separation between oral and written cultural productions, colloquial poetry, did not have the power of the standardization and the level of dissemination of literature in standard Arabic, which benefitted from its official status and strong institutions. Today, Imam needs no introduction in Tunisia and his death is commemorated regularly, but the way he was introduced to the country and his wide effect on local alternative music is closely tied to UGTT and the Tunisian Left.

Hechmi Ben Frej, an influential figure in the Tunisian civil society and cultural scene was at the centre of it all. In the 1970s, he was a young student at Paris 8, and member of Movement Perspectives.[70] "What attracted me to Imam was this: here we have an Egyptian who is talking about the concerns of Egyptians for justice at the height of pan-Arab nationalism in song and poetry," he told me in a personal interview in 2012.[71] "His Egypt was that of the poor, the marginalised and the repressed. It was an Egypt which was different from the one beaming through Radio Cairo, the speeches of Nasser, and television and film screens." At the time, Imam was banned from leaving his country and from giving public concerts. Ben Frej, the sound engineer and young activist, decided to go to Egypt to record him. He did so in private parties, and then released the first album of Imam in Paris in 1974

[70] "The movement Perspectives: Legacies and representations" in *EurOrient*, vol. 38 (2012), pp. 149-164

[71] Interview with Hechmi Ben Frej, Tunis, 13 June, 2012.

under the title-song, *'uyun al-kalam* (Fountains of speech) with Le Chant du monde)[72] [Figure 4: First Sheikh Imam Album]. The album was noticed by Habib Belaid, presenter for Radio Tunis International, who became the first person to play it to Tunisian audiences in the summer of 1978, Ben Frej recounts.[73] Ten years later, in September 1984, Imam was invited to Tunisia by members of the Banking and Insurance Federation of UGTT and held concerts in several cities[74] [Figure 5: ticket to Cheikh Imam UGTT concert].

The Federation's President, Salah Zghidi, explained to me the circumstances under which the visit took place in a personal online interview: "It was us, with our means and union structures who organized the 10 concerts, from A to Z, including two at Qobba (Dome) in Tunis, others in Bizerte, Sousse, Beja, Gabes, Sfax, Kairouane and Jendouba. 50,000 paying spectators attended, 5000 in the first concert in Tunis and 4000 in the second."[75] Cheikh Imam was held at the airport under the pretext he was "a communist

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[72] See the telling album's cover image: https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=cheikh+Imam&espv=2&biw=1920&bih=979&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0CAgQ_AUoA2oVChMIo5Herv6tyAIVB0wUCh0h3AM9&dpr=1#imgrc=Hl3HIPOROicRyM%3A

[73] The date was confirmed to me by Habib Belaid in an online communication on 11 October 2015.

[74] For an album of photos and concerts of Imam's UGTT visit, see

http://moultaka.net/cheikh-imam/content/concertstunisie/10.php

see also a are video of one of hi the concert: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h64S6hVx6No

[75] Personal online interview with Salah Zghidi, 7 July 2015.

invited by another communist", Zghidi added. The union protested and he was allowed to enter the country and sing. But by the time he arrived, Imam's songs were the main staple of the Tunisian student movement in particular, made famous by emerging bands and individuals (Majmu3at al-Bahth al-musiqi (Gabes Group for Musical Research), the singer Hedi Guella and several others). His fame was such that Imam, in a sense, came home. While in Tunisia, he sang the anthem of UGTT, written by the poet Adam Fethi, gave private concerts and collaborated with young artists and poets[76] [Figure 6: Imam and Bahth Musiqi]. For as early as 1977 the prestigious Carthage International Festival was able to put on stage this alternative music – Hedi Guella, Hammadi Boulares, Ali Saidane, singing Cheikh Imam. Hechmi Ben Fredj, who is a key source on a history which remains to be written, even in Arabic, recalls the circumstances.[77] In 1978, Ben Frej joins *nagham*, the music house, established by Azzouz Rebai, initially to record and diffuse Bourguiba's speeches, and was able to record the first album by al-Bahth al-musiqi which includes their iconic song "el besisa" in 1985-86.[78] Several other bands and individuals became well-known figures in this alternative music, playing at UGTT local offices and at university campuses. One of these was Awlad almanajim (Sons of the mines).

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[76] Adam Fathi has written for Cheikh Imam, a song which regained popularity since 2011, ya waladi (My Son!). He wrote the lyrics of the union's anthem (*nashid al-Ittihad*), which was put to music by Salah Toumi, leader of Awlad al-manajim The full text of the anthem can be found is in *al-sha'b* of 28.06.2008. His collection, *ughniyat al-naqabi al-fasih* (The song of the eloquent trade unionist) was published by dar al-Taqaddum in in Tunis in 1986.

[77] Personal interviews on 18 May, 6 June 2012 and 13 June 2012. Al-Bahth al-musiqi were still in high school at the time, as Ben Frej says.

[78] The band started in 1980, with its vocalist, Amel Hamrouni, who continues to sing today, is the best known of the groups. Their song "el besisa", which can be can be found on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPGX6fXod0g is now part of protest music heritage.

The plight of workers figures prominently in this group's music, and none more so than the fate of miners in the region known as the mining basin, a space of high concentration of working class and frequent labour and popular protests for decades; most recently in the 2008 rebellion which prepared the ground for the 2011 revolution. Gafsa and its neighbouring towns live off mining phosphates, are heavily unionized and famously militant. Awlad la-manajim was formed specifically from there. It started in 1977 and continued its mission and style uninterrupted since. "Al-Damus" (the mining tunnel) is one of their landmark and signature songs. The song is a lament which records a tragic accident one night in the mining town of Om Laarayes, and from there recounts the plight of the region as a whole. The song addresses the mining pit:

Long are the stories of our plights.

Your wonders have surpassed The Thousand and One Nights.

Then it goes on to describe in an elegiac tone those who lost their lives in the mine, mourning the loss of effort of those who toil underground like rats to gain nothing but pain.

You covered our homes in darkness

And left our children fatherless.

Oh, mine! You are the darkness of night.[79]

[79] Documentary on Gafsa and the literature of the mines, with video clips of awlad al manajim etc.

http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/pages/d6382053-787c-4a22-856e-a9f6c9bcaea7.

The focus on the condition of the working class in music was part of a wider phenomenon which included writings often called literature of the mines (*adab al-manajim*), although the term is disputed, which includes poetry and fiction, most notably by Mohamed Ammar Cha'abniyya who notably wrote the play, Tunnel Rats (*firan al-damus*), and novelist Abd al-Hamid Tabbabi, himself a retired miner, author of Hmina drinks his last cup (*Hamina yashrab al-ka's al-akhira*); and The Times of Woman of the Mines (*zaman imra'at la manajim*).

3. A citizenship turn in unionism and culture

The 2011 revolution brought about a reversal of the cultural field in the country and new challenges to unions, UGTT in particular. One of the key changes in the cultural landscape has been the end of restrictions on alternative and oppositional expression on the one hand, and an opening up of public space for hitherto banned expression. Carthage summer festival, the most prestigious of the country's many festivals, had been until then the occasion to "showcase a deliberate emphasis on the culture of exhibition and consumption, liberal but not critical", except on rare occasions.[80] Things changed dramatically in 2011. "The festival became the stage of the marginalized, the censored, and emerging talent. The opening show was given to Ridha Shmak, a leftist singer who presented 'Songs of Life,' a show

[80] The program of the 2010 festival reads like the hall of fame of Arab popular culture: Latifa Arfawi, Sabir Riba'i, Majda al- Rumi, Samira Said, Raghib Alama, Sabah Fakhri, Lotfi Bouchnaq . . ." (Omri, "Revolution of dignity and poetry", p. 142).

inspired by the poet Chebbi, while the closing was turned over to the poet Awlad Ahmed and his cast of poets from the "Arab Spring." [81]

The trend was consolidated by what might be called, a 'revolutionary conversion' by which hitherto repressive state institutions, exclusive public spaces, and an acquiescent public turned into ardent supporters and sponsors of revolutionary culture almost overnight. That situation faded within about two years, as we will see, but alternative music took centre stage, even becoming compulsory in state-sponsored as well as private venues. Awlad al manajim, for example, with their distinctive miner's blue uniform (dingri), moved from union offices and university halls to performing in over 300 concerts in two years and featured on national television and an al-Jazeera documentary [82] Ajras, about which I will say more below, had 150 performances in 2011-12. The same goes for al-bahth al-musiqi and individual singers.

On the side of unionism, UGTT gained more clout as a powerbroker and unavoidable national player. But it was challenged to surrender politics to the newly formed political parties and adjust to emerging plurality in unionism, as I show in Part I. At the same time, it also began to redefine its relationship to culture. UGTT set out a new agenda and opened up debate

[81] For the full program of the Carthage Festival 2011, see http://www.festival- carthage .com.tn/. For the 2010 program, see http://www.tunivisions.net/programme- du- festivalde-carthage- 2010,367.html.

[82] Interview with the founder of the band Salah Toumi, *al-Shuruq* newspaper 21 June 2015. Accessed 9 September 2015.

within its ranks regarding the cultural dimension of their work within the new context. Its Tabarka congress of 2011 paid attention to the kind of culture it supports. The congress's General Motion states:

> To emphasise the need to give culture the attention it deserves because it is a fundamental pillar of national sovereignty in a world characterised by a strong cultural and media invasion supported by colossal technological means. Such invasion aims to empower a standardized model, which limits human cultural diversity and prepares the ground for imposing the consumerist model which serves the interests of big powers and multinational companies. For this reason the congress stresses the need to hold on to our Arabic language and to deepen the sense of Islamic identity away from close-mindedness and fanaticism, and advocates openness to global human cultural heritage without falling into cheap entertainment.[83]

The implications of this general orientation have been worked out in a series of workshops and seminars, the third of which I attended as a participant observer on 8 April 2014 in the city of Sousse. It brought together UGTT branches in the governorates of Sousse, Kairouan, Mahdia, Monastir, Sfax and Sidi Bouzid. It was convened by the UGTT section for training and education, under the heading: "Cultural action is a fundamental pillar of union struggle", and was supported by the German foundation, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. The aim was to rethink the cultural role of the union and the position of cultural activity within it, as Mohamed Mselmi, Member of the

[83] *Documents: the 22nd congress held in Tabarka 25-28 December 2011* (UGTT section on media, communication and publications, 2012) (p. 53).

Executive Bureau in charge of Union Training and Workers' Education, explained in his framing introduction.[84] On the practical side, the project aims to launch a strategy specifically motivated by the post 2011 revolution, which includes regional festivals and regular cultural activities at UGTT offices. The colloquium was attended by over 20 participants; about 40% of them were women, representing the six regional unions. The workshops were run by union members involved in the fields of literature, film, theatre, and music. For debate was the question: What legitimates the subject, historically, in terms of remit and at that time in history? The other questions included: What type of culture should the union promote? How does it relate to wider cultural practices in the country? There are fundamental questions, which reveal strategic thinking and deep awareness of the cultural stakes not only for the union but also for the country as a whole.

Participants argued that UGTT was never restricted to traditional trade union activity; it has had a societal project, and culture was part of that. Historically, however, the practice was either a means of recruiting new members, occasional or haphazard. In addition, culture is seen with suspicion by some unionists and in several unions cultural activity declined since the 1980s. In addition, the issue of overtly political cultural production as a limitation was raised. After 2011, the rise of a "new culture of violence", has given the UGTT, which has always been on the progressive side, the responsibility to fight it. "This is not a need but an emergency," argued one participant. The logic of this stance is that UGTT framed a revolution and now that the revolution has gone off course, it must step in to protect its path. A cultural project is the best way to do it. But what kind of culture UGTT

[84] Personal recording of the workshop, 8 April 2014.

must engage in or promote in the new context? Should it restrict itself to "worker's culture", engage with mainstream trends or highlight regional and local practices? And what relationship should it have with other cultural institutions? Some participants called for an "interactive" relationship with the other cultural institutions and spaces not a break with them, as was the case before 2011. One option was to develop a worker's culture, which touches popular sections of society and does not oppose other aspects of cultural activity. More opening up to the society at large was also advocated. One proposal consisted in turning UGTT offices into open spaces for cultural activities, for example, on weekends ("We need to save our children from salafia (Salafis)", said one participant).

Beyond the series of workshops and debates, UGTT went on to implement some of these ideas. The festivals which took place under this strategy were guided by this vision: they included local cultural production and traditions, progressive music and themed colloquia. The third edition of UGTT festival held in Gabes, 3-5 September 2015, included cinema, music, a study day on green economy, a street festival, poetry recitals, as well as an evening of alternative music. During the opening, Mselmi stressed that UGTT has moved since its Tabarka congress to cultural action rather than limiting itself to the supporting role it has played before, particularly in the marginalized regions. "The festival showcases and valorises the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of each region, and adopts new ways to move from consumer culture to a producer culture".[85] Houcine Abbasi, UGTT Secretary General, on the other hand, argued that the union was, and continues to be, a

[85] *al Maghreb*, Saturday 5 Sept, 2015, page 18. The two previous editions of the festival took place in Kef (3-5 November, 2013) and Beja (4-6 September 2014).

welcoming space for alternative culture of all types, hosting and defending the right to free expression and creation despite restrictions on UGTT itself. He recognized that intellectuals and artists have rushed to the union's defence whenever it came under attack, including on 4 December 2012. For Abbasi, the new strategy aims at avoiding the culture of occasion and seeks to institute democratization of the arts, particularly in the deprived and marginalized regions of the interior.

The new role assigned for cultural practice supported by the union is motivated by mobilisation against what it perceives as the twin dangers of consumerist culture and Islamic fundamentalist culture. In the course of this endeavour, redefining the meaning of alternative culture becomes important. The redefinition also opens up critical perspectives on the relationship between unionism and culture in the past. Often-asked questions included: Has cultural production been over-determined by politics? Has this limited its aesthetic range and ambition? Has it been marked out as specific, niche culture, minoritarian, with a limited audience? Has it lacked linkages with musical traditions as well as global radical trends, such as rap music? Implicit in the debate within UGTT reviewed above is a rethink and new orientations. A more explicit intervention comes from Adel Bouallegue, unionist, academic, and leader of the band Ajras, established first in 1999, and musician since the 1980s.[86] In a personal interview with me, he takes stock of three decades of this experience. "I call this 'alternative song,' not

[86] See Interview with Bouallegue, al-Jarida newspaper, 3 September 2011. Accessed 3 November 2015. See "Al-Hama'im al-bidh at 35" in *al-Arabi al jaded*, 21 February 2015. Accessed 3 November 2015.

'alternative music' since music is a wider field, as I learned from working with the group al-Hama'im al-Bidh (White Doves) for 30 years." [87] The distinction he makes goes to the heart of the relationship between aesthetics and politics. "The focus on song has to do with the focus on the word, which is determined by politics. What interests politicians is singing, not necessarily music. In addition, there are cultural reasons for this, including the history of Arabic music and the focus on the word in Arab culture as a whole. The ruling power may have played a role in this since the word is easier to restrict, control, monitor."

Bouallegue argues that UGTT believes workers needed a discourse, therefore it encouraged bands closer to its aims (Awlad al manajim, al-bahth al-musiqi, Lazhar al-Dhawi)." This is of course an overgeneralization since musical research and innovation are clearly noticeable in al-Bahth al-Musiqi and others, including keen attention to national forms, and the tradition of colloquial poetry. Amel Hamrouni, lead singer al-Bahth al-Musiqi and the best known female vocalist of alternative music in Tunisia, explains to me in a personal online interview: "The name [Gabes Group for Musical Research] is important to us since we endeavoured to create an aesthetic of the song, which consists of a new text at the levels of musical form and the content, but one which is in synch with people's aspirations. I take images and forms from the local music traditions." [88] UGTT may have gone more in the direction of social rights before 2011 by practicing mobilisation by means of a particular type of music or singing. Now, it has to think beyond that.

[87] Personal Interview with the author at Aykar, Tunis, 5 September 2015.

[88] Personal online interview with Amel Hamrouni, 31 October 2015.

Bouallegue agrees by drawing a distinction between social and natural rights: "Social rights are limited to contention, whereas natural rights lead to revolution because they entail going beyond the institution itself".

Bouallegue explains: "Democratizing arts and aesthetics is key. We need to expand the field of interest and work to protect ourselves and think of the future. Alternative music should train people to be citizens".[89] The idea of training in citizenship and the practice of democracy, which have become part of UGTT discourse, is the outcome of the radical changes I have been discussing. Absent from this discourse, however, is a proper engagement with other forms of youth music in particular, which have had considerable appeal before and after 2011, with rap being the most popular form.[90] Bouallegue, despite his critical take on the cultural orientation of UGTT, remains sceptical about rap music, suggesting it has been wrongly presented as The alternative at the expense of an entire history which goes back to the 1960s. This uneasiness with elements of the new soundscape in the country is rooted in the special history of "alternative" music, one which is closer to the literary and social commitment of the 1950 and 60s. But within UGTT itself and as far as I can tell from the three festivals it organized, there is a

[89] He locates the work of Ajras in this horizon: "Our project goes beyond mobilisation and towards the right to aesthetics and the arts". (ibid)

[90] A landmark was the popularity of a rap song, Houmani (2013), with over 20 million views. See also: "Rap in Tunisia: art or resistance?" http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/culture/2013/10/tunisia-rap-art-resistance.html#

tendency to be more inclusive of new forms and sensibilities as well as accommodation of the wider cultural production.[91]

Conclusion

For seemingly unnatural bedfellows, in Tunisia, unionism and culture have had in fact a long and evolving close relationship. This has to do as much with the nature and social history of unionism as it does with the social and political roots of alternative culture. Focus on unions and UGTT in particular allows us to observe protest and resistance over a long period of time, along various sections of society and across the country. This is possible because UGTT has had the historical extent, geographical spread and social reach, which equalled no other body, except the ruling party. As such it can be considered a parallel organization to it, at all levels. By January 2011, UGTT was well entrenched in the social memory of protest in Tunisia, more so, I think, than any political party or political orientation, including Islamism. This lent it credibility and clout to act as catalyst and framing force for popular protest and for the articulation of demands for work, freedom and dignity.[92] Its offices across the country became focal points and operation rooms for protest activity.

[91] It includes a carnival, music, local music, a colloquium on Gabes in fiction, and an mural in the city, etc. This is in synch with the other UGTT festivals. See Press conference announcing the programme on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7LXQkUl17k.

[92] It was remarkable how international media, almost without exception spoke to unionists first, and sometimes exclusively. Their speaking skills were honed in the union work; they

UGTT nurtured, willingly or under pressure from its rank and file, a parallel view of society and culture, which has made of it a privileged position from which to begin to understand wider social and cultural phenomena, including the nature of protest over a long period, and the political limitations of protest movements in Tunisia. In addition, the intersection of unionism and the culture of protest can be a productive explanatory frame of the revolution and, I would argue, the transitional period. It is remarkable how no one in Tunisia was surprised to see UGTT emerge as the powerbroker when the politics of transition came to a deadlock. Consensus around the credibility and the record of the union was expected.

UGTT is now in the process of developing a new cultural strategy, based on a reading of the post-revolution situation and under pressure from a freed public space, which made alternative culture no longer an exclusive domain of UGTT and redefined the field itself. This culture as well as the union remain secularised at the moment and focussed on freedom, citizenship and social justice. Both align themselves against the re-Islamization of society, authoritarianism and resurgent neo-liberal policies. For after the initial celebration of alternative music and culture, mentioned above, interest soon waned and well-entrenched players regained the ground they ceded. Bouallegue explains: "There is a serious planning to control artistic taste in general". He argues that in the first and second years of the revolution, there was an exploitation of alternative art/culture by taking on the revolutionary

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knew the demands and were willing to step forward to express them). See more on this in Part I.

garb, as if to say: we, too, are revolutionaries and we gave you fora to perform (main venues, festivals, and public media). In 2014, an orientation towards the spectacle (e.g., Yanni's show at Carthage festival) returned in force. In 2015 we are back to the old days, to dominant music from giant entertainment companies such as Rotana, and Lebanon, etc. There is also an attack being prepared by the private sector as the state was weakened. Beyond Bouallegue's legitimate fears, one must acknowledge that the cultural field has evolved greatly, particularly in two areas. One is youth culture where rap, for example, is very popular, the other is the rise of what might be termed spiritual music. In addition, plurality of trade unionism is now a reality, albeit limited at the moment, while political parties compete for presence among youth and workers.

Being more than an ordinary civil society association - in its history, social roles, and political dimension - UGTT managed to serve its members, protect other dissidents against state repression and ensure that the transition remains on course to lead to democracy, rather than a return of the old dictatorship or the emergence of a new one. At the same time, its eye has been kept on social justice within the structures of the existing state before 2011 and in the complex recalibration of institutions since then. In this, it meets a vigorous civil society, and a cultural field intent on standing against neoliberal policies and counterrevolutionary Islamist forces on the right. The confluence between a largely secular and humanist education built within the context of a secularizing and culturally liberal state, on the one hand, and an engrained labour activism on the other, have been, I claim, the main bases of a Tunisian formation, which allowed the society to develop a culture of resistance to authoritarianism with a specific humanist and social justice content. I have

argued this case with regard to Movement Perspectives and to poetry, and here extend it to unionism and alternative music.

From a methodological point of view, viewing the poetics of contention in Tunisia in a dialectical relationship with unionism questions the usual tendency to separate workers protest and culture into distinct spheres of activity. Conversely, unionism viewed from the vantage point of national or alternative culture reveals that it has been an activity with a wider remit and aims even in its very beginnings in the 1920s and during the height of the liberation movement in the 1940s and 50s. Such picture begins to probe the complexity of contention or what might be called the contentious field or situation in Tunisia during authoritarian rule. It also allows us to understand better the complex, and often puzzling, alliances and meeting points during the transition period.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

On 28 February 2014, the Tunisian interim government, which was led at the time by Ennahda party, broke with a long-standing practice which gave UGTT an undeclared monopoly over unionism in the country. It allowed direct salary deduction of membership fees in the Tunisian Labour Organization (OTT), the newest of the three split unions. Soon the other two protested, accusing the government of political bias since the OTT was judged by many to be a trade union arm of the ruling party.[93] On 16 November 2015, the government extended the practice to include all recognized unions. The first measure was long in coming and could have raised little interest had it not taken place in the very last days of Ennahda government. It also recalls violent attacks on UGTT headquarters on 4 December 2012 by suspected sympathisers of the Islamist party and of the Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution. In addition, the attempt to break UGTT or limit its impact and power occurred at a time of political and social plurality where dangers of co-opting the union under one powerful ruling party were no longer on the cards. The challenges in fact come from two main factors, namely democratisation and Islamisation.

The first has been on UGTT agenda for decades but the union now stands to be affected by it somewhat negatively. Indeed, democracy is a new game in the country, whose rules are yet to be absorbed and respected. It has come with excesses and abuses of freedom and openness. Some of these abuses have been directed against UGTT and have taken the shape of verbal as well as physical attack on the union and its leadership and open accusations of

[93] *Al Maghrib*, 25 Feb 2014.

disrupting and destroying the economy. In this regard, it seems ironic that UGTT, in a sense, has gotten what it wished for. This situation at the same time challenges the union to open up to new blood, including women and young people, but also to new ways of doing things. That UGTT has led in the two Tunisia editions of the World Social Forum (WSF) is a step in this direction, its new cultural policy, outlined in Part II of this work, is another. Likewise, efforts to accommodate calls for quotas for women in the leadership of the union have intensified.

The second threat comes from the surprising rise of a new politics of identity and the persistent re-Islamisation of Tunisia. This has taken a soft version and a hard one. Islamist violence and muscled ways have been a major factor which pervaded all aspects of life and directly affected UGTT. It has lost key supporters in Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi and several of its leaders as well as its offices were put under police protection from serious violent threats. Terrorism has affected the regular work of the union and taken time and energy away from unionists. On occasion, terrorism controlled the union's agenda (e.g., all strikes in the private sector have been postponed as a result of the terrorist attack against the presidential guard on 24 November 2015. Resources have been redirected to fighting terrorism, which became a national priority, compounding pressure on UGTT to play a “positive” role in the fight and to contribute to social peace by curbing mobilisation for rights and mind the delicate security situation.

Parallel to this but of long-term consequences, however, is Islamist politics within the democratic context. By this I mean the consolidation of Islamisation of society, economy and culture by means of soft power and the ballot box. In addition to open alliances with Gulf States, particularly Qatar,

Ennahda party is not shy about its closeness to Erdogan's way. It has advocated re-Islamisation of society through democratic ways and operated to empower its allies, including OTT and civil associations. The recent events around the question of dismissing an imam in Sfax who was accused of spreading hate and extremist views is a case in point. Ennahda leadership have questioned the purposes and tactics of the coalition government, of which it is part, in this area while OTT has supported the dismissed imam openly, and indeed set up a union for imam's to rival the one affiliated with UGTT.[94] The rise of so-called Islamic economy, while in its early stages and focused on banking and calls for the so-called "Halal" tourism, point to deeper effects of Islamization, which recall the Turkish case under AKP. Indeed, the dramatic changes in the Turkish labour scene and the sustained undermining of unions on ideological as well as business grounds, mentioned in Part I, should serve as a sobering lesson for UGTT and for Tunisia as a whole.

For if under Ben Ali the society was governed by repression, commodification and corruption, the post-revolution period is largely determined by plurality – even atomisation - of the political and civil society fields; the re-Islamisation of culture and society; continued economic difficulty and terrorist violence. Any constructive efforts – including in the union's work and in the cultural field, would have to navigate and survive these overarching forces. This is both a tall order and a necessity for the

[94] For the reaction of OTT, see http://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2015/10/21/tunisie-imam_n_8348346.html. For Islamist reactions, see http://www.letemps.com.tn/article/93992/othman-battikh-dans-la-ligne-de-mire-des-islamistes and http://www.lapressenews.tn/article/affaire-jaouadi-guerre-entre-le-gouvernement-et-ennahdha-par-imams-interposes/94/1050.

future of Tunisia. The urgency to act has become a national issue, beyond what a union alone can do, even one as strong and as organized as UGTT. But the context within which UGTT has operated and its rootedness in society have given it significant resources to draw on, at least in the short term. Its recent international success, culminating in the Nobel Peace Prize, has raised the union's already significant symbolic capital.

Amidst the turbulent times of colonial and postcolonial Tunisia, and over more than seven decades, UGTT played the roles of anchor, bedrock and compass for working people and political dissent. On occasion, it was the leading force of social, cultural and political struggle for freedoms and social justice. Yet, it often acted as a ceiling and even a stifling force which tamed more radical change. Unionism under dictatorship has, understandably, fostered strong feelings of solidarity and loyalty, which may have foreclosed radical criticism and dissent. As the political, ideological as well as social and cultural fields continue to be reconstituted in the aftermath of the 2010-11 revolution, new types of confluency (*tarafud*) are bound to emerge. Will *al-ittihad* continue its seventy year-old legacy of helping shape "alternative" realities and visions of Tunisia? Will it continue to be a site of confleumnce where tributaries (*rawafid*) come to intermingle and provide enriching support for one another? Or will the post-revolution situation interrupt a story which has been in many ways an epic one?

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Back matter

“Omri’s concept of *tarafud*, with its rich etymological references—*rāfid* (tributary stream); *rāfida* (supporting force, as well as supporting rafter or girder)— provides a suitable analytical concept, *confluency*, for understanding the UGTT’s activities in striving to engender and now sustain a sociality of contact and conversation as opposed to that of hierarchical dominance and sectarian violence. In that vein, his insightful analysis of the importance of UGTT’s cultural work reveals a sustained long-term project of unionism as a transformative humanizing force of civil society; albeit one that still struggles to address issues of gender and youth. With an eye toward the dangers of the Turkish model Tunisia is being encouraged to follow, Omri remonstrates us that the continued prospects for such unionism are under increasing contrary pressure, underscoring the urgency of the moment. Much is at stake here, and we would do well to listen carefully and interrogate thoroughly in order to preserve some prospect for the new humanism of Fanon’s aspiration.” (R.A. Judy)