Introduction

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Tunisia's Economies: Who knows the Economy?

In 2014, the World Bank issued a report on Tunisia entitled 'The Unfinished Revolution'. Shifting from its usual expert tone, the bank issued a puzzling *mea culpa*. It acknowledged that its previous reports had repeatedly misrepresented the country's economy as one of durable growth and had 'too easily overlook[ed] the fact that its engagement might perpetuate the kinds of economic systems that keep poor people poor' (World Bank Group 2014: 27). The bank called Tunisia a 'shiny facade' (ibid. 26) where representations of economic growth did not match the material realities of persistent dispossession. This premise, the gulf between representations and realities on the ground, informs our engagement with the political economy of present-day Tunisia.

Before the uprisings of 2011, there was an official narrative in Tunisia, posited by the state and reinforced by international institutions and Western lenders, of durable growth and economic stability (Hibou 2011a; Tsourapas 2013; Kaboub 2014; Zemni 2015). On world maps, Tunisia, small and tucked between two neighbouring oil economies Algeria and Libya, was singled out as an 'emerging economy', the advanced stage for developing countries (Meddeb 2010). Yet when the uprisings of 2011 began, that representation crumbled, revealing an economy held together by debt, and where growth numbers were inflated through creative accounting (Allal 2011; Hibou 2011b; Zemni/Ayeb 2015). The reality that became clear to actors in and outside the country was of a system broken for decades: unemployed graduates who were promised the education-to-job pipeline (Blavier 2016; Weipert-Fenner 2020); stark differences between coastal regions and the country's interior strategically forgotten by the state (Belhedi 1999; Bechir 2018); and elite co-optation fostering family monopolies and entrenching dispossession (Gherib 2012; Malik/Eibl 2019). Since the revolution, the rosy narrative of an emerging but mighty small country has been unsettled yet without any kind of resolution: moving from crony capitalism to neoliberal encroachment (Jouili 2023; Mullin 2023); from subsidies keeping prices low to decade-long inflation (Amri 2023); and from manipulated exchange rates to the fall of the Dinar (Tunisian Observatory of the Economy 2021).

Yet, if representations do not account for material realities, perhaps it is because they never do. As Mitchell, Callon and MacKenzie remind us 'the economy' is a construction

that renders it a sphere outside of political life and only legible to experts (Mitchell 2002; Callon 2007; MacKenzie et al. 2007). As such, if what constitutes Tunisia's economy has unravelled, it is also because economic practices defy the measurements that attempt to contain them. Instead, as the chapters of this section will show, it is by investigating the complex realities on the ground, people surviving, accumulating, resisting, and imagining alternative futures in times of crisis, that we can perhaps begin to sketch a picture not of *the* economy but of a political economy attentive to the inextricability of the material and the representational (Keane 2003).

A Few Threads in Tunisia's Economies

A critical political economy of Tunisia foregrounds economic practices as plural phenomena constituted through the sociopolitical. The chapters in this section highlight key features that rattle the sense of *an* economy.

Despite discourses representing Tunisia as urban and de facto modern, Tunisia remains a country where rural life is at the epicentre of socio-economic processes (Gana 2012). Weißenfels (this volume) in his chapter on alternative property rights in the Tunisian South reminds us that struggles over land are essential to understanding the relations between inequalities and resources. Centring agrarian life historicizes movements across the country, through the rural exodus of those who have become the working poor and whose labour sustains other sectors of the economy (Chabbi 1999). Moreover, the agrarian question foregrounds the struggles over land sovereignty (Elloumi 2013), food justice (Ayeb/Bush 2019), and the environment (Bouhlel/Furniss, this volume) that mark contemporary politics.

In state and international institutions' narratives, Tunisia is seen as a country whose key resource is its human capital. Yet this perspective erases the stark differences of class, gender, and location that inform the experiences of educated youth, as Garraoui's chapter in this volume highlights. Education as the path towards a better middle-class life became the ideological cornerstone of the authoritarian state since Tunisia's independence. Both the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes constructed their base by selling a middle-class ethos, of an educated population, with access to credit and aspirations to modernity, yet perceived as apolitical (Hibou 2011b). We can understand the middle-class illusion through the Framework of Capabilities-Aspirations, as Gertel/Grüneisl highlight in the book's introduction, meaning 'as the gap between "what is" and "what might have been"' (page 19). The gap between people's material lives, the promises made by the system, and their aspirations help us contend with the cycle of 'revolution and its disenchantments' (Bardawil 2020) marking life since 2011. In recent years, the middle-class as an aspirational project, as a de facto social class, and as an institutional discourse has crumbled. Class divisions have grown, especially between elites and the working-class while increasing indebtedness has kept people in cycles of dependency. Indebtedness as it trickles from individuals to social groups to the state's sovereign debt is a generative lens into local (Salman 2023), national (Djerbi 2023), and transnational politics (Alami 2021). Tunisia's debt regime, emerging from a predatory banking sector aided by the state constitutes a mirror of capitalist processes across North Africa and the Middle East.

Informality and the State

When asking what constitutes the economy of Tunisia, we grapple with the dizzying information reiterated by mainstream media and state institutions, that 30 to 50 per cent of the Tunisian economy is supposedly informal. This so-called informal economy spans multiple sectors, modes of accumulation, and regimes of labour across Tunisia, from contraband trafficking which alters the fabric of border towns (Amri; Shâfi'i, this volume) to the myriad of modalities of undeclared work that includes both skilled and unskilled labourers in the 'course a la *khobza* (Meddeb 2011)', (literally 'the race for bread', i.e., the daily struggle or hustle to get by) that organizes labour in space and time. These examples highlight how the informal is a catchall word that flattens the different combinations that articulate accumulation, regulation, and governance. The work of lumping these activities as informal and then positing them as the radical opposite of the formal, operates as a mode of governmentality (Foucault 1991), meaning a way to control, contain, and discipline using knowledge production, here of the economy. It puts anything that occurs beyond the state as informal, imbuing it with amoral qualities that relieve the state of responsibility towards fair compensation, economic rights, or social security. Instead, and as Chebbi and other contributions to this volume showcase, what happens in the broad category of the informal is central to an everyday political economy that constructs alternative futures beyond institutional constraints. As Gertel/Audano (this volume) remind us, informal economies are plural, they reorganize space and open up questions about economic power while helping decipher what alternatives are being produced within the cracks. Informal practices also produce new geographies that decentre the sites of wealth accumulation to consider what happens between regions, in working-class neighbourhoods, or at borders (Malik/Gallien 2020; Meddeb 2021). Through a focus on informality, we move beyond methodological nationalism to instead locate the transnational flows that reorganize margins and centres alike. For example, as Amri shows in this volume, the informal organizes borders away from their representations as exceptional geographies, marginal spaces, or lawless lands to instead locates borders as key sites for exchange and circulation across North Africa.

Finally, we are left with the state as a concept and as the site of power that is inextricable from our understanding of Tunisia's political economy. This book tracks the relationship between the economy and the state, meaning how the state becomes a site, a tool, or a node for a plethora of economic practices (Mitchell 1991; Ferguson 1994; Goswami 2004; Appel 2019). The notion of the state has been central to recent works on Tunisia, as a node for capture (Capasso 2021), a site of surveillance regimes (Pluta 2020), and the main interlocutor in social movements (Allal/Bennafla 2011). This scholarship and this edition do not assume a coherence of the state but locate how power invests the state. The chapters here follow the state through an ethnographic lens, meaning they examine daily strategies to resist the state (Weißenfels, this volume), demand the state (Furniss/Bouhlel, this volume), or operate in lieu of it (Amri; Chebbi; Shâfi'i, all this volume). Instead of the state per se, we are concerned here with actions, discourses, sites, and power effects that reimagine the state in a myriad of ways.

Overall, this volume resists looking at Tunisia as a site of exceptional processes, against tendencies often layered with orientalism that see the country and the Arab re-

gion more broadly as a space of difference. This book ultimately argues that it is instead through a critical political economy attentive to practices, politics, and social processes that we can better grasp Tunisia, North Africa, and even global capitalism today.