Imagining Futures

Capabilities and Aspirations – An Introduction

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> Poverty is many things, all of them bad. It is material deprivation and desperation. It is lack of security and dignity. It is exposure to risk and high costs for thin comfort. It is inequality materialized.
>
> Appadurai (2004: 64)

After the 2011 revolution, Tunisia became a symbol of the struggle for dignity, freedom, and justice. It became a beacon of hope for an entire region, where other similar popular uprisings had descended into violence. Bringing to an end the authoritarian rule of Ben Ali, the popular uprisings made a multitude of new developments possible, paving the way for a process of institution-building, transitional justice, and democratic transition. Now, more than a decade later, the outlook has once again dramatically changed: newly won political freedoms that led to democratically elected but rapidly changing government coalitions, are now being curtailed yet again; the economy is in disarray, especially after the crisis induced by the Covid-19 pandemic, the rise in prices for essential goods, and the impacts of drought and poor water management on local agriculture. Socio-economic inequality has expanded rapidly over the past decade, as has increasing resentment and violence against 'others', feelings that were recently instrumentalised by Tunisia's president Kais Saied against a growing minority of Sub-Saharan African migrants in the country. Consequently, the desire to leave the country to build a future elsewhere has grown unabatedly, resulting both in an acceleration of the 'brain drain' that deprives Tunisia of its highly educated younger generation, and in the rise of illegal departures that cost many less privileged young Tunisians their lives. All of this occurs in the context of global dependencies, rendered acutely visible through the impacts of the Russia-Ukraine war on global wheat markets and unprecedented food insecurity in North Africa (Gertel 2023).

Situated in the decade or so of political and socio-economic turmoil following the 2011 revolution, this volume investigates the relations between *Inequality and Mobility* in contemporary Tunisia. Not only does this allow for the analysis of persisting disparities,

it also reveals contestations and negotiations regarding alternative ways of imagining possible futures. Taken together, the contributions presented in this volume argue that the ability to act for a better future – the capabilities – depend not only on a sustained access to resources, but also on an environment that enables multiple forms of desires, imaginaries, and subjectivities – the aspirations. To explore the overarching theme of inequality and mobility from diverse conceptual and methodological angles, as well as empirical perspectives, the chapters in this volume are structured around three overarching questions: First, which forms of inequality have shaped Tunisia in the past and what new dimensions of inequality are determining its present? Next, what are the impacts of inequality on mobility and vice-versa? Finally, how will these interdependencies between inequality and mobility determine Tunisian futures, in terms of enabling new possibilities for dignified livelihoods?

Counter-Revolution and Socio-Economic Crisis

While much of the research presented in this volume was thought out, or began to be carried out, in the context of post-revolutionary societal opening-up in Tunisia, the work was discussed again and completed against the backdrop of an accelerating counter-revolution. On July 25 2021, the elected president of Tunisia, Kais Saied, dissolved the Ennahda-backed government of Hichem Mechichi, suspended parliament and lifted the immunity of its members. This presidential power grab occurred at a moment of political deadlock that had rendered the Tunisian parliament ineffective as a legislative organ, and at a time when widespread anger in Tunisia against the government's mismanagement of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as ever-louder allegations of corruption came to the surface. While Kais Saied's decision was thus celebrated by a majority of Tunisians, and was considered by many a long-awaited step to dethrone the Islamists, others immediately warned against a return to authoritarianism, or rather, a new form of populist dictatorship (Khiari 2022).

The rallying cry of the 2011 Tunisian revolution was 'freedom, dignity and social justice' (*hurriya, karama, 'adala ijtima'iyya*). The process of transitional justice and political opening-up post-2011 allowed new possibilities for imagining and discussing alternative forms of economic and social order that could enable a life of dignity for all Tunisians: from a radically new agricultural system focused on food sovereignty (Ayeb/Bush 2019), to an economy structured around the goal of job creation for all (Kaboub 2012), or a decolonisation of monetary institutions and reform of central banking (Ben Rouine 2022). However, a decade later, the prospects for achieving such alternative visions to the prevalent neoliberal and 'extroverted' economic policies seem rather bleak. The unsustainable foreign debt spiral has accelerated further; the country remains highly vulnerable to world market shocks due to its strong import dependency and export-oriented industrial production and agriculture; while unemployment has grown further. In addition, the more recent dismantling of democratic institutions and reorganisation of local governance under Kais Saied has paralysed much of Tunisia's state administration, slowing down vital infrastructure projects and political reform processes. The socio-economic inequalities young Tunisians grapple with today – globally and within their own

country – are perceived and articulated as injustices (Melliti et al. 2018). Yet as political claim-making has once again become risky under Kais Saied's authoritarian rule – and is often considered futile after the perceived 'failure' of 'the revolution' (*al-thawra*) – such systematic exposure to injustice without avenues for agency translates into exacerbated feelings of frustration and anger (Melliti 2022, 2023; Laroussi 2024).

The period of collaborative research and discussion (2021–2024) of which this edited volume is a product was thus marked by political turmoil and deepening socio-economic crisis in Tunisia[1]. Kais Saied and his government revoked much of what had been regarded as the key democratic achievements and institutions of the transition (Marzouki 2022): this ranges from the dissolution of Tunisia's 2014 constitution to the dismantling of post-2011 flagship institutions like the Truth and Dignity Commission (IDV) to the repeal of judicial independence. Simultaneously, Tunisia's socio-economic crisis became increasingly tangible for an ever-larger part of society in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mansour/Ben Salem 2020, Laroussi 2021). The exponential rise of Tunisia's public and external debt provoked an unprecedented financial crisis, leaving the state struggling to pay the high public sector wage bill as well as vital wheat and medicine imports (Rehbein 2021). In spring 2022, shortages in staple foods such as sugar, vegetable oil, rice, coffee, milk, and subsidised bread thus occurred for the first time since Tunisia's independence, and have since turned into a regular feature of everyday life (Tanchum 2021; Gertel 2024a). In addition to new difficulties for commercial and household provisioning due to such unpredictable shortages, rapid price inflation – accelerated by the reduction in fuel subsidies – has severely affected the purchasing power of even middle-class Tunisians (Amri 2023).

Rising unemployment and price hikes disproportionately affect the urban and rural poor, who remain concentrated in the structurally disadvantaged, interior regions of Tunisia's north-west, centre-west and south. The stark regional inequalities that first sparked the 2010 uprisings in Tunisia's interior regions (Allal 2016; Ayeb 2011) have only increased in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, triggering a sense of profound injustice, but also of complete hopelessness that finds expression in public suicides, protest movements, and in the on-going exodus of youth from the rural hinterlands. The impacts of climate change and poor resource governance amplify already-existing injustices. Water scarcity is particularly affecting population groups in the inland regions, is forcing farmers to abandon previously irrigable land, and more and more households are having to rely on the infrequent public drinking water supply (Mzalouat 2019). In addition, the long-term effects of environmental pollution – most prominently in the southern phosphate mining areas, and in the Gulf of Gabes and Sfax where toxic phosphorus has entered coastal waters – destroy livelihoods and living environments and push people to move (Robert 2021). In Tunisia's southern and western regions, youth unemployment remains extremely high, and often the only viable income-earning opportunities are in the informal border economies with Libya or Algeria (Meddeb 2016). For those who migrate to the rapidly growing, and largely illegally built, peripheries of Tunisia's wealth-

1 The World Bank writes about 'a decade of lost growth' after the 2011 revolution with average growth levels of 1.7% between 2011 and 2019, accompanied by rising unemployment (World Bank, 2024).

ier coastal cities, opportunities on the job market are scarce and salaries are low, making it impossible to repeat the social ascension that many rural-urban migrants of their parent generation managed (Miossec 1985). As unemployment also more greatly affects those with university diplomas, many highly-qualified find themselves unable to enter the job market. They remain blocked in a 'contained' state (Gertel 2018b) of prolonged 'waithood', unable to leave their parents' home and commence an autonomous adult life (Hmed 2016). This pushes young Tunisians to accept precarious or low-skilled employment despite having high qualifications, and it means they are unable to replicate the middle-class lifestyles of their parents for their newly founded families (Gertel 2024b). The rapid degradation of the public health and education system in Tunisia over the past years has moreover placed a new financial strain on families as they increasingly seek private services, adding to severe levels of private household debt (Salman 2023).

Enforced Immobility and Aspirations for Better Futures

Unprecedented constraints on opportunities for social mobility have been compounded by an increasingly stringent border regime that has negatively affected cross-border mobility for all Tunisian passport holders. European border externalisation policies have been stepped up in Tunisia post-2011, both through the securitisation of Tunisia's southern and western borders, and through security cooperation with Tunisia's coastguard, designed to curb the ever-greater influx of migrants from Tunisia's shores into Europe (both of Tunisian and foreign nationalities) (Breda et al. 2023). Such European policies of border closure were complemented with so-called 'soft measures' – prominently funded through instruments such as the EU Trust Fund and implemented through third parties such as think tanks and civil society organisations – with the goal of preventing Tunisia from turning into a major migration transit route (Zardo 2020). Simultaneously however, legal channels for the migration and travel of Tunisians to Europe were curtailed, with the exception of targeted recruitment programmes for highly qualified young Tunisians, such as trained doctors or engineers. Both the officially announced temporary visa limits and the unofficial quotas have led to a volatile and unpredictable visa regime that shifts the decision on the right to leave Tunisia into the hands of private service providers. Tunisians of all social classes, age and gender groups are exposed to long and costly bureaucratic procedures and profound uncertainty as they can be denied access to education, professional development, medical care or travel in Europe and North America (Terradot 2023). Such a restrictive visa regime affects, of course, young people the most, especially men from lower social classes, who have watched their legal options for European migration dwindle

This enforced immobility for ever-larger parts of Tunisian society has resulted in a surge of illegal and risky departures by boat towards Italy, resulting in mass death in Tunisia's Mediterranean waters (Zagaria 2019, 2020). In addition, the externalisation of European migration control to Tunisia has brought about grave human rights abuses and has caused environmental and social harm to diverse communities (Chemlali 2023). Mobilisation and conflict result – as was the case after a migrant boat capsized under unknown circumstances off the coast of Zarzis on September 18 2022, resulting in the death

of 18 young men from the coastal town. The authorities' cover-up of the incident (known as 18/18), and the unidentified burial of some of the retrieved corpses. raised suspicion and caused indignation amongst local residents and families of the deceased, leading to protests and a violent state response (Bisiaux et al. 2023). Yet, European attempts to stop transit migration have remained largely unsuccessful. The related net increase in arrivals of Sub-Saharan Africans into Tunisia, mainly across the Algerian border, has put a considerable strain on local authorities with rapidly growing migrant communities, while simultaneously enabling news forms of economic exploitation (Cassarini 2020). The externalisation of Europe's racialised border regime has also conjured up new forms of xenophobic political discourses in Tunisia. In a speech held on February 21 2023, Tunisia's president Kais Saied mobilized the racist 'great replacement theory', warning against 'hordes of illegal migrants' as 'source of crime and danger', instrumentalising popular fears and resentment in a context of worsening socio-economic crisis. This unleashed an unprecedented wave of anti-black police violence and arrests, as well as racist attacks by ordinary Tunisians, targeting Sub-Saharan African migrants, as well as Tunisian nationals with black skin colour (Cassarini/Geisser 2023).

Enforced immobility through European border closure of Tunisians and migrants from elsewhere in Africa thus produces diverse forms of violence, and curtails young people's aspirations for travel, education abroad, or professional and personal futures in countries that offer greater opportunities than contemporary Tunisia. The '*harga*', the Tunisian term used for irregular migration, is often considered the only way of 'escaping social death' by Tunisia's youth (Zagaria 2019), especially in light of the political deadlock and socio-economic pressure that characterise contemporary life in Tunisia. The feeling of 'being stuck' and condemned to stasis and 'waithood' has severe social and psychological impacts on young people, impeding both their personal and professional fulfilment (Garnaoui 2023).

Capabilities-Aspirations Framework

In order to investigate the complex relationships between inequalities and mobilities, we apply a modified approach, entitled the Capabilities-Aspirations Framework (Carling 2001; 2002; de Haas 2021). While both elements of this framework tackle highly connected fields of everyday life, they analytically open up two different fields of practices to a more analytical approach. The notion of capability captures the importance of resources and is crucial to explaining inequalities. In contrast, the notion of aspiration, emerging from processes of identity formation is key to understanding mobilities. However, these two axes of the approach are only separated on the analytical level; in everyday life, the access to resources and identity formation are inextricably linked and interrelated, shaping multiple forms of livelihoods. While Carling/Schewel (2018) and de Haas (2021) aim to develop new concepts of human mobility in order to expand classical approaches (e.g. leave behind simple push and pull models) and better comprehension of agency and non-movements (e.g. involuntary immobility) – our scope of study attempts a wider-reaching explanation, and requires different conceptual foundations than their earlier versions. We aim to apply the reworked Capabilities-Aspirations Framework (in-

troduced by us in Gertel/Grüneisl 2024) to investigate the linkages between inequality and mobility in Tunisia.

Capability The concept emerges from two strands of discussions: One is about the access to resources and the ability to act, based on the classical approaches of Giddens and Bourdieu, while the second one is about the capabilities of freedom and/or dignity to live a fulfilling self-determined life, based on the approaches of Sen and Nussbaum.

The first perspective on capability is related to the Giddens ([1984] 1990a) understanding of resources and Bourdieu's ([1983] 1986) concept of capital. Both share the conviction that the access to resources (or to capital) is crucial to the ability to do things. Core to Giddens take on society (1990a) is social action and its properties. He underlines the precondition for action and the crucial role of resources: 'Agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their *capability* of doing those things in the first place' (ibid. 1990a: 9; emphasis added). Stressing capability refers to the importance of resources, because it is the access to and the control of these that creates the prerequisites for action. Subsequently, the structures of social systems are of central importance, as they are composed of 'rule-resources complexes': 'Analysing the structuration of social systems means studying the modes in which such systems, grounded in the knowledgeable activities of situated actors who draw upon rules and resources in the diversity of action contexts, are produced and reproduced in interaction' (ibid. 25). Giddens further differentiates between authoritative and allocative resources, with the first originating from the coordination of the actions of human beings and the latter from the control over material products or certain aspects of the material world. Hence, the interrelation between cognition and action in respect to resource availability and the capability to act becomes apparent (Gertel 2007).

Bourdieu (1986) places his argument alongside a critique of conventional economic theory, that, according to him, reduces the universe of exchanges to merely commodity exchange, allegedly driven by economic self-interest and the maximisation of profit. Economic theory as Bourdieu sees it thus defines all other forms of exchange as noneconomic and therefore as altruistic. Bourdieu instead reintroduces a new notion of capital, comprising of different forms. Capital exists as economic, social, and cultural capital. Economic capital is directly convertible into money and is explicitly suited to be institutionalised in the form of property rights. Cultural capital materialises as embodied, objectified, and institutionalised capital, such as titles. Lastly, social capital is made up of social obligations and is equated with resources based on group membership and social networks. Overall, he comprehends capital as accumulated labour, whether in its materialised or its incorporated form, but the accumulation of labour requires time. Bourdieu further stresses the embeddedness of economy within society and is able to trace articulations of power relations down to the human body, as the social position within society is determined by the quantity and structure of available capital (i.e. a concrete resource portfolio).

Combining Giddens' insights into rule-resource-complexes and Bourdieu's concept of capital reveals that the notion of resources comprises linkages to biopolitics (i.e. body of a person), labour (i.e. redistribution of risks in family-livelihoods), and property rights, (i.e. granted and negotiated by communities and state) and thus also to the

discursive construction of rules. Based on these considerations, four forms of resources can be distinguished (Gertel 2007; 2010): (a) Incorporated resources which are bound to the body (e.g. nutritional and health status); (b) socially institutionalised resources, related to the subject (e.g. social obligations); (c) allocative resources, that are linked to property rights (e.g. fixed capital such as land); (d) monetary resources, also dependent on property rights, but easily exchangeable (e.g. money). This perspective offers several advantages. Using Giddens' notion of resources, the connection between individual actions and social structures is addressed, while Bourdieu's concept of capital permits a more comprehensive view of exchange processes. The resource concept further renders socio-economic processes accessible for empirical investigations. Processes such as the accumulation of resources (or capital), their mutual convertibility, and their use by third parties, have an impact on livelihood-security and ultimately shape human bodies. Given the limited reversibility of processes such as marginalisation, precarisation, and dispossession, human bodies are to be understood as the final instance of societal space. The distribution and access to resources are thus foundational to inequality (Gertel 2018a).

Following the argument above, we comprehend societal inequalities in Tunisia as the gap between 'what is' and 'what might have been' – in relation to the notion of structural violence in the sense of Galtung (1971) (Gertel/Grüneisl 2024: 41). There are two principal sets of explanations for this widening gap: classical resource-oriented approaches, corresponding to the political economic considerations of Giddens and Bourdieu on the one hand, and concepts of capabilities based on equitable opportunities and emotions such as fears or desires on the other.

Harvey's (2003) 'Accumulation by Dispossession' offers an entry point for discussing a political-economic explanation of social inequality. Two mechanisms drive the societal split, namely, the expansion of the capitalist system into areas that were not previously involved in market oriented profit-making, and the concentration of capital and power in the hands of a few actors. Instrumental in this are the processes of privatisation and financialisation, increasingly shifting profitmaking away from commodity production towards the use of financial capital (cf. Krippner 2011). Das (2017) criticises Harvey's concept and contrasts his considerations with his own approach of 'accumulation through exploitation', bringing the perspective of the Global South more into focus. In this approach, historical processes of colonial domination and the ongoing exploitation disenfranchising local livelihoods need to be addressed (cf. Tsing 2005; Li 2014). Complementing this, Milanovic's (2016) analysis of global inequality reveals the spatial shift of wealth away from Europe and the formation of new Asian middle and upper classes during the peak phase of globalisation (1988–2008). Although fundamental for the understanding of shifting resource access, these approaches remain largely capital-oriented, and are conceptualised from a materialistic perspective. Equal opportunities are not addressed, and the specificities of the MENA region are not considered.

The second set of explanations for the notion of capabilities explicitly goes beyond resource driven approaches, which are considered to be too narrow and exclusive of too many important aspects of everyday life. Reality, as authors like Sen and Nussbaum argue, is complicated and any evaluation of how well people are doing should seek to be as open-minded as possible. Their approach to capability entails two normative claims,

namely that the freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance, and that well-being should be understood in terms of people's capabilities and 'functionings'. In this way, the capability framework 'changes the focus from means (the resources people have and the public goods they can access) to ends (what they are able to do and be with those resources and goods)' (Robeyns/Byskov 2023: n.p.).

> For the capability approach, the ultimate ends of interpersonal comparisons are people's capabilities. [I]t asks whether people are able to be healthy, and whether the means or resources necessary for this capability, such as clean water, adequate sanitation, access to doctors, protection from infections and diseases, and basic knowledge on health issues, are present. It asks whether people are well-nourished, and whether the means or conditions for the realization of this capability, such as having sufficient food supplies and food entitlements, are being met. It asks whether people have access to a high-quality education system, to real political participation, and to community activities that support them, that enable them to cope with struggles in daily life, and that foster caring and warm friendships (ibid.).

The capability approach thus put the kind of lives people have reason to value at the centre of their argument (Nussbaum/Sen 1993). One position relates this to freedom (Sen 1979; 1985; 1989; 1999), while another one relates to human dignity (Nussbaum 2001; 2011).

In 'Equality of What?' Sen (1979) argues that in order to evaluate people's well-being we need to not only consider the resources they have, but also what they are able to do and who they can be with those resources. Key to Sen's argument are three assumptions. Sen is convinced that individuals differ in their ability to convert the same resources into valuable functionings (he also calls these 'beings' and 'doings'). Individuals are obviously not the same, and they have different aptitudes; these can also change over time, so the availability and the command over the same resources cannot be standardised. Moreover, people can internalise, to a certain extent, the harshness of their circumstances – so they no longer desire what they never expect to achieve. Sen captures this phenomenon as 'adaptive preferences'. Even adults, for example, might not be (fully) aware that they are overworked and sick. He further stresses that people do have valuable options between different actions, even in contexts of deprivation. Thus, there is an important difference between actual achievements ('functionings') and effective freedom ('capability'). For example, one might decide to fast during Ramadan, even in situations when he or she already suffers from malnutrition – that is their effective freedom (cf. Wells 2023). This comes back to Sen's notion of capability. The doings and beings (or functionings) vary from being well nourished, to having self-respect, or preserving human dignity. In this sense, a person's capability represents the effective freedom of an individual to choose between different combinations – between different kinds of life – that they have reason to value (Nussbaum/Sen 1993: 3).

After having been awarded the Nobel prize for economy in 1998 (in relation to his entitlement approach to explain hunger) Sen's work on capabilities has been employed extensively in the context of human development. Here, 'poverty' – such as in Tunisia – is understood as deprivation in the capability to live a good life, and 'development' is seen as capability expansion. Sen stresses (2004: 24):

> It is important to keep the issue of equity constantly in view, because of its extensive reach. There is no basic tension—as is sometimes alleged—between freedom and equity. Indeed, equity can be seen in terms of equitable advancement of the freedoms of all people. […]. Seen in this way, it is possible to make consistent use of both the basic concepts of liberty and equity in assessing the demands of social inclusion and the contingent merits of cultural diversity.

While Sen formulates the concept of capabilities in order to identify ways to achieve equality (and freedom), for Nussbaum, human capabilities also form a precondition for meaningful human development, but she is more explicit about one's abilities to live a dignified human life. She defines dignity generally as the right of a person to be treated respectfully for their own sake (including other humans). Nussbaum presents a list of ten fundamental capabilities originating from the requirements for dignity that have a cross-cultural dimension (2011: 33–4):

- Life – being able to live a full normal human lifespan;
- Bodily health – being able to have good health, including adequate nutrition;
- Bodily integrity – being able to move freely from place to place and safe from violent assault;
- Imagination and thought – being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason;
- Emotions – being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves;
- Reasoning – being able to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life;
- Affiliation – being able to live with and alongside others, including the social bases of self-respect and a life without humiliation;
- Other species – being able to care and relate to animals, plants, and the world of nature;
- Play – being able to laugh, play, and enjoy oneself;
- Control – being able to participate in political choices that govern one's life, including the protections of free speech; and also
- Rights – being able to have equal property rights as others.

Nussbaum is convinced that a life deprived of any of the above capabilities is not a dignified human life. Moreover, if someone lacks access to these capabilities, it is also a failure of society to respect human dignity.

> People may be unequal in wealth, class, talent, strength, achievement, or moral character – but all are equal as bearers of an inalienable basic human dignity that cannot be lost or forfeited (Nussbaum 2012: 61).

It is thus crucial for human beings to have dignity, be perceived as equal to others, and have a 'communal life' which satisfies all human needs, and consequently guarantee a life 'in a morally virtuous world' (cf. Gluchman 2019: 1131). In order to implement these ideas in everyday life, Nussbaum suggests that her list should be debated, local specifics and thresholds identified, and then incorporated into national constitutional guaran-

tees, international human rights legislation, and international development policy (cf. Wells 2023). According to Gluchman (2019: 1137) Nussbaum takes little interest however in individual self-development. She mainly focuses on the obligations and responsibilities of society, states, and governments for creating conditions for a 'full-value life', i.e. a life in accordance with human dignity. What has disappeared from her argument is the individual and their responsibility for the extent to which they can make the most of their capabilities, possibilities, and opportunities (ibid.).

In summary, the concept of capabilities originates from two bodies of discussions: One is about the access to resources and the ability to act, while the other is about freedom, equality, and the dignity of living a fulfilling self-determined life. They are not exclusive of one other, but they do have different entry points, shifting the focus from the means (e.g. access to resources) to the ends (e.g. ability and scope to utilise these resources). The normative goal is to live the kinds of life people have reason to value – a dignified human life.

Aspiration The second part of our Capability-Aspiration Framework addresses the notion of aspiration. In his understanding of migration, de Haas (2021) treats the notion of aspiration rather descriptively and relates it exclusively to migration. But aspirations are also contained in lifeworlds or lifestyles, as complex and dynamic as these are (Behrends 2024; Gertel 2024b). De Hass, however, emphasises the migration focus and starts by underlining that 'the concept of migration aspirations expands the notion of migration agency into the subjective realm' (ibid. 17; cf. Carling/Schewel 2018). He claims that aspirations are conceptually distinct, but not empirically independent from capabilities (ibid. 18). For example, he assumes that education in rural areas, or experience with consumerist urban lifestyles, changes people's notions of a good life, so they may begin to aspire to migrate. De Haas further distinguishes between intrinsic and instrumental dimensions of migration, following a similar vein to Sen's take on freedom, but fails to analyse the constitutive elements of aspirations. In this, he has similar shortcomings to Nussbaum, both having little interest in the formation of subjectivities. It is here where our argument begins.

In order to comprehensively analyse the notion of aspiration, we investigate three aspects in more detail: identity, as the continuous construction of self (Hall 1992); imagination, as a force of social formation and mobilisation (Appadurai 1997); and resonance, as a means of relationship with the world – formed by affect, emotion, and expectation of self-realisation – in which the subject and world are in contact and modify each other (Rosa 2019). Therefore, we understand the notion of aspiration as a composite, and assume that the capacity to aspire is unequally distributed in society. The insights from the works of Hall, Appadurai, and Rosa are crucial for tying our argument together.

A first aspect of aspiration is addressed with the question of identity. The social construction of identities has so far been considered and theorised mainly within the framework of cultural studies. Hall deals explicitly with the question of cultural identity under the conditions of modernity (1992). He argues that a 'crisis of identity' is changing the major structures and processes of modern societies, while also undermining those frames of action that anchor individuals in the social world (ibid. 275). More precisely, a particular type of structural change is transforming societies: namely, the increasing fragmenta-

tion of cultural landscapes of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and nationality that have previously assigned us as social individuals to fixed places in society, according to Hall. These fragmentations alter personal identities and undermine our perceptions of ourselves as integrated subjects. The loss of the stable 'perception of self' is referred to as the 'de-location' or 'de-centring' of the subject (ibid. 275). This set of 'double displacements' – the decentring of individuals from their place in the social and cultural world and from themselves – triggers a 'crisis of identity' (ibid. 275). Hall (1992) ties the structural change causing this crisis back to late modernity and assigns the term globalisation to it (ibid. 277). Drawing on Giddens (1990a) and Harvey (1989), he highlights the speed and extent of structural transformations in modernity, the ongoing ruptures with previous conditions, and the shift and multiplication of social power centres as the main discontinuities that characterise globalisation. The connection between identity crises and the structural transformation of modern societies is not simply one of cause and effect; but rather, what is clear according to Hall's argument, is their increasing interconnectedness and the mutual feedback over the period of modernity alone. The centring of the subject (invention of the enlightened autonomous individual) and its decentring (fragmentation of the individual) has far-reaching consequences. Acting subjects of late modernity are understood by Hall (and partly understand themselves in this way) as no longer having a stable identity, but constitute themselves out of several, also contradictory and incomplete 'identities'. The processes of identification are thus open, variable, and ambivalent. At the same time, the illusion of the continuation of a unified self is continually being built. Actors draw on remembered experiences (anchored and structured by the unifying 'narrative of the self' (Hall 1992, 277)), transport them, selectively and context-dependent, via interactions outside the body, and continue to further develop their re-imagined self.

As emphasised elsewhere (Gertel 2024b: 4), we assume that personal experiences, particularly of violence and powerlessness, but also traumata experienced by loved ones, can shape the repertoire of memories (Nikro/Hegasy 2018 for Morocco; Lazali 2022 for Algeria). This can change individual life plans or even collective political commitment. Referring to the Egyptian revolution, Matthies-Boon (2023) argues that the multi-level traumatic status subordination (including imprisonment and torture) of the Cairene activists destroyed the potential of revolutionary collective becoming. Trauma is therefore not only personal, but also social. Matthies-Boon (2023: 1) refers to this as '*Breaking Intersubjectivity*'. According to this argument, ruptures in self-understanding and the life-worlds of people, such as migrants or refugees, become accessible to empirical investigation (cf. Behrends 2024). In critical situations, 'belonging' forms – at least temporarily –a social anchor, a relationship between contested ontological security and social identity (Giddens 1990a: 60, 375). Behrends (2024), focusing on the borderlands between Chad and Sudan, emphasises that 'belonging is relational and co-constituted, particular in highly uncertain situations like war, displacement and large-scale humanitarian and development aid, and it is connected to the diverse knowledge and situational practices of actors' (ibid. 12). The execution of routines and the pursuit of belonging in situations of great uncertainty, in which it is hardly possible to plan ahead (Gertel 2018a), thus becomes a decisive challenge for the discursive formation and stabilising narrative of the (decentred) self.

Scott (1991) further elaborates on the meaning and construction of experience and explains the relationship between discourse and identity:

> Treating the emergence of a new identity as a discursive event is [...] to refuse a separation between 'experience' and language and to insist instead on the productive quality of discourse. Subjects are constituted discursively, but there are conflicts among discursive systems, contradictions within anyone of them, multiple meanings possible for the concepts they deploy. And subjects do have agency. They are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them. Being a subject means being 'subject to definite conditions of existence, conditions of endowment of agents and conditions of exercise' (in: Adams/Minson 1978: 52). These conditions enable choices, although they are not unlimited (Scott 1991: 793).

According to Scott, three interlinked aspects are significant for the connection between identity construction and experience-making: (contradicting) discourses, the construction of subjects, and their agency. We will focus on the notion of discourse before we turn to the second aspect of aspiration, namely the question of imagination and its relation to agency.

Foucault ([1972] 1991) coined the concept of discourse. Discourses are heterogeneous linguistic acts that cannot be traced back to a single author. However, they are also not free-flowing constructions, but rather they are always embedded and often institutionally anchored in society with material counterparts. For our argument, their importance is in their ability to structure access to resources. For example, the question, 'What does agricultural production mean for the future of Tunisia?' involves problematising the conditions about who has 'the right to narrate' in answering this question (e.g. nomads, subsistence farmers, scientists, or bureaucrats; Spivak 1988), who speaks for whom (e.g. men for women, the literate for the illiterate), and who has the means to define terms and topics to represent particular slices of practices (e.g. through the institutionalisation of expertise). Last but not least, it is important to examine how the corresponding authority is codified linguistically and perpetuated in terms of content (e.g. through the materialisation via plans and the development of programmes, for example, to settle nomads or to subsidise agricultural inputs). Discourses therefore structure the access to resources.

Appadurai (1996) addresses the second aspect of aspiration. In the context of cultural globalisation, he emphasises that a new social practice emerges, namely that of imagination. He argues that imagination broke out of its special expressive realm of art, myths, and rites, and has since become a part of the daily mental exercise of common people (ibid. 5). In contrast to fantasy, which tends to emphasise the private and individual, imagination creates ideas, connotes project-orientation, and consequently becomes a basis for collective action (ibid. 7). From this he emphasises that imagination has become the property of collectives, which he calls 'community of sentiment' (ibid. 8): groups of individuals, who may have never meet face-to-face but who start to think of themselves as, for example, Indians or Malays. He stresses: 'The world we live in today is characterised by a new role for the imagination in social life' (ibid. 31). To grasp the new role of imagination, he discusses three ideas: the older idea of images, especially mechanically pro-

duced images, the idea of imagined communities in the sense of Anderson (1983), and the French idea of the imaginary (*imaginaire*) – as a constructed landscape of collective aspirations (ibid. 31). Subsequently, imagination is understood as a new social practice.

> Imagination has become an organised field of social practices, a form of work, [a]nd a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility. [T]he imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order (Appadurai 1996: 31).

The repositioning of imagination as a force of social formation and mobilisation (Appadurai 1996), as well as in the preoccupation with individuals' relationship with the world, conceptualised as 'resonance' (Rosa 2017), are necessary for explaining the formation and capacity of aspirations. According to Appadurai, aspirations contain at least three properties: they have something to do with wants, preferences, choices, and calculations; they are never simply individual but rather formed during interaction; and that aspirations about having a good life filled with health and happiness exist in all societies (Appadurai 2004: 67). According to his understanding, the capacity to aspire is unevenly distributed in societies:

> [T]he better off you are in terms of power, dignity, and material resources, the more likely you are to be conscious of the links between the more and the less immediate objects of aspiration. Because the better off, by definition, have a more complex experience of their relation between a wide range of ends and means, because they have a bigger stock of available experiences of the relationship of aspirations and outcomes, because they are in a better position to explore and harvest diverse experiences of exploration and trial, because of their many opportunities to link material goods and immediate opportunities to more general and generic possibilities and options. [T]hey are more able to produce justifications, narratives, metaphors, and pathways through which bundles of goods and services are actually tied to the wider social scenes and contexts, and to still more abstract norms and beliefs (ibid. 68).

Although this reflects a rather resource oriented and utilitarian argument, Appadurai (2004) links the scope of experiences to the availability of resources (and to capability) and opens up the notion of aspiration. He terms the unequal capacity to aspire as 'navigation capacity' (ibid. 69). On account of different experiences, privileged members of society are more capable when navigating between norms, wants, and wishes. In relation to Sen's work, he emphasises, that 'the capacity to aspire provides an ethical horizon within which more concrete capabilities can be given meaning, substance, and sustainability' (ibid. 82). Imagination and the capacity to aspire are thus addressing the multifaceted relations between different groups in society and their positioning in the world.

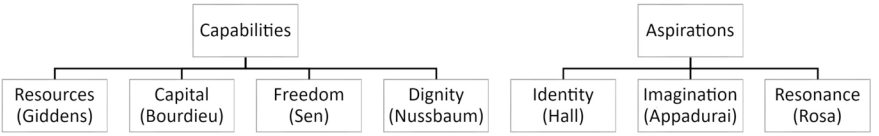
The third aspect of aspiration is addressed with the notion of resonance. Understanding the relationships between subjects and world is Rosa's (2019) object of inquiry. The key mechanism in his project is the notion of resonance, a mode of responsive relation (ibid. 174). He starts his argument by claiming that one's position in the world can only be determined via analysing one's attitude toward and experience of the world.

> Whether or not a given subject manages to develop and maintain constitutive axes of resonance depends, on his or her (physical, biographical, emotional, psychological, and social) disposition; and on the (institutional, cultural, contextual, and physical) configuration of segments of the world in which he or she operates; and finally, on the relationship between these two factors (ibid. 16).

A premise of his argument is that modern societies are geared toward continuous progress by means of growth, acceleration, and innovation, creating a temporal and spatial tendency toward escalation. Since human beings, exposed to these conditions of modernity, are unable to develop any certainty about what a good life is, including happiness, 'they are all but forced to concentrate instead on their level of resources' (ibid. 22). Rosa, however, subscribes to the idea that resource endowment does not ensure a happy life per se. In this respect he also criticises Sen and Nussbaum (although to different extents) who, although seeking to avoid fixing determinations of quality of life to material prosperity, remain subject to a materialistic logic – as they suggest that the quality of life increases with one's abilities and opportunities (ibid. 22). Rosa however, is convinced that quality of life and its social conditions cannot be measured simply by access to resources, but requires examining subjects' relationships to the world. He views the access to resources as a prerequisite for a successful life, but insufficient to shape it (ibid. 26). He argues that social conditions 'form, shape and otherwise influence not only the cognitive or conceptual but all aspects of human beings' relationship to the world', including their corporeal, existential, intentional, and evaluative aspects (ibid. 37).

Therefore, we understand the notion of aspiration as a composite, constituted by the interrelation of three elements. These relationships are neither linear nor are they based on mono-causal concatenations, but instead they represent changing fields of possibility, in which – depending on resource access – the capacity of aspirations is formed by three dynamics: (a) The aspirations and ambitions of subjects are rooted in the identity formation and the continuous construction of the self, while the identity of subjects is embedded in discourses and based on agency and capabilities. (b) Imagination embodies both a site for forming aspirations and is simultaneously a force of social formation and mobilisation. While some ideas and wishes formed in our imagination are not (yet) expressible in words, our intentions represent verbal expressions and a linkage to the world (Searle 1983). It is from here where (c) resonance becomes crucial in shaping the subjective disposition for aspiration. Resonance as a form of relationship with the world is formed by affect, emotion, interest, and expectation of self-realisation, in which subject and world are in contact and modify each other. Aspiration, in this sense, shapes decisions.

Figure 1: Capabilities-Aspirations Framework



As we have discussed, the Capability-Aspiration Framework encompasses a field of ideas. On the one hand the ability to act – as experienced through inequalities and mobilities – depends on access to resources, which is determined by rules, and on the other hand on dispositions and aspirations that emerge from processes of identity formation, given that the capacity to aspire is unequally distributed in society.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the terms and analytical categories of which our Capabilities-Aspirations Framework is composed. It does not show the interrelation between the concepts as they cannot be described in a simplified and unambiguous way. The idea of capabilities builds on the insights of inequality caused by the varying access to different forms of resources (or 'capital') and complements these with Sen's and Nussbaum's notions of freedom and dignity. This shifts the focus in the description of inequality from the means to the ends. On the other hand, aspirations are constituted by the interrelation of identity (Hall), imagination (Appadurai), and resonance (Rosa), which represent different approaches to conceptualising the subjective constructions of the self in relation to communities and the world.

About the Book

This volume is structured into two parts that raise overlapping questions on the multiple linkages between inequality and mobility. The first part focuses on economies and resource struggles. Economies are here approached intentionally in the plural, as emphasis lies on exploring the multiple spheres of resource governance and livelihood-making that co-exist in contemporary Tunisia, beyond official delimitations of 'the economy' (Mitchell 2008). Illicit border economies, or informal work in urban commerce or waste economies in fact provide an essential life-line to innumerable Tunisians today, but remain often conceptualised purely in the negative, as a problem space that escapes regulation and measurement. Here, in contrast, these sites of economic agency become a starting point for examining, first, how people negotiate access to resources, often through intricate strategies of mobility. Second, how they encounter the state, and how politics emerge, from negotiations and contestations over resources; or from their scarcity or insufficient management. Third and finally, resource struggles are located at multiple scales, bringing into focus local governance – and particularly the newly elected municipalities in post-2011 Tunisia – as a crucial site of citizen-state encounters and political contestation. While recent decisions by the authoritarian regime of Kais Saied have put a halt to a decade-long process of decentralisation reforms, several chapters in this volume explicitly document and discuss the possibilities for political change and alternative

resource governance that emerged at the local level, both through formal and informal channels.

The second part centres on diverse forms of human (im)mobility that both shape people's experiences of inequality and injustice, and become avenues for articulating and realising aspirations for a dignified life. This book examines mobilities – or enforced immobility – at different scales and with multiple directionalities: from cross-border migration and flight towards, out of, and back to Tunisia; to everyday urban commutes in the capital city Tunis. Many of the chapters focus on individual trajectories and experiences of past mobility, or on aspirations for future mobility, foregrounding how people make sense of their own decisions or situations that either allow or force them to move, or that let them choose to remain or force immobility. Other chapters shift focus to the new forms of social order – and indeed, racial segregation and discrimination – that have resulted from cross-border mobility to contemporary Tunis, demonstrating how the presence of migrant communities poses new questions for urban governance and reshapes everyday realities of life in the city. As some of the research shows, inequality can be both a trigger and a cause of mobility, as international migration becomes the only 'way out' for marginalised Tunisians and migrant communities at the present conjuncture of intensifying violence and socio-economic crisis. Yet, at the same time inequality also impedes opportunities for mobility, exposing the socially and economically marginalised to situations of blockage or waiting – be it for the next bus or for an opportunity to leave the country. Such constraints on mobility, and indeed the stigmatisation and criminalisation of certain bodies on the move, are here prominently analysed as forms of structural and institutional violence that characterise the lives of many young Tunisians (cf. Gertel et al. 2024).

The chapters demonstrate how diverse forms of cross-border mobility – and aspirations framed around it – characterise people's lives in contemporary Tunisia, despite policies of enforced immobility. Some chapters directly tackle Sub-Saharan African migration to Tunisia, exploring the new challenges and forms of racialised discrimination – as well as opportunities for participation and community-building – that have emerged in local governance and through the urban co-existence of migrant and host communities in Tunisia's capital city Tunis (Ben Medien; Parikh; Sha'ath, this volume). Other chapters focus on the migration of young Tunisians to and from Europe, analysing both aspirations for out-migration (Kreuer/Gertel, this volume) and the impact of so-called 'voluntary return' programs for illegal Tunisian migrants in Europe (Garnaoui, this volume). Beyond the dominant narrative that links cross-border mobility in Tunisia to linear south-north migration towards Europe, the research presented in this volume highlights the diverse forms of exceptional and everyday mobility that reconfigure Tunisia's borders and socio-economic realities. To do so, some chapters offer close-up empirical insight into the diverse material circulations that turn borders not only into spaces of violence, but also into sites of economic opportunity and state encounters (Amri; Shâfi'i, this volume). Another chapter examines the gendered working lives of Syrian refugees who construct new livelihoods in contemporary Tunisia (Zuntz et al., this volume). All of these chapters place emphasis on people's aspirations and strategies for navigating constraints on mobility and inequality in access to resources in contemporary Tunisia. In doing so, they elucidate critical linkages between (im-)mobility and inequality, and

go beyond a spectre of 'crisis' to excavate alternative stories, visions, and possibilities for better futures.

The contributions do so, first, by working at different scales: from the urban micro-scale – the district or neighbourhood – to the level of the municipality or greater metropolitan area; from the village – or single oasis settlement – to the level of the governorate or region; and across borders and bounded sites, by following the circulation of goods and people. This implies that the chapters pay attention to the ways in which space articulates inequalities. On the one hand, the analysis foregrounds tendencies of spatial segregation or isolation, both racialised and class-based (Parikh, this volume); on the other hand, belonging to a shared place or territory can also become the basis for devising alternative modes of resource governance or participation between diverse constituents (Weißenfels, this volume). Second, the qualitative and in part ethnographic research presented here foregrounds actors and agencies that often remain invisible or overlooked, as they operate illicitly or are socially stigmatised. From informal waste pickers (Chebbi, this volume), to urban commuters living in largely informally built-up neighbourhoods (Bouzid, this volume), to fuel smugglers (Shâfi'i, this volume); this edited volume gives centre stage to the everyday strategies and aspirations of marginalised communities in present-day Tunisia. Third, the contributions to this book unsettle simplistic understandings of the state as a single, coherent actor (Mitchell 1991), foregrounding instead the multiple registers of action, and diverse rationales that characterise how the state takes effect or is indeed encountered in contemporary Tunisia. Consequently, several of the chapters in this book trouble neat distinctions between formal and informal economy and work (Amri; Gertel/Audano, this volume) or formal and informal governance and space (Kahloun/Frische; Weißenfels, this volume). Moreover, the research in this volume advances an understanding of 'the political' that goes beyond a narrow view of state politics, focusing on political materialities – such as waste (Furniss/Bouhlel, this volume) – or perceptions of the state and its absence, for instance on the labour market (Garraoui, this volume). The epilogue ultimately reveals the spatial effects and social consequences of mobility aspirations when these are exposed to a politically led racist discourse (Matri/Zuntz, this volume).