

A Historian's Reflections on a Revolutionary Fragment

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One of the most stimulating experiences for a historian is to find him/herself at the heart of throbbing events. The excitement it provides is not as obvious to live through for the tenets of the profession as it is for any citizen. It is akin to the excitement of a journalist, without the indulgence due to the necessity of reporting in a state of urgency, thus running the risk of hasty or partial interpretations. However, in the common consciousness of going through a present that one knows to be overduly more loaded with history than usual, resorting to a historian's kit helps counterbalance the exceptional emotional weight inherent in the experience. Professional training –and deformation—help categorize the questions raised by the events and allow one to draw a few lessons, sort out a preliminary reading of the lived reality, waiting some form of hindsight to carry out more in-depth analyses: the reading of history in the making.

Learning from the Present

The situations of the present beget typical cases: as a historian, this is the first lesson I have been taught by what happened in Tunisia. Until now, Benedetto Croce's famous sentence that: *"history is always contemporaneous"* was a bookish assertion that my excessive aversion for the quotation forbade me to recall. The sentence has taken on its full meaning in this vibrant period when the speed of events and the telescoping between information and rumors were such that, in order to sort out the immediate perception of events, the recourse to historical examples has worked as a soothing sedative. The unprecedented aspect of what we are living out, day in day out, may sometimes be accounted for by the things learnt in books. Thus, the "fraternization with the army," an expression one comes across in history textbooks, dawned upon me when I watched one of the innumerable videos running all the more quickly on computer screens as Tunisians found themselves secluded in their homes after the curfew was declared on January 9, 2011. Presumably filmed by a soldier somewhere on a roof, the nine-minute- or-so shot¹ recorded the cautious entry of tanks in the main avenue in Sfax. The hesitant pace of the drivers was encouraged by a group of youth who climbed on the mechanical caterpillar to fend in the police cordon. Without suspecting the rest of the events, I read the "information" posted on *Facebook* as heralding a possible conflation between soldiers and population, as an example of joint pressure of the street and the military forces, likely to make the police yield in. This quite relative intuition felt in the heat of the January days was corroborated a few days later when, after Ben Ali's escape, the soldiers started being conspicuously treated as friends, protectors, saviors from armed provocation against the population. Whereas uniformed or plain clothes police were feared, distrusted, seen as an unpopular body in the Tunisian cities and

villages, the tanks were covered with flowers, soldiers were kissed, and horns blown at their passage. In insecure districts, where young and elderly men, of all walks of life, were positioning for self defense, soldiers, on sentry duty at the barriers, were offered delicacies, attention, smiles and women's cheers. Some officers had even to interrupt too long conversations, forbid too conspicuous treats near the guard rooms, check on the number of pictures taken. Such tokens of gratitude and connivance extended to soldiers who were until then invisible, now glad to matter for their fellow citizens, caused the jealousy of the police whose omnipresence, violence and corruption ended up getting on the nerves of the man in the street. With a background of fear of the police state under Ben Ali, the appearance of the army in the streets coincided with a fraternization required by insecurity. Once relayed by images, it marked the army's patriotic commitment.

That living "nature lesson" illustrates the ambivalent function of an army, however inconspicuous it may have been. Under 'house arrest' in its barracks, since the Bourguiba era, the Tunisian army was further more coerced into confinement by former General Ben Ali. "Unfrocked", the latter felt visceral distrust for the military institution and kept it under close watch. Erased from the public scene, that body thus kept such an image of "innocence" that it gained the confidence and sympathy of the people, henceforth playing an eminently delicate role : to protect and defend the Tunisians during the turmoil that prevailed in the first days of political void. Though a few glaring tokens of its presence were switched off, the military surveillance role, still visible in this interim period, was more favorably perceived than that of the administration, that obscure yet equally organized body, which secured most of the public utilities services. Though history does not give any examples of fraternization with the civil servants, one must bear in mind that salaries in the civil service were paid as usual on January 22, 2011, i.e. one week after the disarray of the Carthage (presidential) palace. These off-stage actors, both in the army and in the administration, alongside thousands of anonymous cybernauts who relayed information, still need to be identified as the backers of, on the one hand, the movement of the angry masses, young demonstrators, militant women, and trade-unionists who accompanied the movement and, on the other hand, of political protagonists who took over after the fall of the régime. The front-line leaders have been backed up by thousands of less visible, more passive individuals, overwhelmed by the need for freedom conveyed in various forms by schools, radio, satellite televisions, tourism, and cyber-culture. Such vectors have had time to open up society onto cultures carrying political models studied by historians, lawyers, thinkers. Education has sown the seeds of knowledge, images, ideas and a craving for democracy. It conjured up dreams of liberty, thrown into oblivion under the dictatorship and, which, kept at the back of everybody's mind, proved to be up to the expectations of the wave of protesters. Behind the popular landslide and the expression of demands and claims, silent individuals, with no apparent, organized political affiliation, have accessed an ideal of minimal political rights. This platonic love, commonly present in the minds, but forbidden in practice, was flared up by anti-constitutional excesses : it was trodden by violations of private property, the exorbitant privileges of the régime, the exclusive seizure of wealth. Silent followers of a more policed public life, those hidden adepts of basic political morals have constituted a propitious platform, fertile land for the "success" of the movement passed over from the insurgents in Thala and Kasserine to

the world media, via militant groups, scattered internauts, some of whom, well versed in cyber-communication, organized themselves around the events. An informal complicity, shared among all social classes, stifled civic aspirations, a virtual community structured into an information network around insurrections censored by the Tunisian media –all such elements have partaken in creating a spectacular spiral, making of the Tunisian scenario a unique one. The extremely rapid and unexpected end of a month-long sedition is the outcome of efficient local solidarities, a solid technological and emotional structure prevalent in the country. The rapidity of the epilogue has, in turn, generated admiration vis-à-vis an astounding revolutionary framework. Thus was staged to the world the deliverance of a people in the midst of which had matured the feeling of generalized injustice, nurtured by the aggravation of social inequalities and the exacerbation of the mafia practices of the régime, at a time when the secret taste for freedom was germinating within the population, when the more and more imperious need for freedom was also growing. The fusion of active militants and a passive population has played an invisible but tangible part in the sequel of events that tumbled down a government that had confiscated every single person's rights, riches and freedom. The horizontal unfolding of events that affected, in pace and effectiveness, journalists, diplomats, the blogosphere and the TV watchers has simultaneously taken aback the Tunisian people, perceived as the positive heroes and determinate protagonists of an unsuspected democratic process.

That chain uprising, with no charismatic leader or leading elite, has sprung from the conflation of many factors : a bad political treatment insensitive to the making up of a horizon of civic expectations, a confluence of individual desires to enjoy liberties seen elsewhere and envied, an unexpected explosion of multifarious frustrations, a shared feeling of injustice and anger. Is it a *Revolution* ?

Emotion and its Signs

Haloed in a capital R, the word *Revolution* suggests the search for trans-historic landmarks. Like others, I fell back on classical examples, recalling the famous revolutions in world history, mainly the capital-R-revolutions: the 1789 French revolution, the 1949 Chinese Revolution... a reservoir of terms, slogans and analogies in the field of action. The naturalization of the term, through its Arabic translation: *thawra*, was associated with the adjective *sha'biya* (popular), and the logo quickly integrated the political and media lexicon, with a double connotation : as a chronological signpost to mean the post-14 January and an ideological, quasi-mystical reference. In French, a series of qualifiers cropped up in the press, the blogs, in the street : the use of the exotic *jasmine*, deemed disrespectful, was quickly rejected ; that of *democratic* was dedicated to the ensuing *transition* ; a consensus was reached on *Tunisian*. Apart from its *descriptive* efficiency, the expression *Tunisian Revolution* precluded a therapeutic effect ; it wrapped up the country in pride, restored in everyone the need to unite with others : the banner re-founded a usurped *Tunisianness*, welded a feeling of a lost national unity. The uprisings of the underprivileged regions laid the popular foundation ; the solidarity mechanisms defying political surveillance were the amplifying ferment of protests. The unemployment which had united for a number of years diploma holders and the poor among the youth rallied various local conditions, whereas the spread of the revolutionary flames from the Centre-West to the coastline cities then to the capital city,

the strong presence of women in the demonstrations operated as segments of unification of a movement spreading over the whole territory, affecting the entirety of the country. In a few weeks, such unitary dynamics, deploying in the national arena, sowed their own patriotic seeds. In the face of repressive relentlessness, inter-nauts, bloggers and demonstrators rose, as a rallying sign, the national flag, thus marking their rupture with autistic authorities, challenging their monopoly. The re-appropriation of the patriotic emblem entailed that of the national anthem, thus restoring two images of the national self. At home, the red and white flag retrieved its sacred and unique place in defiance of the power that doubled it up, in an obsessive way, with the colour mauve ; in the international sphere, the flag was hoisted as the token of recovered national dignity, against disavowed usurpers.

Still laden with mystery, the economy of the event has surprised witnesses and observers ; beyond admiration, it triggered questions as to its context, its unfolding and its actors. Is it to become unique in national historiography, to invest, with its capital letter, both memory and history ? Could it be compared to the precedents in contemporary Tunisian history ? Does the movement have any previous models since, through the physical escape of the Head of State, it led to the spectacular fracture of the régime ? What are the already known events that could be set as a parallel ? Some specialists mentioned the rebellion of 1864, a revolt against taxation that yielded the uprising of the people in the Thala-Kasserine area, under the leadership of Ali Ben Ghedhahem, against the Bey's authority. The spatial rapprochement and the "popular" character of that tribal revolt against a central despotic power may partly account for the comparison. Yet, in the present circumstances, where can the deep rupture implied in the word *revolution* be delineated ? If the economic factor of poverty and the violence of regional inequalities may link 1864 and 2011, how can one assess the de-multiplying social dimension of the movement that proved to be so potently effective during four weeks? The Thala-Kasserine uprisings in 1906, the April 1938 events in Tunis, the student unrest in March 1968, the protests against collectivization in 1969, the trade-union movements in January 1978, the bread riots in January 1984, the strikes of the Gafsa mine basin in the autumn of 2008 –all constitute precedents in contemporary Tunisian history that need to be addressed should one seek to have some kind of long term vision. Should it prove impossible to establish a perfect continuity between those instances of social fever, more or less followed by some effects, no one can deny the political tenor of the insurrections. Popular, led by young, working, student or unemployed forces, those social movements expressed, in their respective time, between the lines as it were, social aspirations to social justice, economic fairness, and political rights. The leaders of the uprisings were not all known to historians, though local memory has kept some names.

Revolutionary Times

Until in-depth studies are carried out, over the long term, mention should be made of the operations of immediate rupture in the symbolism and space of power after January 14th. Though all the actors of the events that flared up in December 2010 are not yet visible, the figure of 300 dead and their cause still needs to be refined. For the moment, public opinion agrees to point to a clan of traitors, the Ben Ali and Trabelsi families ; it has consecrated a popular hero, Bouazizi, to whom are dedicated an important avenue

in Tunis and a square in Sidi Bouzid. In the revolutionary momentum, the fetish November 7th names of institutions, public places and inscriptions have been erased. The deliberate will to wipe off the tokens, organs and mores of the old régime accounts for the swiftness of the legalist shake-out which abolished the Constitution, suppressed the Assemblies and fired the first circle of the agents of the State-Party. Undertaken in the matter of a few weeks, the abolition of signs and emblems recall the initial gestures of revolutionary actors seizing power, in other climes and other times.

However, the brutal rupture which partly translates the will to project in the future is not devoid of some nostalgia of the past, yet another sign of crisis: many ministers from the Bourguiba era have been chosen, a return to a period which, though it had been forcibly erased, is not so much a thing of the past. It has proved to be brimming with resources for the present. Personalities who had disappeared from public life have returned on the media; hitherto censored episodes were told; the re-establishment of the narration of the past reinstated the legitimacy of the nationalist leader, highlighting his dislike for money. Facebook was used to rediscover Bourguiba's oratorical talent, via the videos of his speeches and interviews. In the framework of revolutionary tomorrows, used to erasing a hated past, resources were tapped in the Bourguibian period, a provider of political staff, reassuring in the face of an immediate vacuum, allowing people to establish historical continuity. In the relationship with time, torn between an attachment to a close past and the tensions of the future, between the need to understand and the necessity of acting, a contemporaneous phenomenon operated in full: the instantaneity of the information and the reverberation mode of the present events outside the country.

If the Internet and the effects of social networks now determined the aggregation of the forces of denial and relayed information outside the national borders, those media enhanced the universal dimension of the *Tunisian Revolution* and amplified its symbolic message at the global level. The emulation power of the event resulted from an astounding combination of the insurrectional facts, the episodes that emptied the top executive circles of the State and the network effects created by the planetary media. In the same way as the communication pattern made of Sidi Bouzid, a hamlet in the Centre-West of Tunisia, a "referential marker" on Twitter (hash Tag), of the injunction *degage!* (Clear off!) a universal slogan and of the qualifier *jasmine* a word censored by the Chinese cyber-police, so did the Web disseminate information, magnify its impact, offer it for readership and commentary in a quasi-instantaneous manner, both on computer screens and in newsrooms around the world. The fabric of that virtual communication has in turn triggered a wave of indignation, imposed a follow up of events, and built an *international opinion* confronting executive authorities taken unawares. Between insurrectional action, blind repression, the making of information and emotion, the Tunisian epicenter, relayed by the might of globalised technology, turned into a laboratory where was observed the awakening to equality and liberty which anchored consciences, shattered the régime from inside, broke the wall of indifference that prevailed abroad. The hearth of in-motion events appears as a pole of political emotion, created an unsuspected shock in a world numbed after the unsurpassed 9/11 events, paralyzed by the depressing effects of the 2008 financial crisis, divided by the egotism of immediate vested interests.

In spite of the uncertainties as to what is to become of Tunisia and its environment, this

national *Revolution* looks like a broader event that cracked a numb geo-political order. The event unlocked the fortress of a State deemed stable and outplayed a political-financial management system which, not limited to the State confines, stretched well beyond it. It broke the purring confidence which used to lubricate agreements and profits and disturbed the tranquility of a lazy balance. Like an earthquake with unpredictable replicas, the Tunisian explosion foreshadowed unknown changes, making phenomena thought to stand miles away from one another move closer, coupling seemingly irreconcilable horizons. By crystallizing a conflation between local events and an international audience, revealing the fusion of individual aspirations to democracy and world empathy, that political liberation has disclosed connections that prefigure a re-composition of social relations and, may be, the physiognomy of planetary regional groupings.

At the time when murderous dramas are enacted in Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, and Syria, and when the ground swell of revolts for freedom continues in blood and shilly-shallying, these historian's reflections on a revolutionary segment may seem derisive. They are most certainly temporary and, with the impossibility of writing such history in the making, they testify to the complexity of the issues re-energized by revolutionary inroad. Not only does the oxygen generated by that mysterious tectonic destabilize a frozen image of countries thought to be predictable, but it also involves the fear of the advent of impromptu rules and unexpected partners. Like fear, when pressure changes places, the reversal of the battle of wills begets, for a while, contradictory possibles. Can one foresee the effects of an emotional impact still persistent in areas where people are still dying? For the moment, in the face of the hesitancy of the leaders from the Northern countries and the concern of the political and economic circles they contributed to create, new actors are entering the stage and changing the new state of affairs. Though reluctant, men and women, from those countries subjected to an order that has become unbearable, still keep a gleam of hope for changes one wishes to be irreversibly on their way to a more democratic life, in Tunisia as elsewhere.

In the manner of a sphinx, the *Tunisian Revolution* has not revealed all its enigmas.

Hammam-Lif, April 10, 2011

Notes

¹<http://www.facebook.com/video/video.php?v=101846866556287&oid=175934182429077&comments>