

# Winou el shabab.

**Images of transformations  
between the two shores of the Mediterranean**

Luca Queirolo Palmas and Luisa Stagi (eds)







Collana ***Immagin-azioni sociali***

04

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# **From «hero» to «zero»: re-thinking youth in post-revolutionary Tunisia. A focus on family, state and public discourse**

*Renata Pepicelli\**

\* University of Pisa

## **1. Introduction**

In post-revolutionary Tunisia unemployment, delayed marriage and socio-economic changes shape the life of the young, or at least of many of them<sup>1</sup>. Many live in a condition of blocked transition to adulthood facing a complex redefinition of gender relations. While the traditional models of womanhood and manhood are under discussion, the institution of the family still defines their roles in society, and moulds this category of youth. As a political, historical and social construction, this concept underwent significant changes in the last decade. If during and soon after the revolution young men and young women were considered «heroes», agents of change, today they are more and more depicted as a problem, a threat to the national stability. In this context, the gender

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1. The ideas presented in this article were elaborated in the framework of POWER2YOUTH, an EU funded project under the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013), grant agreement n. 612782. In particular, this article is a re-elaboration of parts of a research report published as POWER2YOUTH working paper: M.C. Paciello, R. Pepicelli and D. Pioppi (2016) «Youth in Tunisia: Trapped between Public Control and the Neo-liberal Economy». Power2Youth Working Paper No. 6. Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali. [www.iai.it/en/node/5962](http://www.iai.it/en/node/5962).

The photos in this chapter are a gentle donation of *Hugo Albignac*, a french freelance photographer and a member of the European collective of photographers, Shoot4change ([shoot4change.eu](http://shoot4change.eu)). He is also the author of articles from artistic criticism to political and social affairs for French and Italian magazines (*Unità Europea*, *Left*, *Horschamp*...). He has produced documentaries or photographic projects exhibited in France and Italy: *Fragments d'une institution Muratienne en Terra di Lavoro*, under the patronage of the French Institute of Naples, Naples 2016. The pictures shown in this article are part of a Research project on Tunisia for which he is the photographer. - Info: <https://publiquefriction.wordpress.com/>; <http://www.shoot4change.eu/?s=hugo+albignac>.

issues are particularly relevant to considering and discussing hegemonic narratives and counter-narratives about the young.

Fig. 1 - Walls of Tunis after the revolution



The aim of this paper is to deal with the two categories of youth and gender, underlining their intersections and focusing on the institution of the family. The latter is the legal and value system where gender roles are moulded and is the backbone of the progressive narrative of the Tunisian state since Habib Bourghiba up to Beji Caid Essebsi, passing through the 2010-2011 revolution.

## **2. Youth: The Redefinition of a Category**

### ***2.1. The Revolution: «The generation changing the world»***

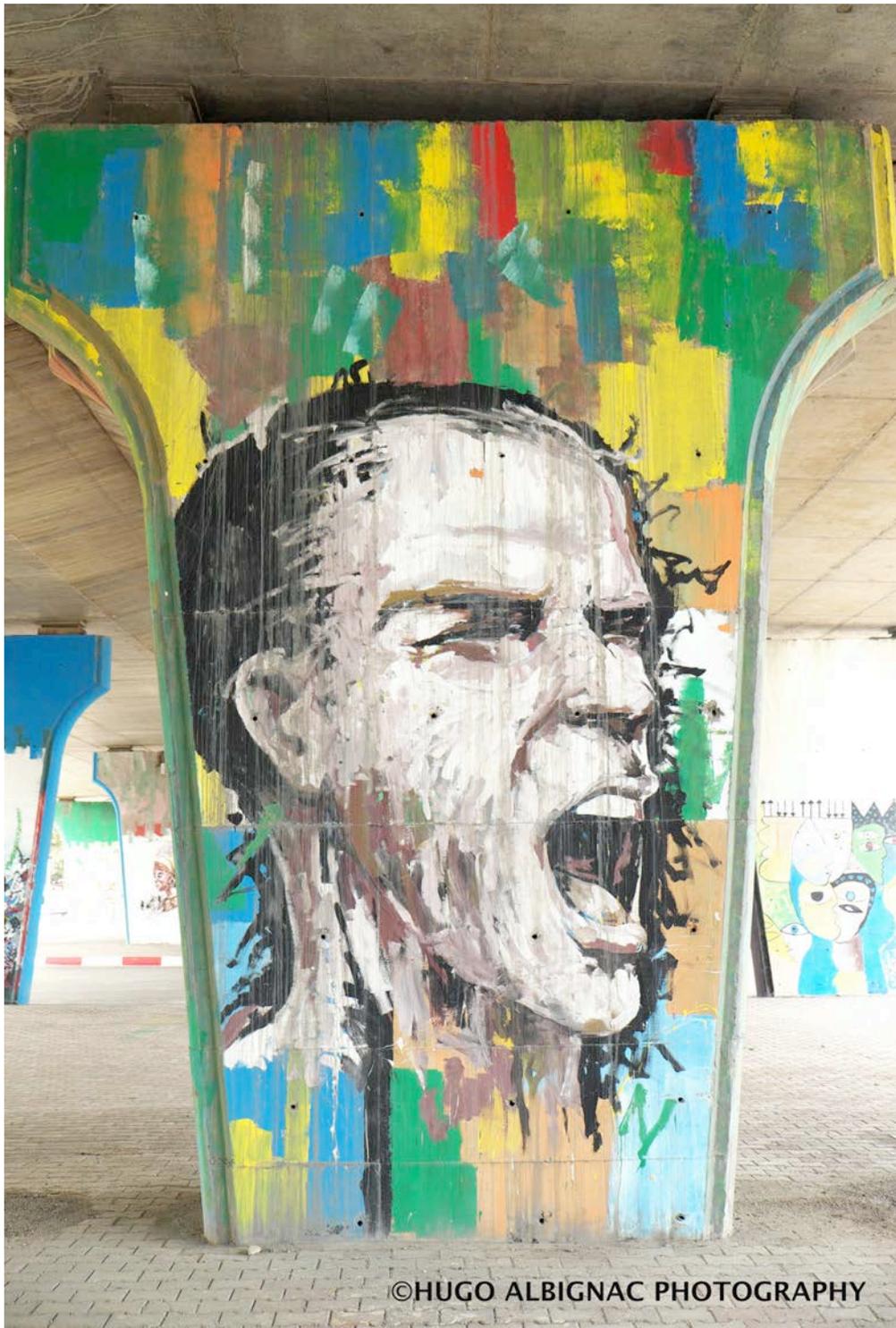
The 2010-2011 revolution brought to the centre of the public discourse in Tunisia, as in other Arab countries, a new powerful narrative about the young as agents of change, as those who would have reformed the Mena region. «The generation changing the world» was the title of the cover of «Time» on 23 February 2011; and this was the spirit of many articles published during the first months of 2011. Youth and women - or better young women - were icons of the Arab uprisings. During the revolts, pictures and videos of youth and women protesting against dictatorial regimes became viral and spread worldwide. In Tunisia, the story of Lina Ben Mhenni who blogged as «A Tunisian girl» is a good case in point of this new interest in Arab youth, Arab (young) women. Born in 1983, she was nominated for the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize as result of her online and offline activism which had attained international prominence.

As a consequence of this change of paradigm, young people have started to be considered key actors in the Mena region, and targeted as a homogenous category even though they are not. The conditions and positionalities of young men and young women are determined not only by age but also by elements like class, status, gender, culture, power relations. What has been happening with the construction of the category of young people is similar to what had happened in the 1990s to the «disadvantaged category» of Arab women who came to the forefront of the international development agenda, and consequently became beneficiaries of many cooperation projects, programmes and initiatives targeting Arab youth, which greatly increased immediately after the Arab uprisings. Not only teenagers and people in their twenties but also people in their thir-

ties and beyond, blocked in the transition to adulthood because of unemployment, delayed marriage and socio-economic changes, became the object of national and international projects, of journalistic and academic publications, showing a deep change regarding the concept of youth and witnessing how this category is a political, historical and social construction, socially manipulated and manipulable (Bourdieu 1993; Bennani Chraïbi and Farag 2007; Blandine, and Myriam Catusse 2016).

This new significance of youth accompanied important changes in intergenerational and gender relations. The access of women to education, the public sphere, the market – at least at some sectors of it (Francesca, Pepicelli 2017) – lower fertility rates and the transformation of young Arabs into consumers of a global cultural factory have called into question traditional models of womanhood and manhood even if the family – the patriarchal family – has remained the fundamental unit of society. Despite a series of significant juridical reforms (e.g. equality in the Constitution, a law against gender violence...), which are the product of state top-down decisions and the campaigns of women's movements, gender roles and power relations in the family are still determined by traditionalist views which tie men and women to their biological roles and do not take into account the socio-economic changes which have occurred in society. A constant and frustrating tension between the duty to conform to social norms and the impossibility of being able to do so moulds the life of many young men and women in the Arab world. More and more they find themselves caught between, on the one hand, the daily difficulties of getting a decent job, a house and, on the other hand, the normative constraints which oblige individuals to fit into predetermined gender roles, firstly getting married in order to become adults. Thus in post-revolutionary Tunisia it is impossible to speak of young people without considering the deep interconnections with gender issues.

Fig. 2 - Walls of Tunis after the revolution



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## **2.2. After the revolution: «Winou el chabeb?»**

«Winou el chabeb?» (*Wīnu š-šabāb?*, where are the youth? in Tunisian Arabic) is a powerful sentence of a documentary entitled “Après le printemps, l’hiver” (After the spring, the winter, 2017) produced by a group of El Manar University students within the framework of a research project of the University of Genova<sup>2</sup> which well underlines the change of narrative about the role of youth in the public sphere in the second phase of the post-revolutionary period. During and soon after the withdrawal of Ben Ali, young men and women were at the centre of the public debate. Considered, in national and international narratives, the «heroes» of the country, the «revolution’s driving forces», they embodied dynamism and positive change, and were considered the active part of the society which was repressed and mistreated under authoritarian rule. Their role in the fall of the regime was considered crucial and the 2010-2011 Tunisian «revolution» – like all the other Arab uprisings - was labelled a «youth revolution» (Sukarieh 2013). The day of Ben Ali’s departure from the country, the 14 January, became the «revolution and youth day». The young street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire on 17 December 2010, was transformed into the symbol of the Tunisian revolution and the catalyst for the wider Arab Uprisings. Evidence of this new importance of young people as a new political entity is to be found in the 2014 Constitution: article 8 states: «Youth are an active force in building the nation. The state seeks to provide the necessary conditions for developing the capacities of youth and realizing their potential, supports them to assume responsibility, and strives to extend and generalize their participation in social, economic, cultural and political development».

But seven years after the revolution the picture has changed a lot: nowadays, the young (mostly male youths) seem to have disappeared from the heroic narrative of the post-uprising period and are increasingly depicted as a problem in terms of frustrated unemployed – depending on their parents, and incapable of having their own family – illegal migrants, criminals, drug dealers, drug users, potential terrorists, troublemakers contesting the new post-revolutionary order and undermining national cohesion (Paciello, Pepicelli and Pioppi 2016, 6-7). It is a fact that there have been continuous demon-

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2. Realized by a group of Sociology students at the University El Manar with the film director Alessandro Diaco, this film is part of a wider ethnographic research project carried out by Luca Queirolo Palmas and Luisa Stagi from the University of Genova. See Queirolo Palmas and Stagi 2017.

strations across the whole country denouncing unemployment, corruption, the return of the old regime, the criminalization of hashish consumers<sup>3</sup>, power abuse by police forces... New active and organized movements have emerged in the last few years. It is the case of *Manich Msamah* (*Manīš msāmāh*, I will not forgive in Tunisia Arabic), created in the summer of 2014 with the aim of protecting the integrity of investigations of economic crimes by the Truth and Dignity Commission (*Hay`at al-ḥaqīqa wa al-karāma*; Instance Vérité et Dignité in French)<sup>4</sup> and still in the streets (Chomiak and Salman 2016). There is also the collective *Hasebhom* (*Hāsəbhūm*, Judge them in Tunisian Arabic) founded to contrast the planned law on the “repression of attacks against armed forces” which would reinforce criminal penalties for various acts that endanger police and security forces, punish speech that is deemed “denigrating” towards the police, and exempt security forces from criminal liability when they use excessive force. However despite these organized movements, many of the protests of the last periods – occurring in marginalized regions such as Sidi Bouzid or Kasserine, but also in the capital Tunis – are spontaneous, the product of «social non-movements, passive networks», collective actions of non-collective actors, claiming rights through individual and non-coordinated actions (Queirolo Palmas and Stagi 2017, 17). They are the answer of many individuals, mostly young men and women, who are not interested in participating in formal politics. The 2014 parliamentary and presidential elections showed a low youth turnout, reflecting a deep disenchantment toward the political transition. But this does not mean that in Tunisia young people are staying away from politics, the continuous street protests, in the north and in the south of the country, in the interior and coastal regions, are the evidence that young men and young women are still politically committed, but not to formal politics (voting, joining political parties, and running for office). They prefer

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3. Law 52 of the penal code punishes the consumption or possession of cannabis with imprisonment and heavy fines. “The goal of the law was to terrorize the population and make them shut their mouths.” The punishment for possession or usage is the same: up to a year in prison and a fine of between 1,000 and 1,500 Tunisian dinars (\$438-\$657). Repeat offenders face a minimum of five years’ imprisonment. Cf. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/02/tunisia-arrests-cannabis-weed-marijuana-change-law.html#ixzz4zwMfYzsh>.

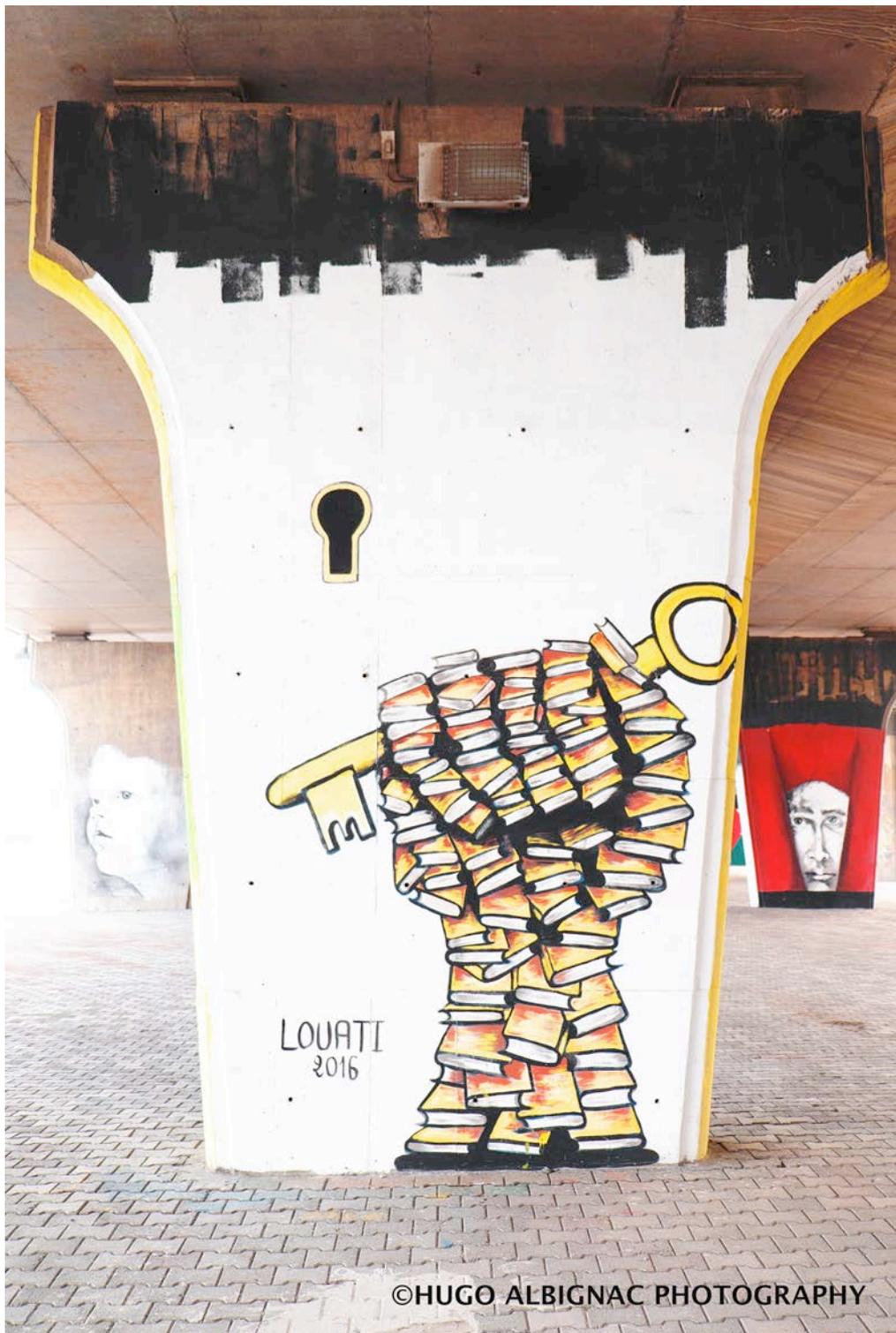
4. The truth and dignity commission is an independent tribunal established on 23 December 2013 and formally launched on 9 June 2014 with the aim to use both judicial and non-judicial mechanisms to investigate gross human rights violations committed by the Tunisian State since 1955 and to provide compensation and rehabilitation to victims. The Commission was given a four-year mandate (i.e. to 2018) with the possibility of a one-year extension.

to take part in informal politics (starting or joining a civil society organization, protesting, signing a petition, doing cyber activism) (Yerkes 2017). Many of them do not feel represented by the current political parties and by old political elite led by a President born in 1926 and in politics from the time of Bourghiba. A stencil on a wall of Tunis maintaining: «I cannot dream with my grandfather» beside the portrait of president Beji Caid Essebsi well illustrates this feeling (Lacquaniti 2015, 129). However even if it is true that the young represent a great part of the ongoing protest movements, the post-revolution «Tunisian street» – to paraphrase the seminal concept of «Arab street» by Asef Bayat (2003; 2009) – cannot be considered the result only of youth protests. Like the 2010-2011 uprising, the current social movements also include many adults, “ordinary people” of all ages. The revolutionary role of adults and adult-led organizations was, and still is today, generally downplayed in Tunisia as well as in other countries, in order to contain the protest only to a specific segment of society and to avoid describing them as structural revolts (Sukarieh and Tannock 2014, 107).

### **3. The gender line: public discourse, state feminism, women’s movements**

In the new narrative about youth as a «problem», the gender line usually works in assigning to young men the role of «bad boys» and to young women that of «good girls». Representing 65% of the students enrolled in the university, more willing to accept precarious and underpaid jobs than their male peers, young women are considered less problematic by the state and families, which more and more count on their help for dealing with the economic crisis and the withdrawal of the state from social welfare provisions. In full continuity with the pre-revolution policies, all the post Ben Ali governments – no matter if «secularist» or «Islamist» – had chosen to orient the national economy towards a neo-liberal free market model, which eroded the already precarious Tunisian welfare state and increased inequalities in society. However, at the same time, they had decided to address the gender issue – from a juridical point of view

Fig. 3 - Walls of Tunis after the revolution



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– as a key factor in driving the political transition and giving answers to “youth and women’s movements”. Since the 2011 revolution the disputes about gender issue have been at the forefront of the public debate and the battleground for political parties, secularists, Islamists, feminist movements, and common people. But notwithstanding the emergence of the Islamist party, al-Nahda, which had proposed more conservative narratives on gender relations<sup>5</sup>, the official state discourse on women’s rights after the revolution has not changed, it has actually become stronger. Article 21 of the Constitution approved in January 2014 declares equality between men and women without any discrimination. Article 46 maintains that the state shall guarantee equal opportunities for men and women in the exercise of different responsibilities in all sectors. In particular, the state shall strive to achieve parity between men and women in all elected assemblies. On 26 July 2017, the Tunisian Parliament passed with 146 votes out of 217 its first law to combat violence against women. The law adopts a broad definition of violence. In addition to physical violence, it recognizes other form of violence, including economic, psychological, political, and sexual, occurring outside and within the family. It also provides for new protection mechanisms that will enable survivors to access the necessary services and legal psychological assistance. Furthermore, the law amended article 227 of the penal code, which pardoned a perpetrator of a sexual act if he married the victim. This law - considered a historical milestone – also obtained the support of some prominent female figures of the al-Nahda party, and paved the way for further important reforms. On 14 September 2017, the Essebsi Government abolished the law – dating back to 1973 – that banned Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men, as it violated the 2014 constitution in terms of gender equality and was considered in contradiction with the life of many people and the young who live in a globalized world. President Essebsi had announced this reform one month earlier in his speech on National Women’s Day, when he had also called for amendments to the inheritance law, which stipulated that women are entitled to receive only half of what a man receives, in order to ensure equal rights for men and women. However, this proposal – which is still under discussion – has not been unanimously welcomed in Tunisia. While officially al-Nahda

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5. For example, some members of al-Nahda in August 2012 proposed including in the Constitutional text the issue of «complementarity» between men and women rather than «equality».

refused to discuss it, as it has not been presented to parliament yet, several religious and political circles strongly criticized it, considering the equality in inheritance to be at variance with verses of the Quran and the basis of religion. In their eyes, it alters the natural economic order of the family and of society. However, Tunisia's Grand Mufti Sheikh Othman Battikh supported the President's call with a surprising declaration – contradicting his previous statements – by claiming that it is in line with the equality between men and women asserted by the Islamic message.

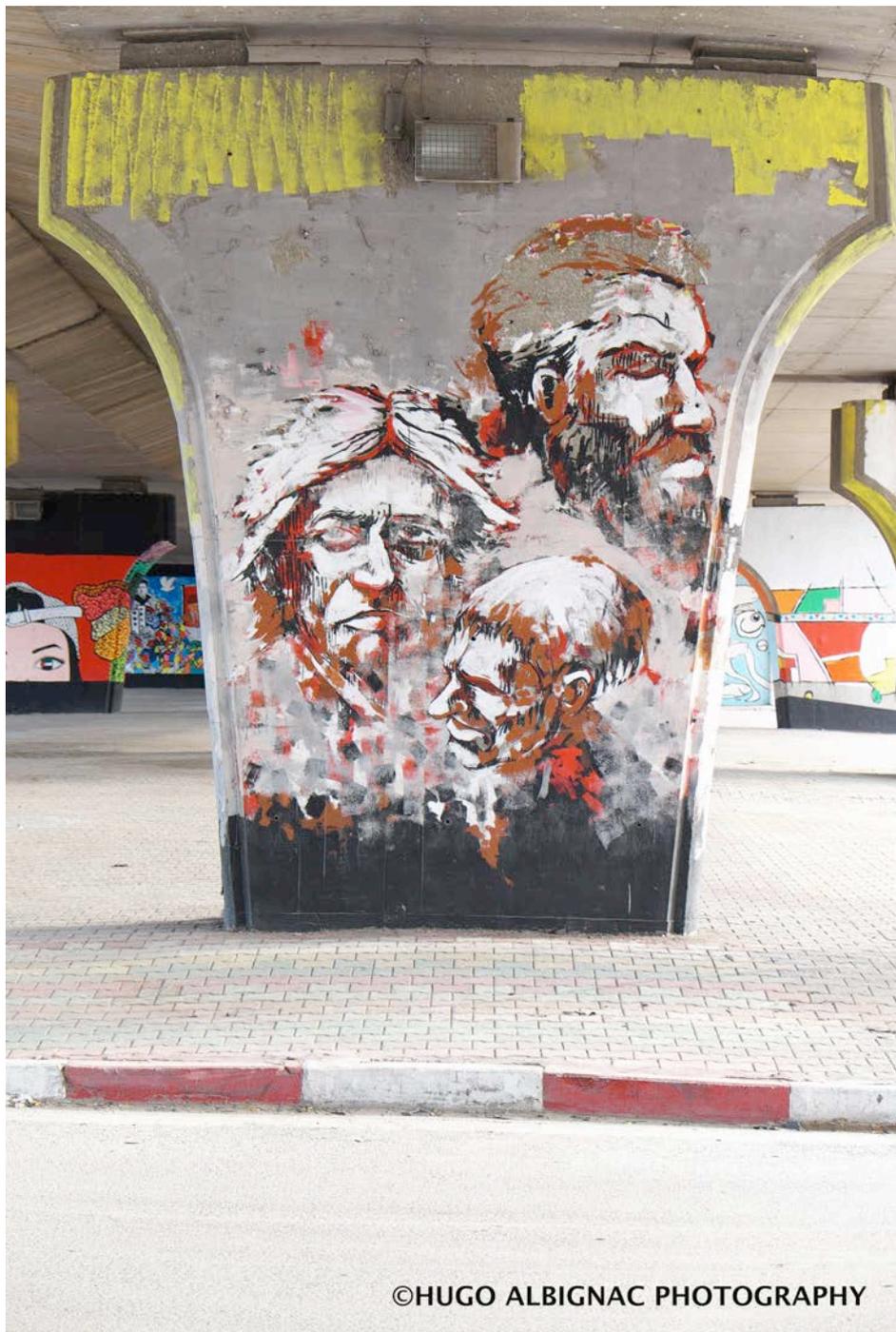
Many critics of the Government maintain that Essebsi uses women's rights for his own political purposes and as a catalyst of public opinion to divert public attention from controversial issues such as the high percentage of unemployment or the ruling party's internal problems. Indeed, in Tunisia, instrumentalization of women's rights is not a new phenomenon. Habib Bourghiba, first, and Ben Ali, later, built their political legitimacy at a local and international level on the status of women and the defense of the progressive family code adopted in 1956 (Bessis 1999). Both justified the struggle against Islamists – and other forms of political dissidence - in the name of the protection of women's rights, within the framework of the so-called "state feminism" (Ben Achour 2001). From this perspective, it was the state – and more specifically the president - that defined and gave rights to women in a very paternalistic way. Thus, women were encouraged to participate in those associations supporting the regime – such as the National Union of Tunisian Women (known by its French acronym Unft)<sup>6</sup> – but were repressed and silenced if they challenged and questioned state policies.

After the revolution the centrality in the political transition of the issue of gender equality has been the product of the interaction between the «state feminism» ideology and women's movements' claims. It has a very plural interaction as the overall picture of women's movements has changed a lot during and soon after the uprising.

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6. The National Union of Tunisian Women (Union Nationale des Femmes Tunisiennes - Unft) was formed in 1956, with the explicit goal of elevating the cultural, social, economic, and political status of Tunisian women. As a women's auxiliary of the national Neo-Destour Party, the Unft was primarily responsible for communicating, supporting, and implementing the Neo-Destour Party's initiatives and policies.

Fig. 4 - Walls of Tunis after the revolution



Beside historical women's independent associations like the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, known by its French acronym Atfd established in 1989 and the Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development known by its French acronym Afturd (Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche sur le Développement) established in 1989 (Labidi 2007), which are mostly concerned with the reform of the judicial system, and beside the new presence on the scene of «Islamist» women with a gender agenda, such as the nahdaoui parliamentarians Imen Ben Mohamed, Meherzia Labidi, Saida Ounissi, there has been emerging in Tunisia a new feminist awareness represented by collectives (composed mostly of young people) which break many taboos and define new counter-narratives about gender. It is the case of *Chouf* (Šūf), an organisation that aims to fight for the bodily and sexual rights of women with non-normative sexualities, which since 2015 organizes, each year, *Chouftouhonna* (Šuftūhunna) a feminist arts festival – unique in the region with a focus on Lgbtq issues – bringing together exhibitions, screenings, live performances, workshops and lectures by artists from different countries. Even if *Chouftouhonna* is the product of minor groups in the Tunisian public sphere, it underlines many young people's need to discuss, from a different perspective, the category of gender, calling into question the normative institution of the family.

#### **4. The Family: the key institution in the relations between individual, society and state**

##### ***4.1. Cps and women's rights: continuity from independence to the revolution and beyond***

In Tunisia, talking about youth and gender means talking about the family. As in the rest of the Arab world, the category of youth is constructed in relation to the institution of the family. The family is a system of law, relations and values that shapes the whole life of the individuals, determining their roles in the private and public sphere. It is the fundamental unit of society, from which gender roles and gender power relations derive. The image of post-independence Tunisia in the last century has been constructed on a specific idea of the family that has been confirmed after the fall of Ben Ali.

Thus to address the issue of the family in contemporary Tunisia we need to go back to Bourghiba's times.

Reforming the Tunisian family was, after independence in 1956, part and parcel of a larger state-building programme that aimed at developing a modern centralized state and at marginalizing patriarchal kin-based communities in local areas (Charrad 2001). At the heart of this ambitious project was the Tunisian Code of Personal Status (Cps). Promulgated on 13 August 1956, in the aftermath of independence from French colonial rule, and amended in 1993<sup>7</sup>, it constituted a radical shift in the interpretation of Islamic laws with regard to the family (Charrad 2001). It abolished polygamy and the husband's right to repudiate his wife, while it allowed women to get a divorce. Furthermore, the Cps raised the minimum marriage age to 15 years for women and 18 for men, thus reducing significantly the phenomenon of early marriage. According to the 2011-2012 Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey (Mics4), only 0.4 per cent of women aged 15-49 were married before the age of 15, and 5.1 per cent were married before the legal age of 18 (Unicef 2013).

In addition to the Cps, the Tunisian Government launched, in the 1960s, an intense family planning programme, which was a forerunner in the region (Robinson and Ross 2007; Ben Romdhane 2011). It included widespread access to contraceptives, an abortion law (1965 for health reasons, 1973 dependent on women's choice) and a network of family planning centres. Fertility rates decreased accordingly from 7.5 children per woman in the second half of the 1950s to 2 in 2005. Although recent studies indicate a counter demographic transition after the 2010-2011 revolution – since 2014 Tunisia, like other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, has experienced an increase in the birth rate – the countries in the region will eventually probably return to limited fertility in a short time, according to Youssef Courbage, research director at the National Institute of Demographic Studies (Mohsen-Finan 2015).

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7. In 1993, for the first time, a Tunisian woman could pass her nationality to a child born abroad, regardless of the nationality of the child's father.

Fig. 5 - Walls of Tunis after the revolution



Today the Cps still regulates Tunisian society<sup>8</sup>. The Code represents in fact an element of continuity from Bourghiba to Essebsi passing through Ben Ali. The revolutionary process has not actually altered the logic behind family policies, while the gender issue is crucial in the making of the new Tunisia after the 2011 revolution as it was in the making of the nation-state after independence in 1956. However, although Tunisian women – thanks to the Cps - have undergone significant social improvements in terms of access to education, health, the public sphere, the labour market; and although the state narrative on the gender issue is based on key words like «women’s rights», «women’s empowerment», «equality», «freedom of choice», the family remains the backbone of gender inequality and the «cultural meaning of adulthood is still defined by marriage» (Singerman 2007, 8).

#### ***4.2. Marriage, sexuality and adulthood: figures and public discourses***

Marriage is still considered the moment of transition from youth to adulthood, both for women and men, but at different levels according to gender. It is a commitment which should be made and it is often felt to be compulsory, but it is an increasingly difficult goal to achieve. In the post-uprising period, the increasing postponement of marriage for social reasons (women’s education, new globalized behaviours) and economic factors (unemployment, wedding fees) characterizes the life of many young people and their families. The former in Tunisia, as in the rest of North Africa and the Middle East, remain single for long periods of time while trying to save money to marry, but with poor labour market outcomes the financial investment in marriage takes years to accumulate (Singerman 2007; Dhillon *et al.* 2009). A survey, carried out by the Office National de la Famille et de la Population (Onfp) under Ben Ali, had already stated that the economic dimension was of central importance in order to explain the postponement of marriage: among the reasons mentioned by young people were wedding fees (34 per cent), unemployment (22 per cent) and difficulties in finding accommodation (22 per cent) (Onfp 2010). Since the 1990s-2000s, the progressive reorientation of the Tunisian economy towards a neoliberal free market economy, incapable of creating job opportu-

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8. According to Andrea Khalil outside Tunis and the big cities in the North, the Cps has had a minor impact: in the southern regions of Tunisia many women live according to a set of customary laws that are distinct from the Code (Khalil 2014, 53).

nities for young people and generating low-paid and precarious employment, has contributed to the delay of marriage and family formation, calling into question the normative model of adulthood transition without offering an alternative.

Today, the age at which an individual marries has undergone a significant and often involuntary delay, both for women and for men, resulting in an expansion of youth status until 30 years and beyond. According to a population census of 1966, the average marriage age for Tunisian women was 19.5 and 26.3 for men, which increased respectively to 27.1 and 32.4 in 2007 (Onfp 2010) in a social context in which celibacy has become more and more important (see Unicef 2008 and 2013). According to data provided by the Onfp (2010), in 2001, 15 per cent of women between 35-39 and 20 per cent of men of the same age group were not married. For women aged 40-44 celibacy was at a higher level than for men (9 per cent compared to 5.7 per cent for men). However even if celibacy is a fact, it is still considered a problem. An unmarried woman is suspect, she can generate «fitna» (disorder) in society, destabilizing the whole social structure, as her sexuality and herself are not under the control of a husband.<sup>9</sup> Even if less problematic, men's celibacy represents an element of concern: traditionally Islamic society is not based on the individual but on the family which guarantees the sexuality of each member and the functioning of society. Finally, the postponement of marriage calls into question the patriarchal order.

Confronted by this situation the public discourse in Tunisia has continued to sustain the centrality of the family and to condemn sex outside marriage. Even if it is not actually illegal, such as in other Arab countries like Morocco, it is morally condemned, while any sexual acts in public – including hugging, kissing – are considered acts of «public indecency» and regarded as illegal. It is the case of a Frenchman (of Algerian origin) and a Tunisian woman who were convicted on appeal in Tunis on 4 October 2017 for «public indecency» after an altercation with the police who arrested the couple while they were in a car. The man was sentenced to four months in prison for «public indecency» and «refusing to obey the police», while the woman was given a three months' sentence on the first charge only. This case, that has triggered an uproar in Tunisia over morality campaigns and police behaviour, bears witness to the lack of indi-

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9. See [http://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2016/03/09/tunisie-femme-celiabt\\_n\\_9416076.html](http://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2016/03/09/tunisie-femme-celiabt_n_9416076.html).

vidual freedoms in the country and the risks for young couples who are constantly threatened for living their sexuality openly.

But while public discourses condemn and deplore sexuality outside marriage, pre-marital sex is widely practised among Tunisian youth. According to a national survey on sexuality carried out in 2009 by the Onfp and the Association tunisienne de lutte contre les maladies sexuellement transmissibles et le Sida, 13.5 per cent of girls and 52.5 per cent of boys in the 15-24 age group have had at least one sexual intercourse. The Onfp survey revealed that the average age for the first sexual intercourse is 16.4 for girls and 17.4 for boys. The same survey also highlights that 60 per cent of youth having had a sexual encounter did not use any type of contraceptive, exposing both to sexual diseases and young women to pregnancies. After the revolution, sexuality outside marriage is more and more widespread. But in the absence of sex education programmes, pornography is diffuse and young people are left alone to deal with their sexuality. In 2015 voluntary abortions were estimated at 15,000, while, in a socio-political context which does not provide any help for single mothers<sup>10</sup>, children born outside marriage were 909 (Queirolo Palmas and Stagi 2017). In the post-uprising period, the social stigma towards single mothers, mostly young women, who are often abandoned even by their family of origin, continues to be very high (Sbouai 2012). In November 2011, for example, Souad Abderrahim, an al-Nahda deputy in the Constitutional Assembly, called single mothers a «disgrace» and declared that they «do not have the right to exist». In front of the changes in the social behaviours of the young, the Islamists propose to restore the centrality of the family in society as a bulwark against «disorder» and as an element of social cohesion. In its 2011 electoral programme, the al-Nahda party underlined the necessity of adopting policies and taking measures to help young people to have a family, explicitly addressing the problem of delayed marriage<sup>11</sup>. In August 2014, during the annual holiday commemorating the 1956 Cps, Rached Ghannouchi on the radio station Mosaique FM drew attention to the rise in the age of mar-

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10. From a legal point of view, even if by law the potential father has to submit himself to a test to establish paternity and, once recognized as the natural father, has to pay a cheque to support the child the authorities do not provide support for single mothers and their children.

11. Point 205 of the 2011 al-Nahda electoral programme. A French version is available at <http://www.businessnews.com.tn/pdf/programme-ennahdha0911.pdf>.

riage, along with the imbalances in family life and the rising divorce rate. As a solution to these problems, Ghannouchi called on young men to marry divorcees and women over 30: «Today, 30, 35 and 40 is still young»<sup>12</sup>. For their part, Salafist groups, who oppose the progressive ideology on which the Code of personal status is based, are instead promoting alternative forms of families based on *urfī* marriage (*al-zawaġ al-‘urfī*)<sup>13</sup>. Not requiring an official contract, nor parental consent, the purpose of these unions is to secure the recognition of a couple before God, even though the marriage has no value in the eyes of the law. Strictly forbidden by the Cps, ‘*urfī* marriages, which had generally disappeared since the 1970s, have once again spread in poor neighbourhoods of Tunis, and in university campuses where Salafist groups are active<sup>14</sup>, as a remedy for high wedding costs, premarital sex, and the general crisis of the family.

#### ***4.3. The new centrality of the family in neoliberal times and the research of exit strategies***

Paradoxically while we witness a crisis of the family as an institution (due to changes in social behaviours and economic reasons), the family appears more and more fundamental in the neo liberal economic system. As a consequence of the withdrawal of the state from social welfare provisions, the family - the family of origin - plays a new important role in the lives of many young people as it provides a minimum safety-net, and at the same time allows governments to preserve the status quo and exercise control over young people by containing their anger. However, this new centrality of the family comes at the cost of exacerbating frustration and increasing intergenerational resent-

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12. See «Ghannouchi to Tunisia youth: Marry divorcees and women over 30», in Middle East Online, 14 August 2014, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=67599>; AFP, «Tunisia Islamist chief urges men to wed women over 30», 13 August 2014, <http://news.yahoo.com/tunisia-islamist-chief-urges-men-wed-women-over-235300476.html>.

13. ‘*Urfī* or common-law marriage is a “customary” Sunni Muslim marriage contract that is not registered with state authorities. This form of marriage does not require witnesses, but it is often performed before two witnesses. Through ‘*urfī* marriages, young people are finding alternative ways to have “sanctioned” sex. These nonconventional marriages, also called “halal marriages”, are considered legal by some from a religious point of view, even if they are not recognized by the state. However, the growth of *urfī* marriages poses particular problems related to family law and the economic welfare of women entering these relationships as well as the children that may be born to them (Dhillon and Yousef 2009:27). For an analysis of the ‘*urfī* marriage in Islamic law, and in particular of its spread in Egypt, see Paonessa (2012).

14. See Bensaïed (2012), Baldé (2012), Tajine (2012), Belhassine (2013).

ment. Postponement of marriage and unemployment have prolonged the material dependence of the young on their family of origin, producing high expectations, performance anxiety and intergenerational conflicts. Parents put enormous pressure on their children in terms of expectations, but the latter feel unable to respond positively to these expectations, and live a suffocating sense of debt towards the family that sustains them until adulthood (Melliti 2015). In this context, even girls and young women grow up under similar pressures. More and more Tunisian families expect their daughters to have a job and contribute to the expenses of the house or at least be economically independent and get married earlier. Nowadays young women are required to study, work, take care of parents and elders, do domestic work but without calling into question the traditional order of the family where the father, the brother, the husband later – regardless of his contribution to the family – is still considered the head. Even when families recognize gender equality in the public sphere in terms of access to education, the job market, political activism, in the private sphere inequality still remains largely dominant.

Confronted by the difficulties of the blocked transition to adulthood and of performing the traditional model of manhood, many young men oppressed by requirements considered unachievable, take increasingly into consideration extreme exit strategies such as illegal migration or participation in violent extremist organizations. It has been estimated that Tunisia supplied organizations such as the so called Islamic State (*al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya* also know with the acronym *Daesh*) with the highest per capita rate of foreign fighters in the world: between 6,000 and 7,000 people, mostly young, left the country to go to Syria, Iraq and Lybia<sup>15</sup>. While joining radical organizations concerns only a small percentage, migration affects both real life and the imaginary of a large majority of young people in Tunisia. It has been estimated that since the mid-1990s, the share of young Tunisians that have intentions to leave the country has dramatically increased (Silatech 2010, 211; Khoury and Lopez 2011, 36). The 2011 revolution has strengthened this process. Many have tried to leave the country in search of better condition and in search of freedom. Indeed, revolution has opened new spaces of freedom, including freedom from material and immaterial borders. The fall of the Ben Ali regime in January 2011 represented, at least at the beginning, a turning point in the discourses

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15. [http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG\\_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf).

and practices concerning migration. During the first months after his departure, in the absence of domestic security controls at borders, an unprecedented outflow of Tunisian migrants tried to reach Europe. In less than three months (January-March 2011), 20,258 Tunisians arrived on the Italian island of Lampedusa (Frontex 2011, 29; Boubakri 2013, 5). Huge flows continued even during the following months, doubling the average presence of Tunisian migrants on Italian shores. It is estimated that more than 40,000 of the 51,000 Tunisians who emigrated abroad between May 2011 and May 2012 were young and mostly male (Iom 2014)<sup>16</sup>. But if in the first months after the revolution, a new discourse in the management of irregular emigration emerged and the political parties openly criticized the role of “guardian” of European borders imposed by the EU as well as the double standards of EU in dealing with the concept of human rights (Boubakri 2013, 19), seven years later, the security-based approach returned to be dominant and illegal migrants (mostly young male people) are considered a threat and a problem for the country. Indeed, although the 2014 Constitution guarantees the right for “every citizen” to leave the country (Article 24) and to return (Article 25), the current legal provisions constrain this right and criminalize “irregular exit”, and consequentially the tone of criticism towards European migration policies by political parties in power has become weaker.

## **5. Conclusion. Being young in post-revolutionary Tunisia between disenchantment and power relations**

The present paper has tried to show the marked shifts in the public discourse on youth, which have occurred in Tunisia in the recent years. If during and soon after the revolution the young were considered «heroes», agents of change, today they are increasingly depicted as a threat for the fragile Tunisian political system, characterized by limited statehood and recurring crises in the relationship between the state and societal forces (Hanau Santini 2018). In a few years, the heroic narrative about youth changed dramatically and a securitarian and paternalistic discourse has taken its place, while many

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16. In the attempt to escape from Tunisia, hundreds of migrants disappeared in the Mediterranean during sea crossings between March and May 2011 (Smith 2012).

young feel more and more like “zeros”, betrayed by the current developments of the political democratic transition and in search of a place in a society trapped between public control and a neo-liberal economy. Blocked in an unachieved transition to adulthood that moulds their day life, creating intergenerational resentments and reshaping gender relations, they experience an increasing disenchantment towards a political elite, considered corrupted and incapable of responding to the request for employment, justice, dignity which were at the core of the 2010-2011 demonstrations and are still there, echoed in the current street protests as well as in the products of the new very dynamic Tunisian cultural scene. In this regard, probably the 2017 movie ‘Alā kaff ‘Ifrīt (Beauty and the dogs) by Kaouther Ben Hania – even if not completely successful from a cinematographic point of view – is one of those works that best epitomizes the social and political tensions in Tunisian society, thanks also to the choice of adopting a gender and feminist approach able to describe the multiple relations of power affecting young people’s lives. Loosely inspired by a news item that shook Tunisia in 2012, the film tells the story of a young woman who, raped by the police after a university party, decided to do whatever it took to see charges pressed against them. Following the life of Meriam and her friend Youssef, the movie narrates the Tunisian transition focusing on widespread corruption and abuse of power by police forces and the state, the bureaucratic system dominated by male power, the oppressive morality codes that persist despite significant changes in the models of manhood and womanhood. But if the conclusion of the movie is a happy ending, signals coming from the country about putting into effect the promises of the revolution are not so optimistic and the role that youth can and do play in the Tunisian transition should be followed carefully.

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