When People Speak:
A Post-Colonial Analysis of the Tunisian Revolution or a Path to Democracy

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to define the Tunisian’s perceptions and understandings of the Tunisian Revolution. From the description of the socio-economic and political contexts in Tunisia before the revolution, it draws the roots of the social uprising. Describing the event in itself, it explains the several steps crossed by the Tunisian population during their struggle for the establishment of a democratic system. The study focuses on the meanings of the social uprising from a Tunisian individual perspective. It uses the Gramscian and post-colonial approaches to understand the power relations between the political system and the Tunisian society. The data used have been collected thru interviews with key informants and participants of the revolution and from books and articles written between December 17th 2010 and March 1st 2011. Different themes of the revolution are analyzed such as the role of the Internet. The Tunisian Revolution is a turning point in the History of Tunisia and the thesis aim to capture the different meanings if the social uprising from lived experiences of the Tunisian citizens.

Key Words: Tunisian Revolution, Gramsci, post-colonial studies, discourse of development, democracy
Acknowledgements

I would to extend my warmest to thank you to all the people who participated to this study. I am especially grateful to all the participants and interviewees who kindly shared their thoughts and ideas about the revolution. Above all, I would like to thank Souhir Ben Amed and her family for their essential support and generosity during the tumultuous moments of the Tunisian Revolution. I would like to give a special thank to my internship supervisor, Oumama Enneifer who kindly helped me to find contacts and references for this research.

I am equally thankful for all the insightful advices and constant support coming from my supervisor Catia Gregoratti and all my fellow Lumiders.

Finally, I also want to direct a special thank to my family and friends for their encouragements.
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<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
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<td>Zine El Abidine Ben Ali</td>
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1. Introduction

For several years, the resistance to democratization in the Arab region led social scientists and political analysts to define the ‘Arab authoritarian exception’ as a persistent lack of political freedom across this area of the world that has escaped from the third wave of democratization (Camau 2006). However, the Tunisian Revolution that started on December 17, 2010, after the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouzizi, a Tunisian fruit seller from Sidi Bouzid, seems to have turned the tide. After one month of popular demonstrations and protests that were aggressively repressed by the authoritarian regime, the Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali stepped down after twenty-three years of running the country with an iron fist. For the first time in the history of independent Tunisia, a popular movement was toppling a president.

The Tunisian Revolution has been largely qualified as sudden and unpredictable. Mohammad al-Haddad (2011: 3) comments on the exceptionality of the social uprising by saying that “it was the first time in the Arab world that the people had overthrown their ruler without the means of the abhorrent trinity of military coups, foreign interference or religious extremism.” The Tunisian Revolution was preceded by several protests in the central region of the country, where the population lives in very poor conditions. In this area, the unemployment rate was one of the highest in the country, a result of several years of lack of investments from the government and a lack of engagement of the state to develop the southern region of Tunisia. (Bishara : 2011) What was at first a protest for bread and basic needs found its echoes in the rest of the population through a popular and general dissatisfaction toward the authoritarian regime of Ben Ali. In one month (from December 17, 2010, to January 14, 2011), the popular revolt gathered thousands of protestors all over the country. The Internet has been one of the catalysts of the revolution, giving the Tunisians a space to express their criticism toward the system and to share information on system abuses and ongoing revolutionary events. (Kilani 2011)

This paper explores and discusses the possible political and social roots of the Tunisian social revolution. It tries to define the different meanings of this historical event starting with the individual perceptions and interpretations of those who participated in the revolution, the Tunisian citizens themselves. It analyses how the development discourse (democratic development) tainted the Tunisians’ way of perceiving freedom and conceptualizing their struggle for a fairer nation-state. With insights from within the revolution, this thesis also reflects upon the actual articulation of the development discourse by Tunisians who made connections between equality, quality of life, freedom of speech and the political system of democracy as the natural path for development. The analysis highlights the influence of the power relations between the Tunisian population and Ben Ali’s regime and uses a Gramscian conceptual approach of hegemony, intellectuals and subaltern to reflect upon. By using the post-colonial concept of subaltern, one of the goals of the research is to explore a dialogue between post-colonial and development studies that leads to a better understanding of how the Tunisian Revolution happened. The analysis and findings discuss the main themes that concerned the interviewees when explaining their own vision of the uprising and the significance of the event.
1.2 Research Problem

The objective of this thesis is to define the different meanings of the Tunisian revolution from the perspective of the ones who experienced it: the Tunisian citizens. Many commentators from all over the world have been describing the motivations of the Tunisian population: the jobless youth, the hopeless middle class and the inhabitants of deprived regions going out on the street bare-chested to face murderous repression in search of democracy. Mostly based on interviews performed in Tunis during the month following Ben Ali’s defection, this paper tries to fill the gap in firsthand knowledge of the experience of Tunisian individuals and their understandings of the uprising.

The lack of democratic political systems in the Arab region, referred to by scholars as ‘Arab exceptionalism’ or the ‘Arab authoritarian exception,’ has been the subject of debates among political analysts for many years. While observing a globalization of democracy since the end of the Cold War, the Arab region remained impervious to the expansion of democracy. The Freedom House report of 2004 notes the existence of an “Arab electoral gap.” The UNPD Arab Report on Human Development 2002 states that the third wave of democratization has not reached the Arab states and the conclusions of the 2004 Arab Human Development Report, entitled Towards Freedom in the Arab World, explicitly denounces the deprivation of freedom in this particular region of the world.

Scholars often treat democracy in an Arabo-Islamic context as a problematic question because of the tense relations between Islam and democracy (Sadiki 2002). As Mahmoud Ben Romdhane (2001, 20) points out, part of the debate about the persistence of authoritarianism in the Arab region revolves around the organic aspect of the religion that takes roots as the fundamental source of law. Because of its intrinsic pluralistic character, democracy seems to be opposed to religion and fundamentalism-based systems (Sadiki 2002).

Therefore, the Tunisian Revolution of 2011 has been described as sudden and unexpected by many Middle East experts and analysts. The spark ignited by Mohamed Bouzizi’s self-immolation on December 17, 2010, paved the way to a growing popular revolt that led the former president of Tunisia, Ben Ali, to step down from power and flee to Saudi Arabia. For the first time in history, the popular victory over an authoritarian regime of twenty-three years cleared the way for a democratic transition in the Arab region.

The focus of the study is to explore the way Tunisian individuals have experienced the uprising of 2010-2011 in Tunisia that led to end of a dictatorship, leaving Ben Ali’s powerful authoritarian regime with only one option: to relinquish its hold on power. What are Tunisian citizens’ perceptions of the event? And how do they define it from their own perspective, having lived for years under the strict rules of a ruthless regime? The study strives to identify the socio-political roots and meanings of the uprising for Tunisian individuals.
The thesis tries to build a theoretical knowledge about the roots and motivations of the Tunisian revolution and its protesters and actors, and uses the perspectives of those who have experienced it from the capital of Tunisia (Tun). The Tunisian uprising is still a very recent event in the history of Tunisia. I was living and pursuing research in Tunisia when the popular rebellion started. I have collected testimonials and performed interviews with the participants of the revolution (Tunisian citizens), and tried to create in this thesis a better understanding of the motivations of the Tunisian population. The main goal of this thesis is then to draw some connections between the motivations of the Tunisians who participated in the revolution and the way they understand and imagine a democratic system in Tunisia.

1.2 Purpose and research questions

The thesis tries to move from one level of analysis to the other; it describes political events as a socially unstructured phenomenon, then moves on to the individual perceptions of the revolutionary upheaval from a personal and intimate point of view. More specifically, on one hand it maps out the socio-economic situation and the political authoritarian regime. On the other hand, the thesis also focuses on the meanings and perceptions of the social phenomenon from an individual Tunisian point of view, being either witness or participant, experiencing and living the events from the capital of the country. As if using a magnifying glass, I analyze the societal uprising from the eyes of the individual Tunisians themselves.

Thus, the purpose of the thesis is twofold. Firstly, it is to investigate the political event and social uprising from a theoretical perspective. Secondly, it explores the discourse employed by the actors (Tunisian citizens) and the witnesses (Tunisian citizens and experts) to draw out a broader meaning of this uprising and finally capture the essence of the event from a social point of view. It tries to understand why this social uprising happened in the context of a civil society atrophied due to censure and political control.

To reiterate, the purposes of the thesis are the following:

1. To highlight certain post-colonial themes (power relations) used by the Tunisians defining the revolution and use those assumptions to better understand the roots of the uprising and place it in its political and social context.
2. To identify and reflect upon the use and meanings of the development discourse developed by Tunisian citizens to build a better understanding of how the uprising can be transformed into a concrete and integrated pathway through a consolidation of the ‘values’ of the revolution in political institutions.

Building a better understanding of the social and political event from an individual Tunisian perspective is the focal aim of the thesis.

To further define and limit the scope of the research as well as properly cover the purposes and answer the global problematic of the research, the following sub-questions have been posed to guide the research:
- How do Tunisian individuals understand the “Tunisian revolution” and how do they define it?

- What are their personal explanations of the causes and roots of the uprising?

- How have Tunisian individuals experienced the “Tunisian revolution” and what do they expect from it in the future?

Having presented the research aims, delimiting the scope and purposes of the thesis as well as the main problematic and questions to be answered, the methodological aspects will be discussed further, ending with a description of the research design and methods used for collecting and analyzing data.

2. Research Context

2.1 Socio-economical situation, unemployment and regional disparities

In a national population of around 10 million, 63 percent of Tunisia’s inhabitants are part of the urban population. The illiteracy rate is below 23 percent (31 percent for women and 14.8 percent for men). The GDP per capita is $6,760, resulting from a diverse economy based on agriculture, mining, energy, tourism, and manufacturing sectors. The Tunisian population is religiously homogeneous as more than 95 percent of Tunisians are Muslims although the country has a small percentage of Christians and Jews (BTI Country Report 2010). In Tunisia, Internet users form 36.8% of the population (UNdata) and around 3.6 million Tunisians have a Facebook profile.

President Ben Ali had established a pro-western foreign policy supported by the integration and liberalization of the economy. Tunisia’s foreign trade regime is one of the most open in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and Tunisia was the first Mediterranean country to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union in July 1995 (EU website). Key economic indicators show Tunisia to be a middle-income country and in 2009 the World Economic Forum Global Competitiveness Report ranked Tunisia as the most competitive country of the Maghreb and African economy (World Economic Forum 2009: p. 37). With a positive GDP growth rate between 4.7% and 3% in the first decade of the 2000s, Tunisia’s impressive growth has been named the “economic miracle of the Maghreb” (UNdata 2010).

However, unemployment rates have been growing high in recent years and Tunisian economic growth remains unequal, varying based on region. Thus, in 2009, the unemployment rate for youth aged 18-29 years was 29.8% and the percentage of graduates of higher education reached 44.9%. Over 35% of young people aged 18-29 were unemployed in 2009 in the Central West region (Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, Kairouan) and they represented almost 26% in the Central East region (Monastir, Sousse, Mahdia, Sfax). The North West (Beja, Jendouba, Le Kef, Siliana) and Southwest (Gafsa, Tozeur, Kebili) were
particularly affected by youth unemployment with rates close to 45% and over 50%, while youth unemployment was at only about 30% for Greater Tunis. Also, 60% of young people were looking for work in 2009 at Kasserine, versus 20% in Nabeul. In addition, persons aged 18 to 29 years living in the western regions of Tunisia were in a particularly difficult situation of unemployment compared to those living in areas near the coast (Leaders article). According to the World Bank, the main cause of that persistent high unemployment rate was due to an investment deficit and a loss of dynamism from private investment since mid-1990 (Ben Romdhane 2011: 178). As Ben Romdhane (2011: 178) argues: “the social elevator that is education seems to be broken and the effort not being rewarded anymore, it can be tempting for the youth to find other deviant ways to find social promotion.”

Another indicator for measuring regional disparities is the poverty rate by region. This indicator, derived from the five-year survey of consumption and living standards of households in the National Statistics Institute (INS), illustrates these differences, despite a likely "adjustment" from the old power. And like the unemployment rate, it is the western regions of Tunisia which show the highest proportion of poor. The results of this survey for the year 2005 led to a classification of the regions of Central West and Southwest as the poorest in the country with a poverty rate of 12.8% and 5.5% respectively, compared to a national average of 3.8%. While the poverty rate for the country decreased between 2000 and 2005, the number of poor reported in the local population nearly doubled for the Central West region (7.1% in 2000 to 12.8%). In comparison, the region of Monastir (Central East) and the region of Sidi Bouzid (Central West) have more than a decade and a half times greater proportion of poor than the other (respectively 2% and 12.8%) (Leaders: 2011).

2.2 Political context

Before January 14, 2010, the date Zine El Abidine Ben Ali quit after twenty-three years of holding power, Tunisia was a constitutional republic with a single party called Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique (Democratic Constitutional Rally, hereafter RCD) possessing over 2 million members and more than 6000 representatives throughout the country. Tunisia has a republican presidential system characterized by a bicameral parliamentary system, including the chambers of deputies and the chamber of advisors. The former general Ben Ali took control of the RDC from his predecessor Habib Bourguiba in 1987, in a bloodless constitutional coup (BIT Country Report 2010). He then became the head of the state, supreme commander of the armed forces, the legislator, and the official appointer of civil servants, soldiers and judges of the state.

When Ben Ali took control of the government, he announced several democratic reforms: rule of law, a fight against corruption, and the granting of civil liberties strengthening Islamic solidarity, Arab, African and Mediterranean (Beau & Tuquoi 2002: 46). Bourguiba had been in power since independence from France in 1956 and had privileged in his policies ‘progress’ over ‘democracy’: he implemented social and economic reforms and invested substantially in education. His government legislated the Tunisian Code du Statut Personnel (Personal Status Code, CSP) which was very progressive for an Arab state, and afforded women full and equal legal rights (Freedom House : 2009).
Under Ben Ali’s first years in power, there was a wind of freedom that seemed to blow on Tunisia. In 1987, Jean Daniel, an expert of the Tunisian political system, welcomed “the return of democracy in Tunisia” (Beau & Tuquoi 2002: 49). The 7th of November, the date Ben Ali seized power, was renamed the ‘Day of Change’. That grace period which characterized those following years, called the ‘Jasmine Revolution,’ refers to that non-violent transition of power between the previous and the new president. As Beau & Tuquoi (2002: 48) highlight: “the former military policeman (Ben Ali) plays the democratic game” (free translation from the author).

Nonetheless, during the twenty-three years of Ben Ali as RCD leader, many restrictions were imposed on political rights and civil liberties. The regime remained authoritarian and police-based, falling short on its promises of greater political openness. In 1989, the grace period was already over and Ben Ali was elected for a five-year term with 99.20% of the suffrage (Perrault in Beau & Tuquoi 2002: 6). Rached Ghannouchi, the leader of the Islamist opposition party named Ennahdha (Renaissance), left the country in the same year for what was supposed to be a tour of Muslim countries but which finally became an exile of several years. During that period, Ben Ali’s regime declared it was fighting the “Islamist wave” (or the tendance Islamique) and used that fear of Islamist extremism to opportunistly restrain overall political freedoms and civil liberties (BTI Country Report 2010). As Beau & Tuquoi (2002: 63) mention: “the first test of the democratic transition is a complete failure, a huge step backwards” (free translation from the author). Continuing on the same path, in 2003, a constitutional referendum was passed to ‘legally’ allow Ben Ali to run for a fourth five-year mandate in the elections of 2004 (Freedom House: 2009). On October 25th 2009, Ben Ali ran against three candidates and won the election with 89.6% of the popular vote (CIA World Fact Book: 2010).

During the numerous Ben Ali mandates, the press was progressively muzzled and multiple parties were forbidden – with the exception of a few opposition candidates for show. The freedom of association was confiscated and justice mostly operated for the benefit of power. Public criticism towards the RCD was not tolerated and all types of protests were severely repressed by the system. In 2010, the Democracy Index 2010 ranked Tunisia 144th out of 167 countries (The Economist Intelligence Unit: 2010). The right of association was harshly curtailed. Creating an organization request involved tedious bureaucratic steps and the request had to be made directly at the Ministry of the Interior. Even when an association was approved, members would cope with surveillance and harassment. The official government data states that there were more than 7000 NGOs recorded in 2003. However, independent sources declared that only ten human rights NGOs existed in Tunisia and five of them remained unauthorized (Freedom House: 2010). From the few existing independent civic associations, the Ligue Tunisienne pour la Défense des Droits de l’Homme (LTDH – Tunisian League for the Defense of Human Rights), one of the oldest

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1 That is the main reason why there were many complaints from Tunisians about the use of the expression ‘Jasmine Revolution’ to designate the Tunisian revolution of 2011.

2 Beau & Tuquoi use the term grace period to describe Ben Ali’s early years of power when hopes of a transition and of a more open and democratic system were still shared by the elites and population.
human rights movements in Africa, had tumultuous relations with those in power over the years of the Ben Ali regime, having its sixth congress banned in 2007 (LTDH: 2010). The quasi-absence of interpersonal trust between citizens because of the persistent impression of being constantly observed by the authoritarian system has left behind an atrophied civil society. Among the population, many Tunisians are convinced that one citizen in two was a RDC informant working for Ben Ali’s regime. Over the years, Ben Ali’s police-based system created a general feeling of paranoia and fear amongst inhabitants who were constrained to act as if Big Brother was constantly watching. Pictures of Ben Ali were posted on many business, public building, café and restaurant walls all over the country. Domestically, freedom of expression was limited by severe government controls over media and the internet. Many websites were banned including Youtube, Dailymotion and sometimes Facebook. Journalists writing non-glowing articles about the regime were threatened, physically attacked, arbitrarily arrested, sentenced to prison and even tortured. Around 40% of the TV news was devoted to the doings of the president (Perrault in Beau & Tuqioi 2002: 8), and during the popular revolt and escalation of protests from December 17, 2010, till January 14, 2011, Tunisian national TV barely mentioned the situation in the country.

3. Methodology

3.1 Ontology and epistemology

Qualitative methods research gives a particular insight into a situation or events that allow one to deeply understand parts of the world. Interviewing Tunisians about their personal “experience” and “perception” of the revolution allows a tridimensional meaning of the social uprising. There is the societal level of the political crisis drained by an economical plight, but equally importantly the living event itself experienced by individuals.

What I suggest as an intellectual path to a better understanding of the Tunisian revolution is to start from the living experiences of Tunisians who were involved in the events and to elicit their personal perception of “how” and “why” it happened. Supported by scholarly articles reflecting upon the revolution and using post-colonial theories to draw the outlines of my analysis, I suggest trying to capture the essence and meanings of the revolution for the Tunisians themselves. As Bryman argues (2007: 16): “social reality has a meaning for human beings and therefore human action is meaningful – that is, it has a meaning that they attribute to their acts.” As that reflection suggests, the Tunisian revolution and what it implies for the participants (risks of physical injuries, jail sentences, torture) produce significance for Tunisian citizens who attribute a particular meaning (e.g. access to more freedom) to their actions (protestations on the street, resistance on the web) and contribute to make sense of that social reality itself. The researcher must then grasp the subjective meaning of social action and interpret it (Bryman 2007: 16). Following the interpretivism stance, the personal representations of the Tunisian revolution for each

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3 Information collected by the author during interviews.
individual will then be expressed as a single reality in the way he or she discusses it, argues it (Potter: 1996:98).

Furthermore, the context in which the following research has been done is very specific and it certainly has a huge impact on the methodology chosen. As I was already doing research in Tunisia when the revolution started, I found myself being a witness to the daily development of the unexpected historical event. I was performing a summative evaluation of a development project about good governance in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Tunisian government. However, when the revolution started, it was then impossible for me to continue my project since the political situation was too precarious. Performing interviews with the governmental representatives was by then impossible. The revolution happened suddenly and the first event that started the revolt was the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010. At that very moment, I did not know yet that it would expand this way and that I had to either start a new research project or completely stop my field research in Tunisia and go back home.

Until January 14, 2011, I did not expect that Ben Ali would finally leave the country. As the revolt was growing and the protests were becoming more and more violent, causing the death of several individuals, I realized I could not go further with my previous topic no matter what the outcome of the revolution was.

On the second week of January 2011, the revolt started to become very violent in Tunis, the city I had been living in for more than three months. During the night of January 12th, there was a huge demonstration in the streets of Tunis because of the curfew imposed by the government. Several Tunisians went out in the streets that night to proclaim their dissatisfaction towards President Ben Ali. In the morning, on my street, the grocery store was burned down; many car frames were still smoking, burned down as well by the demonstrators. Two days later, on January 14th in the afternoon, a huge mass of demonstrators, men and women of every age, gathered in front of the Minister of the Interior in the city centre of Tunis to demand the departure of the president. Around 5 p.m. that day, information on the internet was circulating about the President leaving the country. For three months, I had been doing an internship at UNDP while performing my field research. I received a message on my mobile phone from the UNDP security department saying that the country was in an emergency situation and that the airport was closed. At that moment I thought I would need to leave the country and give up my field research. The army tanks took positions everywhere in the city: the Tunisians had succeeded. Ben Ali was gone.

During the following two weeks, the UNDP office had been running with critical staff because of security matters. I was staying home, waiting for the situation to calm down. It was a moment of insecurity and euphoria. Each day, I was wondering if I would have to leave the country or not because no one could tell by then how the situation would progress. During those two weeks, I started to think about a new topic of research. I was confused, trying to figure out from what angle I could construct a research methodology about what I was living. I knew it was a very crucial moment in Tunisian history and I wanted to dedicate my research to it.
I had the chance to live with a Tunisian family during the more tremendous moments of the revolt. This provided a particular insight into how the Tunisians were experiencing that extraordinary moment of their history. I had several informal discussions about how Tunisians around me were living the event, their opinion about it and their perspectives for the future. As at that moment I did not know how it would all turn out, I decided to start from that point: the Tunisian’s perception of the revolution. As they were so proud to remind me: it was the revolution of the ‘people.’ Thus, I took a decision that I would focus on those people, the people who had the courage to fight and risk their life for more justice and equality in their country, for a better life free from dictatorship.

Time was pressing. When the situation calmed down, I had less than one month left in the country to pursue my research. The security situation was still very unpredictable and I had to be careful going to interviews by myself. The weekend before I left the country, the protests started again and there were six deaths in Tunis. During the following week, I stopped my interviews. I had to cancel three interviews and a focus group because of security matters. Each time I was performing an interview I was not sure if it would be the last, considering I could not know how the security situation would be the day after. Some informants told me I should be careful whom I was contacting for interviews and where I was going in the city.

I constructed my semi-structured interviews around the broad aim of making the people ‘express themselves’ about ‘their’ revolution (see the themes of the interviews above). I was very privileged to have access to that firsthand information, being on the spot at that exact moment. Thus, the topic of the thesis has been deeply inspired by my impressions on the moment and my personal observation of the event. After some interviews, I realized that many themes addressed in the interviews were common: the unbearable system of repression, the thrust for democracy and the crucial role of the Internet during the event. Listening to my interviews several times, wondering how I could make a thesis out of my research, I started to weave my analysis around those themes, looking for a theoretical background that would suit those themes and serve the purpose of the thesis. I finally found the post-colonial studies and Gramscian conceptualizations of power relations that finely address the tensions and interconnections between political power and the different classes of society. Those theories allow the interconnection of the common themes of the interviews mentioned above and the weaving of them around a significant analysis that provides the meaning of the Tunisian revolution.

3.2 Post-colonial studies approach of research

As a North American female social scientist who grew up in a democratic state, my constructed view of the concept of democracy and my perception of struggling for what is perceived in the Western world as acquired rights have an impact on the way I interpret the Tunisian revolution. Choosing qualitative research involves the epistemological stance of striving to get close to the research subject and thus going into the field. By positioning oneself in the research, the researcher acknowledges that his or her perception of the reality and values could perhaps influence the study (Creswell 2007:11). Using post-
colonial methodology as broad guidelines of analysis, I stand upon the post-colonial approach which argues that, “knowledge is never impartial, removed, or objective, but always situated, produced by actors who are positioned in a specific location.” (McEwan 2009: 35). The relationship between researchers and researched can be skewed by the historical background of their respective country (Scheyvens & Storey 2003). However, as Spivak (2004: 567 in Kapoor 2008: 35) stipulates, I, as a pragmatic researcher, may stay open to the other and not bring the ‘other into the self.’ Being aware of those possible biases, I am capable of making the intellectual conscious effort to avoid the trap of seeing the ‘realities’ from only two oppositional perspectives: ‘myself’ and ‘the other.’

3.3 Methods

Case studies are used in social science to build a better comprehension of complex social phenomenon. (Yin 2003:7) This study qualifies as a case study with an overall goal of understanding the phenomenon of the Tunisian revolution, ‘how’ and ‘why’ it happened. The case study approach is particularly suitable here because I am researching a contemporary and living process and the topic is not removable from its context (Yin 2007: 9). Individual stories are collected as primary units of analysis and together will form the single case study that purposely preserves the holistic and significant characteristics of real-life events. (Yin 2003: 8)

3.4 Data collection and Sampling

Multiple methods for data collection and sources of information were used to facilitate an extended understanding and engender complementary insights. The main fieldwork method consists of interviews with Tunisian individuals (journalists, human rights activists, bloggers, lawyers, professors, staff from the aid industry) who experienced and witnessed the revolutionary events going on from December 17, 2010, till March 1, 2011. Complementary sources of information have been used such as key informants’ interviews and informal meetings, articles from newspapers and blogs, literature reviews and personal observation. The empirical data have been collected from the capital of the country, Tunis.

I chose a mixed procedure of purposive and snowball sampling. I used the purposive sampling due to its strategic nature, which ensures that participants are relevant to the topic. The snowball sampling was suitable based on the fact that the unstable political situation and security matters forced me to carry out the interviews in a very short period of time. Sampling technique has been selected on criteria such as purpose of the thesis and practical limitations in terms of security. Unfortunately, I had to cancel two interviews and one focus group because of the unexpected escalation of violence in certain areas of the city.

3.5 Primary Data

3.5.1 Informant Interviews
Four informant interviews were performed with senior staff at United Nations Development Programme Tunisia, a member of the Consultative commission on political reforms, an historian from the Social Sciences Faculty of University of Tunis and researcher for the Research Institute on Contemporary Maghreb and finally, a political scientist from the Law and Political Science Faculty of University of Tunis. The interviews were concerning the social, economical and political context that could have led to the Tunisian revolution, the disparities of unemployment and poverty rates between different regions of Tunisia and authoritarian regime repression. Those interviews have served to build up a better understanding of the key issues related to the revolutionary events and identify the possible roots of the escalation of protests. Having a better view of the big picture has been useful to construct the semi-structured interview questionnaires and grasp the major aspects of the phenomenon.

3.5.2 Semi-structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were carried out with six Tunisian citizens who had been involved in the revolutionary events going on between December 17, 2010, and March 1, 2011. The citizens selected were the ones who took actions during the revolt against the repression of Ben Ali’s regime and the ones who belonged to groups who distinguished themselves during the demonstrations such as lawyers, bloggers, human rights activists or journalists. The semi-structured interviews took around one to two hours for each and were performed in cafés located in Tunis. Only one has been carried out over Skype due to distance matters (with the co-funder of the blog Nawaat). All the semi-structured interviews were structured around the following themes:

- Personal understandings of the meanings of the revolution
- Own explanation of the reasons that provoked it
- The motivations to participate in the revolutionary events despite the risks
- The reasons of the personal engagement towards social and political changes
- The expected outcomes for the future of the revolution

All the interviews have been performed in French, the second language of the interviewees (the first being Arabic), but all of them were speaking in and understanding a very good level of French. This means that I have translated the quotations included in the research paper from French to English (French being my mother tongue). The interviews were recorded and transcribed to allow an intensive comprehension of respondent’s answers. The analysis has been achieved two times: a first analysis during the transcribing, evaluating the major ideas and issues brought up and a final theory-driven investigation consisting in reading interviews several times and looking for common themes to touch upon related to the theoretical framework used (Bryman 2008:451, Kvale & Brinkmann 2009: 236).

3.5.3 Secondary data
Using secondary data is particularly relevant because it strengthens the validity of the research via the triangulation method (Yin 2007: 100). I relied on secondary data to better understand the political and social roots of the revolutions and based my analysis on scholars’ reflections upon the new Tunisian political situation. From the analysis of articles posted on the blog Nawaat, newspapers talking about the revolution collected on the field and books about the revolution published in Tunisia right after the revolutionary event, I received different viewpoints on the revolution.

### 3.6 Quality of the research

As qualitative research does not imply quantitative measurement, Bryman (2008: 376) points out that the validity of a qualitative research has little bearing because the measurement itself is not the research focus. However he identifies four criteria to verify the quality of the research: the external reliability (the degree to which the research can be replicated), the internal reliability (when there is more than one observer), internal validity (good match between the researcher observations and the theatrical ideas they develop) and external validity (the degree to which the findings can be generalized) (Ibid). In order to ensure the quality of my research I use the respondent validation providing an account of my findings to my key informants. I exercise triangulation as well to increase the reliability in my findings by using different sources of data such as articles and personal observations.

### 3.7 Ethical considerations

The ethical considerations have to be borne in mind by the researcher as to “which extent the participants' needs and concerns is taken into account” (Scheyvens and Storey 2003:140). On one hand, guidelines elaborated from Immanuel Kant’s theory are fixed and permanent to any relativism. Ethical considerations have to be a constant concern in everyday life research. Being confronted with a different culture demands the researcher be attentive to those particularities. I have carefully been informing all participants of the objective of this research and how their answers will be used. The voluntariness of their participation has been stressed and I have expressed my commitment to assure the privacy and confidentiality of participants (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009:70). Because of the unstable political situation and the uncertainty towards possible future repression from the pro-RDC supporters, it could have been tremendous to openly declare a personal participation in the revolt against the authoritarian regime. This latter is the main reason why real names have not been used anywhere in this thesis. Additionally, oral informed consents were given by all participants concerning the voluntary nature of the participation and the agreement on audio recording on condition of confidentiality.

### 3.8 The limits of the research

The following thesis does not pretend to answer all the interrogations that the Tunisian revolution brought up. It does not cover all the issues related to the event. Some choices have been made to keep the focus on the way people ‘speak it’. The goal is then to create a
scientific knowledge and reflection about the Tunisian revolution taking ground from the Tunisian citizens’ experiences in order to have a closer look at their own vision of the historical event. Therefore, the singularity of the analysis lies in the data collected on the spot, at a very close moment after Ben Ali’s departure.

4. Theoretical background

4.1 The Arab exceptionalism

Literature about the persistence of authoritarianism in Arab states has been providing different explanations about the phenomenon of the absence of democracy in the region. In the context of the ambiguous relationship between the East and the West, Eastern civilisation has been associated with despotism while the second was linked with freedom: “At the same time, freedom was spreading, to varying degrees, among countries in the West. As a result, we now face the dichotomies of “despotism/backwardness” and “freedom/progress” metonyms for the “East/West” duality. (Mahir Hanandah cited 2002 in UNDP 2004: 68) Authoritarianism became the given reason for the slow progress in the Arab area. The publication of the book “The Clash of Civilizations” (Huntington: 1996) reinforced that idea and the September 2011 events in New York City engendered the political ‘war on terrorism’ and inflamed the debate. (UNDP 2004: 69) Before December 2010, Tunisia was one of those Arab states where authoritarianism was the ruling system established since independence from France in 1956. Thus, the sudden Tunisian rise up for democracy has been surprising many political analysts. The revolution that started on December 17, 2010, is defined by the Tunisians themselves as a struggle for the establishment of a real democratic system based on fair elections, freedoms of press and association and rule of law. Insofar as the aim of the following thesis is to explain the meanings of the revolution from a Tunisian individual perspective, it remains important to set first the basis of the democracy notion in order to install the reflection upon the Tunisian vision of the political and social system to be established in post-revolutionary Tunisia. Following that, it will be explained why the post-colonial theories are useful to place the social uprising in its political and social context. Post-colonial theorists have been critical towards the development discourse, but joining those two theoretical approaches while trying to capture the essence of the social uprising requesting democracy provides insight into what the ‘Third World’ perceives from Western knowledge and how they integrate it. In this particular case, the development discourse defines democracy as the more suitable political system to allow the progress of human development.

4.2 Post-colonialism as suitable theoretical approach for development studies

Postcolonial approach focuses on relationships between power and knowledge. Knowledges are always subjective. The illustrations of the South issued from those relationships have impacts on identities and culture. Postcolonial approach requests more
worldwide informed knowledges, rather than western-centric ones. (McEwan 2009: 23) Therefore, it strives to explore the possibilities of producing a ‘de-colonized knowledge.’ However, Moore-Gilbert (1997:2), cited in Kapoor, describes post-colonialism as “a contested field, with porous boundaries and no single or coherent position. Nonetheless, it is a field haunted by the complex connections between domination and subjection/resistance, connections rooted in colonial history but which continue in various guises today.” Mc Ewan argues for a dialogue between post-colonialist and development studies in order to equilibrate the power relations between the North and the South and the roots of the institutionalization of the development. On one hand, postcolonial study remains suspicious about the way the development project has been introduced and institutionalized in the South and the power relations of superiority that still exist within that old European project of civilizing those territories. It convicts the dominant and universalizing Northern development agenda. On the other hand, development studies have been criticizing postcolonialism because of the tendencies to neglect the lived experiences and material realities of postcoloniality. However, bringing together these criticisms can certainly result with a significant convergence of the theories and practices that allow a better understanding of the power relations and influences between the regions and localities.

Furthermore, Kapoor argues: “Therefore, a self-reflexive and democratic postcolonial politics is conductive to a more just development as well. By better establishing an ethical and dialogical relationship with the subaltern, by being ever-vigilant to the disguises of power, by clearing discursive spaces for bottom-up and insurgent subaltern action, a postcolonial politics may better be able to strive towards an always unfinished yet democratic development.” (McEwen 2009) In his view, (2008:36), aid industry has been using the ‘rights agenda’ to define and categorize the ‘needs’ of every human being, those rights being conceived as universal. As in the debate about democracy, the westerners sometimes use those rights has an alibi for strategic or military intervention (Iraq, Afghanistan), a pretext to ‘liberation’ or ‘humanitarianism’ as if war would be acceptable if it brings peace and democracy. (Zizek 2004: 508) As postdevelopment theorists (Escobar 1984, Sachs 1992) argue, development workers always have to position themselves within a “development discourse” through which the Western-style is taken for granted and the Northern way of modernization becomes a standard. There exists a persistent dichotomy between the us/them relationship and “our subjects are coded or framed in terms of ‘we’ aid/develop/civilize/empower ‘them.’” (Kapoor 2008: 42) The postcolonial approach challenges that idea of two separated entities and reveals how the centre and the periphery have always been interconnected (McEwan 2009: 28).

Starting from those interconnections, the use of postcolonial and development studies is particularly interesting to analyse the Tunisian revolution. It allows a significant focus on the power relations of domination that provoked the Tunisian social uprising while highlighting the way the development discourse has been integrated and used by the population to legitimate and express their struggle for freedom. Using postcolonialism theories allows one to avoid falling into the trap of the “moralizing development discourse” that seems to be Euro-centric and unfold from broad abstract principles far from South people realities. It keeps focus as well on the several ramifications of power relations and
allows the possibility to truly understand the roots of the oppressed claims. From another perspective, a research based on the use of development studies’ instruments of analysis gives food for thought about the meanings of Tunisian demands and the signification of their struggle as a developmental means.

4.3 Democracy in the development discourse

Democracy is definitely polymorphous. Only one aspect of the concept of democracy seems to reach consensus among social scientists and political analysts. Its etymology comes from the term *Demokratia* in Greek, formed of the word *demos*, people, and *kratia*, taking its origin from the verb *krateen*, which jointly mean ‘rule by the people’ (Sadiki 2002, 10). Aristotle refers to democracy as “the form of government in which every man whoever he is, can act best and live happily” (Aristotle, Politics). However, this is wishful thinking more than an applicable process and Sartori (1987) points out that democracy is inherently imperfect and that no all-inclusive democracy has ever existed.

In the history of the conception of democracy, Western philosophers searched for a form of government that would ensure the liberty of their population. In order to accomplish the ideal of “pursuing our own good in our own way,” James Mill suggested the “representative government” through which the interests of the people governed and the state leaders are congruent. The elections of the rulers by the citizens would then guarantee the accountability of the government. The latter becomes an instrument to preserve the liberty of each individual. Thus, democracy has been elaborated from the aspiration of defending the freedom of the majority from oppression by any greedy minority (UNDP 2004:47). That is the crux and main expectations of the democratic ideal. Freedom is thought to be essential for a human being’s capacity to “ennoble” and to live in dignity. However, as Sadiki finely argues, the interrogation that it brings up does not lie in the risk that democracy could not flourish in a non-specific western cultural milieu but rather if “democracy has what it takes to be amenable to decentring or destabilising without losing its moral potency?” (Sadiki 2002: 8)

According to Zakaria (2004), societies should focus on freedom instead of primarily concentrating on democracy. Liberty should come first, then democracy. Dahl (1971) suggests seven institutional guarantees to qualify a system of democracy including the following:

- Freedom of expression
- The right to vote
- Freedom to establish and join organizations
- Eligibility for public office
- The right of political leaders to compete for support and votes
- Availability of alternative sources of information
- Policy-making institutions based on voting in free and fair elections and other means by which the people express their preferences.
Embedded in those guarantees is a well-organized civil society acting like the watchdog of the state and proposing alternative policies (UNDP 2004: 49). Democracy must then be considered as a means or an instrument to more freedom, not an end (UNDP 2004: 72).

4.4 A post-colonial Analysis of the Revolution: The subaltern, the Intellectuals and the Internet as a democratic space

Democracy and democratization can no longer be studied without taking into consideration the political power of the new technologies of communication such as the internet and the social media (Howard 2010). Within the Tunisian revolution, the instrumental role of Facebook, Twitter and blogs as a new space of communication free from dictatorship coercion cannot be denied. As Howard argues: “The internet has become a necessary infrastructure for the development of civil society in the experience of the Muslim communities around the developing world.” (Howard 2010: 132) Howard argues that these new technologies of communication have been influencing the relationships between civil society and the state in three different ways. First of all, the internet is a logistical tool to organize communication within the members of civil society. Second, the internet becomes an incubator for social groups to meet, share common values and form groups free from state control or influence. Thirdly, the Internet has transformed the system of political communications creating a site of contestation between the state and civil society. (Howard 2010: 135)

Using that virtual space of communication during the revolution, the Tunisian citizens have been particularly active on blogs, Twitter and Facebook. As Howard mentions while explaining the advantages of the virtual space, the internet became an instrument to share opinions and information that contributed to raising the population’s awareness about the ongoing social uprising. The traditional mediums of communication such as broadcast and radio usually used by political power to promote its leadership are not the only media of influence anymore. The internet can be used as a space of promotion of other political and social values free from the complete control of the state. In very authoritarian regimes, the internet becomes one of the few places where citizenship can be performed and opinion expressed. (Howard 2010) However, as mentioned above, only 36.8% of the population has Internet access in Tunisia (UNData). Thus, there is a broad segment of Tunisian citizens who cannot participate in the virtual dialogue.

In his article called “Digital Divide 2.0 and the Digital Subaltern,” Mike Kent (2008) defines the concept of the digital subaltern, representing those marginalized groups who do not have access to the virtual space. Kent weaves his analysis around the concept of ‘cultware’ which is: “the social capital that might enable a person to ‘borrow’ literacy through someone who can help him or her gain access and solve hardware and software problems. It also measures the networks of contacts that add to the value of online communications.” (Kent 2008: 86) The digital subaltern, consisting of nearly a quarter of the entire population (24%), cannot have access to that open space where communities can be formed and values shared. Kent links the digital subaltern identities to the post-colonial concept of subaltern, referring to their incapacity to speak and be heard on the digital space. They are trapped in
the virtual periphery and cannot become active within the digital dialogue. (Kent 2008: 92) Kent’s digital subaltern concept is particularly interesting within the analysis of the Tunisian social uprising when related to the Gramscian approach of the ‘intellectuals.’ The latter have the capacity of awaking subaltern awareness about their subordinate position. Intellectuals can promote the values of the subaltern and create a subaltern class alliance that would be capable of presenting a new set of values and then challenge the power relations within the society.

How come the one third of the Tunisian population who represent the internet users have been able to have such an impact that it influenced the outcomes of the social uprising? To answer this question, it can be quite enlightening to look at the interaction between the Tunisian internet users active in cyberspace and the marginalized part of the population. But first, the post-colonial concepts of hegemony, subaltern and intellectual must be defined in order to properly understand the power relations between those different groups of Tunisian society. Explaining the post-colonial and Gramscian conceptualization of those notions provides particular insight to understand how the challenged power relations between those groups have been influencing the outcomes of the revolution.

4.4.1 Gramscian approach of the Integral State

The concept of hegemony conceptualized by Gramsci gives a useful theoretical basis for the analysis of the power relations within a society. Hegemony refers to the process by which some assumptions are made prominent in a population and become norms or a way of thinking that perpetuate the power relations of stratified groups within the society (Clayton 2006: 11). Gramsci’s view on civil society and hegemony is particularly useful to understand the unequal relations between the Tunisian citizens and the State. In Gramsci’s writing, political society and civil society together compose an organic unity. The state being a means for class oppression, it requires a ruling social group to maintain power. This social group needs to exercise a degree of hegemony in civil society as well in order for the subaltern group to accept their own subordinate position. This vision of civil society is opposed to the liberal understanding of it that considers civil society as a domain of free expression and organization (Green 2010). The integral State described by Gramsci is constituted of the unity of the ruling civil society that exercises a certain power of persuasion on the subaltern. What Gramsci named the ‘traditional intellectuals’ performs a political leadership within society and allows the state to get a non-coercive consent. Hegemony suggests a structure of social control that is: “characterized by the combination of force and consent variously balancing one another.” (Forgacs 2000: p.423) That process legitimizes the authority of the state within the civil society without using coercion. Gramsci writes that civil society: “operates without ‘sanction’ or compulsory ‘obligations’ but nevertheless exerts a collective pressure and obtains objective results in the form of an evolution of customs, ways of thinking and acting, morality.” (Gramsci Notebook 13, &7; 1971, 242-3 cited in Green 2010: 7) The civil society and political society are then working together to reinforce each other’s dominance. In that context, law courts and police are the coercive tools used by the political society and hegemony to ensure that the groups who do not consent will obey. As Green summarizes: “hegemony is protected by coercion and
coercion is protected by hegemony and they both protect the dominant group’s political and economic positions.” (Green 2010: 7) This means that the political power finds its legitimacy in both force and consensus.

4.4.2 The Subaltern

Gramsci’s methodology towards the subaltern consists in transcribing their historical reality into a theoretical scheme that is still open-ended and non-dogmatic. He originally used the notion of subaltern to conceptualize inferiority of the subordinated class in Southern Italy. (Gramsci 1995) He points out that the theory will never correspond to exact historical fact and that it must be the theoretical abstract that is modified and not the other way around. (Notebook 3, 48 in Green 2008: 8) The focus is made on the historical, economic, political, social and cultural context that coined the roots of the subaltern position in the civil society. How come their lived experience developed in that sense and what engendered this standstill position of inferiority? (Green 2010: 19)

Within postcolonial studies, the concept of subaltern has been largely theorized by Spivak in her controversial essay ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ Her proposal focuses on the subordinated class of the subaltern that she identified as: “subsistence farmers, unorganized peasant labor, the tribal and communities of zero workers on the street or in the countryside.” (Spivak 1998) Spivak concentrates her description of the subaltern on approaches of gender, ethnicity and colonialism. She set the context within the subaltern cannot speak. Marginalized and oppressed by their position and having no way of making their voice heard, the subaltern, for Spivak, have no possibility of overcoming their inferiority. She denounces the process of production of knowledge from the dominant discourse that she describes as Euro-centric and westernized. Spivak argues that trying to understand the subaltern by using European models has been destructive and does not allow the subaltern to express their own vision of the world. (McEwan 2009: 68) She specifically criticizes the way Western intellectuals such as Foucault and Deleuze engaged in gross universalization of the ‘Third World’ other and how the representations that they made stitch on their own western vision of them instead of focusing on the cultural differences of the subaltern. The latter points out the unwillingness of the Western nations to internalize by self-reflectivity the language of differences in order to hear the subaltern. (Kapoor 2008: 41)

Working on the widow-sacrifice (sati) in India, she shows how British colonialists tried to abolish certain rituals during which a widow would jump into the burning funeral pyre of her husband. Spivak captures the cultural gap between the British ‘civilizing mission’ and the subaltern impossibility to be understood by the famous phrase: “White men saving brown women from brown men.” (Spivak 1998: 297) She argues that even when the female subaltern does speak, she cannot be heard. (Spivak 1998:308) Kapoor points out that the main argument brought up by Spivak’s piece of work relates to the following idea: “representations of the Third World conflate two related but discontinuous meanings of ‘representations’: (1) ‘speaking for’, in the sense of political representation; and (2) ‘speaking about’ or ‘re-presenting’, in the sense of making portrait.” (Kapoor 2008: 41) For
Spivak, the subaltern are constantly ‘speaking for’ and there is no space where the subaltern can be heard. She problematizes the situation of the subaltern but does not give any answer about the way the subaltern can overcome their inferiority and finally express their experiences in order to be heard.

However, unlike Spivak, Gramsci sees the subaltern inferior position as transformative. The realm of inequality for Gramsci is the way the subaltern cannot conceive their vision of their world in an incoherent, fragmentary and contradictory way and then cannot effectively challenge hegemony. To form a counter power to the dominant group, the subaltern must see beyond their vision of their own reality and be aware of the larger political and economic realm in which they evolve. Subaltern need to conceptualize their inferiority in the society. While developing a conscientiousness of their existence as a subordinated mass, they can engender solidarity within the subalterns. Thus, to eventually end up in a political movement they must construct an intellectual mass that would promote their vision of the world. (Crehan 2002: 103)

4.4.3 The Intellectual

Ultimately, what Gramsci argues for is a postsubaltern state that contains no oppression of one group on another. The key to access the end of group domination is for subalterns to look beyond their current subordinate conditions and to historicize and conceptualize the relations of power that engendered their given identities and attempt to change that institutionalized system of power. To convert hegemony in a democratic state that rejects domination, there is the necessity of a revolutionary transformation that implies a coalition of all subaltern social groups with a common political aim. The most organized group of the subaltern play the role of the ‘organic intellectuals’ who: “attempt to create a subaltern class alliance that would be capable of presenting a new set of cultural values, social relations, and a new conception of the state.” (Green 2009: 21) For Gramsci, the role of the intellectuals to create and re-create culture is particularly crucial regarding the subaltern situation. There are two types of intellectuals. On one hand, the traditional intellectuals are writers and priests who participate in maintaining the hegemony and perpetuate the culture of the dominant. On the other hand, the organic intellectuals belong to their social class and have the possibility of providing that class with consciousness. Those intellectuals can be actively involved in the production of culture and fill the gaps within the subaltern’s fragmented way of conceptualizing their world. As Crehan (2002: 129) argues, culture is, for Gramsci, closely linked to the intellectuals in the way that “‘culture’ for is not something that simply persists through time, handed down from one generation to another, culture is both tightly bound to basic economic relations and, particularly for a group or a class attempting to win hegemony, has to be actively created.”

Spivak defines the concept of the intellectual by describing the traditional intellectual and linking it to the Euro-centric culture. She refers to Westerners as having a neo-colonialist attitude when speaking on the behalf of the subaltern. By trying to give a voice to the subaltern, they stand in their place and their work reflects their own Western vision of the subaltern, not the subaltern themselves.
For Gramsci, subaltern can empower themselves through the winning of a war of position that unites masses of different levels of subaltern in promoting a new set of social values as a counterforce of the leading group. Thus, the subaltern organize political groups and leadership support that endorse their vision of the world. In the end there is the establishment of a state and society based on values of equality and democracy free from domination and oppression in all aspects of life. (Green 2008: 22)

Gramsci conceptualizes the subaltern's identities as progressive and believes that any transformation will come from below. Subalterns will attempt to rise above their subordination through a broad struggle that will have an impact on every sphere of society and, as a result, their social being.

5. Analysis and Findings

5.1 The political system and the society: oppression and dissatisfaction

The oppressing authoritarian government led by Ben Ali had several impacts on subordinating a part of the citizens, making them voiceless with regards to criticizing the system. The threat of prison sentences and torture if they expressed an unfavourable opinion about the political system was making the Tunisians silent about abuses.

“I was given the impression of living in a country where it is always silence, contaminated by the system.” (Lilia, journalist and Facebooker)

The woman uses the word ‘silence’ to express the absence of contestation of the hegemony within the civil society meaning that the citizens then were giving their silent consent. When she talks about her involvement on the internet and criticizing Ben Ali she says:

“I was constantly criticized. They were saying I wanted to diminish Tunisia’s image.” (Lilia, journalist and Facebooker)

The interviewee emphasizes the pressure within the society itself to respect hegemony. The people she’s referring to using the pronoun “they” symbolizes both the political society and the subaltern who, together, perpetuate the hegemony by accepting the system values, fearing to criticize it. The political system is described by the interviewees as a system led by the fear of possible retaliations.

“It was a system of fear, governing by the fear.” (Mohamed, lawyer)

“As people were not informed by a reliable source and since everything was coming from rumors, there was a real phobia in the population.” (Lilia, Facebooker and journalist)
The ‘phobia’ mentioned was omnipresent in the society. Criticizing Ben Ali’s regime could have several impacts on individuals, but on their relatives too: threats of losing a job, not finding one or never having access to advancement. The RCD, the political party led by Ben Ali, had ramifications in every working sphere of the society. Private companies (telecommunications services, food sector) or state administration services (education, information) were almost all led and administrated by supporters of the RCD. Kilani explains it in his book, summarizing the revolution event:

“A survey summary will release later that the majority of those working positions do not have the profile function, which is likely to mislead the whole nature of Tunisian and all the socio-economic development.” (Kilani 2011: 42)

Thus, before the collapse of Ben Ali’s regime, key positions were filled with candidates hired with regard to their political allegiances instead of their professional qualifications. Keeping political control on every working sector of the society was certainly a way to get the silent consent of rest of the civil society. Tunisians could feel the pervasive pressure coming from the political society in their working environment.

Moncef Marzouki, while interviewed by Vincent Geisser about Ben Ali’s dictatorship, explains that Tunisians were constantly monitored by the system. It was part of the political regime strategy to make them feel that they were watched in every sphere of their lives.

“There is a diffuse form of anxiety in the Arabic societies... Dictatorship is a pathological and pathogenic form of organization. It produces effects in all sectors of society: work, administration, daily lives of citizens, etc. marked by violence and discomfort.” (Kilani 2011:25)

Later on during the interview, Marzouki (2011: 25) mentions a revealing story about how this political pressure was felt in daily Tunisian life. He says:

“This may seem surprising or offbeat, but it is as a simple driver – following friendly rules of the road that I discovered the daily pervasive effects of dictatorship. I was systematically controlled by the police. I wondered why because I did not feel that I had committed any violation of traffic laws. This was a Cooperating French woman who gave me the key explanation: "Mr. Marzouki, you are constantly controlled because you do not slow down when you drive alongside the police!" It was that simple: I had to slow down to show my submission to the system.”

To sum up, the oppression and fear of the system was lived by the Tunisian in every sphere of their life: as a worker or as a simple driver, their submission was constantly requested by the political hegemony. The threat of retaliations, from losing a job to jail sentences, was like the sword of Damocles hanging over Tunisian heads.

5.2 The collapse of the system: from fear to pride
Ben Ali’s system was based on the non-coercive and coercive consent of the population. From the RCD ramifications within work sectors and everyday life to the omnipresent police apparatus and corrupted justice system, its hegemony lasted twenty-three years. However, from December 17, 2010, to January 14, 2011, the pressure of the population succeeded to force Ben Ali to step down. Many interviewees explain the collapse of the system as because of the disappearing tacit consent of the society. The political regime could not handle the growing pressure of the unsatisfied society expressing itself about poverty, unemployment, lack of freedom and corruption.

“It exploded because there were too many problems at the same time. Corruption, economic crisis, poverty; it was too much pressure for the system and the people.” (Mohamed, lawyer)

“There were no real fervent of Ben Ali’s government. They were 2 million. Where are they now? Probably in the streets, protesting with the others.” (Labri, human rights activist)

“People were not believing in the State anymore.” (Zouhair, journalist)

“There was an erosion of the autocratic legitimacy.” (Astrubal, blogger from Nawaat)

“It started because of poverty and misery. It is a social movement starting with social claims that turned into political demands to expand at a national scale.” (Labri, human rights activist)

The last comment relates to the alliance between the different levels of the society to build up a broad coalition of people requesting all together a single demand: “Ben Ali dégage” (translation: “Ben Ali get out”). The latter has been the slogan used as a catch phrase, which clearly expresses the main goal of the demonstrators. In an article published on February 2, 2010, called “Six keys to understand Ben Ali’s downfall in Tunisia”, Labri Chouika summarizes the convergence of individual dissatisfaction merging in general protest expressed at a national scale.

“However, for the first time, this crisis has taken in the space of one month (17 December 2010-14 January 2011), a popular dimension and a national scale on which have been grafted all the frustrations of youth unemployment, to disadvantaged regions, to business people outraged by widespread corruption and nepotism in the spheres of government, to all those who aspire to freedom, the rule of law, social justice ...” (Chouika 2011: 6)

Another interviewee mentions the cohesion of society around one aim: the end of Ben Ali’s regime. She talks about the pride to be standing up together as a nation against authoritarianism.

“What has been gathering people was the opposition to Ben Ali. It is an apolitical movement. People have found a slogan: “I am Tunisian”. During the last presidential campaign, there was no picture of Ben Ali, but the use of Tunisian nationality. For the revolt, we used the pride of being Tunisian to relate.” (Lilia, Facebooker and journalist)

The lawyer, Mohamed, refers as well to the feeling of pride from overcoming the fear of the system.
“People were feeling cowardly and were afraid. Algerians were a symbol of courage, but not the Tunisians. The problem was fear, but there is no fear anymore. People believe in themselves.” (Mohamed, lawyer)

The human rights activist Labri identifies the key success factors of the revolution, such as the unity of population.

“It worked because all the population was against Ben Ali, from the business man to the peasant; it gathered everyone.” (Labri, human rights activist)

The following anecdote from a protest effectively reflects solidarity between citizens and their desire to fight together, as one single nation.

“I was in a protest on January 11th and there were many policemen. Someone told one of them that he was illiterate. He said: "I am illiterate, I am just like you, I am your brother; we are all brothers. The one who governs is a thief. Respect the law and do not shoot at your brothers.” (Abbou, lawyer)

The spark that ignited the Tunisians, the desperate act of Mohamed Bouazizi to set himself in fire on December 17, 2010, had echoed within the population. People related to his situation and saw themselves in his misfortune. Two interviewees refer to this event of the revolution.

“What happened to Mohamed Bouazizi is like an allegory. He got his cart to carry and sell his vegetables confiscated by Ben Ali’s police. The middle class has houses. Bouazizi had a cart. But it's still some form of capital. The policeman confiscated his cart, and then he went down in social class. It made echoes to everyone. They could go down, too. People saw themselves in his tragedy.” (Abdelhamid, historian)

“It was not just about the poverty but also about recovering some dignity. The slap that Mohamed Bouazizi received from the policeman was an act against his dignity. People recognized themselves through him.” (Mohamed, lawyer)

That solidarity between the different classes of Tunisian society ended up in protest. It started in the western central region of Tunisia, Sidi Bouzid, and grew in force to reach the capital Tunis in the last week before Ben Ali’s departure. From the extreme disillusion of the poorer part of the population living in the centre of Tunisia to the frustration of urban citizens in Tunis, the revolt was generalized and encompassed the people without having an identified leader.

“There is no political party or political program attached to this revolution. This a real popular revolution... it's a spontaneous revolution, not directed or organized power of opposition” (Labri, human rights activist)

In his book, Kilani describes the expansion of the leaderless revolt from the region to Tunis.
“The movement won first Regued and Bouziene Menzel. The inhabitants of those cities counted their dead. Thala and Kasserine followed quickly. Concerns grew as other cities followed, and went beyond slogans about simple social demands. People expressed their frustration about all the abuses and scourges of the society.” (Kilani 2010: 57)

Many interviewees insist on the ‘leaderless’ specificity of the revolution. That solidarity between regions and classes finds its echoes in the rejection of proclaiming a leader of the revolution.

“No one wanted a leader of the revolution. People were so tired of Ben Ali’s leadership that no one wanted a leader that could become a second Ben Ali. There was no trust anymore in political leaders” (Lilia, Facebooker and journalist)

“I was at a protest with some lawyers and some people tried to lift some of them to make them more visible. The lawyers refused. No one wanted to be in front of the other. Everybody was equal, on the same level in this revolution.” (Mohamed, lawyer)

In an article published in February 2011, the sociologist Pierre-Noël Denieuil captures and summarizes those particularities of the revolution.

“Events experienced since December 17th are a real shock for all Tunisians. They exude a sense of pride, a recovered dignity to have fought and rejected Ben Ali alone, without leader, without a party and without foreign support.” (Pierre-Noël DENIEUIL Sociologue, IRMC, Tunis)

As the social uprising has been experienced as “the revolution of the people,” its participants translate the desire to be equally represented in their requests: the establishment of a democratic system.

5.3 A Democratic Revolution

When asked about the meanings of the social uprising, many interviewees insist on the democratic values emerging from the revolution. Starting with social requests from the poorer regions of Tunisia, it has been translated into a political fight for democracy.

“At first people did not use the word democracy to formulate their claim. They dissected the word democracy because it is an elitist word. They do not recognize themselves in the democratic discourse. People feel, they do not theorize. They requested dignity, freedom and work.” (Abdelhamid, historian)

“It is a community movement. People want dignity and respect. Ben Ali killed our children. We had no hope anymore. We want to breathe.” (Lilia, Facebooker and journalist)

“It started with social slogans that became political. People realized how broad the corruption was.” (Mohamed, lawyer)

As mentioned above, Ben Ali was proclaiming himself as a democrat. Each year, on the celebration of November 7th, he was boasting the Tunisian system as a great democracy.
Tunisians were conscious that it was not true and they “used” the revolution to show Ben Ali what democracy was: “a system ruled by people.”

“Ben Ali was governing under the principle of democratic legitimacy. The reality had to be readjusted. The revolution is the rebalancing of the reality of declared values. People said: we are not clandestine, you are. It had to happen. Ben Ali was using the discourse of democracy. But this wasn’t democracy.” (Astrubal, co-founder of Nawaat)

“My answer for those who told me I was criticizing the system was to say that Ben Ali was proclaiming himself for democracy and freedom of speech so I do as he says.” (Lilia, Facebooker and journalist)

“When Ben Ali says: ’long live democracy’ people now answer: ‘Shut up, liar.’” (Astrubal, co-founder of the blog Nawaat)

Democracy was then a crucial request of the revolution. Tunisians were claiming their attachment to the freedom of speech, equality and justice. Published during the revolution on the blog Nawaat, an article written by Yadh Ben Achour insists on those values.

“It is pretentious, in the heart of the event, to want to theorize or predict its effects. One point seems to me certain. The Tunisian people showed during the recent events, that the democratic idea was neither Eastern nor Western, neither North nor South, it was over territories and borders, and was constitutive of humanity. Man was created to be a Democrat. It does not tolerate torture or discrimination, or the stifling of his thinking being.” (Yadh Ben Achour, blog Nawaat2011)

Another interviewee bounds in the same direction.

“In the fight against Ben Ali’s regime, we did not contest the declared values of the system (meaning democratic values) but we endorsed it and adopted it. It was like saying: what you say does not conform to what you do. Democratic values are consensual values in that struggle.” (Astrubal, co-founder of the blog Nawaat)

Democracy became in the end one of the main demands of the revolution. A social uprising democratic in its essence: leaderless and gathering all the classes of the society. Many interviewees mentioned the role of the internet to communicate between regions, classes and generations.

5.4 The Internet as a space of freedom

Many informants have been referring to the Internet as an essential tool of expression and communication. Mainly used by the youth to discuss, reflect upon and criticize the political power, it has been used as well to share precutting images of the martyrs and protests gathering.
“It's a revolution provoked by the youth who created new spaces to communicate such as the internet and social media... The older generation was moderate regarding the system, open to compromises; the youth is more radical, a complete rejection of the system.” (Labri, human rights activist)

“People were sharing information about the system on Facebook and with their cellphones and everyone realized how big the censorship was.” (Mohamed, lawyer)

“The regime made a big mistake: shooting people with real bullets. Thus, Tunisians started to revolt. People were not armed, had no guns, empty hands facing guns. Because of the internet and Facebook, everyone saw it at the same time. Before that moment no one wanted to see it, to face the truth. Now, they were seeing real images so they revolted. Without internet, we couldn't have seen that everyone was revolting. Everyone has been touched by the abuse of the regime, even the rich, everyone.” (Zouhair, journalist, political prisoner)

An interviewee, talking about her implication on Facebook, mentions the sense of community that has been reinforced through the internet and the share of common opinions about the system.

“There was a feeling of social disconnection from the political power that Ben Ali’s system was able to establish with propaganda and censorship. It was like a Tunisian “Big Brother”. Every fact that was denouncing the system was based on hearsay, rumors from neighbors, “the brother’s uncle's cousin was tortured.” And people justified the accusations, saying it was “deserved.” Even at this level, people did not dare to question the system. There was no objective informative support to gather the facts. I realized that I did not know the history of my country. So I started to search about the history of Tunisia. I was shocked by the fact that Bourguiba proclaimed himself "Supreme Leader". Nobody wanted to talk about torture, everybody avoided the subject. I felt alone, isolated, because no one wanted to share about it. The solution: Facebook. Internet and proxy. Because no one was realizing the extent of censorship. I carried articles on Facebook. I was doing virtual meetings. There was information on the Internet about violations of human rights, on political prisoners...” (Lilia, Facebooker and journalist)

The Tunisian as a space to express their dissatisfaction towards the political system has used the internet. Silenced by the oppression of the political system, the internet is a place where they can act upon their freedom of speech.

“It had to happen. Did we predict it would happen this way? No. It is an acceleration of history because of the growing openness of satellite channels and the internet.” (Astrubal, blogger from Nawaat)

“The internet was a real war chest. We do not have the State's financial means, so it takes much more creativity.” (Astrubal, blogger from Nawaat)

“The political leaders were imposing themselves through media. Because of the internet, the organization of the discourse is not the sole preserve of one organized group that possess the means of expression.” (Astrubal, blogger from Nawaat)
“On the internet, we did not hesitate to use our right of freedom of speech.” (Astrubal, blogger from Nawaat)

Finally the Internet was for the Tunisians a space of debate and freedom. Because those in power had their hands on the media, citizens were going on the internet to get daily information about the progress of the revolution. The Internet did not make the revolution. The social uprising has been successful because of the people who joined the movement and protested. However, the Internet played the instrumental role of a catalyst for the voices of the Tunisians to be heard.

6. Concluding Remarks

The interviewees’ views and perceptions of the revolution converge into particular topics and themes that are relevant to understanding the meanings of the Tunisian Revolution. Ben Ali’s system has been oppressing the Tunisian population for twenty-three years of authoritarianism with a strict control over the media, several rigged elections and corruption. The interviewee’s discussions about the system highlight the pressure on the Tunisians to make them stay silent about those abuses. The RDC was having ramifications among the population as well. Thus, in every sphere of their lives, Tunisians were confronted with that oppression. Ben Ali’s regime was also using coercive measures to keep the population submissive. The threat of torture, jail sentences and retaliations against the family and relatives of individuals who dared to criticize the system were incentives to maintain the Tunisians’ quiet. However, it was a matter of time before Tunisians went out on the street to protest for the recovery of freedom and dignity, having had more than enough of the unbearable system of lies and corruption led by Ben Ali. As highlighted in the interviews, the Tunisian Revolution started with social demands. As mentioned above in the socio-economical context section, the poorest region of Tunisia, situated in the middle of the country far from the coast, was suffering from a high rate of unemployment. The protests started in that area with the immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi. The police confiscated the cart he used to sell fruits and vegetables. Desperate and having no other livelihood to survive, he set himself on fire on December 17, 2010. It was the spark that would inflame all of Tunisia.

As mentioned in the analysis section, Tunisians have been recognizing themselves in the Bouazizi tragedy. A victim of a corrupt system, he had lost his dignity and could not feed his family anymore. Many Tunisians were sharing that dissatisfaction toward the system, feeling as though they were being stolen from every day by the corruption and lies of the regime. The interviews’ data highlight the fact that people were living in constant fear of Ben Ali’s regime. They could not express any criticism or political opinion. The Tunisians were voiceless for too long and the ones who had decided to talk had faced ruthless consequences. When the protests started in the middle of the country, the Tunisians felt called to join the movement to end the dictatorial system. Different classes of the population united against Ben Ali’s power. The well-educated youth creatively used internet to share information and opinions on the political system. The calls for huge
protests were done via Facebook. As mentioned in the socio-economic context section, around 3.6 millions of Tunisians have a Facebook profile (mostly the young adults). Internet users created communities on the web and shared different videos of martyrs and acts of repression. Those images left marks on the imaginations of several Tunisians who judged that the system went too far. Repressive measures were used. The system’s attempts to calm the protestors were particularly violent, using real guns and bullets while the population was unarmed. The frustration of the population facing that ruthless regime was growing bigger. People were using the slogan “Ben Ali degage” (Translation: “Ben Ali get out”), expressing that enough was enough. The population was requesting a fair system with equal chances for everyone. The Revolution has been largely qualified as democratic. People stuck together in their struggle against dictatorship. The revolution was leaderless. No ideologies or political leader headed the social uprising. On January 14, 2011, thousands of Tunisians gathered on Habib Bourguiba Avenue in the center of Tunis. Facing the sharpshooters (called “snipers” by the population) positioned on the roof of the Ministry of Interior, the Tunisians, bare-chested, reclaimed democracy. At the end of the day, at around 5 p.m., Ben Ali fled the country. The Tunisians had succeeded. It was the end of Ben Ali’s regime.

The research has been explaining the historical event of the Tunisian Revolution. The main aim of the research was to start with the Tunisians’ own impressions and perceptions of the event to try to determine the significance and the different meanings of the event from a Tunisian perspective. The Gramscian and post-colonial conceptual approaches of the hegemony, the subaltern and the intellectual have been to highlight the way the discourses of the revolution, the people’s requests, had evolved from social demands to democracy.

6.1 Further Research

The Tunisian Revolution is, by now, a very recent historical event. The research was done while it was still in progress. It opens the way for further studies about the democratic transition that started in the country. In October 2011, Tunisians were electing their first democratic government. However, there remains a lot to be done with respect to freedom of press and justice reforms. As mentioned in Reporters without borders, Tunisia still ranked 154th out of 178 countries for freedom of the press. (Abrougui 2011) Further research could evaluate how Tunisia is making its path to democracy. A democratic transition encompasses several steps and pursuing research about those different reforms and political choices made by Tunisians would highlight the current situation. Besides, questioning Tunisians about their own evaluation of the progress made from a social point of view could be very interesting. The thesis has been trying to synthesize the Tunisian perceptions of the revolution while it was still very recent. It would be particularly interesting to build a research methodology in order to find out what the Tunisian perceptions of the revolution are by now, one year after the event, and observe the progress made. In addition, the Tunisian Revolution, as a major event in the history of Tunisia, will surely be greatly researched in the coming years.
References


Kvale, Stein and Svend Brinkmann (2009) InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing, Sage, Thousand Oaks.


Websites:


Appendix I

Map of Tunisia
## Appendix II
### List of Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Profession</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labri</td>
<td>Human rights activist, Has been working with the Tunisian human rights league, University teacher, Medias specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slah</td>
<td>Politicologue, University Teacher, Tunis University, International Relations and Maghreb issues specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lilia</td>
<td>Journalist, Cyber activist via Facebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohamed</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zouhair</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Astrubal</td>
<td>Co-founder of the blog “Nawaat”, Cyber Activist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asma</td>
<td>Member of the Consultative commission on political reforms, Researcher in political science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdelhamid</td>
<td>Historian, University of Tunis, Researcher, Research Institute on Contemporary Maghreb</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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