

## Revolutionary Roundup: Western misconstructions of the Tunisian revolution

Guillaume MAZEAU

**Why was the 2011 Tunisian revolution perceived in France as a rerun of 1789? Why did Tunisian revolutionaries identify with an "Arab Spring" couched in terms of the European revolutions of 1848? Historian Guillaume Mazeau parses these mirrored constructs and how we view and skew revolutionary temporalities.**

In December 2010, a Tunisian street vendor gave the signal. Mohamed Bouazizi's act of self-immolation not only sparked an upheaval in Tunisian history, but was also to raise once again the recurrent questions of how revolutions come about and spread from one country to another. Long before that date, the French, for their part, seemed to have already bid goodbye to their revolution. Historian François Furet found that revolution as a political project had already disappeared in these climes by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. Writing from an anthropological angle amid the whirlwinds of the Bicentennial (1989), historian Steven Kaplan showed that the whole revolutionary construct itself had apparently collapsed in our collective consciousness at the same time as the communist world (*Adieu 89*, Fayard, 1993).

Previously hailed as one of the founding myths of modernity, the French Revolution inevitably became banalized: the nation's founding event morphed into a monument to rather dated national history. And yet what happened on the other side of the Mediterranean during the winter of 2011-2012 reactivated schemata we had thought consigned to outmoded historiography. Old interpretive machines got fired up again, reprising an historical narrative that had fallen into a deep slumber a few decades earlier and that the Tunisians had now reawakened.

### **Return to our future?**

From the very beginning of January 2011, contributors to Wikipedia, which has become a leading authority on matters of terminological standardization and history writing<sup>2</sup>, began arguing fiercely over how to define what had been going on in Tunisia for a few weeks. A perusal of the old threads of their discussion reveals the trials and errors of these first eye-witnesses trying to draft an entry which, in compliance with Wikipedia's editorial guidelines, had to remain as faithful as possible to the most standard usages. The contributors initially proposed designations like the "Tunisian protests" and "demonstrations" used in the English and Dutch press, for example, then used the whole panoply of terms the French press had seized upon on the spur of the moment ("revolt", "revolution", "rebellion"). Eventually, after Ben Ali's departure (January 14, 2011), they decided to call it a "revolution".

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<sup>1</sup> François Furet, "La Révolution française est terminée", in *Penser la Révolution française*, Paris, Gallimard, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Luc Chappey, *Ordres et désordres biographiques. Dictionnaires, listes de noms et réputation des Lumières à Wikipedia*, Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 2012.

A revolution then, fair enough: but which one? After rejecting the collocations "Tunisian intifada" and "revolution of the free" employed by Al Jazeera, as well as "Sidi Bouzid revolt" and "January 14<sup>th</sup> revolution", these Wikipedians, mostly French but also Tunisian, suggested calling it the "Jasmine Revolution", which was then likewise discarded. For one thing, it had been used by Westerners to denote Ben Ali's taking of power 24 years earlier. For another, it was a rather syrupy appellation – as was the whole nomenclature of "color revolutions" – for the intense political and social turmoil involved in the mass movement<sup>3</sup>. After a few days, the name "Tunisian revolution" prevailed and ended up with a lasting hold on Wikipedia. This whole terminology debate, based on a rather helter-skelter roundup of the leading French newspapers (*Le Monde*, *L'Express*, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *Le Point*, *Libération*) and Arab media (Al Jazeera, *nawaat.fr*), nonetheless epitomized all the surprise and discomfiture felt by contemporary observers, on the one hand drawn by a desire to capture the specificity of these events that were ceaselessly eluding them and wearing a different face every day, but also motivated by a desire to work these unforeseeable and distinctive events into a longer-term temporal fabric and an already familiar conception of history.

Historians, politicians, sociologists and economists, promptly raised by the press to the peerage of "experts" and "intellectuals" in the winter of 2011, were not a whole lot more at ease, despite their knowledge of the subject, than the modest Wikipedians when asked to explain what exactly was going in. In an article in *Le Monde*, journalist Thomas Wieder noted this malaise among French pundits expounding on the events in Tunisia and wondered whether these "intellectuals" weren't "prisoners of mental constructs" rendering them "ill-fitted to thinking about new phenomena" (*À Paris, l'intelligentsia du silence*, *Le Monde*, February 6, 2011). Henry Laurens, who holds the Chair of History of the Contemporary Arab World at the Collège de France, likewise censured the aphasia of the "media pundits", whom he deemed incapable of contemplating occurrences outside the mental categories produced by the Cold War.

This terse indictment underscored a reality all the same: more often than not, what was happening in Tunisia was being ethnocentrically pasted onto the storyboard of Atlantic and/or European history. This ethnocentric approach revived old debates over the French Revolution, **reducing** the Tunisian events to an umpteenth episode in the vast arc of "Western revolutions". The latter had been described in the 1950s by historians Robert Palmer and Jacques Godechot as the driving forces behind the "wind of liberty" that blew in from America in 1776 and, after gusting across Europe in the 1780s, ended its crazy course in South America, where it eventually gave rise to the revolutionary 19<sup>th</sup>-century independence movements. Most "observers" in France did not confine themselves to fitting the Tunisian events into this Western conception, prevalent since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, of a universal, secular, progress-oriented era, whose apogee consisted in attaining liberal democracy.

Moreover, in response to nascent anxieties or hopes that the revolution might spread, they resorted to a diffusionist and teleological theory of revolutions, characterizing them as phenomena in which chance and human unpredictability play no part, and which, defying national and local contexts and disregarding economic and social motives, only respond to mechanisms of organic, even viral contagion and are spread like pandemics by the cross-border movement of men and ideas. So Facebook, Twitter, satellite television and smartphones were portrayed, even by some revolutionaries taken in themselves by this myth,

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<sup>3</sup> See Jean-Clément Martin's contribution to this debate.

as the main vectors of transmission of the “Revolutions 2.0”. Behind their ostensible novelty, these analyses availed themselves of a single Western conception of time, presenting the “Renaissance” and the “Enlightenment” as crucial stages in the modernization of human society, and attaching undue importance to the vectors of knowledge and the exchange of ideas.

Thus absorbed into the resurgent “Enlightenment 2.0”, the Tunisian revolution was eventually won by a multi-centenarian movement that was expected to culminate in the triumph of Western political and economic liberalism as conceived two centuries previous by the Scottish Enlightenment and encapsulated in 1992 in the notion of the “end of history” (Francis Fukuyama). Eager to proclaim the failure of Samuel Huntington’s theory of the “clash of civilizations” (1996), many commentators, replicating to a wider public the old mistakes of comparative “democratization studies”, unwittingly underestimated or simply denied the specificity and novelty of the Tunisian events. By inserting those events in a Western temporal schema asserted as the standard of universal time, they are rubber-stamping clichés about the Arab world being “the sick man of the modern age” (Najete Chaib, *Le Monde*, March 9, 2011) or “a pocket of resistance to democratization and globalization” (Alexandre Adler, *Le Figaro*, June 8, 2012). Likewise, according to Emmanuel Todd, champion of the “*rendez-vous des civilisations*” (“meeting of civilizations”), Tunisia has now finally “joined the general historical model” (*Libération*, January 17, 2011).

Taken to extremes, suchlike interpretations, articulated after the Dakar speech in 2007 in which President Nicolas Sarkozy placed Africa outside the course of progress and history, gave a new twist to old clichés about the backwardness and even immobilism of Maghreb societies by embedding them in the “crisis” of historical consciousness that Europeans themselves have been going through. Claiming that the “Arab revolutions” did not invoke any past or universal point of reference, historian Christophe Prochasson argued that they represented the “first *presentist* revolutions in history”<sup>4</sup>, i.e. characterized, to paraphrase François Hartog, by an inability to project themselves into the future<sup>5</sup>. According to economist Hakim Ben Hammouda, the standpoints of Western intellectuals on the whole look a lot like a contemporary rehash of patronizing Orientalism<sup>6</sup>.

Parallel to this new “theft of history” (Jack Goody, 2006), the domino theory formulated during the Cold War to describe the spread of Communist revolutions resurfaced as well, reducing the revolutions to “waves” or “chain reactions” that worked exactly the same way. Astoundingly, however, even as postmodernism seemed to be plunging the historical scholarship into a “crisis” and fragmentation, even as the condemnation of Stalinist atrocities and the collapse of the Soviet bloc seemed to have reduced revolutions to cold, inert objects, and even though French society was apparently bogged down in a “crisis of progress” since the 1970s, evolutionist schemas were mobilized to put a more positive slant on revolution as a process that may be long, complicated and apt to spin out of control, but nonetheless geared towards progress. On the whole, the Tunisian events were, in short, ranged within the modern Western conception of revolution, which since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as Reinhart Koselleck described it, had ceased to be regarded as a “rewind” or return to a golden age or as a restoration, but as a radical break with the past and the old order.

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<sup>4</sup> *Actualité des révolutions*: study day on December 7, 2011, Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France [prod.], 2011, digital video file, 59 min., talk by Christophe Prochasson.

<sup>5</sup> François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps*, Paris, Seuil, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Hakim Ben Hammouda, “L’orientalisme et les révolutions tunisienne et égyptienne: pourquoi ne l’ont-ils pas aimée la révolution ?”, in Pierre Blanc (dir.), *Révoltes arabes: premiers regards*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2011.

Significantly, philosophers and historians of European and especially the French revolution were often asked to explain the events as though it were understood that these past and present revolutions were tied together by a common thread, giving rise to the idea of a “return of revolutions”, which ultimately went to show that despite the apparent prevalence of the theory of revolution as *rupture*, as a radical break with the past, the schema of “cyclical revolution” still lived on in the collective imagination. According to historian Jean Tulard, the Tunisian revolution followed “a trajectory parallel to that of the French Revolution, which makes the two events pretty comparable”, adding that Tunisia was “doubtless undergoing the 1789 of its revolution” (*Le Monde*, Jan. 18, 2011).

Steven Kaplan, albeit somewhat more subtly, likewise took the liberty of forging links between revolutions past and present based on the continuity of calls for bread and freedom (*Le Monde*, Feb. 7, 2011), ultimately entertaining the fanciful notion of parallel histories or the “return of revolutions” to which we ourselves all too readily succumbed<sup>7</sup>. The ousting of Ben Ali was ubiquitously hailed as “Tunisia’s Bastille Day” (editorial in *Les Inrockuptibles*, Jan. 17, 2011), with the occupying of the Kasbah in Tunis frequently compared to the storming of the Bastille<sup>8</sup>. Tunisian revolutionaries’ references to the French Revolution were held up as irrefutable proof of a pure continuity between the model and its subsequent aftershocks. Reduced to the catch-all “Arab Spring”, the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions were thus tagged as contemporary replicas of 1830, of the “People’s Spring” of 1848, of the “Prague Spring” of 1968 and even of the 1989 revolutions, as in the widely-used expression “Arab 89”<sup>9</sup>. In other words, the Tunisians were not inventing a new history, they were catching up with history or, at best, setting it in motion again. As Alain Badiou puts it, they were simply enabling “history to wake up again” (*Lignes*, 2011).

In any case, historians of revolution returned to center-stage, where they hadn’t been in a long time, and took up again age-old controversies over what revolutions mean, how they work and where potential pitfalls lie. “I say ‘admiration’ but I also say ‘watchfulness’, for what we know today is above all that we don’t know how it’s going to turn out” (Alain Finkielkraut, *Le Monde*, Feb. 6-7, 2011). Increasingly venting anxious innuendos, the many heirs to François Furet, who saw the guillotine of Year II as prefiguring the gulag, hastily parsed the present in terms of the past and worried about the dangers of the second phase of the revolution. They expected a swing towards violence and *la Terreur*. Tunisians thus saw themselves decked out in 1793 costumes with the revolutionary, i.e. progressive, democratic and secular side facing off against the counterrevolutionary Islamists. Though some historians like Jean-Claude Caron, Jean-Clément Martin, Elisabeth Roudinesco and Pierre Serna called attention to the pitfalls of such comparisons or, like Sophie Wahnich and myself, pleaded for keeping a tighter lid on the anachronisms, those appeals went unheard for the most part, such was the resurgent thrust of the national epic as an explanatory template and of the fanciful

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<sup>7</sup> Jean-Luc Chappey, Bernard Gainot, Guillaume Mazeau, Frédéric Régent, Pierre Serna, *Pour quoi faire la Révolution*, Marseille, Agone, 2012, introduction.

<sup>8</sup> “La Kasbah, c’est la Bastille, on va la démonter !”, *Le Parisien*, Jan. 24, 2011, “Aujourd’hui, on a pris la Bastille”, *Libération*, Jan. 15, 2011, “Tunisie: ‘Une prise de la Bastille’”, interview with Tunisian philosopher and anthropologist Youssef Seddik, *Sud-Ouest*, Jan. 16, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Gil Mihaely, “Révolution en Tunisie: 1789 ou 1830 ?”, *Causeur.fr*, Jan. 14, 2011; Edwy Plenel, “1789, 1989, 2011: les révolutions tunisienne et égyptienne sont un ‘89’ arabe”, *Médiapart*, Feb. 2, 2011; Edwy Plenel, Benjamin Stora, *Le 89 arabe*, Paris, Hachette, 2011; “1848, 1989, 2011 - Il était une fois la révolution”, *Le Monde*, Feb. 20, 2011.

notion that revolutions, “modeled” on 89, adhere to unchanging rhythms, go through identical phases and are liable to “come back” and shake up the prevailing order<sup>10</sup>.

Occurring at a time when Europe was rocked by economic troubles, social tension and a crisis of public confidence, the events in Tunisia could thus be cast as the umpteenth “relay” of a revolutionary movement which, contrary to Furet’s contentions, had only absented itself temporarily from French political culture. Though hardly taken seriously, the alleged imminent possibility of a new revolution in France became a recurrent leitmotif. This unlikely prospect was buttressed by the success of Stéphane Hessel’s *Time for Outrage* (original title: *Indignez-vous !*, 2010), by Western protest movements such as los Indignados/les Indignés followed by the Occupy movements, and by the presidential campaign in which Front de Gauche candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon, calling for a “citizens’ revolution”, pointed up the affinities between his slogan “Qu’ils s’en aillent tous” (“They’ve all got to go!”), coined in the fall of 2010, and “Dégage!” (“get lost”), the mantra of the revolutions the following winter. However, the notion that “we’re in 1788” was belied by the apparent apathy of French society: only a few hundred people turned out for the Indignés demonstration at la Défense, and in the spring of 2012 the French elected a “normal” candidate to the presidency, whose program shilly-shallied between social liberalism and social democracy. Taking advantage of the positive image of the “Arab Spring”, certain fundamentalist Roman Catholic groups opposed to the same-sex marriage bill actually tried to get a “French Spring” going in 2013, brandishing the hardly credible threat of a counterrevolution.

In the light of the foregoing observations, the echoes of the Tunisian revolution seem to tell us more about the role of a “dream machine”<sup>11</sup> that the revolution continues to play in the collective French imagination than about the Tunisian revolution itself. But that is not entirely clear. The confusion in the face of the unexpected, the dizzying effect of divergent timelines and the difficulty of intertwining the present into the fabric of history reveal not only the profound reality of the Tunisian revolution, but ultimately may in fact take part in the very specific workings of these peculiar events called revolutions.

### **Divergent timelines**

Often reduced to a black-and-white pitched battle between two diametrically opposed forms of historicity (revolutionaries or “secular progressives” vs. counterrevolutionaries or “religious conservatives”)<sup>12</sup>, the Tunisian revolution, on the face of it, is disconcerting on the contrary by dint of the variety of conceptions of history in whose name political projects are championed. What surprises us is the sheer plurality of temporalities that intersect there and hamper attempts to construe the events. Above and beyond economic inequalities, social tensions and political divergences, the sudden collapse of Ben Ali’s government led to an abrupt deregulation of collective norms and values. Within weeks, old conflicts and past divisions, hitherto stifled by a dictatorship eager to show it had succeeded in nation-building

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<sup>10</sup> Broadcast “Concordance des temps”, *France Culture*, March 19, 2011, interview with Jean-Claude Caron; Jean-Clément Martin, “Le renvoi à 1789 égare plus qu’il n’éclaire”, *Le Monde*, Feb. 11, 2011; Guillaume Mazeau, “Une Révolution tunisienne”, blog Lumières du siècle, Jan. 14, 2011; Elisabeth Roudinesco, “Il n’y a pas de révolution sans risque”, *Le Monde*, Feb. 18, 2011; Pierre Serna, “Les Tunisiens ne sont pas en 1789 ! Ou impossible n’est pas Tunisien”, CVUH web site, Feb. 3, 2011; Sophie Wahnich, “Au peuple !”, ...491, free arts monthly, No. 177, January 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Clément Martin, *La machine à fantasmes. Relire l’histoire de la Révolution française*, Paris, Vendémiaire, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> See Leyla Dakhli’s contribution to this debate.

from the top down, resurfaced, giving the revolution the double dimension of a war of independence and a civil war.

But instead of trying to tie the Tunisian events of 2011 into Western history, maybe we should shift our vantage point and assess them on different scales. Viewed at the crossroads of local and global developments, the Tunisian revolution is strikingly different and novel. Indeed, many Tunisians experienced it as a second independence, but more complete than that of 1956: for the first time, thanks to the strength of the people's uprising in the winter of 2010-2011 and the establishment of an elected constituent assembly in October 2011, Tunisians perceived the revolution as finally putting paid to a long period of subjugation, of which the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes were in a sense but the continuation. The revolution in Tunisia is like a plunge into the depths of the nation, or rather like the resurfacing of a history that had been kept buried for too long, not in the sense of a repetition, but a bleeding which, after having been temporarily stanchied, resumed in fitful torrents. In the struggle between the opposing political sides, social classes and communities, which were now free to confront one another in broad daylight, history, constantly instrumentalized, has become a potent weapon that everyone uses to impose their narrative of the past and, while they're at it, to claim their rightful place in the new regime.

So the future of the Tunisian revolution will depend, in part, on the outcome of these conflicts of temporality. Not everyone involved in the revolution embraces the same conception of time, or rather Tunisians staged the revolution in the name of mixed and conflicting conceptions of time. Above and beyond the differences between the progressive and liberal groups espousing the values of revolution as a break with the past and the Islamists seeking to build the new regime as a return to a mythical purity of origins, we can make out a great many nuances. To wit, although many commentators see Islamism as a mere anachronistic archaism imported from outside, many of these Islamists actually regard themselves as heirs to the conservative reformism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which dreamed of a Tunisian society grounded in religious and moral values. The supporters of Ennahda (which tellingly means "Renaissance Movement"), in particular, embrace a conservative modernity based on the invention of Islamic traditions and touted as a reaction to the decadence of Arab society. So they set themselves apart from the Salafi, who are viscerally attached to the idea of a "return to the roots" of the mythicized Islam of the first centuries<sup>13</sup>. This is why historian Jean-Pierre Filiu sees in the events of 2011 the inception of a "second Arab Renaissance" based on the legacy of the "first Arab Renaissance" (Nahda).

Commencing after Napoleon's campaign in Egypt and Syria (1798–1801), the history of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Muslim reformers was that of a hybrid modernization built on trade and cultural transfers. Although now subject to all manner of instrumentalization by those proclaiming themselves the legitimate heirs thereto, that history shows that it is impossible to confine the legacies of the revolution to a black-and-white dichotomy between Western influences on the one hand and regional dynamics on the other<sup>14</sup>. Nor is it entirely certain that Tunisian liberals, democrats and secularists – whose unity is often artificially posited, seeing as some pledge allegiance to Muslim reformers – unanimously experience the revolution through the overly rigid model of a "break with the past" or of a *tabula rasa*, even if the latter do not sound like hollow verbiage \*to them either\*. Historian/anthropologist Jocelyne Dakhli shows how for the most part progressive and liberal segments of urban populations

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<sup>13</sup> Sylvia Naef, Jocelyne Dakhli (*et al.*), *Créations artistiques contemporaines en pays d'Islam: des arts en tension*, Paris, Editions Kimé, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> *La Révolution arabe: Dix leçons sur le soulèvement démocratique*, Fayard, 2011.

on the Sahel side of the country, some of whose elites have been educated in Italy or France, maintain a nonetheless critical stance towards the Western reformism that previous regimes sought to impose swiftly and by force. This deliberate dissociation reveals the outmodedness of French representations of Ben Ali's Tunisia, all too often viewed as "a small Enlightenment-Age Europe in gestation or in its infancy"<sup>15</sup>. Far from being mere imports of a Western historical model, the universalist values and slogans championed by the 2011 revolutionaries are the outgrowth of a pluralistic political culture which existed before the revolution and which ultimately emblemized a formerly broadminded Tunisian history marked by interaction and mixing with other Mediterranean cultures. So if Tunisian feminists identify with Olympe de Gouges<sup>16</sup>, if protestors marched for "human rights" and journalist Taoufik Ben Brik evoked the storming of the Bastille, these are not, in spite of appearances, out of deference to a glorious Western past which they would confine themselves to reviving, co-opting or replicating, but in the name of their right to exercise their own sovereignty, their capacity to construct their own narrative while seizing upon the history of others. It is, in the final analysis, in the name of their right to be recognized as fully-fledged agents of a history that goes beyond cultural particularisms, including the right to pick and choose, according to their current needs, from among references to French history<sup>17</sup>. President Marzouki, in affirming during his official visit to Paris that the Tunisian revolution "would not have occurred without the 1789 Revolution", is not merely playing the diplomatic game or submitting to the neocolonial mindset. But in serenely acknowledging the legacy of the French Revolution, he is revealing the extent to which Tunisians make pragmatic use of the past, as worthy and autonomous agents of a history whose various components they piece together according to their needs<sup>18</sup>.

While recognizing that the term "Arab Spring" is a "facile media shortcut", Tunisian journalist Akram Belkaid nonetheless endorses it, arguing that it does have the merit of enabling his nation to attain to the dignity of other protagonists of universal history: "The expression refers to the 'People's Spring' of 1848," he says, "to universal values like those of the 1789 French Revolution, to which we Arabs are also entitled to accede. We are rising up for our dignity, we are driving out a tyrant, that goes beyond nationalities."<sup>19</sup> The success of the slogan "Dégage !" ("Get lost!") shows how behind the apparent stops and starts of history lie various forms of appropriation and recontextualized updating that make revolutionary cultures and temporalities collide. Chanted in French, the slogan was soon hailed as indicative of the role the French-speaking world continued to play in the dissemination of democratic values<sup>20</sup>. Besides the fact that it overlooks dozens of other watchwords coined in Arab dialects or in English (including "Yes we can!"), this gilded legend of the French Enlightenment neglects to point out that the word actually is not French, but "françarabe", i.e. a blend of French and Arabic. Pronounced "*Digage*", it was an interjection leveled at Tunisians during the colonial period: "It was the French who told us to '*digage*'."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jocelyne Dakhliya, "L'an I de la Révolution tunisienne ou les résurgences d'un passé qui divise", *Nachaz. Dissonances. Revue numérique Tunisian*, 2012-1.

<sup>16</sup> Marie Gouze (1748–1793), French feminist and abolitionist playwright and political activist, guillotined during the Reign of Terror for attacking the Revolutionary government regime. (Translator's note)

<sup>17</sup> "Ben Brik, des mots pour seules armes", *L'Humanité*, Aug. 18, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> "Un président tunisien sans cravate et sans rancune", *L'Humanité*, July 19, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> "Pourquoi parle-t-on de printemps des peuples arabes ?", *Slate.fr*, Feb. 22, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> "'Dégage', un mot français pour une invitation à la démocratie", editorial in *Le Monde mensuel*, No. 13, February 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Nabih Jerad, "*La révolution tunisienne: des slogans pour la démocratie aux enjeux de la langue*", *Archivio Antropologico Mediterraneo on line – Anno XII/XIII (2011)*, No. 13 (2).

And if Tunisian time sometimes seems disoriented, it is not due to contagion with Western “presentism”, but far more to the disconcerting concatenation of recent events. From the fall of 2010, the blogger “Z” began writing ironically about dizzy Tunisians stunned by the manipulation of temporalities:

*You may not know it, but Tunisia is stuck in a temporal rift. This metaphysical accident began on November 7, 1987, when a certain Ben Ali pulled off his medical coup d'état against the bedridden invalid president Bourguiba. Everyone back then applauded the change. Ben Ali took became the ruler of time, but he pressed the rewind button (◀◀) too fast in order to relive his victory. Once, twice...23 times he pressed the same button obsessively. What was supposed to be a single day's change became change forever, hence the genesis of the concept of never-ending “Change”. The rest of us looked on helplessly as he played his little game... ”<sup>22</sup>.*

Thus, far from being a “return” or “rewind”, the Tunisian revolution was experienced more as a taking charge of time that was turning round and round on itself. And yet from the very first months, the sense of history accelerating, the clash of temporalities and rival pasts, hardly shed any clarifying light on the historicity of the Tunisian events. Whilst the Islamists were trying to rewrite history by presenting the Westernist experiment as a brief interlude, the liberal progressive forces for their part were trying to prove their pivotal role in achieving independence, which engendered acute tension between these rival forces: in December 2012, the UGTT (General Union of Tunisian Workers) organized a highly political commemoration of the 1962 assassination of its founder Farhat Hached by the Main Rouge<sup>23</sup>, an event that culminated in clashes with the Islamists. Revolution exposes the wounds of history.

Are the teleological clichés about the events of 2011 unprecedented? Is the tangle of temporalities in the Tunisian revolution truly exceptional? Or aren't these two phenomena actually the hallmarks of revolution? Historians specializing in past revolutions no longer view them through the prism of diffusionism. They know that revolutions do not just get “exported” as they are, shaped by the selfsame matrices, but that there are people who rise up and some who don't, there are those who appropriate and adjust pre-existing paradigms and those who combat them. So it is that the “Atlantic revolutions” have given way to “hybrid” or “mirrored” revolutions composed of exchanges, borrowings, misunderstandings, transfers and mutual inspiration<sup>24</sup>. For a long time now, as Quentin Deluermoz shows for the 19<sup>th</sup> century (*Le Crépuscule des Révolutions*, 2012), revolutions have also given rise to profound disruptions in the ways in which people conceive of and experience historical time. In 1789, right after having recovered from the commemorations of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, didn't the English too have the impression that the French were merely joining a process that had been set in motion a century before, subsequently giving rise, in view of the unexpected turn taken by the radicalization of the populace, to the ongoing controversy over the historical meaning of revolution? Two centuries later, in 1989, while celebrating the bicentennial of their own revolution, didn't the French in turn assess the fall of the Berlin Wall against the yardstick of their own conception of historical time? Haven't these recurrent reflexes, aimed

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<sup>22</sup> *Débat Tunisie, le blog de -z -, Nov. 17, 2010.*

<sup>23</sup> “The Red Hand”, a French terrorist organization run by the French intelligence service to stamp out the Algerian independence movement. –Translator's note

<sup>24</sup> Annie Jourdan, *La Révolution, une exception française ?*, Flammarion, 2004; Pierre Serna, *Républiques sœurs. Le Directoire et la Révolution atlantique*, PUR, 2009.



at minimizing the unexpected and smoothing the course of history, inspired a great many – and often fairly unconvincing – essays on the comparative history and sociology of revolutions? What the both real and false “return” of revolution in Tunisia shows us is perhaps that in opening up “an immense field of possibilities”, as Sylvie Aprile describes it<sup>25</sup>, revolutions act as centrifuges of temporality that not only make history, but disrupt the course thereof. It is because they are driven by this denser and more uncertain “other time”, banging together abrupt continuities and discontinuities, juxtaposing the ephemeral with the enduring, that revolutions remain an enigma to the men who live through them, as well as to those who seek to understand them through linear conceptions of history, trying to weave a thread too taut and too tight between causes, events and consequences, between past, present and future.

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<sup>25</sup> “1848, 1989, 2011 - Il était une fois la révolution”, *Le Monde*, Feb. 22, 2011.