From the 'Tunisian Mai ’68' to 'Occupy Tunis'

BY JOACHIM BEN YAKOUB

When making sense of the world from the vantage point of the global south, and from Tunisia in particular, a direct line can be drawn from the revolts of 1968 to the recent series of uprisings that shook the world in 2011. Both form discrete turning points in a continuous struggle for an “unfinished independence”. Time and again, however, the claims for liberation and dignity embodied and enunciated in these worldwide struggles, are caught in a web of Eurocentric readings. It therefore remains crucial to point at the fundamental differences between 1968 in Tunis and 1968 in Paris, as did philosophers like Michel Foucault and Albert Memmi. Exposing the historical tensions between Tunis and Paris in 1968, but also in 2011, from the perspective of the global south, will hopefully facilitate the vital insight why the recent demands to “occupy Tunis” might seem superfluous in the light of the latest demand to “decolonize Wall street”.

The anti-authoritarian character of the protest movement in 2011 in the streets of Tunisia, demanding the fall of the regime, now only seven years ago, convinced some observers to frame the uprising as the 'Tunisian Mai 68'. Writer and philosopher Mehdi Belhaj Kacem (2011) went as far as to dub the Tunisian revolution “a successful May ‘68”. Even in academia, Tunisia specialists like Michael Ayari and Vincent Geisser (2011) drew a parallel, unveiling what they consider “a generational and cultural dimension reminiscent of French May 1968”. Such readings of history put the recent uprising in Tunisia in a progressive teleological line, implicitly reinforcing the idea that Tunisians, and by extension Arabs or Muslims, are late or backwards, and are only today becoming truly modern, as they catch up with the train of History. It moreover erases the legacy of protest happening in Tunisia since 1968 and thus dismisses the simultaneous global rhythm of history. I will therefore take up the challenge formulated by Frantz Fanon (1963: 206), taking a critical stance against colonial dynamics of historical erasure and amnesia, as he stated, that “[e]ach generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it.”

The challenge of rediscovering the proper mission of our generation, out of relative historical opacity distorted by colonial currents and undercurrent, starts from the necessity to think through the global circulation of 'Mai 68', but also of the more recent 2011 uprisings, their points of diversion or rupture and their points of convergence or confluence. Shedding light on the way contestations travel globally, in transnational solidarity constellations, in this case between French and Tunisian activists, will hopefully contribute to the collective challenge to provincialize 'Mai 68' and to reflect on the similar need to provincialize the recent “Occupy Movement”. Questioning the reproduction of Eurocentric historiographies from the perspective of the Global South, will illuminate not only the radical simultaneity of worldwide dissent since the sixties, but also on specific but too often overshadowed demands for decolonization.

Tunisia’s March 68

Before going into the details of the protest year of 1968 in Tunisia, we have to re-adjust the historical period within which this period is too often situated and framed. The student and working class revolts of 'Mai 68' did not happen in 'the post-war period'. To understand this, we have to go back about 20 years, until May, 8th 1945, the day the Allies vanquished Nazi Germany and thus the day World War II ended. That day is until today being remembered and celebrated as V-day and came to signify the start of what is generally known as the post-war period. But, as sharply noticed by Hannah Feldman (2014), a general acceptance of the idea of a post-war periods silences the decades of decolonization. Rachid Bouchareb (2010) showed in his controversial film ‘Outside the Law’ how a parade in Sétif, where thousands Algerian celebrated the victory over the Nazi’s, ended in a bloodbath as French occupying forces start shooting after the celebrating masses also proclaimed national liberation. In the post-colonial context of Algeria, May, 8 1945 is today thus not so much remembered as the victory over Nazi-occupation, but as the day of the Sétif massacre, a prelude to the Algerian revolution that led to its formal independence about twenty years of struggle later.

Also in relation to its former colony Tunisia, the Eurocentric appellation of post-war period is relative. AlthoughTunisia gained official independence in 1956, the French still used military force to impose their political will. In 1958, for instance, the French Army bombed the village of Sakiet Sidi Youssef causing the death of more than 70 people, including a dozen of students from a primary school, while 148 were wounded among the civilian population. Five years after official independence, i.e. in 1961, the French were pushed back out of the port-town of Bizerte and its naval base after a three-day battle with Tunisian military forces, leaving about 600 Tunisians dead. Tunisia was one of the first African countries to liberate itself from the French colonial Empire, but certainly not the last. Algeria gained independence in 1962, Djibouti only in 1977. The fundamentally problematic and inaccurate historicization of the so-called 'post-war' period, silences France’s continuous

involvement in colonial occupation, military interventions and imperial wars in Tunisia and elsewhere in the Global South.

It was thus in the bloody context of a worldwide decolonization movement and anti-imperialist struggle that the first fierce mass protests against the independent post-colonial state of Tunisia occurs. On June, 5th 1967, members of Groupe d'études et d'action Socialiste en Tunisie, (or G.E.A.S.T.), better known under the name of its journal 'Perspectives', organized a first protest at the British and American embassies in Tunis to contest their government's complicity with the Western support of Israel in the Six-Day War. The military strength shown by Israel against Egypt, Syria, and Jordan was not only a turning point in the history of the occupation of Palestine and thus of the international legitimacy of the Israeli state, but also heralded the end of Pan-Arab ideology, leaving a fertile ground for different forms of political islam to emerge. The Perspectivists denounced what they considered an imperialist aggression against the Palestinian people and in vain demanded a two-state solution.

The protest spread over the capital into adjacent popular neighborhoods, deteriorating into incidents of anti-Semitic vandalism. The state responded with the arrest of the young activist Mohamed Ben Jennet, member of the Perspectives movement and student in Islamic theology at the Zitouna University, sentencing him to twenty years of forced labor, as he was accused of having incited the attacks on Jewish shops and synagogues and by doing so of threatening national security.

January 10th 1968, the Perspectivists organized together with the Communist Party and the 'Tunisian Committee of Solidarity with the Vietnamese People' a protest to contest the diplomatic visits of U.S. Vice President Hubert Humphrey and South Vietnamese Minister of Foreign Affairs Tran Van Do to Tunisia. Thousands of students converged at the University of Tunis to contest the Vietnamese war and imperialism in general. The re-organization of the protest movement in solidarity with Vietnam, facilitated the formation of the 'Committee in Support of the Liberation of Mohamed Ben Jennet'. An increasing number of protesters were mobilized, who condemned the state's arbitrary criminalization of Ben Jennet and demanded his release. On March, 15th 1968 thousands of protesters congregated to demonstrate at the Faculty of Literature of the University of Tunis. Protest spilled over in the Science Faculty and to neighboring technical and high schools. Protesters denounced American and British imperialism and the occupation of Palestine and called for a general strike to protest against the repressive and authoritarian regime of Habib Bourguiba, the first president of independent Tunisia. The police consequently arrested more than 200 protesters, nearly half of whom were incarcerated, accused of having incited the protest. Leading Perspectives members such as the by now renown Ahmed Othmani, Gilbert Naccache, Noureddine Ben Khader, Brahim Razgallah, and Abdelaziz Krichen received – without legal defense - up to sixteen years of prison for their membership of an allegedly illegal organization and for attempted subversion against the state.

Teaching in the philosophy department at the University of Tunis in 1968, French philosopher Michel Foucault had no other choice than to leave his ivory tower and enter into the praxis of the ongoing political movements. His house in the bourgeois Northern Suburb of Sidi Bou Said transformed in an organizing quarter for protesting students. Foucault also took Ahmed Othmani under his protection and helped him hiding, while authorities sought his arrest. He also engaged in mobilizations for liberation of political prisoners in Tunis and later also in Paris with 'The Prisons Information Group'.

In an interview with Duccio Trombadori in Paris in 1978 Foucault expanded on the way in which he experienced March 1968 in Tunisia. Indirectly responding to the German critical philosopher, Herbert Marcuse's commentary on his absence on the barricades in Paris, Foucault compares both events, as he witnessed and experienced politics in a totally different way in Tunisia. Both student revolts in Tunis and Paris were ideologically framed from a Marxist perspective, but in Tunis the students revolted with an impressive violence and radical intensity, making any theoretical references redundant. In the neocolonial context of Tunisia, ideology was not only an analytical frame, but at the same time "a kind of moral energy"; taking the streets was therefore an "existential act".

It made Foucault see – at least for a moment – how the "intolerable nature of certain situations produced by capitalism, colonialism and neocolonialism" can provoke "the envy, taste, ability and the possibility of an absolute sacrifice" without "the least ambition or the least desire for power and profit". More than by ideology, Foucault saw how the protesting masses were moved by "the evidence of the necessity of the myth" even by a certain kind of "spirituality" that demands "direct, existential and physical engagement". The revolt that he had witnessed in Tunisia, was thus something incomparable with the actions on the barricades of the Latin Quarter in Paris that , whatever its

violence, was mostly characterized by a nearly institutionalized repetition of “cold academic discussions about Marxism”. Foucault thus contrasted the existential struggle with a form of 'hyper-Marxism', i.e. a kind of endless over-theoretisation that provoked dynamics of division and groupuscularization within the struggling masses. Contrary to Tunis, the 68 student protests in Paris were thus characterized by “an unyielding discursivity” that paralyzed processes of contestation. No wonder that Tunisian philosopher Albert Memmi (in: Simon 2004), spoke of the protests in Paris in a somehow dismissive tone as “entertainment for bourgeois kids” and of the revolting students as "pseudo-revolutionaries” who after protesting “return home for dinner with their parents”. More importantly, he called their underpinning Marxist ideology a "placebo of thought" that forces people to undergo what Memmi called “the yoke of utopia”.

Contrary to the May revolts in Paris, Tunisian workers did not join forces until later in the 1970s and 80s, when the socialist experiment of post-independence was gradually abandoned as the state pushed for economic liberalization to open up the local markets for the international financial system. As the self-proclaimed 'Father of the Nation', Bourguiba, declared himself president-for-life, the government moved slowly but surely towards political authoritarianism, promoting a new kind of state-capitalism. When economic growth started to sputter, protest gained momentum during the historical 'Black Thursday', January, 26th 1978, when the government killed about 200 of its own citizens and provoked what Hele Beji (1982) aptly termed a generalized feeling of “national disenchantment”. IMF-imposed austerity program and the consequent rise in the price of bread and other basic products provoked in 1984 what came to be known as 'The Bread Riots', killing again over a hundred protesters. Nevertheless, the protest movements offered a blow to what was left of the legitimacy of the neocolonial regime, but at the same time paved the way for the medical coup conducted by General Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, November 7,1987. Since Tunisia had signed its ‘structural adjustment plan’ with the World Bank and the IMF in 1986 and 10 years later its ‘association agreement’ with the European Union to assure the installation of a Euro-Mediterranean free trade zone, it was frequently endorsed as an exceptional and advanced and flourishing state, ahead on the road to progress and democracy. The script of the world bank and the IMF, staged by the European Union, investors and policy makers, contributed to a general belief in the 'economic miracle' realized by Tunisian authorities.

The initial international anti-imperialists' demand during the protest of 1968 in Tunisia – the contestation of state support to the war in Vietnam and the continuous occupation of Palestine - were complemented with national demands for political liberation, pointing at the neocolonial character of the freshly independent regime. As argued by Burleigh Hendrickson (2012) what was at the heart of the concerns of March 68 protests in Tunisia was the notion of 'unfinished independence'. However Tunisia gained official independence in 1956, its economy stayed in the grip of European (and French) foreign interest and the neoliberal international order lead by the U.S. The student protest of 1968, the ‘Black Thursday’ of 1984, the ‘Bread Riots’ of 1984 and the recent uprising of 2011 can thus be read in one continuous historical line, connecting the dots that demarcate an ongoing struggle for a still 'unfinished independence'.

The Tunisian Uprising and the limits of the Occupy Movement

The uprising of 2011 smashed the myth of Tunisia as an 'economic miracle'. The miraculous and exceptional façade that was hiding huge social and economic disparities between city centers and their peripheries but also between different regions, was blown to smithereens. No wonder that the revolting masses did not rest after having ejected Zine-El Abidine Ben Ali in 2011. Directly after the ousting of the authoritarian president, a government of 'National Unity' was proclaimed, mostly constituted by members of the ancient regime. Demands to completely overthrow the government were consequently pushed for by disenfranchised youth who travelled with the ‘Liberation Caravan’ from Menzel Bouzaïane, Sidi Bouzid to the capital. The convoy mobilized under way to finally occupy Kasbah Square in Tunis, where the Prime Minister and his government held office until the national constitution was abrogated.

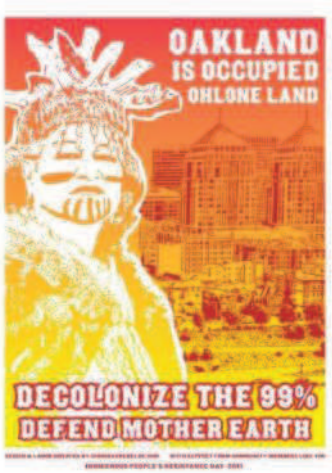
The successful occupation of Tahrir Square in Egypt, which took place in the aftermath of the Tunisian uprising, inspired activists over the Mediterranean to follow suite. When travelling over the Atlantic, the strategy of occupation became the name of a worldwide movement. Launched as ‘Occupy Wall Street’ in New York City's Zuccotti Park, on 17 September 2011, the movement developed into the most viral worldwide protest of the last decade.

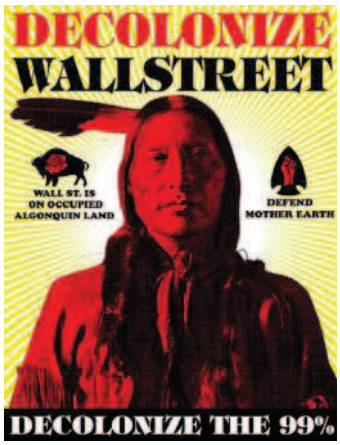
While clearly inspired by the praxis of the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolution, the global occupy movement might in the future be remembered as an event in itself, framed in a purely Western

genealogy, in the same way as May 68 is remembered as a worldwide protest with Paris as it epicenter. The Occupy movement could indeed easily be historicized in line with the student occupations of 2009 and 2010, when students of the University of California occupied campus buildings in protest against budget cuts, tuition hikes, and staff cutbacks resulting from the economic crisis of 2008. As such the Occupy movement could be seen as a continuation of the anti-globalist protest that gained momentum in the early 2000s, erasing its transatlantic genealogy, silencing the protests that emerged in Tunisia, the Arab world, the African Continent, the Global South at large.This potential process of historiographic erasure was disrupted by a viral picture of a women demanding the freedom of Palestinian political Prisoners, holding a banner proclaiming: 'Occupy Wall St. NOT Palestine'. It was the first image that punctured the colonial connotation of the main slogan of the ongoing protest and provincialized the occupy movement that was circulating globally. In an interview by Arun Gupta (2012) for The Guardian, acclaimed writer Arundhati Roy completed the slogan: “We ought to say, 'Occupy Wall Street, not Iraq', 'Occupy Wall Street, not Afghanistan', 'Occupy Wall Street, not Palestine.' The two need to be put together. Otherwise people might not read the signs”.

Indeed the reframing of the worldwide protest movement through the thematization of its main strategy (i.e. occupying squares) exposed the limits of settler colonial and imperialist contemporary realities and interests. Equally telling was the way in which the Occupy movement faced its shortcomings in the city of Oakland in California in the United States, when militants of the newly formed ‘Occupy Oakland’-movement were invited by indigenous activists and their allies to re-think the main aspiration of their protest, as for the Ohlone people Oakland has already been occupied land for about 240 years. In short, indigenous activists tried to make clear that their demands to “Occupy Oakland” happen on stolen land (Barker 2011). Their demand to 'Decolonize Oakland' rather than re-occupy it, was nevertheless rejected by the assembly and as stated by Eve Tuck & K. Wayne Yang (2012) shows “the reluctance of some settlers to engage the prospect of decolonization beyond the metaphorical or figurative level”.

Also in the revolutionary context of Tunisia, the transnational translation process of the occupy movement failed. The





occupation of the Kasbah square of 2011 in Tunis pushed forward a revolutionary method that would later seem to be constitutive for the global social dynamic now known as the Occupy movement. Once the signifier of the Occupy movement was codified globally, it traveled back to Tunis but devoid of its political agency. On 11 November 2011, when the worldwide movement against the 1% gained momentum and people pushed at a global level “to occupy the streets, the cities, the countries and the world”, a small group of engaged Tunisian students hardly succeeded in mobilizing a hundred enthusiasts to protest on the Bourguiba Avenue with the slogan 'Occupy Tunis'. Except for a few dozens of well-connected students and activists, nobody really saw the political purpose of 'occupying Tunis' in the light of the revolutionary process the country was going through. Their action did not provoke any significant momentum in the public debate. How can this be explained?

To understand this, we need to go back to 'May '68' in Tunisia. 'May '68', as understood in Europe, never happened in Tunisia; not in 1968, nor in 2011. As already discussed, we need to understand the Tunisian 'March 68' in the context of an ongoing struggle for independence and decolonization, against the occupation of Palestine, the war in Vietnam and a fortified neocolonial regime at home. Similarly, the recent uprising of 2011 is not so much a 'May '68', but rather a continuation of the struggle for decolonization, this time against a neocolonial regime strongly embedded in global dynamics of capital accumulation and deeply entangled in a worldwide web of imperial and settler colonial interests that converge in Wall Street.

By claiming the strategy (i.e. occupying squares) rather than the message (i.e. decolonisation) of the uprisings, the worldwide Occupy movement was deprived of its most contentious demands. One wonders if perhaps in 2061 we will commemorate 50 years of Occupy movement, remembering how bravily the students in New York were occupying the epicenter of global capitalism, while again unwittingly

overseeing the bloody sacrifice of the masses in the Global South fighting their neocolonial authoritarian governments? Solidarity networks that connect the Global North and Global South remain as critical today as they were 50 years ago. It is vital to underline the connections between Tunisia and Wall street, in 1968 and 2011. Keeping in mind that Paris in 1968 was not the epicenter of a global wave of protest, but one of the many centers of a confluent worldwide protest against neocolonial, imperialist and settler-colonial interests, is key to understand why the Tunisian regime will never fall, unless Wall Street falls too. Only then one can see why the demand to occupy Tunis might seem secondary to the demand to decolonize Wall street.

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