

**A Political Economy of Youth Policy in Tunisia**

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## **Introduction**

The uprising which took place in Tunisia in 2010 made dramatically visible the scale and problematic status of the Arab world's youth population. The demands of young protesters reflected profound frustrations over issues which perhaps most pertinently impacted upon them: poor quality education, high unemployment, expanding poverty, widening income gaps, deteriorating public services, political oppression and social neglect.

Since the 1990s the Tunisian regime, under President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, had positioned the country as among the global leaders in developing youth policies to supposedly address the very issues that youth were to protest about in 2010, adopting and reproducing the positive development approach espoused by key international partners and institutions. The Uprising was indicative that such policies had substantively failed, raising questions about the objectives and efficacy of the formats applied.

This paper seeks to add to evolving debates over the contribution that a political economy approach can make to understanding the current condition of youth, specifically narrowing the focus to youth policy. This paper suggests a political economy approach which locates youth not as a class in itself but as being increasingly but not universally located at the epicentre of the growing global labour precariat. Young people are differentially vulnerable to this status, their identities being inter-sected variously by race, gender, locale, ethnicity and all manner of other identities, as well as by the particularities of the political ecology in which they find themselves. But by virtue of their late-comer status to the labour market at a time when older cohorts are struggling to maintain the privileges previously accorded them by welfarist industrial state models, as well as their very restricted access to networks and structures of political power, they have limited capacity as a collective to resist the new formats for work and labour relations.

In this context, the political structures and institutions which promote the interests of neo-liberal capital construct narratives of youth which segregate them from older cohorts, disrupting the potential for broader class consciousness, legitimising the subordination of young people to political control, and casting resistance as a threat to the collective interest. Youth policy becomes the vehicle for establishing segregation and control, as well as a means of distracting attention from the deeper structural failings of national economies and the political regimes which rule them.

By examining youth policy under President Ben Ali, imbued as it was with the positive development approach espoused by international partners such as the EU, the paper argues that it served both discursively and operationally as an instrument of neo-liberal economic change in the context of globalising capital. However, Tunisian youth policy was simultaneously fraught with contradictions created by local authoritarian political structures, intent on subverting the economy to their own self-enrichment, and reinforcing their own structural power. Interrogating national youth policy in Tunisia thus extends our understanding of what drives youth policy, and determines its outcomes, showing that a political economy approach can help us to understand the impact of the multiple global and local structures and hierarchies of power which frame it and ultimately determine its efficacy. The interests represented in these hierarchies can create contradictions which may not only obstruct the

anticipated outcomes of policy, but actually divert policy instruments to service entirely different agendas *at the expense of youth*. Moreover, policies which distinguish youth as a target category for supposedly progressive intervention may in reality be instruments for the subordination of entire populations.

### **Towards a new political economy of youth policy**

Youth policy can be understood as having lain, till now, largely within the disciplinary domain of social policy, building on a long tradition of work in sociology, psychology and criminology. Until recently political economy made only a limited contribution: Marxist and radical critiques in the late 1960s focused on youth activism as illustrations of resistance to the pressures of industrial capital. In 1968, Rowntree and Rowntree (1968) famously argued that young people constituted a particular form of socially, economically and politically disenfranchised class. Later research included contextual considerations of gender and race when it became clear that ‘youth as class’ obscured the differential experiences of youth attributable to vertically-stratifying social categories, while ‘underclass theory’ suggests youth have their own class culture distinct from that of the working classes (MacDonald, 1997). But debate then moved away from political economy and youth studies was dominated by sociological discussion which paid attention to youth as a process or relational concept, a period of transition between childhood and adulthood, a constructed social category whose meanings and identities are derived from context and environment, and which constitutes a process of navigation towards markers that line the route towards, and demarcate achievement of, the status of adult. Undoubtedly such discussion moves us well beyond the deficit approach (Cooper, 2009: p.XX) to ‘youth as problem’, notions of ‘storm and stress’ (Hall, 1904), youth as a response to modernity or a focus on ‘delinquency’ and ‘deviance’ studies (Merton, 1938). But while such approaches emphasise sources of exclusion (whether due to the deficits within youth themselves or within the environments which they inhabit), they have less to say about (policy) pathways to inclusion other than those that are regulatory, sanctionary, ameliorating, or revolutionary. Moreover, as Côté argues (2013: 527), they direct attention to only the most disadvantaged among youth, rather than the youth category as whole, and have been “preoccupied with subjectivities rather than material conditions”.

Côté himself made a potent plea for a return to a political economy approach in light of accumulating evidence that youth as a social category have become substantively proletarianised in the wake of decades of neo-liberalism and a global crisis of capitalism which has manifested itself in disproportionate rates of youth unemployment, precarious living and lost futures.

Liberal youth studies research has, he argues, inadvertently endorsed corporate capitalist exploitation of youth-as-class by failing to question who or what has caused the trends they describe and by accepting the status quo as ‘something that can be fixed by changing the young person into “an adult”’ (Côté, 2013: 538). For Côté, a political economy approach “can be defined as a perspective that investigates the root causes and consequences of positioning over time of the youth segment in relation to those (adults) in a given society with political and economic power”. Drawing for evidence on sociological work not normally presented as political economy, he

suggests that youth can be understood as an economically exploited group, politically unrepresented and “part of a progressive disenfranchisement and proletarianisation” associated with global liberal capitalism.

In coming late to the labour market and with little access to established networks of power, young people are the most vulnerable to capitalism’s insatiable drive to lower wages, leading to a progressive deterioration in their material wealth and a growing redistribution of wealth (and power) between age cohorts or generations. Narratives of ‘youth as problem’ – and youth policies designed to address ‘the problem’ - evolve to ideologically justify both these differentials in wealth and the political suppression of efforts to protest them. Finally cohort awareness of the material and generational differentials evolves, much akin to, if not actually constructing, class consciousness. Thus Côté heralds the return of youth-as-class, albeit not un-problematically.

This approach foregrounds the causes and processes of social conflict: Côté refers to the “‘conquest of youth’ by corporations and governments in stifling dissent and orchestrating social control of youth.....as having neutralised recent cohorts of youth as a political threat to the hegemony of capitalist ideologies” (Côté, 2013: 528). In short, those with power devise policies towards or impacting upon the young with the intent of consolidating their subordination, including for example the production of consumption-based youth cultures which either manufacture consent or reduce resistance to spectacular performances. Recognising this provides pathways to resistance which go well beyond the minor reforms in fields such as education and training which are the focus of liberal youth studies.

Côté’s political economy approach is not uncontested. In a rejoinder to his original article France and Threadgold (2016) argue that “Ever-increasing inequalities within the so-called youth class make youth-as-class unlikely” (p. 616). Indeed, as a social category which encompasses individuals from across income groups, youth-as-class can actually disguise other structural inequalities exacerbated by capitalism. Race, sect, gender and what are more conventionally considered as income-based socio-economic class differentials, can be obscured by its homogenising discourse. Moreover France and Threadgold argue that the blurred boundaries between the concepts of youth and adulthood and the un-fixed status of both, make class formation improbable, and that the notions of manufactured consent and false consciousness among the young simply replicate the moral panic behind the youth-as-problem frame and occlude very real evidence of youth agency. While they agree that a political economy perspective “remains vital for understanding macro-structural power” (619), they propose that understanding the differential experiences of the youth cohort – the inequalities between them rather than the material distribution of wealth between age cohorts, can be best understood through the concept of political ecology, the interrelationship between the social and economic environment within which a young person finds her/himself and the political ideas and institutional practices which structure it.

“We need to recognise not only the important role that politics has on structuring and forming the world around the young, but also how relationships of power and access to resources operate in particular contexts to produce unequal outcomes” (621).

The dialogue between Côté and his critiques raised the importance of recognising both the commonalities of the positioning of younger cohorts in the global liberal capitalist political economy, and at the same time the differences between them which may inhibit a substantive form of class consolidation. To accommodate the breadth and complexity of local settings, the totality of social relations, and long-term patterns of change, Sukarieh and Tannock (2016) therefore suggest that a broader definition of political economy be used, citing that of The Political Economy Project (2016) which:

Addresses the mutual constitution of states, markets, and classes; the co-constitution of class race, gender, and other forms of identity; varying modes of capital accumulation and the legal, political, and cultural forms of their regulation; relations among local, national, and global forms of capital, class, and culture; the construction of forms of knowledge and hegemony; techno-politics; water and the environment as resources and fields of contestation; the role of war in the constitution of states and classes; and practices and cultures of domination and resistance”.

This definition may be so all-encompassing as to be virtually impossible to actually apply, but it does foreground the totality of the political ecology, with all its multifarious actors, agents, dynamics and constraints, contributing to a route map by which we might deploy a political economy approach to studying youth policy in a specific context.

Firstly, it suggests that young people may usefully be thought of as a cohort located at the epicentre of a larger structural transformation, and specifically new forms of precarious proletarianisation, in the global liberal capitalist system. By virtue of their late-comer status and their lack of political power, young people are simply the most vulnerable in society as capital seeks to extract ever more surplus value from labour and to diminish the costly welfarist obligations which were imposed upon it, and enjoyed, by previous age cohorts. Young people do not exclusively constitute a class, but they are disproportionately represented within what Standing has termed the new ‘precariat’ (Standing, 2011). They are collectively but not universally at the heart of a socio-economic class which exists relative to capital. Thus the condition and structures which support neo-liberal capital within a given context are crucial to understanding the location and status of youth and youth policy.

Secondly, since youth as a social category is increasingly socially and politically constructed around their relationship with capital, hegemonic narratives of youth are formulated and reproduced which view them principally as human resources, as potentially embodying the skills and capacities which can be mobilised for national economic growth, or alternatively as costly recipients of public support dependent on their employment status. Exploring the hegemonic narratives of youth and the political and social structures which reproduce them becomes key to the study,

Thirdly, these narratives are embedded within the political institutions and structures which service the reproduction of capital. Liberal capitalism is secured, protected and advanced by political structures which operate at both systemic (global) and local (national) levels. The precise configurations of these structures may be historically, geographically, economically and even culturally specific, suggesting that the precise

nature of both the social and political constructions of youth on the one hand, and their integration into the global political economy on the other, will be variable and case-dependent. For countries beyond the post-industrial core, much will depend on how local political structures interact with and map onto global political structures and hierarchies of power as well as the location of national economies within global divisions of labour and distributions of capital. The analysis needs thus to extend to the location of the national within the global political economy.

### **Youth Policy in the liberal capitalist economy**

This would all suggest that youth policy becomes a vehicle through which the political structures which sustain liberal capitalism seek to mobilise youth as a factor of production whilst controlling young people's capacity to resist or assert alternative identities. By distinguishing youth from older cohorts, youth-specific policies serve to disrupt processes of class formation and consolidation, to fragment class identities and to ferment conflict between generational cohorts within the new precariat.

Sukarieh and Tannock (2014: p.19) were making much the same argument in their discussion of the positive development approach (PDA) to youth which underpins much of what is touted as the 'gold standard' for youth policy, arguing that it "represents a shift in dominant conceptualisations of youth that has been driven, in large part, by neoliberal ideology and human capital theory". The positive development approach (PDA) which originated among community organisations in the USA in the late twentieth century, claimed to empower young people to overcome the obstacles to their own exclusion (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2014: p.17).

Governments and international agencies, notably the European Union but including bodies such as the World Bank and the United Nations, began to structure policies around recognition of the unique capacities and potential contributions of youth, aiming to nurture their contributions in the fields of entrepreneurship, political activism, civic engagement, and social leadership. Youth policy was extended to a wide range of inter-connected policy arenas such as education (both formal and non-formal), access to new technologies; information and career guidance, mobility, justice and youth rights; participation and active citizenship; recreation and leisure activities, international opportunities and a safe and secure environment. (Denstad, 2009). The objective was to facilitate the development of skills and competencies, a key premise being "that once these competencies have been identified and conditions created, all youth are capable of healthy or positive development" (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2014: p.18).

Coussée, Roets and De Bie (2009: p.425) have pointed out that employment is at the heart of the PDA. The approach rejects notions of adolescents as wilfully reluctant to engage in the responsibilities and commitments of work as they explore and develop their own adult identities, viewing them rather as resourceful and resilient workers when offered the opportunity of meaningful employment. As well as constructing an identity for youth based on their potential to contribute to the (capitalist) world of work, the notion that young people – if properly nurtured – can become independent contributors to society effectively undermines welfarist visions of collective responsibility. If young people are not after all necessarily vulnerable as a result of their immaturity, they do not need generalised state-delivered support and protection and can be expected to prove "capable of bearing life's burdens without breaking" (Damon, 2004: p.15).

Accordingly, the PDA focuses on education and training as the primary vehicle for youth policy. "In recent times, education (and 'training') policy has been formulated on the basis of an economic rationalist agenda in which young people are only of value as an investment in the future and as workers of [the] restructured economy... They have come to be seen as the bearers of skills which will be capitalised on in the future" ((Wyn and White, 1997: 7). As Standing puts it: "The neo-liberal state has been transforming school systems to make them a consistent part of the market society, pushing education in the direction of 'human capital formation' and job preparation." (Standing, 2011: 68).

But the neo-liberal economy is not friendly to youth once they achieve this education. It has entailed the abandonment of restrictions on the working hours and conditions of young people, downwards pressure on their wages to the point where they can often ill-afford economic independence from their parents (Blanchflower, 1999a, 1999b). and the removal of social security and income support infrastructure. At the same time, competition for the relatively few jobs at the pinnacle of the knowledge economy has forced the prolongation of the educational phase and a qualification inflation which forces many young people to settle for lower-tier lower-paid jobs than they are educated for. All this has fundamentally transformed the connection of young people to the labour market and placed more responsibilities upon families to give economic support to young people undertaking ever more extended transitions" (Coles, 1995: p.56). Continued material dependence on the family contrasts sharply with the developing personal autonomy of young people, especially as the possibilities for communicating and socialising beyond local communities are expanded by education, ICTs and new forms of mobility. Inter-generational differences are reinforced as young people are forced by their parents' deferred retirements into informal economies or migration in order to find work in employment patterns deeply unfamiliar to their parents' generation. At the same time, increased reliance on familial and social networks rather than public services and/or regular employment reinforces pre-existing disparities among youth in terms of access to social, economic and political power. Woodman and Wyn (2014) suggest that the inequalities arising from class, gender, ethnic and other social differentiations are not simply reinforced by neo-liberalism but rather restructured and reproduced in new ways, and that youth suffer disproportionately and very specifically from these changes, albeit differently in different 'North' and 'South', national and local contexts. They speak of "local, and increasingly global, transition regimes, based on institutionally sanctioned trajectories through education into labour markets, [which] create normative youth transitions, yet the neo-liberal promise of the benefits of global economic development has emerged for a minority only, creating new forms of inequality in and across national boundaries" (p.166).

Youth policy, from this perspective, is the institutional vehicle through which transition regimes prepare and direct young people into the least secure corners of the neo-liberal employment market. Undoubtedly the normative framework or ideological justification which provides the logic of 'youth policy' comes from the governments and institutions of the Global North - the highest layer of the particular structures and hierarchies of power determined by neo-liberal capitalism. The EU has been foremost among such institutions, promoting its PDA-based approach through instruments such as the White Paper on Youth in 2001, (revised in 2010 as *An EU Strategy for Youth: Investing and Empowering*'), a European Youth Pact devised in 2005, a 2007-2013

Youth in Action Programme, the 2007 Structured Dialogue, the 2008 Renewed Social Agenda and the Youth Partnership (Denstad, F: 2009, pp.21-39). What is notable about all these initiatives is their promotion of a PDA to youth policy, not only within the EU but within aspiring EU members and Mediterranean partner states such as Tunisia. An unequal partnership has been used to export the policy frames of the global North to the liberalising economies of the South.

But how transferable are such universal policy propositions? It is important to note that the PDA to youth policy is built upon an ideal of the modern market society nurtured in the most developed, largely liberal or social democratic countries of the North and reproduced through the youth policy agendas of the largest and most powerful actors in the global political economy. The universalising dimension of the PDA to youth policy renders variations in political structures at local levels less visible. It assumes that youth policy models can be exported despite very different political environments precisely because they focus on developing the individual rather than the public context. Despite the social construction of youth in any given geography being still shaped in large part by meanings derived from local social and political processes and institutions, these are considered less relevant to policy, in turn allowing the political structures which comprise perhaps the key component of the local political ecology in which young people find themselves to fade from view. Ironically, however, the task of narrating, justifying, formulating and implementing the specifics of youth policy depend in any given context on local political institutions and structures, so any assessment of youth policy is duty-bound to bring the local political economy 'back in'.

### **Youth policy in Tunisia through a political economy lens**

The examination offered here, of Tunisian youth policy under President Ben Ali attempts to do just this. It not only recognises the impact of authoritarian political rule on the construction of youth in Tunisia, and the policy architecture established to harness its multiple potentials, but also the international structural context which provided both discursive and operational cover for the regime in its efforts to contain them. The objective here is to offer a multi-layered political economy of youth policy which acknowledges both local and global structures and hierarchies of power around the neo-liberal economy.

This comes with a health warning, however. Building on radical rather than liberal trends in critical thinking foregrounds structure at the expense of agency and risks reducing very real and meaningful strategies and actions of resistance to futile gestures in the face of over-whelming structural power. There is insufficient space here to elaborate on formats for youth-based class resistance throughout the Ben Ali years, such as the Gafsa riots in 2008, social media activism or the growth of popular protest music cultures. However, the analysis does suggest an understanding of the Uprising in 2010/11 – which was youth-led but not youth-exclusive – as an act of mass resistance to the particular politically-structured manifestation of neo-liberal capitalism in Tunisia in which authoritarian cronyism distorted the progress of economic liberalisation even as it subordinated Tunisian youth to it. That should not be read as reducing the Uprising to simple class warfare but rather as explaining how the positioning of youth within the totality of the local ecology might have led to this particular outcome. As Côté points out, political economy cannot offer a grand theory



for understanding contemporary youth (2013: p.41), or youth policy, but it can provide a potent critique of the current direction of travel.

### **Tunisia: The (local) authoritarian neo-liberal context**

The departure point for analysing youth policy under Ben Ali must be the particular configurations of structural power, both locally and in terms of how Tunisia was integrated into the global political economy.

Tunisia became independent in 1956, progressing from a corporatist model of single-party rule under its first President Habib Bourguiba, into a distinctly authoritarian political system under President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali (Murphy, 1999). The regime relied on formal and informal coercive and neo-patrimonial institutions and networks, which concentrated power in the hands of a small urban, regionally-focused, internationally-connected political elite clustered within a first single, later dominant, ruling party (the PSD, renamed RCD), backed by a core of security-service personnel and over time coming to orbit the extended family of the President himself.

After a short-lived socialist experiment, Bourguiba pursued a mixed-economy approach to development which privileged the public sector but never sought to purge the private sector. Under his rule, the state developed its own empire of production, regulation and employment, economic and political activity became geographically concentrated in Tunis and along the coastal *sahel*, and civic life existed only within the nationalist vehicle (Parti Socialiste Destourienne) or carefully regulated corporatist associations.

Prolonged economic crises, compounded by growing militant Islamism and Bourguiba's own deteriorating political acuity, led to Ben Ali seizing power in a constitutional coup in 1987. He set Tunisia on a course of profound structural adjustment, enmeshing Tunisia in the neo-liberal financial structures of IFIs, and adjusting national political discourses to accommodate the transformation to an export-oriented market economy driven by private sector investment. In order to overcome resistance from within the ruling single-party, he initiated a pseudo-democratic liberalisation process, legalising selected opposition parties and overseeing weighted electoral processes which reduced them to the status of loyal opposition. Genuine opposition, from either the communist left or the Islamist right, was forcibly excluded from politics under a harsh regime of surveillance, human rights abuses, detentions, and exile. The regime staged democratic performances through party reform, national elections, manipulation of the media and international engagements, largely driven by the desire to integrate Tunisia into the European and Atlantic economic and security architectures. The process itself was widely applauded by both the IFIs and the EU (with which Tunisia was the first southern Mediterranean country to sign a Partnership Agreement in 1995). A succession of five year development plans which successively sought to achieve macro-economic stability, curtail budget deficits, initiate public sector, financial and trade reforms, encourage FDI, accelerate privatisation, develop the local stock market, deepen integration with global markets, upgrade the competitiveness of local firms, and introduce technology innovation produced sufficiently positive indicators that the IMF noted in 2007 that: "Effective economic management has helped achieve relatively strong growth while preserving macro-economic stability, hereby positioning Tunisia among the leading economic performers in the region" (IMF, 2007).

Partnership with Europe was predicated on a Tunisian commitment to a liberal economic transformation. The Barcelona Process which under-pinned it aimed at creating an intra-regional industrial free-trade area on a hub-and-spoke model, with southern Partners opening their markets, upgrading their own private sectors (with financial and technical support from Europe), and implementing the fiscal and regulatory reforms which would enable both. In fact, and despite the overall growth in Tunisian exports and investment, the terms of the Partnership Agreement itself led to a continuing and massively disproportionate Tunisian reliance on Europe for markets, imports, FDI and tourism remittances. Despite reciprocal commitments in the Partnership Agreement to supporting human rights and a flourishing civil society (Xenakis and Chrysochoou, 2001: pp.75-6), the European Union turned a blind eye to Ben Ali's authoritarianism, placing greater weight on the economic basket and on shared security concerns over Islamist terrorism, illegal immigration and drug trafficking across the Mediterranean.

Beyond the carefully constructed positive macro-economic indicators, the reality was grim. The absence of political accountability, the power of the family-based regime to act as gate-keepers over the domestic economy through process of removing state regulation and ownership, and the simultaneous possibilities presented by flows of international finance, undermined the outcomes of the structural adjustment process. The distortions created by authoritarian rule were largely hidden from view through careful manipulation of the statistical data offered to international partners, tight control of domestic media and the forceful repression of dissenting voices (Murphy, 2013: pp 35-57). Far from facilitating a re-invigorated and vibrant private sector, the extensive corruption and lack of transparency deterred all but the most cynical of foreign investors. These last colluded with the family and allies of Ben Ali, to create low added-value jobs in industrial plants which were sub-contracted to European producers or serviced European tourists. Domestic private industry was squeezed not only by an incompetent and overly-complex bureaucracy, but also by foreign competitors with privileged access to licenses that supplied rent to the regime cronies. The President, his family and their cronies used their political leverage to capture privatisations at below-market prices, to cut competitors out of the market, to appropriate the financial support of IFIs, to gain cheap unsecured loans from the banks, to bully their way into lucrative directorships and share-options, and to simply seize assets as they chose. The loosening of financial regulations allowed them to transfer much of their new found wealth out of the country. In effect, the result of neo-liberal reform under authoritarianism was that the private sector did not grow to fill the space of a diminished public sector but rather that a new deviant hybrid third sector arose. It occupied as much as a third of the entire economy which experienced widening poverty, profound structural unemployment, corrosive corruption, and ultimately political and economic crisis.

The political economy of Ben Ali's Tunisia was built around a particular set of structural hierarchies of power. The regime elites were incorporated into a Euro-global capitalist class, although they were on the margins of network power in that they extracted rent from the circulation of capital (into and out of Tunisia) rather than being at its productive heart. Where they were engaged in productive activity, this remained ultimately extractive and had little or no investment focus for long term growth. The regime reproduced the discourses and instruments of the IFIs, the EU, the

USA, and to a lesser extent the United Nations, both to legitimise itself at home and to embed itself within the global neo-liberal hierarchy. But these discourses and the performances they entailed, masked the reality that the regime depended on its coercive control over the political apparatus and wider society in order to sustain its own survival and enrichment. Outbreaks of unrest in the regions most severely impacted by unemployment and disinvestment (such as Gafsa in 2008) were brutally repressed and hidden behind media censorship. The language of universal inclusion based on widening opportunities for political representation and national growth grotesquely obscured a reality of deepening authoritarianism and the private looting of the national economy.

### **Youth policy under Ben Ali**

For Ben Ali, the need to reorient the economy towards private sector-driven growth came at an awkward time in demographic terms. The population had grown rapidly after independence as a result of economic growth, falling infant mortality, and Bourguiba's own nominally progressive social agenda (including state feminism, universal education, and the availability of family planning). The total population grew from 6.3 million in 1980 to 10.6 million in 2010, although the actual growth rate declined from 2.61% in 1980-85 to 1.12% in 2005-10).

By 2011, Tunisia was exhibiting a very significant youth bulge, the largest sections of the population falling between the ages of 15 and 35. Although youth (measured as being between 15-24 years old) was falling as a percentage of the working population from 39.2% in 1980 to 27.1% in 2010 (United Nations, 2012), the consequences of the earlier growth meant that Tunisia was briefly enjoying falling dependency ratios which should have translated into a thriving economic environment.

In fact, the opposite was true. The progressive failure to grow the economy sufficiently fast to absorb new entrants to the labour market meant that youth unemployment (for 15-24 year olds) was officially 31% of the male labour force and 29 of the female labour force by 2010 (and unofficially, and regionally, very much higher). In September 2008 the *Consultation nationale sur l'emploi* published a report, later mysteriously to disappear from official sources, indicating that young people (below 29 years of age) represented around 80% of all unemployed (CNE, referred to in Paciello et al, p. 12).

'Stalled transition' had become a primary feature of Tunisian life (Paciella, Pepicelli and Pioppi, 2015: 6). The absence of opportunities for so many young people to be materially independent, to marry and have children, or to express their own political and civic preferences under progressively worsening authoritarianism, meant that Tunisia was the example, par excellence, of a generalised MENA generational narrative of youth exclusion (Murphy, 2012: Pacella, Pepicelli and Pioppi, 2015: p.7).

The Ben Ali regime was not unaware of the destabilising potential of so many disappointed young people and Tunisia was among the first Arab states to try and address youth directly as a social category for policy purposes. Until then, youth had barely featured distinctively in policy beyond education. A Ministry of Youth and Sport (MYS) had existed since independence but a separate Ministry of Education and (from 1992) and Ministry of Women and Family Affairs, meant that the MYS

confined its activities to sport and ring-fenced projects such as international exchanges, orphanages and support for scouting organisations. The *Union general des étudiants de Tunisie* (UGET), existed principally as a mobilisatory vehicle for the ruling party (initially the PSD, then latterly the RCD). Beyond that, there was little by way of recognition of youth in national policy.

In 1995, however, the *Conseil National de la Jeunesse* (National Council of Youth) was established to engage youth in the preparation of a National Youth Strategy. In 2002 the *Observatoire National de la Jeunesse* was also established to conduct research on youth which would inform national development plans. The subsequent approach to youth policy-making had a number of distinct features.

### ***Youth as human resource***

Firstly, and as could be expected from Ben Ali's commitment to the neo-liberal economic project, the category of youth was constructed first and foremost as one of human resource. Unable to reconcile rising (youth) unemployment with its master narrative of economic success through liberalisation, the regime relied on a somewhat contradictory strategy. On the one hand, it sought to emphasise the specific problems associated with a demographic bulge (making less visible the problems of generalised structural unemployment); on the other it consistently massaged the figures to suggest that unemployment was lower than it actually was (Hibou, 2006), not least by ignoring the growing reliance of young people on partial or informal employment. (By 2012/13, 34.2 of men aged 15-29 and 46.0 of women were in vulnerable, casual or temporary employment, while 37.4% of men and 31.8% of women aged 15-19 were unemployed (ILO, 2015: pp.91 and 93).

Youth employment policy, (which identified youth as within the 15-29 years age bracket) followed a twin track approach. Firstly youth were encouraged into employment through training programmes and professional internships, targeting primarily the pool of graduate labour. Paciella, Pepicelli and Pioppi list the progression of internship programmes starting in 1987 with the *Stages d'initiation à la vie professionnelle/SIVP*, and followed with the SIVP2 in 1993, the *Prise en charge par l'Etat de 50 pourcent des salaires versés (PC50)* in 2004, the Labour Market access and Employability programme (CAIP), the Voluntary Civil Service (SCV), the Employment Program for Graduates of Higher Education (CIDES) and the Youth back-to-work Program after 2009, all of which "exacerbate precariousness and insecurity among youth" (p.11). Although the Tunisian government invested significant sums in these Active Labour Market Programs (ALMPs), a World Bank report based on extensive survey work and published in 2014, showed that relatively few Tunisian youth were familiar with them, they had low rates of participation (especially among non-graduates), and they were considered to be little more than a 'sham' - providing firms with cheap subsidised labour, accessible only to those with connections, offering a poor quality of training and unlikely to lead to subsequent employment (World Bank, 2014: pp.62-64), a criticism also levelled at the National Employment Fund, which provided salary support for young graduates recruited by associations. A number of entrepreneurship programs were also initiated by the National Agency for Employment and Independent Work (ANETI), offering microfinance loans through The *Fonds National de Promotion del;'Artisanat et des Petits Metiers* (FONAPRA add in accent) or the *Fonds National de Solidarite* (FNS -

add in accept). Again, the World Bank found that both awareness and take-up of these programs was low.

Overall, and in terms of the liberal economic logic behind their construction, both the ALMPs and the enterprise programs were overly-centralised, inhibiting innovation and local adaptation, and were poorly structured and managed causing duplication, ineffective provision, no local ownership, and low levels of trust among youth. They suffered from the reluctance of the regime to genuinely engage the private sector as full-partners but rather to deploy it as a captive partner in a collusionary game. The importance of personal contacts or RCD party membership in accessing schemes (Honwana, 2011: p.12) - whether real or perceived - was indicative of the trickle-down impact of patrimonial politics and corruption more broadly (Wikileaks, 2008) and in no way did the various programs address the profound structural distortions behind unemployment. In fact, only 25% of all unemployed took advantage of any ALMPs, making the 1% of GDP what was spent on them both inequitable and largely ineffective (Achy, 2011: p.11).

Ben Ali's youth policies replicated the discourses and objectives of the EU's PDA. They served to disrupt representations of the reality of an overall structural incapacity to create demand for labour, casting the problem of deep structural unemployment as being largely specific to youth and passing the responsibility for its resolution onto young people themselves by offering a variety of ALMs for which young people had to compete with one another and subordinate themselves to (formal and informal) hegemonic political institutions. Those same local political structures themselves impeded the growth of the private domestic productive economy fully-integrated into the global political economy, upon which this supply-side approach to the labour market was predicated. Even the exploitative precarious work which integration into the global economy *could* bring was restricted, while the capacity of policy initiatives to feed young people into such work was very low. With older workers busy defending their relative privileges positions in the labour force (and directing trade unions activity thus), and a youth policy discourse which identified youth as the determining characteristic of poor employability, the overall long-term transformation of the Tunisian labour market to the detriment of labour was effectively disguised and class consolidation disrupted.

### ***Constructing a narrative of Youth***

At a political economy approach would predict, Ben Ali's regime was at pains to develop a national discourse on youth which justified the propositions of his youth policy. The political construction drew from broader relational constructions of the family so as to resonate with society as a whole. The two key features of this construct were the role of the President himself as a father-like champion of youth and the representation of youth as alternatively good and obedient family/nation members or troublesome deviant outcasts. Youth were portrayed as 'virtuous citizens and hope of the nation' on the one hand, or 'youth as problem and threat to the nation' on the other.

Ben Ali located youth directly in relation to his own rule, proclaiming himself to be the champion of youth and personally responsible for enabling them to take their rightful place in the national project by offering varied opportunities for political and

social representation. Policy initiatives were fronted by the President, often in media spectacles, as with the Presidential Youth Programme of the 11<sup>th</sup> Development Plan 2007-11 or the 2010 International Symposium on “Youth and the Future”. In doing so, he claimed the position of authoritative father-figure, reducing young people to a position of obedience and subordination. His policy initiatives deployed symbolic and discursive tools which offered inclusion to those ‘responsible’ young citizens, who were hailed as "being at the forefront of the forces of progress embracing noble universal values" (Morjane, 2010: p.3).

There was nothing new in this: the ruling party had since independence sought to engage youth as citizens in the national project. The MYS had established over 300 Youth Centres across the country which had promoted citizenship and the integration of youth into society. Largely under-funded, these were considered by most young people to be useful only for sports and latterly internet access facilities. In 1971 the Tunisian Union of Youth Organisations was established as an independent association of youth organisations and was represented on the Higher Youth Council - a body elected by associations and acting as a government forum on youth matters but largely ineffective.

As the regime came under increasing pressure from the competing appeal of political Islamism in the 1980s, and then worsening unemployment from the 1990s, it stepped up its efforts to buy youthful compliance through direct political engagement. 1988 was proclaimed a “Year of Dialogue with Youth”. In 1996 a “First Youth Consultation” was held under the theme 'Tunisia listens to its youth’. A second Youth Consultation was held in 2000, with the theme “Youth, Dialogue and Participation in decision-making” and a third in 2005 was themed on “Youth preparing for a promising future”. 2008 was proclaimed to be a “Year of Comprehensive Dialogue with the Youth”, with the associative engagement feeding into a National Youth Pact (reportedly signed by 1.3 million Tunisian youths) and a National Strategy for Youth Policy for the period 2009-2014. To incentivise political participation, the voting age was lowered from 20 to 18, the minimum age for standing for parliament was lowered from 28 to 23, and the political parties were encouraged to increase the representation of youth in their higher committees.

The paternalistic discourse which overlay all these initiatives suggested that youth had to be guided into responsible participation by wiser heads and that they should assume responsibility for their problems rather than looking to the state to resolve them, echoing the underlying ethos of the positive development approach:

“It is [also] necessary to imbue our youth with the culture of diligence and self-reliance, and with the sense of transcendence on overcoming difficulties and obstacles they face in their life. Attention should be focused on the vital sectors that target youth directly, such as health, education, training, culture, communications technologies, employment, social care, leisure and sports activities, volunteerism and civil society action. Wisdom dictates that in all these sectors, we should offer youth all the conditions that ensure a sound educational, intellectual and physical upbringing, and prepare them to be an inspiring force of action in their societies, to assume their sense of responsibility in terms of decision-making in their countries and to positively influence their time” (Short, 2010)..

Ben Ali spoke of the importance of youth in representing the symbolic values of “freedom, equality, justice, dialogue, tolerance, democracy and human rights” – all virtues which the state claimed for itself regardless of the authoritarian political reality and in antithesis to militant political Islam. Here was the dark side of this discourse; the suggestion that youth were vulnerable to alternative, violent and disruptive behaviours associated with those political groups which challenged the regime itself. Ben Ali warned in the same speech about the “propagating trends of extremism” and in his final speech before fleeing the country in 2011 he spoke of the demonstrations as being led by “delinquents” who had fallen foul of youthful naivete and deviation from the path of rightful and patriotic behaviour (YouTube, 2011). He repeatedly spoke of the importance of decisions taken for youth on their behalf, of efforts to prompt them into action for their own good, and of the responsibility of their elders for them.

The notion that the state had a parenting role in protecting youth from harmful influences, instructing them in their citizenship, was not unique to Tunisia among Arab states (Swedenburg, 2007), finding resonance in deeper authoritarian modes of parental and social control (UNDP, 2003, p.22). He also found receptive audiences for this projection of a deficit approach to youth among Western allies concerned about the rising tide of political Islam. Through this discourse both the Tunisian population and its international allies were offered a securitised choice between working with a neo-liberal, internationally co-operative Tunisian government which valued and nurtured its youth on the one hand, and a descent into violent, economically incoherent and Islamist-fermented chaos on the other. This discourse was ultimately used to defend the regime from the demonstrations in 2011. In his final speech Ben Ali stated:

“To those who deliberately harm the interests of the country, abuse the credibility of our youth and that of our daughters and sons in schools or colleges or incite unrest and agitation, we say quite clearly that the law will have the last word.....We urge parents and all citizens to protect their children from these agitators and these criminals to take better care of themselves and be aware of the risks to be instrumented and operated by such extremist groups” (Ben Ali, 2011).

Not surprisingly the various government initiatives and the organisations designed to incorporate youth were considered by most Tunisians to be nothing more than off-shoots of the regime itself, with membership and participation depending on RCD affiliation. Youth Information Points (run through the Youth Centres network), Youth-oriented TV and radio stations, and a national youth website, were all perceived as instruments for regime propaganda.. Independent youth organisations found their activities closely monitored and were subsequently clustered in the arts, sports, cultural and voluntary sectors rather than politics. An EU-funded study produced in 2009 that just 0.5% of young people were engaged in associative activity (Floris, 2009, p.8), that youth leaders were considered poorly trained, and that young people “were afraid of long-term, weekly, regular participation” in associations. Although official dialogue spaces were multiplied, the authoritarian nature of rule meant that youth citizenship was equated with compliance with the regime's own political survival project..

The construction of a narrative of youth under Ben Ali acted to legitimise local structures and institutions of power, subordinating youth to their control and – by drawing on constructions of youth which had wider social familiarity (the family) and historical (nation-state building) resonance – serving to manufacture consent for that subordination. Youth were distinguished from older cohorts, set apart from them as needing a particularly watchful oversight, tasked with achieving maturity through service to the regime and its ambitions. The Islamist ‘threat’ conveniently recruited international institutions and partners to Ben Ali’s cause, building a political coalition which buttressed and enabled the economic project. Resistance to the political economy project was disenfranchised, delegitimised and discounted through the depiction of it as youthful storm-and-stress and the subsequent status of young people as *necessarily* less-than-autonomous.

### ***Youth Policy as an international project***

A final key feature of Ben Ali’s youth policy was ironically its de-politicisation. His strategy for promoting youth inclusion was located firmly within a discourse of a shared global problematic, divesting the particular Tunisian political ecology of responsibility for any problems of youth exclusion. At the same time, by putting Tunisia forwards as leading global efforts at devising appropriate youth policy, Ben Ali could recruit international allies in cementing both his narrative construction of youth and in winning ‘rent’ to offset the domestic impacts of precarious youth.

Ben Ali’s list of initiatives included promoting and gaining UN endorsement for a World Solidarity Fund, proposing the right of youth to practice sport and physical activity (adopted by the UNGA), and determining 2010 as the UN International Year of Youth. The 2010 symposium was organised in cooperation with the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ISESCO), the General Secretariat of the Arab Maghreb Union, and the Arab League Educational Cultural and Scientific Organisation (ALECSO). Ben Ali’s speech high-lighted an important sub-text to the Tunisian policy discourse - that the problems faced by youth - the things "which cause them to feel disappointed and frustrated, and have adverse effects on their growth and development" were common - if imbalanced - across countries.

The Tunisian regime thereby absolved itself of specific responsibilities for local economic, political or social failure, whilst simultaneously establishing its status as a good international citizen, and off-setting criticism over the repressive political system and abysmal human rights record.

The Euromed Youth programme was a prime example of a youth-based international collaborative project through which Tunisia could project itself favourably.. The programme focused on supporting exchanges, voluntary service and training and networking opportunities. Tunisian applicants had to apply through a Youth Unit which operated under the auspices of the MYS, conferring control over EU funding and prestige on the Tunisian government. Tunisia was also party to the EU’s Youth in Action program and the associated SALTO-YOUTH Training Strategy which tied the Youth Unit into a Europe-wide network of institutions and opportunities. Through these initiatives, the regime established its ‘youth-friendly’ credentials whilst ensuring its position as gate-keeper to international youth policy initiatives.



In fact, Tunisia was able to access funding through the youth agenda from a range of international organisations, including the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organisation, the Conference of Countries with French in Common (CONFEGES), the Arab League, UNICEF, UNESCO, the UNDP, the World Bank and the African Union. Aid foundations such as the Anna Lindh and Friedrich Ebert Foundations also provided financial support directly to Tunisian associations, usually for education, training, capacity-building and consultancy/information gathering on youth issues (Floris, p.25).

All these initiatives focused their attention on education, training, employment, cultural exchange, health and participation – but never representation. Following Tunis' initiative, 2010 was declared the International Year of Youth by the UN, which produced a “Regional Overview: Youth in the Arab Region” (United Nations 2010). The document listed the issues and challenges facing youth in the Arab region as education, employment, health and participation, as well as the need for strategic visions for youth development and the formulation of national youth policies. Nowhere did the document recount the problems of authoritarianism and political repression, human rights abuses, sectarian or ethnic divisions endorsed by ruling regimes, the subordination of women, corruption, inefficient and politicised bureaucracies or inequalities in global trading regimes. The document ignored the causes of youth exclusion and focused instead on either its symptoms or palliative means to ease the difficulties of neo-liberal economic integration. Thus the international youth agenda effectively endorsed the Tunisian regime's economic and political strategies, despite their negative impact upon young people.

Ironically, perhaps the most revealing aspect of Ben Ali's Youth Strategy, was the *absence* of a clearly-defined youth policy or set of policies. Floris argued in 2009 that “It is more accurate, in Tunisia's case, to speak of plural strategies concerning youth rather than a single youth policy... there are now public programmes, without however, the existence of any defined youth policy” (Floris, 2009, p.9). Ben Ali had mastered the art of propagating a discourse of youth inclusion which served to reinforce the hierarchies of power embedded in existing political structures, despite the fact that those same structures were responsible for youth exclusion in the first place. Any genuine attempt to formulate a coherent national youth policy which could address the sources of exclusion, would have threatened both the economic strategy and the political structures which enabled it. Authoritarian pseudo-democratic rule had created a distorted crony version of neo-liberal capitalism which was incapable of delivering welfare, employment or social goods to the population, forcing new generations into the socio-economic and political margins. The Youth Policy discourse was a convenient means of presenting the problems as beyond the government's control, of creating new lines of patronage and incorporation to minimise dissent, and to win international endorsement (or stave off condemnation). In short, authoritarianism had disrupted the logic of the positive development model which might have led to more coherent and unified (if still problematic) policy-making.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has argued for the utility of a political economy approach to youth which understands them as being the epicentre of late capitalism's transformation of labour

markets into a precarious world of work. They are not a class in themselves but fall increasingly but differentially within the global precariat depending on their particular intersectional identities and local political ecologies. Politically-managed constructions of youth serve to disrupt class consciousness and provide the manufactured consent which supports growing intergenerational inequalities in material wealth but also life opportunities. Youth policy has become the vehicle through which local and global political structures impose their constructions of youth as ways to subordinate and control young workers and defuse resistance. At the same time, however, local (in this case authoritarian) political ecologies and context-specific structures and hierarchies of power may themselves disrupt this process as they seek their own survival and enrichment through engagement with global capital.

It is tempting to suggest that, in the midst of all this, a youth policy industry has evolved around the institutionalisation of the positive development model within national governments and international organisations, not unlike the Human Rights Industry identified in a study of the Palestinian Occupied Territories (Allen, 2013). The professionalization, financialisation and institutionalisation of discourses of human rights for Palestinians have, for Allen, created a surreal parallel world where everyone has learned to “talk the talk” but only as part of a complex dance around the reproduction of specific structures of power and flows of rent. This argument resonates with the case of youth policy in Tunisia: it became a discursive and operational instrument for national and global power structures to reproduce their own neo-liberal or political dominance which were themselves the source of the exclusion.

Returning for a moment to the matter of agency, this does not mean that the emancipatory aspects of the positive development model have no impact. Widening and prolonged education, access to global communications technologies, and the trickle-down effects of liberal norms embedded in those same global institutions, inform young people’s aspirations, their critiques of the political economies in which they live, and ultimately their capacities to resist. The position of young people at the forefront of the Tunisian Uprising in 2010, and their on-going efforts to establish themselves as autonomous political agents through that country’s political transition, suggest that resistance may not, after all, be futile.

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