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Youth as Actors of Change? The Cases of Morocco and Tunisia

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ABSTRACT

In the last decades, 'youth' has increasingly become a fashionable category in academic and development literature and a key development (or security) priority. However, beyond its biological attributes, youth is a socially constructed category and also one that tends to be featured in times of drastic social change. As the history of the category shows in both Morocco and Tunisia, youth can represent the wished-for model of future citizenry and a symbol of renovation, or its 'not-yet-adult' status which still requires guidance and protection can be used as a justification for increased social control and repression of broader social mobilisation. Furthermore, when used as a homogeneous and undifferentiated category, the reference to youth can divert attention away from other social divides such as class in highly unequal societies.

KEYWORDS

Youth; employment;
mobilisation; Morocco;
Tunisia

There is a general consensus on the fact that since the dawn of the new millennium the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has witnessed a phase of renewed political mobilisation that reached a peak in 2010–11 during the so-called Arab Spring. In the period immediately following the 'youth-led' wave of protests, an enthusiastic and positive narrative on youth permeated media reports, development literature and global and national government discourses. Youth as 'revolutionary actors' were associated with dynamism and positive agency, the engine for long-needed change in the region.¹ However, as soon as post-revolt transitions turned into authoritarian restorations, civil wars or simply presented the danger of instability, a more paternalist, negative and at times securitising discourse took over, insisting that youth's potential deviance and extremism threatens societies with large youth populations.²

Leaving aside for the moment the contrasting and almost schizophrenic narratives on youth, it is a fact that 'youth' has increasingly become a fashionable category in academic and development literature and a key development (or security) priority for governments and organisations like the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) or the International Labour Organisation (ILO).³ All this enthusiasm or preoccupation with

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¹Sukarieh, "From Terrorists to Revolutionaries".

²Sukarieh and Tannock, "The Global Securitisation of Youth".

³Sukarieh and Tannock, "Youth Rising?" and "Best Interests of Youth or Neoliberalism?". See also the assessment of the AHDR 2016 in Paciello and Pioppi, "Is Arab Youth the Problem?".

young people could not go unnoticed and this article aims at critically analysing the way youth is framed and utilised in the official or mainstream discourse by national governments and by development and academic literature in relation to political agency, mobilisation and prospects for change in general. After all, youth is – beyond its biological attributes – a socially constructed category and one that tends to be featured in times of drastic social change. Youth can in fact represent either the wished-for model of future citizenry and a symbol of renovation or, by emphasising youths' 'not-yet-adult' status requiring guidance and protection, a justification for increased social control. Furthermore, when used as a homogeneous and undifferentiated category, youth can divert attention away from other social divides such as class (but also gender, ethnicity, etc.) which are increasingly relevant in highly unequal and fragmented societies.

The empirical examples for the article are taken from the cases of Morocco and Tunisia.⁴ Both countries were involved in a major reconfiguration of state / capital / labour relations following the gradual implementation of Structural Adjustment Programmes from the 1980s onward in ways that dramatically transformed the nature of labour relations, the role of the state *vis-à-vis* the family and market, and the modes of state intervention and control,⁵ with implications for the dynamics of collective mobilisation. Both countries were hit by the so-called Arab Spring, although the Moroccan monarchy succeeded in taming and/or co-opting rising opposition more successfully than in Tunisia where it resulted in the immediate fall of the Ben Ali regime. Also, the category of youth has a long history as a target of public action and symbol of change in both countries, dating back to independence – something that was revamped again in the nineties and, above all, in the post-2011 phase. Finally, both Moroccan and Tunisian youth are the object of a large development literature by international agencies, national institutions and academics.

Youth between social change and social control: from independence to neoliberal reforms

As already mentioned above, the category of youth becomes more relevant in times of change, not least because young people are associated with renovation, dynamism and transformative power, albeit with different meanings depending on the stakes at play in specific historical phases. A brief look at the history of the narratives on youth in both Morocco and Tunisia proves this statement to be true. In both countries, in fact, the category of youth first appeared with the emergence of a bourgeois nationalist movement (Young Moroccan or *chaban watani* and Young Tunisian movements) and the decolonisation process. At that time, youth embodied the new spirit of modernisation and social progress embedded in the nation-building project of which the emerging urban élites were the vanguard. After independence, the reference to youth as a positive force of change tried to turn a specific class-based ideal into a universal axiom, but the

⁴This article is a re-elaboration of parts of three research reports published as POWER2YOUTH working papers: Paciello *et al.*, *Youth in Tunisia*, Paciello *et al.*, *Public action towards Youth*, and Paciello *et al.*, *A Comprehensive Approach*.

⁵Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt*, 144-225; Tsourapas, "The Other Side"; Bogaert, "Contextualizing the Arab Revolts"; Catusse *et al.*, "L'Etat face aux débordements"; Zemni and Bogaert, "Trade, Security and Neoliberal Politics"; El-Said and Harrigan, "Economic Reform, Social Welfare, and Instability".

'hopes of the nation' were not in fact *all* young people, but only those with an urban, educated and middle class background (and males, in the case of Morocco).⁶

Notwithstanding the differences between the two countries, the post-independence social pact was based on the provision of education, employment opportunities and relative social mobility in exchange for regime loyalty and political acquiescence. In Tunisia, President Habib Bourguiba restricted and co-opted political mobilisation in state-sponsored organisations such as, for youth, the *Union générale des étudiants de Tunisie*, but also the juvenile sections of the regime party, youth centres, scout organisations and the like. All these institutions contributed to defining and diffusing the category of youth itself among the population and were fundamental in forging the national culture and consciousness of the new generation along predetermined paths to adulthood and, more broadly, in rallying different social strata behind regime policies in an inclusive and corporatist fashion.⁷ In Morocco, where the social welfare system remained highly unequal and limited, reflecting a more conservative social pact than in Tunisia,⁸ employment problems and social discontent emerged in the 1960s already, provoking a wave of worker and student protests. The growing politicisation of the lower to middle classes was seen as a threat to the country and harshly repressed by various means.⁹ Protesters were also paternalistically portrayed in the official media and government discourse of the time as deviant, immature youth in need of guidance, victims of external instrumentalisation and conspiracies.

The category of youth was again revamped in the public debate following changes in the two countries' political economy in the 1980s and 1990s with the implementation of neoliberal economic reforms. Morocco and Tunisia took measures in favour of the private sector, revising labour laws to induce greater labour market flexibility, pushing for privatisation, providing incentives to investors and establishing free trade zones. The role of the state *vis-à-vis* labour was redefined by abandoning the policy of offering university graduates a job, reducing the public sector workforce through early retirement schemes and lowering their wages/social benefits, while increasingly delegating the responsibility for providing jobs to the private sector (business, non-profit actors, family and self-employment). These reforms were accompanied by dramatic increases in unemployment, precariousness and insecurity of labour relations, particularly among youth¹⁰ and, in their early phases (1980s and early 1990s) by waves of social and labour protests denouncing their negative effects.¹¹

In both countries mounting labour problems were increasingly framed as "youth unemployment among the educated" and explained mainly in terms of young men and women lacking adequate skills to meet market requirements (the employment-education nexus). This view, echoing that of global institutions imposing neoliberal reforms, primarily attributed unemployment to the shortcomings of the young people themselves and wrongly assumed that an education better tailored to the market and a stronger spirit

⁶Bennani-Chraïbi and Farag, "Jeunesse des sociétés arabes"; Bono, "Une lecture d'économie politique".

⁷Ben Romdhane, *Tunisie. état, économie et société*.

⁸Ennaji, "Social Policy in Morocco", Catusse "Maroc: un fragile état social".

⁹Bono, "Une lecture d'économie politique"; Desrués, "Moroccan Youth".

¹⁰For Morocco, Paciello *et al.*, *Public action towards Youth*, Mejjati-Alami, "L'ajustement structurel et la dynamique"; Achy, *Trading High Unemployment for Bad Jobs*; for Tunisia, Paciello *et al.*, *Youth in Tunisia*; Elbaz, "Quand le régime du 'changement'"; Meddeb, *Courir ou mourir*; Pfeifer, "Neoliberal Transformation".

¹¹For Morocco, Seddon, "Winter of Discontent"; Buehler, "Labour Demands, Regime Concessions"; Seddon, "The Politics of 'Adjustment'". For Tunisia, Keenan, "The Origins of Labour Autonomy".

of self-entrepreneurship among youth would automatically bring them into the labour market.¹² The focus on youth had the added advantage of being able to portray social marginalisation as a residual consequence of the demographic bulge, rather than as a product, for instance, of concrete economic policies carried out by the regimes in as much as the undifferentiated category of youth helped to conceal issues of growing class inequalities and social conflict, which were sharpening in the 1980s and '90s.¹³

In Morocco, the application of structural adjustment and diminishing public spending led to massive cutbacks in public sector employment ending the policy of offering a job to university graduates; wages were frozen between 1983 and 1987.¹⁴ In this context, in the early 1990s with the creation of the *Conseil national de la jeunesse et de l'avenir* (CNJA), and even more in the 2000s, with the new King, a specific category of youth, that of “educated unemployed males”, became a political priority on the public agenda.¹⁵ In 1991, unemployed graduates started organising by establishing the Moroccan National Association of Unemployed Graduates (*Association nationale des diplômés chômeurs du Maroc*, ANDCM) in Casablanca to demand jobs in the public sector, thus denouncing the breach of the social pact based on the promotion of the urban middle classes.¹⁶ In response to the emergence of a new movement that risked threatening the social order, King Hassan II attempted to depoliticise the question of unemployment by publicly acknowledging the problem of *diplômés chômeurs* and, while repressing student movements and trade unions, allowed the ANDCM to enter the public arena.¹⁷ Public programs specifically targeting unemployed graduates were launched in the 1990s and intensified in the second half of the 2000s,¹⁸ but at the same time the ANDCM was progressively transformed into a corporatist organisation which aimed more at negotiating limited job quotas in the public administration than at questioning reduced labour rights for the middle and lower classes. Regular negotiations with the groups of unemployed postgraduates also allowed public authorities to supervise the protesters' political positions.¹⁹

In Morocco, a major turn in public policies came with the first *'gouvernement d'alternance'* of Abderrahman Youssoufi in 1998 and with young King Mohammed VI's accession to the throne in 1999. Public authorities were already increasingly concerned with the security risks of rising social tensions and started placing the 'social question' high on the agenda.²⁰ In December 1999, Mohammed VI advised the new government to make “the integration of youth” (*intégration de la jeunesse*) together with women and marginalised regions, one of the

¹²For Morocco, see the studies by the CNJA (*Enquête nationale auprès des jeunes; Enquête nationale éducation-formation*); World Bank, *Morocco: Strengthening Poverty*; and the speech given by the King, 8 October 1999, <http://www.maroc.ma/fr/discours-royaux/discours-de-sm-le-roi-mohammed-vi-lors-de-louverture-de-la-session-d'automne-de-la-30> July 2001, <http://www.maroc.ma/fr/discours-royaux/discours-à-loccasion-du-deuxième-anniversaire-de-lintronisation-de-sa-majesté-le-roi>. For Tunisia, World Bank, *Dynamique de l'emploi*, and *Breaking the Barriers to Youth Inclusion*.

¹³For a critical analysis of the concept of youth exclusion, see Paciello and Pioppi, *A Comprehensive Approach*.

¹⁴Between 1982 and 1993, the proportion of workers integrated in the civil service dropped from 65.4 to 23.7%. El Aoufi *et al.*, *Chômage et employabilité des jeunes*; Ben Ali, “Economic Adjustment and Political Liberalisation”.

¹⁵Bennani-Chraïbi, “Jeunes marocaines et politique”, 137; Paciello *et al.*, *Public action towards Youth*.

¹⁶Bennani-Chraïbi, *Soumis et rebelles*; Bennani-Chraïbi and Farag, *Jeunes des sociétés arabes*; Emperador “Diplômés chômeurs au Maroc”; Emperador, “Does unemployment spark collective action”, 198.

¹⁷Bogaert and Emperador, “Imagining the State”; Bennani-Chraïbi, “Jeunes marocaines et politique”.

¹⁸For a review of these employment programmes, see Gouitaa, “Aspects institutionnels de la pauvreté”; Ibourk, *Contribution of Labour Market Policies*.

¹⁹Cavatorta, “More than Repression”; Emperador, “Does unemployment spark collective action”.

²⁰Catusse, “Morocco's Political Economy”.

major goals in the 1999-2004 development plan.²¹ As a part of this overall reorientation of public discourse and action, the ‘youth question’ gained centrality together with the ‘women’s question’ (see, for example, the reform of the *mudawwana*, the family code, in 2003-04).

However, while reaffirming the centrality of the social question, the regime went ahead with the neoliberal economic policies that were at the heart of the exacerbation of social and economic problems and inequalities, as well as the increased labour insecurity and precariousness. Morocco’s integration into the global market, instead of creating good job opportunities for the educated young as the dominant narrative stated, was based on low-cost outsourcing in unskilled activities, such as clothing industries, often tapping into a reserve of young female labour.²² The spread of free zones such as the Tangiers Zone, the expansion of agro-export production (e.g., in the coastal area of Gharb and in tomato-producing regions such as Souss-Massa) and the off-shore regime in the service sector (particularly call centres) have been major sources of exploitation of young labour.²³

The proliferation of programs and initiatives tailored to youth in the 2000s were instrumental to extending the neoliberal agenda. First of all, the need for policies aimed at correcting an increasingly unjust political economy system was reduced to a matter of protecting specific categories deemed to be more vulnerable, such as young people and women. Second, they were basically geared to alleviating the state of the responsibility to provide jobs, university education, vocational training and social services. This was delegated to hybrid/public-private forms of management (such as the Muhammad V Foundation and the Hassan II Fund),²⁴ the private sector, and the young people themselves through an emphasis on individual responsibility and self-employment. The plethora of job creation programmes implemented in Morocco in the 1990s-2010s were based on giving strong impetus to youth enterprise creation and improving the employability of graduates through training and professional internship programmes in private companies. However, these programs completely failed to provide youth with long-term and good quality jobs, deepening precariousness and insecurity by offering very low wages and temporary contracts.²⁵

In the 2000s, alongside the unemployed graduates a new category of youth emerged as an object of public concern and target of public action, that of “youth living in poor marginalised areas” exposed to the risk of religious extremism and threatening the country’s security. The 2003 terrorist attack in Casablanca was largely framed by public authorities and the media as a problem of youth extremism strictly correlated to extreme poverty and social misery.²⁶

²¹See the speech given by the King to the government, 16 December 1999, <http://hiwar.justice.gov.ma/HiwarFr/uploads/Doc/DiscoursFr.pdf>.

²²See Joeke, “Working for Lipstick?”, Cairoli, “Garment Factory Workers”, Bourquia, “Gender and Employment”, Martinez, “Emerging Grassroots Processes”.

²³For agribusiness in Morocco, Corrado *et al.*, *Migration and Agriculture*, 251-2; for the service sector in Tunisia, Meddeb, “La Tunisie, pays emergent”.

²⁴Catusse, “Morocco’s Political Economy”.

²⁵Paciello *et al.*, *Youth in Tunisia*, Paciello *et al.*, *Public action towards Youth*.

²⁶Catusse, “Morocco’s Political Economy”, 203.

Unlike Morocco and other countries in the region, in Tunisia the Ben Ali regime tried to avoid public alarmism on the issue of youth unemployment and migration,²⁷ as this would have contrasted with Tunisia's 'economic miracle' and success story. Still youth and youth-associated problems (delinquency, drug abuse, juvenile extremism and to a certain extent graduate unemployment) increasingly became truisms of public discourse when dealing with the country's social problems.²⁸ In Tunisia also, public action increasingly prioritised employment creation, as is evident from the boom of initiatives and employment programs tailored to the educated unemployed with the support of external donors in the 2000s.²⁹

Paradoxically, however, Ben Ali's strict control over access to job creation programmes and legal migration channels was instrumental to managing the political discontent of the new generation.³⁰ For example, negating the delivery or renewal of passports to Tunisians who were not members of the ruling party or were suspected of opposing the regime was aimed at discouraging social protests, particularly among the unemployed in poor marginalised regions. Given the discretionary power of the judiciary and the ambivalence of the 2004 migration law, those unable to migrate could be easily accused of participating in or preparing for illegal border crossings if they were not acquiescent to the regime.³¹

Given their low turn-out in elections, scarce participation in formal political institutions and voluntary work, young people in both countries, as well as more generally in the region, were described as being apathetic and uninterested in politics prior to 2011.³² In the early 2000s, the new Moroccan king took a number of measures to favour the participation of youth in civic and political life.³³ The voting age was lowered to 18, while the 2002 amendments to the law of association allowed more space for the creation of youth organisations. Nevertheless, regulation and supervision of youth associations remained the domain of the Ministry of Interior, while those with a political agenda were subject to heavy sanctions or excluded from the distribution of resources.³⁴ Focusing specifically on youth participation was part of a broader rhetoric of 'good governance', participative development and pluralism that translated – again with the support of international partners and donors – into a booming but largely apolitical associational sector and an apparent increase in participation that did not challenge the absolute supremacy of the monarchy.

²⁷The 10th Development Plan (2002-2006) optimistically claimed that the unemployment rate had declined from 15.6% in 1994 to 15% in 2001 as proof of the positive results of the employment policies pursued by the government (Tunisian government, *Xème Plan de développement*, 88). Similarly, the 11th Development Plan (2007-2011) applauded the success of economic and social policies, announcing that unemployment had declined to 14.3% in 2006 from 15.1% in 2001 (Tunisian Government, *XIème Plan de développement*, 14). Public authorities very seldom referred to the unemployment of graduates as a problem, preferring more neutral expressions such as "the question" of the employment of graduates (Hafaièdh, "Trajectoires de chômeurs diplômés en Tunisie"). For more detail, see Paciello *et al.*, *Youth in Tunisia*.

²⁸Murphy, *Economic and political change*; Hibou, *La force de l'obéissance*; Tsourapas, "The Other Side".

²⁹Huber, "Youth as a New 'Foreign Policy Challenge'". See the 10th (2002-2006), 11th (2007-2011) and 12th (2010-2014) Development Plans (Tunisian government, *Le Xème, XIème et XIIème Plan de développement*).

³⁰Cassarino, "Channelled Policy Transfers"; Hibou, *La force de l'obéissance*.

³¹Cassarino, *Ibid.*, 105-6.

³²For example, Dhillon and Yousef, *Generation in Waiting or*, for Tunisia, Hibou, *La force de l'obéissance* and Hibou *et al.*, *Tunisia After 14 January*.

³³Bono, "Pauvreté, exception, participation" and, "Une lecture d'économie politique".

³⁴Berriane, "Complexities of Inclusive Participatory Governance"; Desrués, "Moroccan Youth".

The 'youth revolutions'

The 2010-12 Arab uprisings, unanimously labelled 'youth revolutions' regionally and internationally, triggered a real explosion of the category of youth in relation to social change and transformative power at all levels of public debate and academic production. In Tunisia, the day of Ben Ali's departure from the country, the 14th of January, became the 'revolution and youth day', while youth became the priority, at least discursively, of the post-revolutionary governments. This is well illustrated by article 8 of the new Tunisian Constitution of 2014 which states, still reminiscent of the post-independence rhetoric:

*La jeunesse est une force agissante au service de la construction de la Nation. L'Etat veille à fournir les conditions permettant aux jeunes de développer leurs capacités, d'épanouir leur énergie, d'assumer leurs responsabilités et d'élargir leur participation au développement social, économique, culturel et politique.*³⁵

More in general, in the post-revolutionary political debate, youth came to embody dynamism and positive change and the lively part of society that was repressed and mistreated under authoritarian rule. A number of academic works and international agency reports were published on youth-related issues and the revolutionary role of youth, youth creativity, youth needs and youth exclusion as the push factors for the revolts.³⁶

As well illustrated by Maysoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock in their inspiring book,³⁷ there are a number of problems in this enthusiastic, unanimous and acritical appraisal of youth transformative power, youth revolutionary potential and, generally, the idea of an identifiable youth agency or youth as coherent actors of social and political change. First of all, the use of an undifferentiated category of youth in relation to social and political mobilisation (as well as socio-economic problems). This has a strong depoliticising effect, especially when youth is taken to represent a homogeneous and coherent political actor as if all young people have specific interests different from the rest of society, thus replacing other social groupings such as labour or class.

In Morocco, where the 2011 protests did not lead to a regime change, the rhetoric on youth was also revamped in the public discourse just as it was in other countries of the region.³⁸ The February 20th movement, a large popular movement composed of many different activist groups, forms of protests and social constituencies (sit-ins of unemployed graduates, strikes and demonstrations of organised labour, women's movements for land access and gender rights, Islamist movements and associations, etc)³⁹ was unanimously referred to as a "youth movement" thereby not only negating the universal character of the protests and confining them to "youth demands",⁴⁰ but also, again, concealing their structural causes and overlooking broader social conflicts.⁴¹

³⁵[Youth are an active force in building the nation. The state seeks to provide the necessary conditions allowing young people to develop their capacities, let their energies bloom, take on their responsibilities and broaden their participation in social, economic, cultural and political development.] *Constitution tunisienne 2014, Chapitre I - Les Principes Généraux.*

³⁶The examples in academic or development literature are too many to give a full account. See Honwana, *Youth and Revolution*; World Bank, *Tunisia, and Promoting Youth Opportunities*; and ILO-Tunisian Ministry of Employment, *Transition vers le marché*; the new Arab Human Development Report, *Youth and the Prospects*, etc.

³⁷Sukarieh and Tannock, *Youth Rising?*

³⁸As an example, see the speech by the King in August 2012 (*Discours adressé par SM le Roi à la Nation à l'occasion du 59ème anniversaire de la Révolution du Roi et du peuple*, <http://www.maroc.ma/fr/discours-royaux/texte-integral-du-discours-adressé-par-sm-le-roi-à-la-nation-à-l'occasion-du-59ème>).

³⁹Bennani-Chraïbi and Jekhllal, "La Dynamique Protestataire".

⁴⁰Bono, "Une lecture d'économie politique".

⁴¹Bogaert, "The revolt of small towns"; Buehler, "Labour Demands, Regime Concessions".

In Morocco, the official narrative on youth, re-invigorated after 2011,⁴² continued to be functional to preserving the existing power system and the continuation of neoliberal policies even more than in the countries where incumbent regimes were overthrown.⁴³ Public authorities focused on the importance of enhancing “youth participation in the economic, social, cultural and political development of the country”,⁴⁴ and initiatives targeted to youth proliferated.⁴⁵ This was in stark contrast, however, with the top-down approach through which the new Constitution was prepared under control of the King, the cosmetic political changes it introduced and the repressive strategy (from the use of force to intimidatory practices) pursued by state authorities against the February 20th movement’s activists and other forms of protests.⁴⁶

The post-2011 overemphasis on youth mobilisation/youth movements had the effect of moving the spotlight away from pre-existing political organisations such as the labour movements and other forms of socio-economic protests which, although weak and fragmented, still played an important role in creating the pre-conditions for the mass revolts.⁴⁷ It also led to an underestimation of the diverse class and regional composition of the 2011 uprisings in both countries,⁴⁸ which soon became evident in the fragmentation and divisions following the early phase of protests.

Mainstream academic analyses have generally over-stressed the spontaneous character of the protests carried out by ‘non-politicised youth’ independent of political institutions, using the new social media. However, the 2011 mobilisations in both Morocco and Tunisia were coordinated with actors of varying degrees of organisation: political opposition parties, trade unions and civil society organisations.⁴⁹ In Tunisia, the 2008 Gafsa mining basin mobilisation that anticipated the 2011 uprising was coordinated with a number of organisations such as the *Association tunisienne des femmes démocrates* (Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, ATFD), and the *Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l’Homme* (Tunisian Human Rights League, LTDH), lower cadres of the main Tunisian trade union, the *Union générale tunisienne du travail* (UGTT), as well as the Tunisian association of unemployed graduates (*Union des Diplômés Chômeurs*, UDC), associations of Tunisian expatriates living in France, journalists, human right activists and the like who also played an important role in 2010-11.⁵⁰

Furthermore, post-2011 development discourse attributes an enormous potential (and related responsibility) to young *individuals* as actors of (progressive) change through individual processes of empowerment, thereby offering the political parallel of the economic mantra of youth self-entrepreneurship as a solution to unemployment and worsening labour conditions.⁵¹ Recent academic literature on youth and social change also concentrates on

⁴²For examples of this ‘new’ discourse, see the National Strategy of Youth (*Stratégie nationale intégrée de la jeunesse*) (2015-2030) elaborated under the strict supervision of the World Bank and the Centre pour l’Intégration Méditerranéen de Marseille (Ministère de la Jeunesse, *Stratégie nationale intégrée*).

⁴³Paciello *et al.*, *Public action towards Youth*; Hanieh, “Shifting Priorities or Business as Usual?”.

⁴⁴Ministère de la Jeunesse, *Stratégie nationale intégrée de la jeunesse*, 1. See also the amended Constitution adopted in 2011 (Articles 33 and 170). <http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/fr/details.jsp?id=13535>.

⁴⁵Bono, “Une lecture d’économie politique”.

⁴⁶Molina, “The Monarchy vs. 20 February Movement”.

⁴⁷For Morocco, Bogaert, “The revolt of small towns”; for Tunisia, Allal, “Ici ça ne bouge pas”; Ayeb, “Social and Political Geography”; Zemni, “From socio-economic protest to national revolt”.

⁴⁸Ayeb, *Ibid.*; Gana, “The Rural and Agricultural Roots”; Bergh and Rossi-Doria, “Plus ça Change?”; Bogaert, “The revolt of small towns”.

⁴⁹For Morocco, Bennani-Chraïbi and Jekhllaly, “La dynamique protestataire”.

⁵⁰Allal, “Réformes néolibérales”; Hamdi *et al.*, *Mobilization of the marginalized*.

⁵¹World Bank, *Tunisia*; Arab Human Development Report, *Youth and the Prospects*.

individuals. Linda Herrera and Asef Bayat, for instance, emphasise the transformative power of youth, describing how young people challenge, react or adapt to their perceived marginalisation in a number of ways, exerting their *individual agency* by appropriating public space and claiming their rights to it.⁵² Recent research on youth and political mobilisation tends to concentrate more on the micro level, on the individual paths of young activists, rather than on the dynamics of collective agency, thus underestimating the importance of organised struggle and mass organisations in bringing about substantial change.

Moreover, the prism of the youth category portrays labour conflicts as intergenerational. Youth are not normally associated with organised labour movements, and are mostly linked in both Morocco and Tunisia to the unemployed or ‘unemployed graduates’ category while, following the same narrative, the previous generation strenuously tries to protect its ‘privileges’ with defensive and anachronistic forms of protests, draining scarce resources away from the new and more dynamic generation. This narrative hides issues of the political economy of labour that concern the entire society, as worsening labour conditions and high unemployment are two sides of the same coin. Although youth are at the epicentre of the (un)employment crisis generated by neoliberal reforms, such policies have also significantly undermined the economic conditions of traditional working classes, namely post-independence workers employed in the public sector, with a dramatic impact on their wages and security of employment. Moreover, this narrative further divides the already fragmented working classes along generational lines, hindering the potential for organised labour to build alliances with the less organised unemployed and the precarious.

The political and academic enthusiasm for youth since 2011 has further multiplied programmes and initiatives targeting youth, mainly carried out through international cooperation and national NGOs.⁵³ However, the policy solutions in both Morocco and post-revolutionary Tunisia seem to be in full continuity with the past as they propose to expand existing training, internship and income-generating programmes to reach “disadvantaged youth” (*les jeunes défavorisés*) living in rural areas and reinforce the neoliberal policies⁵⁴ that have proven to be unsuccessful in terms of lowering inequalities and creating quality jobs. The persistence of protests, particularly in marginalised and poor regions, as well as the phenomenon of irregular migration show that structural problems are far from having been addressed.

After the enthusiasm for the uprisings slowly ebbed, another discourse emerged in both Morocco and Tunisia resonating previous regimes’ discourses on unsupervised youth being fertile ground for extremism and violence. This time, the negative construction of youth is applied for instance to those Tunisians volunteering to join the Islamic State,⁵⁵ or supporting local Salafist groups or jihadist organisations (such as the ones that attacked the Bardo Museum on 18 March 2015). It is also applied to those who live in the working classes areas of Tunis or smuggle in the Kasserine region, both stigmatised as terrorists,⁵⁶ and also more broadly to the unemployed who continue to mobilise in the marginalised regions,

⁵²Herrera and Bayat, *Being Young and Muslim*, 15.

⁵³A quick look at the internet suffices to spot a plethora of youth initiatives in Morocco and Tunisia by national governments, development agencies and global powers. See also Huber, “Youth as a New ‘Foreign Policy Challenge’”.

⁵⁴For Tunisia, World Bank, *Tunisia*; ILO-Tunisian Ministry of Employment, *Transition vers le marché du travail*; for Morocco, see Ministère de la Jeunesse, *Stratégie nationale intégrée*.

⁵⁵Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters*.

⁵⁶International Alert, *Experiences and perceptions*; Meddeb, *Young People and Smuggling*;

and who are accused of posing threats to national security and destabilising the country.⁵⁷ From revolutionary heroes, 'excluded' youth have thus become potential terrorists, illegal migrants and troublemakers undermining national cohesion and the prospects for a bright future, reflecting the need for public authorities to restore order, stability and security. Again, the explosive social conflict caused by rising inequalities and a failed development model is reduced to a question of juvenile extremism or youth as easy prey for (foreign) Islamic radical groups, which can be dealt with with a mix of repression⁵⁸ and the preaching of tolerance through education or anti-radicalisation programmes.

Conclusion

This brief overview of the way the category of youth has been framed and used in Morocco and Tunisia since independence, should have made it clear that any study of youth agency cannot avoid questioning the category itself and how it has been socially constructed at different historical times. Actually, we can even take the argument one step further by suggesting that it is precisely the way in which the youth category is framed that is revealing of instances of social change and continuity at any given time since youth are "at the cross-road of social reproduction."⁵⁹

In the post-independence state-centred phase, different mechanisms were created to co-opt or control the younger generations through public sector employment programmes, but also various social and political institutions that served to forge a national feeling of belonging via a common path to adulthood. The last decades have instead been characterised in both Morocco and Tunisia (but a similar analysis could be carried out in other regions of the world) by a reduced state capacity for inclusion, which is compensated regionally by an increased resort to pure coercion and securitising discourse. Generally worsening labour conditions, high unemployment and diffuse precariousness are undermining the predetermined path to adulthood, especially for medium to lower social strata. At the same time, the privatisation of education and dismantling of state political and social institutions are enhancing social fragmentation and provoking a *de facto* segmentation of the mechanisms of social reproduction as more and more private, formal or informal institutions replace the state in providing social aggregation, identities and allegiances.

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⁵⁷Hamdi et al., *Mobilization of the Marginalized*.

⁵⁸Lamloum, "Les jeunes des quartiers populaires"; Meddeb, *Young People and Smuggling*.

⁵⁹Furlong and Cartmel, *Young People and Social Change*, 139.

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