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RUNAWAY URBANISATION IN TUNIS: RETHINKING THE TERRITORIAL BOX OF THE METROPOLIS

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1. Introduction

By now, the notion of a “Planet of Slums”, in urbanist Mike Davis’s alluring apothegm, has become a way for many to see the urban question in the Global South (Davis, 2007). This pathology has not spared Tunis, Tunisia’s capital and biggest metropolis. Its symptoms are visible in the city’s physiology: congestion, pollution, metastatic sprawl. These problems overlap and make each other worse in a whirl of socio-ecological duress. As sprawl seeps into agricultural land, people need to travel further and further to get to work. Since mass transit has been difficult to erect in immiserated, capital-strapped, and socially hollowed-out Tunisia, everyone drives or uses jerry-rigged collective taxi services, previously the province of the countryside, where they were called Taxi Rifi – rural taxis. Whether higher-density collective taxis or individual taxis for the middle class, more cars means more and more traffic. Of course, if the poorer portions of the population had private cars, the problem would be even worse. In turn, Tunis emits more and more carbon dioxide and non-greenhouse-gas pollutants, damaging air quality and slowly pushing the country up the ladder of greenhouse gas emitters. These workaday problems of non-functional cities have been paired with endemic and unsolvable unemployment, sectoral and general strikes and mass protests that paralyse roadways, mines and cities, and which occasionally produce an unrest so combustible as to set off immolations – such as the one which led to the tragic death of Mohamed Bouazizi in the interior city of Sidi Bouzid, the spark of the Arab Spring.

Much contemporary planning literature, including that on slums, considers cities boxes within which governance takes place. More heterodox formulations cast the city as a unit of a multi-scalar polity – both subject and object of multi-scalar governance processes. Nearly all scholarly works posit urban development as a question of trade-offs: development damages the “natural” exterior but reduced development damages the increasingly naturalised “social” urban interior. A subset of this accepts, in the dubious words of geographer David Harvey (2012), “the traditional peasantry was disappearing and that the rural was being urbanized,” with the result that “the mass of humanity is thus

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increasingly being absorbed within the ferments and cross-currents of urbanized life". In turn, for Harvey, the political subject of social change and the site of struggle is the "right to the city," with the rest of the world a kind of antediluvian remnant. I question the degree to which such an ad hoc social mapping, structural diagramming for planning, or positing of political subjectivity speaks to the social struggles of today and the planning regimes of tomorrow. This is not to say that cities are not sites that merit both planning-level and political engagement. Rather, I suggest that we examine the city as the outcome of the history of development (Ajl, 2014). Thus, we ought to regard Tunis as it is not as teleology, but as the outcome of choice and struggle – the outcome of history, not the object of timeless social-scientific modelling. By understanding choices made and unmade, we might better understand the choices before Tunisian policymakers today, understand which choices are *not* on the agenda, *why* they are not there, and in turn push some alternative, affordable, feasible, and real Utopias for arresting the cascade of crisis that is Tunis today.

2. History

Tunis has grown rapidly in at least two stages. The first ran from 1936–1956, as the effects of French agricultural colonial-capitalism dramatically transformed the rural world (El Annabi, 1975). On the coast, usury and debt, price manipulation and warehousing were the socio-financial alchemy which converted olive growers into the victims of debt peonage, leading to rural social crisis and, subsequently, massive migration to the cities – in fact, to slums, and the birth of the *bidonvilles*, the term used in Tunis for the temporary knots of housing in urban semi-peripheries. The northern cereal belt, which confronted intense mechanisation and drastically reduced labour needs on the colonial wheat plantations, haemorrhaged population (Kassab, 1979). Some went to tenuous hillside farming, but more went to Tunis, as it kept shooting out pseudopods of growth from the old urban core centred around the Medina. Such extensions and even the core city itself – alongside slightly wealthier Lafayette – soon brimmed with deracinated peasants. Those people were less drawn by the allure of the city and more fled a countryside without a place for them. In the former, there was no question of them taking up posts in productive circuits: they were, instead, relegated to the tertiary circuit.

Post-colonial planning accelerated rather than arrested this process. This occurred in two phases, but with the same mindset animating both: that agriculture could soak up some quantity of the unemployed, but labour-light, machine- and capital-intensive modes of production ought to prevail in the cities, in the burgeoning network of factories which urban-based planners identified as inseparable from if not equivalent to that eternal eidolon in the eyes of city-based social managers, modernity.

In the first stage, from 1961–1969, capital- and machinery-intensive coops burst across the north, gathering together peasants on their small scraps of land and around state-owned nodes (Amrani, 1979; Makhoulouf, 1968). Because the state opted for capital-intensive and technicist modernisation and US aid programmes pushed tractors on the population beyond any plausible need, there was a temporary crowding of the population into

coops which bled money. Meanwhile more of the population fled the countryside to Tunis, a flow magnified after the state put an end to the cooperatives in 1969. Tunis grew alongside the urban factory base for import-substitution industrialisation and rural tractor fleets.

The second phase was equally based on capital-intensive agriculture and urban industrialisation – this time through the “off-shore” regime (Gouia, 1988; Romdhane, 1981). Agricultural modernisation rested on a Green Revolution. The logic of technicism, *deus ex machina* solutions to social problems through chemical, genetic and mechanical modernisation of the rural cereal-growing world reached its consummation. USAID planners and Green Revolution acolytes in Tunisian ministries converged on a plan with the ambition of increasing cereal yields for Tunisia’s swiftly growing population, further replacing labour with machines, but skipping entirely the reorganisation of the social organisation of labour as occurred through the cooperative mirage. Instead, private farm-owners would organise this process. The state dumped subsidies into improved seed, fertilisers and tractors. As chemicals and metal replaced men and women, people fled the country to the city. But not just to the city of Tunis. By the late 1960s national planners were predicting that industrialisation would be unable to produce enough jobs to deal with the populations continually displaced from production in the countryside (Centre de Recherches et d’Etudes Administratives, 1967). Tunisia’s urbanisation-industrialisation project was neither resilient nor capacious enough to provide for the exiles from the countryside. In turn, many of them became adjuncts to the European and Libyan industrialisation projects. People went at first in equal measure to Saudi Arabia, Libya and France. Later, as the former two saw oil boom turn to bust, France became a preferred destination for labour emigration – or more accurately, labour export. Tunisia’s rural problems were never solved. Its people were just transposed to cities where the country could not afford to incorporate them, leading to ever-mounting problems.

From the 1960s, well before Tunisian cities had any labor-absorption capacity whatsoever, planning literature, educational curricula, and cultural programming was replete with contempt towards “tradition”.

Amidst intense urbanisation, the transport sector now absorbs 45% of total fossil fuel consumption and is the second largest user of energy after industry. Fully half of that is private cars. Bank loans accelerate and exacerbate this process, since car ownership is a status symbol and credit for car purchase is released easily and frequently. The car fleet increases 6% per annum while the bus fleet is more like 0.6% per annum, with the latter often too crowded to even enter while proceeding slower than walking speed. Increased density in the urban core and increased car use combine in a synergistic mélange, increasing car travel time, energy consumption and, finally, emissions. Infrastructural investments – a site of chronic under-investment on the part of the public authorities – orient more towards road infrastructure and less towards investments in public transport. Indeed, the two are in a spatial zero-sum game in downtown Tunis where they literally share road space (Mraihi et al., 2015).

One obvious solution is increased investment in public transport using clean-burning energy. But I wish to make a less obvious suggestion and put forth the idea that the problem of the city in Tunisia, and the problem of the city of Tunis, must also be considered as a question of demography. Of course, a caveat is necessary: demography is not a natural fact but becomes a problem only because of the structuring of the institutions which exist to absorb and manage population growth and allocate resources. Put differently, demography is not primarily a problem

of fertility but in fact is the demographers' translation of systemic social malaise. I wish to first raise the socioeconomic point that Tunisia – and Tunis – do not provide enough jobs for the denizens of the city, despite ongoing growth and its function as a population magnet. People come to the cities, flock to their mushrooming private universities, but then find themselves unable to find jobs. Tunis's structural maldevelopment then becomes one of the country's exports, and the problem of other countries, since most young people see no future for themselves in the country. This is in effect a loss of value – the country feeds and educates them when they cannot add to social wealth, and then loses them to Europe when they can. Furthermore, there are those in the capital who live in a complex relationship with the countryside: they spend much of the week in the city, working in the tertiary or secondary sector, while their wives may work on a farm in a primary sector. Urban life is a means to increase incomes, while it ends up contributing to urban dysfunction. Such an outcome is neither inevitable nor positive.

But such an attitude is the fruit of many people's reading of the socioeconomic landscape. I suggest that we turn the question on its side, and ask: If people move within Tunisia to its capital, and abroad, in search of meaningful and remunerative labour, what then is the cheapest way to make jobs?

3. Policy mechanisms

We are accustomed to considering prices the outcomes of a fey and indecipherable market logic which produces outcomes in accordance with the arcana of supply and demand. Meanwhile, ownership titles are frequently considered as natural facts with an appropriateness if not a permanence akin to the tides or the mountains. Both price and land-tenure policies in Tunisia – as I indicated above – led to population shifts from countryside to city. But, as I also indicated above, those were the outcomes of history, and history is made and unmade by men.

As partial policy remedies, I here propose four ways to lighten the rural-urban population flows which aggravate contemporary Tunis's mounting urban issues. The first is to consider the question of shifts in ownership titles, or to consider what agrarian reform could do for Tunis. In the first place, in Tunisia as elsewhere, labour intensity per hectare is in an inverse relationship with plot size, and productivity measured in dollars per hectare generally has an inverse relationship with plot size. Although in the Tunisian case this ratio is perhaps slightly more complex due to the tendency towards irrigation as a means of intensification, it then also becomes a function of access to credit or capital to finance such means of (usually unsustainable) intensification. A redistribution of land is tantamount to a redistribution of income. Economic modelling and planning schemas are based on the "pull" factor of the city, based on the relative outcomes of living in cities. Because such planning has been premised on existing agrarian inequality that inequality has endured, converting the countryside, particularly Tunisia's western belt, into Tunisia's repository of poverty. A redistributive agrarian reform would, in the first place, rein in rural-urban migration by making the countryside a more remunerative place for people to live their lives.

Consider also the historical process through which Tunisia moved to low-value-added export-oriented industrialisation alongside wage containment in the urban centres where industry concentrates. This history occurred in part because of the narrow size of the internal market, thereby making selling products from urban factories relatively less attractive for private capital. Because of a constrained internal market – and keeping in mind that the magnitude of the internal market is no natural fact but the outcome of a variety of choices and struggles – there was insufficient internal articulation of the productive system. Thus, Tunisia moved to a system of production based on using industry for export. As studies have shown, such efforts, for example in the textile sector, are only successful, or can only be evaluated as successes, when the metric is monopoly profitability (Baghdadi et al., 2017). Workers' livelihood outcomes are less successful, giving them less income, leading in aggregate to less demand.

A larger and more articulated internal market, which would emerge if Tunisia adopted an agrarian reform and more justly redistributed internal incomes, would create more opportunities for a wider-ranging programme of import substitution industrialisation (ISI). This is the second policy – industries, especially those based on processing primary-sector production, could produce for a wider internal market and subsist if not prosper based on economies of scale rather than wage containment. Accordingly, wages could increase in the cities, thereby allowing for both higher income and demand. Because there would be a wider internal market, there would be a greater need for all kinds of wage-goods, both agricultural and industrial. To create those goods, more jobs would be needed, and more jobs would thus be available to absorb urban unemployment. Such goods need not be typical ISI, or non-productive manufactured goods. Even better, they could also be implements like solar energy grids, or tools for alleviating labour intensity without resort to inappropriately heavy farming implements. Solar energy could free up capital spent on imported fuel, allowing the state more resources for price engineering or, for that matter, jobs in sectors not oriented towards profit – such as hospitals. Such a combination could set in motion virtuous circles of economic growth based on relatively less entropic modes of production. In this way, changing what factories make in Tunisia could easily make the countryside a better place to live.

A third policy mechanism would be getting prices wrong. Of course, the notion of “wrong” prices is always a bit of a provocation, since “right” prices do not exist. In any event, this mechanism is not new to Tunisia. In fact, price engineering has been central to Tunisia's post-colonial experiment in economic management. Throughout the 1960s, wages were nearly frozen, to take one “price” – the price of labour. There is no reason that the terms of trade need to be weighed against the goods produced by labour-intensive agriculture, such as durum wheat and barley, except that this has been understood as the way things work. I would suggest that anti-agricultural goods terms of trade are also a mechanism for siphoning off rural value. And like all such suction devices, it takes the people along with it. The movement of people from countryside to city is not a natural phenomenon such as the movement of light, the movement of the moon across the sky, or gravity pulling planets together. It is the result of sociopolitical arrangements, which are a kind of human-designed gravitational field pulling people hither and yon. Because they were made socially, they can be unmade and remade differently. A government could use selective price policy

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alongside an agrarian reform to *strategically* rework the terms of trade, favour agricultural goods that are labour-intensive and concentrated in poorer areas of the countryside, and thus induce a relatively more favourable standard of living in the countryside. Because such policies would divert more capital to small farmers, they would also allow for increased investment, creating more wealth in the countryside and more demand from farmers for goods which enhance rural production, such as appropriate-scale mechanisation.

A fourth policy mechanism is preferential interest rates for small farmers and opening the spigot of loans and capital for small farms. In Tunisia, there is an absolute capital shortage and a fundamental incapacity of the state to supply enough credit at competitive rates to the smallest farmers, whether seasonal credit or medium- or long-term credit. Creating a credit system that benefits large plot owners is another way of making the countryside less attractive to rural people, since large farms substitute capital for labour. Put differently, in a credit-limited system – freezing other variables for the moment – opening wider the flow of credit is akin to choosing which plant one wishes to grow in a world in which only so many plants can grow. The choice to over-allocate credit to industry, and furthermore to over-allocate credit to city-based private real-estate development, is in form and content precisely a decision to not allocate enough credit to small farmers. Increasing credit to small farmers in the context of expansionary macroeconomic policy in fact increases overall small-farmer wealth, with effects analogous to agrarian reform, thereby increasing the country's overall wealth.

4. Non-livelihood cultural investments

At least two other policy reversals would need to accompany such a programme. The first: a revision of the educational curriculum and the language of state planning. From the 1960s, well before Tunisian cities had any labour-absorption capacity whatsoever, planning literature, educational curricula and cultural programming were replete with contempt towards “tradition” (Akkari, 1993). Tradition meant that which was affiliated with the rural world, above all the world of the centre and south. Population flows correspondingly moved along channels lubricated by an ideological value system which told young people that the good life was in the city and the bad life was in the countryside (Amami, 1982). Such a programme is not inevitable. It is a choice, the result of policies oriented towards replacing men and women with machines in the countryside and concentrating the population in the urban core, above all Tunis. In 2018, this experiment has failed. It is no longer the countryside which young people consider unliveable amidst the allure of the city. It is Tunis itself they consider unliveable amidst the allure of the Global North metropolis. That is a choice, the result of people-made development, infrastructure, investment and planning policies. Furthermore, there is a question of the “objective” allures of city and country life – culture, museums, culinary diversity. I would simply suggest that a policy suite based on decentralising populations and not allowing any further growth of a city like Tunis ought also to be partnered with cultural investments in local urban centres, as well as means for people to access those centres.

5. Conclusion

This chapter has historicised the concentration of Tunisia's population in the coastal belt and above all Tunis. It has located the origins of those demographic shifts in a set of policies which, when clumped together and put in simple words, made it so that country people could not make a life for themselves in the countryside and thus went to try to make a life for themselves in the cities. What I propose is that planners concerned with constantly swelling cities make problems easier for themselves – and for the people on whose behalf they plan – by looking at why cities keep growing faster than population rates in countries like Tunisia and try to grasp the problem not by its thorny and difficult exterior, but rather with a little more digging, at the origin of all things – its root.

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