Ecologically Unequal Exchange and the Environmentalism of the Poor in Gabès

Max Ajl[*1]

[1]Cornell University – États-Unis

Résumé

In Tunisia, social mobilization increasingly centers around ecology – the "environmentalism of the poor." In the Global North, consumption and development are often perceived to be in zero-sum conflicts. In the South it has been otherwise. In Tunisia, the development project was part myth, part deception, and never enfolded much of the country. It brought with it poverty and the dissolution of ancestral life-ways through resource extraction and pollution. This paper will interrogate Tunisia's "environmentalism of the poor" by tracing the imbricated use and contestation over phosphates, fishing, and farming in Gabès, Tunisia's fast-evaporating garden oasis. There, the phosphate-based economy and accompanying informal urbanization has damaged or destroyed oasis farming and fisheries which have long been the basis of the local economy. Contestation over resource development intertwines with questions of developmental models more broadly – whether such models will be sustainable, based on land, or ecologically and socially toxic, and based on extraction and processing. This paper will offer a historical account of how phosphate-processing and urbanization replaced agro-ecological oasis farming, and how theories of environmentally unequal exchange cast light on this process. It will use primary observation, archival sources, and secondary data to trace the course and assess the consequences of resource processing and thereby allow us to interpret to what degree such conversion of resources into capital flows has meant despoliation or development for Gabès's people. It will assess whether we might understand such protests as an "environmentalism of the poor" and to what degree they prefigure an alternative developmental model.

Mots-Clés: Tunisia, ecology, political ecology, enviromentally unequal exchange, political economy, environmentalism of the poor

---

[*]Intervenant