
Inequalities or injustices? Understanding the 2011 Tunisian revolution through the lens of Critical Agrarian Studies and Political Ecology

Mathilde Fautras*¹

¹Université Paris Nanterre – UMR LAVUE (7218, CNRS) – France

Résumé

This paper aims to understand why inequalities in access to resources – especially land – are not necessarily or always perceived as injustices, nor denounced by the people concerned in the rural areas of the centre of Tunisia. Setting off from the argument that one needs to draw a clear distinction between protest, mobilisation and dissent to understand transitions from below, this paper seeks to answer the following question: Can Critical Agrarian Studies and Political Ecology help to understand better the above paradox in a region where inequalities in access to agricultural resources form a fertile ground for the social protests that have led to the 2011 Tunisian revolution? The aim is to analyse empirical data through lenses provided by these theoretical frames and to question their analytical power for understanding social and environmental conflicts.

Despite Sidi Bouzid has become a region of national importance in agricultural production and export, social inequalities between inhabitants and especially farmers have been increasing the last decades. In a context of strong land fragmentation versus accumulation by a few people, land acquisitions and groundwater appropriations by Tunisian businessmen non-native of the region have increased since the 2000s. These resource appropriations are often perceived as illegitimate by local farmers who have developed a narrative that refers to the land grabbing issue. Even if this narrative highlights the role of these non-native businessmen in rural change and increasing inequalities, it tends to hide the role of local elites and small farmers in the resource degradation and social inequalities, as well as the historical trajectories of agrarian change. Moreover, the frontiers of what is considered as injustices change depending on the context and the arrangements between different actors.

So far, the 'land grab debate' has rarely been incorporated in the rural and agrarian studies about North Africa. However, this literature helps to reveal the multiplicity of actors – and especially the local and domestic elites – involved in the resource appropriations. The focus on conflicts is definitely crucial to understand the social differentiation, but the case of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia underlines also the importance of taking into account the arrangements between actors. On this aspect, the Political Ecology approach provides interesting insights by questioning the narratives and the representations of environmental inequalities. It enables to bring out the different legitimacy narratives and the way they are politically and culturally shaped. By paying attention to the scale of analysis and of the narratives production, Political Ecology also augurs enlightening lens for understanding the hiatus between inequalities and injustices. Through the Tunisian case study presented here, the aim of this paper is more broadly to uncover weaknesses and possible synergies between the Critical Agrarian Studies and Political Ecology, and to identify new research fronts of agrarian and environmental issues to investigate.

*Intervenant

Mots-Clés: inequalities, injustice, land grabbing, political ecology, critical agrarian studies, social protests, Tunisia