

# Globalization, Power and Authority. The Emergence of New Connectivities

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## The Mediterranean and Tunisia

The Mediterranean is composed of four sub-regions distinguished by different standards of living and by different political and social institutions. Over the past two decades, a new discrimination-related, institutional relationship with the European Union (EU) has emerged. Globalization has come to accentuate some of these differences and to lessen some others.

The northern Mediterranean is dominated by the EU and standards of living are higher there than elsewhere in the region. Per capita annual income exceeds US\$ 10,000. This region, however, is divided into four main areas. The first is formed by the countries of continental Europe — the original nucleus of the EU — and which are more economically advanced than other northern Mediterranean countries. Within the EU, France and Germany form a major political axis. The second region is the southern European continent. Some of its countries, such as Spain and Portugal, have joined the EU and are quickly catching up in terms of economic development. The third area is formed by newcomers to the EU. They are geographically at the periphery of Europe, and include Greece and former socialist countries. These are countries that are distinguished by differences in religion (Orthodoxy is the religion most prevalent, while the rest of Europe is predominately Catholic). They are also newly converted to the free market and democratic institutions. The fourth area of the north Mediterranean consists of two countries that are at the edges of the region: Great Britain and Turkey. The first, although a full member of the EU, makes itself an exception by its determination to keep its own currency. Turkey is still a candidate for the Union, but as a Muslim-majority country it faces strong opposition from major members. Great Britain and Turkey are distinct from other north Mediterranean countries in their close relations with the United States.

The southern Mediterranean, with the obvious exception of Israel, consists of two major regions, both with predominantly Muslim populations. The split here is between the Maghreb (West) and the Mashreq (East). Differences between the two have persisted since the colonial period of the last two centuries. The Maghreb countries were French colonies for some time while most of the Mashreq countries were under English rule. Each of these regions has inherited the administrative system of the previous occupying powers. But the two regions are similar on many counts, including economic development. For the most part, they rank as intermediate-income countries with per capita annual income ranging from just under US\$ 500 for the most populous country in the region (Egypt with 70 millions inhabitants) to a little over US\$ 7,000 for countries better endowed with natural resources (Libya and Algeria are two major exporters of gas and oil). The south is also distinguished by a slow and faltering progress towards democratic regimes, although economic liberalism is deepening rapidly. Foreign economic trade is mainly with other countries in the southern and northern Mediterranean, while exports and imports in the north Mediterranean are more oriented toward other regions of the world. Since World War II, the South, and especially the Maghreb, has witnessed large migrations to the north, particularly into continental Europe.

Tunisia, a country of 10 million people, is one of the most advanced non-oil producing countries in the region in terms of per capita income (about US\$ 4,000). The growth rate is speeding from 4 to 5 percent per annum. Democracy advances gradually, at a very slow pace, by the opposition's account. But, according to the regime, the path to democracy is related to economic progress. The regime also claims major achievements in terms of political stability and the neutralization of various Islamist tendencies.

Tunisia is also a country that has embarked on the final phase of the demographic transition. By 2030, the number of persons over the age of 60 is expected to double what it was at the beginning of the century. The percentage of the population over 60 years is expected to increase from 9 to 18 percent, while the percentage of the population that is less than 20 years old will decline from nearly 20 percent to around 10 percent. At the same time, Tunisia will face a very important increase in numbers of university graduates in the workforce. In fact, the percentage of young people aged 20-24 years attending the University is on the upswing and is expected to reach 50 percent within a decade. This trend can be attributed to an influx of students enrolling for graduate studies, as a way to delay entering the workforce where a double-digit unemployment rate persists. Consequently, there is great interest in doctoral research on various topics, including globalization.

For the region as a whole, globalization is a source of major cultural, institutional, economic, and geopolitical change. However, given the differences in economic and political status, research on either side of the Mediterranean has addressed globalization from different angles. In the north, several researchers and intellectual movements have become interested in the globalization process itself. In the south, globalization has been examined in terms of its implications and its relationship to key issues concerning the region — namely economic development, the process of democratization, culture, and religion.

### **How My Own Research has Focused on Globalization**

My own research branched out in the mid-1990s, to include globalization, as a result of economic changes that were taking place in the country. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the central issue in Tunisia (and for most countries of the southern Mediterranean) was the effects of globalization on economic development. My work focused on the economic and socio-economic impact of integrating the Tunisian economy into the global economy. It has used modelling techniques and analysis of new concepts that make it possible to understand better these impacts. These tools have been used to support decision making and to manage the transition to a more integrated economy. A part of this research took place while I was Director of the Institute of Quantitative Economics — a research centre related to the Ministry of Economic Development which was in charge of economic policy choices for Tunisia.

From an economic point of view, Tunisia's integration in globalization processes was formalized in the mid-1990s with the signing of a free trade agreement with the EU. My research has since expanded to the study of new challenges facing a country integrated into the process of globalization. The work undertaken as part of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Major Collaborative Research Initiative on Globalization and Autonomy is the most representative of this latest research. In fact, it is difficult to envision a single economic issue that can be tackled without taking into consideration globalization and the open economy.

One consequence of this new focus is the greater attention paid to the contribution of disciplines other than economics. Since the mid-1990s, and on the technical side, my own research has

appealed more to futurology than to the instruments of economic modelling.

### **Most Pressing Research Questions Related to Globalization**

Two main research streams have developed in Tunisia in relation to globalization. The first consists of a series of reflections and questions about stereotypes and fears vis-à-vis globalization. The second one is fed by a desire to understand better the implications and scope of the process. Both streams sometimes examine the same themes, but they differ in the motivation behind them. In the first case, the research aims at elaborating a judgment on the whole process through one of its aspects. In the second case, the research is concerned with optimizing behaviour and achieving the best outcome from the process.

In the first stream, globalization is seen as a process that has accelerated after the break up of the Soviet Union. Globalization is considered to be a process driven by the capitalist countries of the North, represented by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization — a process that will result in a loss of social gains in the South and even within northern countries. In this context, the game is zero-sum or almost. Research and reflections of this kind are similar to those developed in northern countries. However, many Tunisian researchers point to the double standards practiced when it comes to international politics.

The second research stream is more utilitarian. This research is interested in learning more about the process and mechanisms by which local impacts are produced. In the economic field, for example, several studies have sought to highlight the effects of the opening up of trade on the main objectives of economic policy (employment, income, economic growth). Another emerging research theme is economic competitiveness on the world market and helping decision-makers to determine the pace of integration in the globalization process. A third concerns the important role played by various international agreements. Joining and signing these agreements — international treaties (children's rights, environment) or regional agreements (free trade zones) — are a matter of debate in Tunisia and other countries concerned.

In more concrete terms, the issues dealt with by one or the other of the two streams described above are:

- \* globalization, social policy, and poverty
- \* globalization and economic competitiveness
- \* globalization, environment, and natural resources
- \* globalization and migration
- \* globalization, risk management, economic and financial crises, and security issues
- \* globalization and governance

While the list of research areas is wide and varied, some limitations prevent the development of more fruitful research. Most studies are funded by international organizations involved in globalization. They have their own priorities, which are not necessarily in harmony with academic concerns or interests. For a variety of reasons related to local and academic communication, interdisciplinary exchanges are few. So research in one area is not discussed widely. Most social sciences and humanities scholars in Tunisia are francophone while most of the important works on globalization are published in English. As a result, awareness of the main debates on globalization issues is limited.

### **South-North Collaboration**

Cooperation between academics from the North and South might help to give the research agenda on globalization an international dimension which better reflects the phenomenon itself. A comparison of views from scholars with different geographical backgrounds would be more interesting and would take account of both sides of the reality. Collaboration might also give a multidisciplinary dimension to research on globalization. Multidisciplinarity is practiced much less in the South than elsewhere. At the academic level, it is more acceptable for international projects to involve scholars from different disciplines than it is for national ones.

A number of topics are of interest to several countries or disciplines. They have the potential to link academics from the North and from the South to study:

- \* external debt and international financing
- \* the use of natural resources
- \* minimum social politics and social dumping
- \* economic impact of international migration
- \* intercultural and community relations
- \* social indicators related to globalization
- \* an international course or diploma on globalization (an online Masters degree, for example)

### **Understandings of Globalization**

The term "globalization" is understood in Tunisia in several ways:

1. Globalization is the supremacy of neo-liberalism on a global scale
2. Globalisation is the international free trade of goods and capital
3. Globalization is the internationalization of national political issues
4. Globalization is the intensification of information and communication flows brought about by the proliferation of satellite TV stations and the Internet

These views reflect the changing socio-economic and political landscape, as shaped by globalization, in the Mediterranean. In fact, globalization is a shifting site of analysis in the region, defined by external events, its effects, and its implications. The countries of the region have gone through a long period of strict control of foreign trade, state information control, and relative autonomy of international politics as a result of the previous East-West neutralization.

A country such as Tunisia, for example, is likely to experience major changes in these three areas (the role of the market, the flow of information, and international politics). The concept of globalization, as it appears in the local literature, is evolving with the interaction between the process and these changes.

One of the most obvious signs of globalization is freer international trade. This has made itself felt at the level of the citizenry. The citizen, as employee, enjoyed some social protection during the period of international trade control while enduring a lot of deprivation as a consumer. With globalization and the freeing of international trade, this citizen has become more vulnerable in the workplace and more pampered by the availability of products on the market.

With regard to politics, it is no longer uncommon to witness national authorities needing to contend with other countries, mostly from the West, on very local issues. This is part of the right of interference, which is claimed more and more by the United States and the EU. The right of interference is presented as part of the implementation of universal (human rights) values or

international security concerns.

For those early notions of globalization, the link between the phenomenon and the willingness of political authorities is fairly admitted. The process might be imposed by one partner or the other, but globalization, in this case, is put in place by institutional channels and is negotiated.<sup>1</sup>

The intensification of international communication and information flows is attributed to technological advances accompanying globalization and is seen to bring countries closer together. Understanding the effects of lifting communication barriers is as important as studying the impacts of implementing free trade zones.

Negotiated and spontaneous globalization processes act in complementary and interactive ways. At the moment, research conducted in Tunisia does not distinguish between these different aspects of globalization. Multidisciplinary and international cooperation is needed to understand the phenomenon as an integrated process.

### **Barriers to the Dissemination of Research on Globalization**

One of the principal obstacles faced by researchers in my country involves separation between scientific areas which leads academic scholars to become bound up in internal scholastic controversies. Scholars often fail to step intellectually outside the enclosure of their institution or their family of scientific discipline. There are several explanations for this institutional and disciplinary agoraphobia. One of them is related to the hiring criteria used by universities. Hiring does not penalize the lack of impact on other disciplines or on the world outside academia. Lack of available and open space for public debate on the issue of globalization is another obstacle. For complex reasons media are relatively homogeneous and draw very little on sources of information outside the country.

In the case of research on globalization, these obstacles are particularly important. Indeed, globalization studies is an area where perspectives from different disciplines can benefit each other. Lack of motivation and spaces for such exchanges limit the opportunities for developing more fruitful research. This further limits the interest and the awareness of the general public and about the process of globalization itself.

Not all transnational collaboration will permit us to overcome these obstacles. One may even fear that some types of international collaboration can lead to a diversion of research to centres outside developing countries. Placing some conditions on collaboration might help to avoid such a situation. One condition is to make sure that transnational projects address globalization on an interdisciplinary basis. Another condition is to plan in advance how research will be disseminated and through what channels. Strategies for enhancing the visibility of international research which involve local faculty from the South are a key factor in such research being apprehended by the public at large.

Finally, the products of transnational collaboration themselves are potentially of greater inherent interest as they provide a more global perspective on the themes examined; such a perspective is appropriate for globalization issues.

### **Appadurai's Analysis**

Some of the observations made by Professor Appadurai in his article, "Grassroots Globalization and

the Research Imagination" (2000) are relevant to research on globalization in Tunisia:

1. Academics in Tunisia tend to raise internal controversies within academically separated groups. But, unlike their counterparts in the West, the boundaries between such groups are less moved by ideology than by professional considerations.
2. The concerns and issues addressed by Tunisian researchers, and created by the social forces involved in globalization, are not the same as those raised in the northern countries. There is often a mutual lack of information on the challenges that globalization presents elsewhere, and these challenges may be different in the North and South. A comprehensive approach to globalization, which takes into account the complexity of the issue and differences in perception, would lead to a better understanding of the phenomenon. Even within the Mediterranean region, elites with the same ideological background may arrive at different analyses, depending on whether they belong to the northern or southern Mediterranean shore.
3. Academic research on globalization in Tunisia is much more focused on the impact of the phenomenon and less on understanding the phenomenon itself.
4. The pace of globalization is much faster in Tunisia than the progress of research on the topic. The general public may have trouble finding timely insights on it. Often neither the population nor the major actors are able to seize the key changes associated with globalization in order to set up appropriate strategies for dealing with its manifestations and its evolution.

In conclusion, internationalization of knowledge on globalization and strong internationalization of research on the issue are the two pillars on which new and promising research projects might be built.

## Works Cited

**Appadurai, Arjun.** 2000. Grassroots globalization and the research imagination. *Public Culture* 12 (1): 1-19.

## Notes

1. The political right of interference is, for example, mentioned in the free trade zone agreements linking EU and Southern Mediterranean countries under the cover of institutional conditions.