

Eur Orient n°38 - 2012

LA TUNISIE DU XXI^e SIÈCLE
Quels pouvoirs pour quels modèles de société ?
Dossier dirigé par Ahmed Jdey

Sommaire

* Présentation.....	7
* Mohamed Abdel-Azim Des révolutions, des malentendus et des impasses.....	15
* Lotfi Aïssa La Tunisie postrévolutionnaire : société civile et activisme politique	47
* Fathi Bahri Une révolte et des écrits : Maysara, les Berbères et le Maghreb à la fin de l'époque Omeyyade.....	61
* Michel Carlier Tunisie : L'après révolution du jasmin. Une démocratie qui cherche sa voie. Un peuple inquiet pour son avenir.....	71
* Mahmoud Ettayeb Allégeances et puissances dans la régence de Tunis dans la deuxième moitié du XIX ^e (entre 1864 et 1881)	87
* Ahmed Jdey Pour une histoire de la Tunisie du 14 janvier 2011 : la fin d'un dictateur et l'amorce de la construction démocratique.....	95
* Nabih Jerad La Révolution tunisienne : des mots qui ont fait l'Histoire aux enjeux des langues	113
* Ronald Abderrahman Judy Restless Tunisians	137

* Mohamed Salah Omri The Movement Perspectives : Legacies and representations	149
* Mounir Saidani Mouvements sociaux et alternatives de modernités : le cas de la révolution tunisienne	165
* Silvia Marsans-Saklyl The Tunisian Revolution : Making and Meaning of an Event	185
Des militants des droits de l'homme de Toulouse à Tunis novembre 2011	201
* Ata Ayati Une page du nationalisme tunisien.....	249
* Revue des livres	261
• Trita PARSI , A Single Roll of the Dice, Obama's Diplomacy with Iran, (Michel Makinsky) • Julien ZARIFIAN , Les États-Unis au Sud Caucase post-soviétique (Arménie, Azerbaïdjan, Géorgie)(Ata Ayati) • Alain CHAOULLI , Les Juifs d'Iran à travers leurs musiciens(Ata Ayati)	
* Revue des périodiques	271
• <i>Questions internationales</i> , AFPAK, n° 50, juillet-août 2011, La documentation Française(Ata Ayati) • <i>La nouvelle revue Géopolitique</i> , La France dans le monde. Ses atouts gagnants. n° 4, avril-mai-juin 2012 (Ata Ayati) • <i>RAWAFID</i> , Revue de l'Institut Supérieur d'Histoire du Mouvement National, n° 16, 2011(Ata Ayati)	

The Movement Perspectives: Legacies and representations

Mohamed Salah Omri

Lecturer in Modern Arabic, Tutorial Fellow,
St. John's College, University of Oxford¹

Abstract

The movement Perspectives and its individual members have left a lasting impact on the culture and practice of protest in independent Tunisia. Through a novel (Cactus Flower), a film (Golden Horseshoes) and a play (Fifty), the essay follows the changing representations of the movement and of its legacy, locating both within the changing contexts of Tunisian history and politics, from the late 1960s to the eve of the January revolution. It argues that the failure of the Bourguibist state to transform Tunisians from subjects to free and empowered citizens was first revealed by the struggle of Perspectives and remained the guiding principle of opposition since.

Résumé

Le Mouvement Perspectives et ses membres en tant qu'individus ont eu un effet durable sur la culture et la pratique de protestation dans la Tunisie indépendante. À partir d'un roman (Fleur de cactus), un film (Sabots en or) et une pièce de théâtre (Cinquante), l'essai suit l'évolution des représentations du mouvement ainsi que son héritage en situant les deux dans les contextes changeants de la politique et de l'histoire tunisiennes, à partir des années 1960 jusqu'à l'aube de la révolution. L'essai maintient que l'échec de l'État de Bourguiba de transformer les tunisiens de sujets en citoyens libres et souverains a été démasqué par la lutte de Perspectives et demeure le principe directeur de l'opposition depuis cette date.

¹ Latest publications: « A Revolution of Dignity and Poetry », *Boundary 2* (39), 2012, p. 137-165. Champs de recherche : Littérature Arabe moderne ; littérature compare ; études culturelles du Maghreb ; Tunisie ; la méditerranée dans la littérature.

THE starting point of this inquiry is a movement of political and cultural protest which marked independent Tunisia in the 1960s and 70s and continued to have reverberations in different ways up to the present time. By this, I mean the Movement Perspectives (*harakat afaq*), known by the title of its journal (*Perspectives tunisiennes pour une vie meilleure*), which run from August 1963 to October 1971 and published 63 issues. The movement started as a youth study and thinking enterprise in the early 1960s, known as Groupe d'Etudes et d'Action Socialistes Tunisien (the Tunisian Group for Socialist Studies and Action), henceforth Geast by its French acronym, and continued in one way or another through the 1970s. Historian Abdeljalil Temimi, to whom we owe the most comprehensive act of preservation of this group's memory in a series of five seminars he convened in 2003 and 2004 called Perspectives: « a shining landmark in the record of intellectual modernity in the Tunisian society » (*Perspectives* 15 Arabic).² He adds: « the group Perspectives was the voice of the Tunisian elite who laid out a comprehensive plan to insert the country into real modernization; but it was unable to communicate its political and intellectual message because of the logic of exclusion and the repression perpetrated against its figureheads and leaders » (21 Arabic). This, he argues, deprived the country as a whole of their talent and the opportunity to found a visionary politics based on pluralism (21 Arabic).

In self-representation as well as in public perception, Perspectivists come across as intellectuals, militants and humanists all at once. They defined what it meant to be a political prisoner and came to be associated with the infamous prisons, Nadhour and Borj Erroumi, and the lore around them in songs, poetry and collective consciousness. The group members also became symbols of resistance and courage, particularly for the political Left and the student movement in the 1970s and 80s. They included now famous names: Gilbert Naccache, Nouri Bouzid, Hama Hammami, Mohamed Ben Jannet, Noureddine Ben Khidhr, Fathi Belhaj Yahia, Mohamed Charfi, Ahmed Ben Othman, Mohamed Salah FLIS, Khmaies Chammari and famous women: Zayneb Charni, Amel Ben Abba... From the group would emerge the most influential leftist movements: al-Amel al-Tounsi, al-Shu'la, Parti des ouvriers communiste tunisien (POCT), Mouvement des patriotes democrates (MOPAD). In one way or another they gave birth to the Tunisian Left.³ The movement « gathered all sorts of people: from genuine liberals to extreme Left activists, young people who passed through Arab socialism, Trotskists, communists, and students who rebelled against the repression which became routine in Tunisia » (Temimi, 28, French). Once they left

² Temimi, Abdeljalil, ed. *Le rôle politique et culturel de Perspectives et Perspectivistes dans la Tunisie indépendante*. Tunis: Ftersi, 2008. All translations from Arabic and French are mine unless stated otherwise. Proper names are spelled following the French convention.

³ The exception was the Tunisian Communist Party which was founded in 1934.

jail and internal or external exile, they ended up as journalists, academics, writers, publishers. Several of them, fittingly, will enter the fields of human rights and non-governmental organisations.

The itinerary of prominent Perspectivists reflects a wide spectrum of opinions and directions. The Perspectivist Fethi Belhaj Yahia singles out four prominent members of Perspectives and sums up their itineraries and effect after leaving prison. Ben Khidhr continued his activity in the fields of human rights, culture and publishing. Rashid Ben Lallouna isolated himself from the group but continued to think about global issues of the Left. Mohamed Charfi left prison quickly after apologizing to Bourguiba but continued to affect the country as influential academic and mentor to generations of activists. He also joined the government of Zine al Abidine Ben Ali and impacted its educational policy (partially in response to the rise of Islamism). Gilbert Naccache, a Tunisian Jew by origin, resisted, wrote (in French) and helped constitute the movement of democratic Women (Temimi 79-81 Arabic). Any of these lines and others as well, such as the radical Left movements which emerged from Perspectives or in relation to it, deserves a separate study. But the aim here is a reflection on the overall meaning, impact and cultural representation of this « pioneering » movement. I will zero in on key elements, namely, the relationship to Bourguiba's legacy; attitudes to language as marker of identity as well as tool of protest; and practices of citizenship, such as political protest, cultural resistance, and civil society. After commenting on each of these briefly, I will trace landmark recalls of the movement in the cultural sphere, mainly through a novel – *Zahrat al-Sabbar* (Cactus Flower), written in 1984-5; a film – *Sfayih min dhabab* (Golden Horseshoes) (1988) and a play – *Khamsoun* (Fifty) (2006). One of the aims is to show how the meaning of Perspectives changed over time. This wide time frame will allow reflection on wider issues pertinent to the moment at hand, namely the middle of the 1980s; the immediate aftermath of Ben Ali's access to power in 1987 and the period preceding the January 2011 revolution. With this, I aim to take the long view of the roots and representations of political protest in Tunisia.

Bourguiba's prodigal children

Unlike the Youssefist movement, which was in open conflict with Bourguiba over the project of the ideological orientations of the nation as a whole, particularly in its relation to the wider Arab world, Perspectivists were in many ways, as Ben Khidhr put it, the « natural children » of Bourguiba (Temimi 27 Arabic).⁴ In fact they saw themselves as true inheritors of his

⁴ By the name of its leader, Salah Ben Youssef, who opposed Bourguiba early on, was expelled from the ruling party, exiled and then assassinated in Germany, most likely under orders from Bourguiba. The canvass of my dense summary of Tunisian history is informed by the

modernizing project and legitimate proponents of its logical end, namely, a democratic and socially fair state.⁵ What were the relevant pillars of this modernizing project?

Embedded in Tunisia's independence and within its movement of national liberation from French rule was a project of pervasive and radical modernisation of society and culture. Such modernization was a state project, made possible because of the grip and legitimacy of Bourguiba and the state. The two did everything to turn Tunisians from Beylical and colonial subjects into modern subjects. Bourguiba was the pedagogue, the teacher, and the father figure, all at once. The « modernization of mentalities » he used to talk about in his speeches around the country, was a state and personal project at once. Cultural modernization, in the wide sense, including religion, education and cultural institutions, aimed at covering the whole of the territory, the school system, both sexes, and all ages. Some of its manifestations and action included: the promulgation of a progressive and daring Personal Status Code; control over religious interpretation by the state; planned universal and free education; planned cultural policy, including houses of culture even in small towns, local and mobile libraries, local and mobile cinemas; classes in art, theatre and music in schools, and often beyond them.⁶ Local society (*al-mujtama' al-abli*), including traditional leadership, was dismantled and replaced by powerful institutions run by professionals. A civil state was established, with fairly competent administration, curtailed religious institutions and a weak and depoliticized army.

But the transformation in cultural production in the late 1960s and 70s coincided with a key realization that the independence state did not complete its mission. That realization, which has driven the protest movements ever since, has been initiated, theorized and implemented as a programme of action by the group Perspectives at first and by Perspectivists as individuals after that. They laid bare the state's failure to turn Tunisians from subjects (*ra'ayah*) to citizens (*muwatinun*) in terms of empowerment, entitlement and accountability. Indeed, no civil society was created and democracy was not permitted. This explains why the struggle for civil society and citizenship – including in and through literature, cinema, theatre – rather

work of Hedi Timoumi, *Tunis, 1956-1987* (Tunis: Dar Mhamed Ali, 2006), Munsif Wannas (*al-dawla wa al-mas'alah al-thaqafyya fi tunis*) (The State and the cultural question in Tunisia) (Tunis: dar al-mithaq, 1988) and others....

⁵ In an interview given in 2002 to Michel Camau et Vincent Geisser, Ben Khidhr adds that, they for example, sided with Bourguiba in his conflict with Nasser, but they also were against his personal power and his positions in relation to Vietnam. Source : <http://nbk-ben-khedher.blogspot.com/2012/02/entretien-avec-m-noureddine-ben-khidher.html>

⁶ See UNESCO report of 1982, where the country profile on Tunisia details cultural policy from 1961 to 1981). CLT-82/Mondiacult/REF.1/ARB. Paris, 21 June 1982. Translated from the French original by UNESCO.

than revolutionary change, dominated Perspectives until the mid-seventies. In this sense, Perspectivists were Bourguiba's progeny and prodigal children at the same time. Their demands, their vocabulary and even their means were within the wider Bourguibian framework. They fought the state with its own logic, referring to its own aims and project. They were the advocates of what the state has not achieved internally and externally, linking with the working classes and students inside Tunisia and international movements outside it. They were the first example and manifestation of this practice of citizenship.⁷

With the repression and virtual dismantling of Perspectives, Bourguiba, in Ben Khidhr's words in 2003, « impoverished his people and left them without heirs of Bourguism in its positivist and rational meaning. He committed a mistake against the entire people. I believe we are still suffering from this absence today » (Temimi 27). He adds: « Bourguiba was responsible for killing the generation of communication (tawasul) », a generation capable of creating a « culture of democracy » (Temimi 112 Arabic). With this, the possibility of linking the nationalist project with the democratic one came to a brutal end (Temimi, 141 Arabic). I suggest that such project has been the main focus of protest and resistance movements since then, and will see in the January 2011 revolution its most radical expression as well as its most promising possibility. Much of the culture of protest is imbued with this meaning in content as in form. It can be read as expression of this desire for rights, freedom, and empowerment. *Harakat at-tali'a al-adabiyya* (The literary vanguard movement) (late 1970s early 80s) and *Al-Masrah al-Jadid* (New Theatre) (1974-1988), would become the most sophisticated expression of this.

One other important link between Bourguiba and Perspectivists was that both were staunchly Tunisian in focus. This was clear in their attitude towards language. Bourguiba had excellent command of classical Arabic and French, but his mark was most lasting and most effective in his use of dialect in its regional variations in his numerous direct speeches and through radio and television. Tunisian dialect was in fact to become the locus of a Tunisianness, argued most prominently in books like Bachir Benslama's 1974 *al-Shakhsiyya al-Tunisiyya*, but was also the language of Perspectives' newspaper *al-Amil* at Tounsi (The Tunisian Worker), which aimed to address workers in « their » language.⁸ (*Perspectives* itself was written in French). This was apparently an important issue, so much so that when the newspaper adopted standard Arabic in 1975, Naccache would see in this a change in political orientation, towards pan-Arabism. It was a « thunder strike », he recalls, which would spell the end

7 There were of course other forms of opposition – the Arab nationalist Youssefist movement, mentioned above; small groups of radical opponents to Bourguiba; and, from the late 1970s, Islamists and splinter groups of the ruling party.

8 See Omri, Mohamed-Salah, *Nationalism, Islam and World Literature* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 34 and ff. on the debate about language and identity in Tunisia at the time.

of Perspectives (Temimi 41 French). Belhaj Yahia would see in it a regression from debate and thinking; from acting on the language to acquiescence to the tradition, which would bring with it a tendency towards conforming to social norms rather than challenging them (Temimi 82-3 Arabic). It marked a move governed by political action without intellectual dimension. At stake, Belhaj Yahia suggests, were the foundations of Perspectives, namely linking freedom of the citizen to that of the nation (86). These freedoms included a remarkable openness about gender relations and equality. In literature and the performing arts, this dialect will find a new poeticity of its own, one that builds on the long tradition of singing and oral poetry in the dialect. To write in this language became in itself a political stance which flagged open siding with common people and local reality while imbuing their language with a poeticity and idiomaticity that appear crafted, even researched. The iconic play, « *Ghassalat al-Nawadir* » by the group New Theatre would give this language wider and enduring impact around the country and set standards others will follow, in cinema and theatre, and even in the novel, as does Tabai in *Cactus Flower*, as I will show below.⁹ *Al-tali'a al-adabiyya*, would integrate this tendency in its theory as well as practice of literature.¹⁰ Both had strong connections to Perspectives.

With such diverse profiles, popular appeal, and impact on the cultural field, it was expected that Perspectives, perhaps more than any other opposition formation, will be the subject of literary and artistic representation.

Indeed, Perspectives and Perspectivists, as individuals, are recalled and remembered in works that run from criticism, to retrospectives, to nostalgia and commemoration. The group's key members were jailed, tortured, expelled from jobs, exiled around the country and abroad, entered universities, civil society and human rights organizations, took part in cultural production, led trade unions activities, and even joined government as ministers and high officials. As a result, they elicited a wide spectrum of responses, including several memoirs and autobiographical novels by members of the group.¹¹ Forms and styles of recall do also affect such process and color it. I will limit myself to seminal cultural acts of recall, starting with a contemporaneous work, a sort of *histoire a vif*, albeit in fictional form.

Autopsy of a youth movement

Zabrat al-Sabbar (Cactus Flower) was composed initially in 1984 and 1985, revised in 1987-89 as stated in the text (172) and published only in

⁹ On language in this theatre see the long interview with founding member, Fadhel Jaibi: <http://jamiatalhurriyat.org/ar/figures/presentation.php?IDfiche=10>.

¹⁰ See the beginning of a reflection on this in my essay, « A Revolution of Dignity and Poetry », *Boundary 2*, 39(1), March 2012, p. 135-167.

¹¹ Other responses include songs, novels, poetry, films, memoirs, testimonies and academic studies. A full view will be the subject of a more substantial study underway.

1991.¹² The novel is important because it was written before 1987, the date when Zine Alabidin Ben Ali took power, a seismic event in the history of the country. The book is an example of confession, revision, and analysis. It is significant for a discussion of Perspectives and the Left more widely in three respects: its library, its language and the dynamics among its characters, as representatives of social groups. In what follows, I will look at the cultural, linguistic and class dynamic within which Perspectives is perceived and recalled, starting with the latter.

The book mimics the social composition of the movement by focussing on the youth, their collective life and their social origins. Nine chapters (fusul) cover a reunion lasting about the same number of hours during which two ex-lovers review the Tunisian Left, mainly since 1967, and the key moment, which marked the transformation of one Perspectives member into a legend. By this I mean the arrest, trial and sentence of Mohamed Ben Jannet to 20 years for leading the first large-scale student demonstration against the collusion of his government and other Arab states with the American government and others in the aftermath of the 1967 war and defeat. The events are recorded with some precision in the novel (pp. 131-31). Ahmed, the naive and wealthy 14 year old, asks his father and his uncle to explain the events he just witnessed: « men in black helmets encircling masses of screaming people...I saw sticks rising up in the air, faces split open and bodies falling to the ground twisting with pain, like in the cinema » (131). The father was merciless: « A bunch of kids whom we teach and spend money on only to see them bite the hands that fed them. Damn them! What do I care about the Middle East? » (131). The uncle, on the other hand, takes Ahmed to the side and explains his puzzlement at what the term *taalib* mean. The word refers to university student but also means to demand, to seek, and a beggar. The uncle uses the full range of these meanings in his response: « What an idiot! Where are you living? What are they teaching you at school? *Taalib*: a university student. A beggar at Sidi Mehrez. A seeker of knowledge. Demanding a fight. Demanding the release of Ben Jannet who was sentenced to 20 years of hard labour. Demanding that Mr. Humphrey leaves the Tunisian soil immediately. Seeking revenge. Seeking war... » (132).¹³ Beyond the narrative, this statement indexes what the student movement stood for at the time.

12 *Zahrat al-Sabbar* (Cactus Flower). Tunis: Dar al-Janub, 1991.

13 This is a reference to the visit by the US Vice President Hubert Humphrey on January 10th 1968, which was met by student protests who accused president Johnson of being an « assassin » with reference to the Vietnam war. See the New York Times report on: <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1665&dat=19680110&tid=QRsaAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=ViQEAAAAIIBAJ&pg=6434,579163>. The shocking severity of the sentence handed to Mohamed Ben Jannet will prove to be a watershed in the history of student movements in Tunisia, and that of Perspectives as well.

A triangle of characters and a love triangle are at the heart of the story. Ahmed, an urban and well off student at the law faculty, his girlfriend Raja who hails from the old city district Bab al Khadhra and Adel, her classmate in French at the faculty of letters and Ahmed's closest friend, comes from Gafsa in the South of the country. Their social backgrounds determine to a large extent their politics, rendering them sometimes feel as types and symbols.¹⁴

Predictably, Adil is radical, even extremist while Ahmed starts as a rebel against his background and then becomes informant against his peers. Adel will resist and suffer, Ahmed will leave the country and make a comfortable life in France, at which time Raja will marry Adil. Raja summarises his short life thus: « When Adil stood before a judge he was 22 years old, had lost two of his front teeth and started his journey with diabetes and extremism. His end was on a track carrying fuel, between Boufisha and Nfidha, one afternoon in May » (72). Adil spends three and a half years in Borj al Rumi (the notorious prison, mentioned above), loses his younger brother to suicide as a result of rape in prison and is exiled to the far south of the country. Ahmed recalls his own itinerary: « I did not enter the organisation to spy on him (Adel). I did it when I discovered the gulf separating reality from what my family and my environment told me it was like. I was in some way taking revenge on my father and his fortune and on my mother and her glorious Turkish history » (94). He adds: « I was subject to suspicion from the beginning but Adel guaranteed my trustworthiness and sincerity » (95). Ahmed will become the subject of struggle between his mother and Adel. His mother hated Adel and told him on one occasion: « Ahmed is on my side and will not betray my interest no matter your temptation. Consider whatever you are filling his head with a mere entraining game. We rule the country and the people; and those who are not satisfied with that should either leave it or will see their teeth broken » (96). Adil indexes a turning point in Perspectives' history by the early 1970s almost to the letter. The movement was being radicalised through government repression, internal ideological debates and the influx of new members, largely students coming from the interior of the country in greater and greater numbers. *Al-Amil al-Tounisi* (The Tunisian Worker) would emerge at this time along with new forms of opposition as well as new orientations, including pan-Arabism, and more emphasis on action. Naccache recalls: « 1975 was the thunder strike. » In prison, Perspectives received a copy of the newspaper *al-Amel al-Tunisi* (The Tunisian Worker), with a new logo, written in classical Arabic, choosing the side of guerrilla and peasants, and an orientation favourable to Arab nationalism (Temimi 41 French). The

¹⁴ Ahmed introduces Raja to Adil on a specific date, 1973 (69). This is important, and so are other dates, recalled deliberately (1974 trials, 1978 Labour crisis, 1984 bread uprising). We are not told of direct relationship between these characters and Perspectives but all is thinly disguised.

details of this change are not as relevant to the present study as the fact that the movement began to disperse, or rather, as many have argued, coalesce into directions that were there in the first place but were no longer possible to contain within such a loose collective. With this, came changes in political behaviour, ethics and discipline, more fitting of traditional leftist parties. The novel does not pursue these lines. Instead it zeroes in on what I would call the Perspectives ethos: linking struggle for political freedom to personal freedoms, including in the domain of sexual life; intense preoccupation with local and global culture; deep interest in the Tunisian reality and steadfast resistance.

What keeps this community together is also multilingualism, paradoxical as it may seem.¹⁵ Dialect is what separates the flow of thought of Raja, the main character and narrator, from other types of narration. Standard Arabic symbolises the language of her alienation. One instance of its dramatic uses spans nine pages, and does so paradoxically in a letter *written* by Raja to Ahmed. Raja's letter (pp. 77-88) is a virtual long prose poem or artistic prose in the dialect. She tells the doctor that the letter starts in French and continues in « our dialect (*darija*) ». The French part is missing. Here, as elsewhere, languages compete for space and for significance. Standard Arabic shapes the narrative, occupies the outer space of debate, descriptions, and dialogue while the inner world is inhabited by dialect. I suggest that the novel owes this formal feature to the language debate led by Perspectives and the literary avant-garde movement I discuss above. Fusha does not hold exclusive position as the expression of the character's identity and inner thinking.

The novel portrays a community of young men and women spending their time reading widely, mixing freely in public and private spaces, and discussing the affairs of their country. Raja, Ahmed and Adil read widely, from modernist poetry (Eliot) and French enlightenment philosophers to Marxist books. They listen to iconic stars, from the French Piaf and Brel to the American Bob Dylan to the Egyptian Sheikh Imam and the Tunisian diva, Saliha. This was pretty much the canon of progressives at the time. But Raja, as well as Adil when he leaves jail, would eventually open up to texts and ideas from al-Hallaj and al-Niffari, and question their earlier sources of knowledge. This will mark a revision of Perspectives, led by Adil, by which he decides to pay more attention to the people and small acts along with interest in the history and heritage of Tunisia. He rejects being trapped in the role of « marginal crazy Leftist intellectual » or turned into an icon to be used as an old « communist hero » (155, 156). He declares himself the enemy of

¹⁵ The novel was a first on several levels. It is the first novel by a woman, which takes the Left as its subject and the first fictional text to use dialect, not only in dialogue but also in stream of consciousness and internal monologues. This is one of its main strengths. In this regard, the novel challenges other creative uses of diglossia in Arabic literature as a whole.

anyone who « claims he is right and the rest are wrong » (155). He sees his place among the people, trying to understand them better and open their minds in small steps, which prompts him to return to his native Gafsa. Such revision and change can be read as a critique of the movement and a recording of its change at the same time. Adil's disillusionment and Ahmed's betrayal will have strong echoes in Nouri Bouzid's film *Golden Horseshoes* (1989), as I will explain below.

The Personal despair of a Gramscian intellectual

The film shows the personal despair of Youssef Soltane (Hichem Roustom), a Left wing former political prisoner torn between his experiences in jail and the changing political and social landscape of Tunisia during his absence. Much has been made of the autobiographical nature of the film. Nouri Bouzid was himself jailed from 1973 to 1979 for political activities as member of Perspectives. He was tortured and witnessed torture. There, we learn from his prison mate Gilbert Naccache, he continued his creative work, issuing a magazine of caricatures and humour writings, *Les camarads déchainés* (the unchained comrades), a take on the French satirical newspaper *Le canard enchainé* (The chained duck) (Temimi 44 French). He was also an aspiring poet in Tunisian dialect in particular, writing, among others, the closing song in the film under discussion and a collection of poetry.¹⁶ Perhaps like him, Youssef Soltane, leaves prison « dispersed » (*mfarrit*) as he put it. He suffered brutal torture, isolation, loss of support, the dismantling of the « organization » and a careless society, which turned its back on those who fought for it. To top it all, Islamism was on the rise, although to lesser degree than what we will see in Jaibi's play. Politics has caused his family to disperse (divorce and loss of his children's custody). The film treats the subjects from an intellectuals' point of view rather than through the lenses of the average citizen.

At some point Youssef talks to his reflection in a mirror: « Youssef Soltan! You are a forbidden citizen. And you will stay all your life forbidden ». To illustrate this forbidden and denied citizenship, Yusuf is kept out of public spaces. He lives in the shadows after leaving prison, itself a place of darkness and oblivion. Most of the film takes place at night, in deserted streets, marginal parts of town (brothel, basement, near the sea at night, at a former lover's apartment). One could even say that Youssef still lives in the shadows as the film is mostly made up of memories and flashbacks; he lives in his mind rather than in the reality around him. This reality appears fragmented in the film through flashing images whose chronology and meaning cannot be grasped until later in the narrative. The overall picture is that of defeat,

¹⁶ His collection of poems, *Bahhar* (Sailor).

a defeat somewhat foreseen but difficult to read, as Armes suggests.¹⁷ Yusuf concludes: « After 25 years, you realize what you wanted to do, and that none of it is done. Continue dreaming all your life, if they even let you dream. Socialism deceived you; Nasserism turned into mere memory; all ended with Marxism, which disintegrated between your fingers, and left you in disarray. »

In the film, Youssef is writing intermittently, a novel or an autobiography of sorts, that he would eventually burn.¹⁸ This act is contrasted with images of him in his earlier life as activist university professor burning political tracts and evidence to prevent them from falling into the hands of the police. Yusuf reflects on it: « A thinker (*mufakkir*)? About what? What [writings or thought] did you leave behind you? They even prevented you from writing. »¹⁹ In the first instance, his writings are censored because they defy the state while in the second he prevents his own writings from reaching a public. This is a damning indictment of the whole act of writing of this sort of experience. It highlights the loss of relevance and the waning belief that drove writing. This is also an allusion to the futility, or perhaps the impossibility, of writing and narrating the trauma Youssef endured. Torture is in fact shown graphically in the film, but is rarely talked about. This unexpressibility of torture and its lasting scars is picked up in Jaibi's play almost two decades later.

Here, this trauma is exacerbated by the radically altered ideological landscape, revealed through the following interchange between Youssef and his brother Abdallah (Fethi Haddaoui):

Abdallah: You are supported financially by a woman now. Shame on the son of the South that you are! Shame on you and on the Left you belong to! They scattered in the blink of an eye. You all thought you knew the insides of the country. You thought you and the likes of you were capable of ruling the country, leaders of the people. You messed things up: some call themselves Marxists; others revolutionaries, Trotskists, Maoists, Watad (Democratic Patriots), pan-Arabists...

Youssef: You turned politics into a religion, a politics that cannot handle doubt. I need doubt.

Abdallah: You are a loser, and will always remain a loser.

Youssef: I am not a loser. I spend 10 years of my life so that you, and the likes of you, can speak up.

17 Armes, Roy, *Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 138.

18 Just like the other Yusuf in the play, who records his memories after losing speech.

19 The irony is that as he is burning the papers, someone advises him to burn them only if they were in Arabic, the word of God. (Youssef confesses his atheism, earlier on.) (Here we are taken to a scene in prison where a pen is smuggled to him at great risk to him and to the guard).

Youssef clearly believes he was fighting for free speech regardless of who would benefit from it, i.e., democracy for all. This is the crux of his disillusionment and of that of scores of Leftist activists after him: they see their rights denied by those whom they thought they went to prison to liberate. The democracy and the sense of citizenship that drove their struggle are now subjected to two forces, the state and Islamists. Youssef, who lashes out at his wife and children because their noise is preventing him from reading Gramsci, and whose wife accuses of marrying politics, emerges in an environment where his only connection was a dispersed family, a disinterested former lover, and one old neighbour. Some of his isolation is self-inflicted but things have also moved on in different directions as the conversation with his brother, mentioned above, reveals. The film records a complete closing up of possibilities, which marked the end of Bourguiba's reign, and portrays the environment within which Ben Ali would emerge. Youssef's oppositional politics aimed at expanding the « secularized » modernity of Bourguiba's time and democratizing it. Now, he finds himself in a largely Islamized environment where even personal freedoms for himself and his children were under threat.²⁰ With Ben Ali, Bouzid's film was allowed and so were a number of key texts banned under Bourguiba.²¹ There was a widow for freedom and participation in the construction of civil society again. Some Perspectives figures took the opportunity and joined the government, as I mention above, only to discover that it would even exacerbate the repressive policy of its predecessor and turn to open authoritarianism. The turn of events was such in fact that, a decade later, as seen through Jaïbi's play, the loss became complete.²²

Between state violence and re-islamization of society

Khamsoun (Fifty) attracted huge attention at home and across the Arab world, Europe, the United States and even Japan.²³ In the play, the family is a small but significant one. A father, Youssef, leftist and secular; knew long jail for his ideas (12 years) and severe torture; his wife, Maryam, who shares his past and beliefs and an only daughter, Amel, raised in a household that

20 His brother Abdallah pressured his daughter to dress modestly and not to pursue her acting. Yusuf himself in fact was turning conservative in some way.

21 Ben Ali lifted the ban on several publications including landmark popular collections by Awlad Ahmed and Tahar AL Hammami; a novel and essays by Mouncef Marzuki.

22 The film concludes with scenes where the white horse is slaughtered (as ordered by Abdallah, we assume), and those of Youssef collapsing in the shower in an act of combined ritual cleansing and suicide. A white horse running across a field and onto a beach, accompanied by a song (written by Bouzid, sung and put to music by Anouar Brahim) urging it to run freely closes the film.

23 It was first performed in the Odeon in Paris on 7 June 2006. The text was published as Baccar, Jalila, *Khamsun*, (Tunis: al-Dar al-Janoub, 2007).

taught her to stand against injustice. On the footsteps of her parents, she takes to activism while in high school and is expelled for organizing protests to denounce Ariel Sharon's visit to al-Aqsa mosque. The parents, helped by human rights activists in France, manage to get her registered at university in Paris. There she is set to continue her progressive politics and liberal lifestyle. Or so her parents thought, until they receive the following email from her: « ana muslimah wa Allahu 'ala ma aqulu shahid » (I am a believer and Allah is witness to what I say). Soon a letter would follow with a picture of Amel wearing hijab (veil) and the news that she was coming home. What will be the reaction of her parents who taught her Marxism as well as « to believe that her body and her mind belong to her alone »?

Telling is the fact that Amel « converts » in France and returns home, triggering deep soul searching and a new set of questions facing secular intellectuals more widely. Re-islamization is seen as « imported », alien to the body of the family and of the nation, but still a family and national matter, regardless. Yet, there is more to this distancing; there may be a feeling of betrayal. Jaibi's secularism is French in a way (by education, artistic affiliations, etc). And France is seen as traditionally a bastion for the secular: it is where the seculars have gone – still go – when under threat. No more, the play tells us. Re-Islamisation can originate in the heart of the secular West and in one of the most secularised Arab states. It is a globalised phenomenon, just like socialism was in the time of Amel's parents.²⁴ But in *Khamsoun*, Amel's « conversion » unsettles the family, the mother articulates her doubts and desire to understand and rationalise. This sets in motion an archaeology of state violence against both the Left and the Islamists, a self-critique of Leftist tactics and genuine questioning. And it is here where *Perspectives* becomes directly relevant. *Khamsoun* is, in important ways, a commemoration, perhaps even a memorial to Perpectivists, their legacy and their plight. Mariyam, Amel's mother tracks down a former Torturer, Gaddour, who reminds her that she was the first woman to bring her jailed husband a bouquet of flowers (124). What ensues is a revealing exchange between the two:

Maryam: Youssef. You hated him.

Ghaddour: No

Maryam: and Noureddine?

Ghaddour: No

Maryam: and Munsif:

Ghaddour: No.

²⁴ The Arabic novels *Ana Abya* (1961) by Leila Baalabakki and *al-Bab al-Maftuh* (1960) by Latifa AL-Zayyat are classic examples of this. Jaibi's play is instructive. For the order of things was not like this at their parents' time. The usual scenario was the rebellious daughter, who rejects the law of the father and his conservative beliefs, leaving the parents trying to cope.

Maryam: And Habib; Tahar; Aicha; Dalila; Ahmed; Fathi; Gilbert; Hamma; Salih; Sadiq; Ibrahim; Slim?

She lists more names.

Maryam: The marks of your teeth are still on Youssef's arm.

He laughs.

Ghaddour: They are all tattooed. (128)

Inscribed in the dialogue are the names of prominent Perspectivists.²⁵ Two of them had just died, which, Baccar confesses, has occasioned the play.²⁶ Later on, the play describes the torture methods they suffered, as Maryam reads from a notebook handed to her by Youssef in hospital.²⁷ Youssef dies on 20 March 2006, fifty years to the day since independence, hence the title play, *Khamsoun*. Through his life, an alternative and parallel history of Tunisia is told.²⁸ So, while the mother embarks on a trip to understand her daughter and the past of her husband, Youssef, is struck dumb by the sight of his daughter in veil. He loses the capacity to speak, i.e., the very thing he struggled for and paid dearly all his life. « He is a negative example to me », Says Jaibi, a cautionary tale. « I must not lose my voice ». « I am a secular democrat. And I will fight, with all the power I have, anyone who forces on me a non-secular and non-democratic system. »²⁹

Conclusion

The story of Perspectives, as seen through their own words and in the cultural texts discussed here, has elements of the epic, the tragic and the lyrical all at once. Foucault admits in an interview that the Tunisian youth of 1968 were nothing short of heroes who linked their being to brave and selfless political action. The reaction of Tunisian students was « a desire, an eagerness

25 Some mentioned above. The others are: Sadiq Ben Mhenni, Fathi Belhaj Yahia, Dalila Ben Othman, Aicha Belabid; Ibrahim Razgallah....

26 Belhaj Yahia, *al-habs kadhhab.. wa al-hay yrawwah* (Prison lies.. and those who survive will come home), *alawan*, 18 April, 2009. (<http://www.alawan.org>.)

27 See Temimi for detailed description of torture and intimidation by members of the group. See for example, Testimonies by Hammami and Fliss.

28 Along with this, the play records emerging new sources of contestation – represented by Amel and her peers – that poses a problem for the alternative protest movement that Perspectives and their legacy, represented here by the young student Lamia who presents herself as the continuation of Youssef's ideals and teachings (pp. 148-50). She does so, however, in a language that does not inspire hope as it is mostly made up of slogans and set dated statements.

29 Jaibi was, it must be noted, very close to Perspectives, although working on the cultural side from the beginning. The Poet Ali Saidane notes that while the historiography of Tunisian Left tends to separate intellectuals and artists from Leftist political activists, these two formed in fact one block (Temimi 164 Arabic). The key figures of Tunisian theatre – Fadhel Jaibi, Fadhel Jaziri, Tawfiq Jbali, Raouf Ben Amor, Raja Farhat – were among this block. « The group effectively functioned as an 'organic intellectual, in Gramsci's word », say Naccache.

and a capacity for absolute sacrifice without the least indication of suspect ambition or desire for power or personal benefit » (Temimi 213 Arabic). Through testimonies, as in acts of recall, Perspectives appear to have had concrete as well as less tangible effects. They set what we might call militant standards and an ethic of resistance. « Perspectives has entered, if not history, at least the common representation, by its capacity for struggle, its continuous mobilisation, its determined resistance in the face of repression. », Naccache suggests. Former Perspectives sum up their achievement: they refused to ask for pardon from Bourguiba; gave an example of how to conduct oneself with dignity and without recourse to violence in prison; institutionalised the mixing of women and men in resistance; the jailed women will serve as model and example for the Tunisian feminist movement later on (Temimi 48 French). According to Naccache, they represented « a hope that it was possible to do politics in another way, to be honest and brave » (Temimi 47 French), but also to join thinking to political action.

Their protest acts and their suffering were personal, often carried in the flesh, to allude to a famous novel. But their effect was mostly collective. Its organic intellectuals were a collective, diverse, multilingual, closely tied to the local reality and tuned to global perspectives. In addition, they were creative and humanist. The hardship they endured, particularly brutal torture, exclusion and internal as well external exile, endowed them with a powerful aura. This explains their enduring appeal, and even the lyricism and nostalgia surrounding their legacies and their key figures. The novel, the play and the film testify to this. That Perspectives are often referred to as Youssef-like figures (in Jaibi and in Bouzid) is telling. For the much-loved handsome prophet Youssef (Joseph) betrayed by his brothers, is almost a topos in narratives and poetry of the Arab Left. Mahmud Darweech's poem « Ana Youssef » is perhaps the most memorable formulation of it in the case of Palestine. But the Egyptian Yusuf Chahine and the Algerian Mohamed Chouikh have also made use of the legend in memorable films; the first to lament the fate of Ibn Rushd and his own and the second to look at the post-independence fate of a former Moujahid in the Algerian liberation war.³⁰ The Youssefs of Perspectives have been remembered lyrically as figured who suffered for the people, only to see themselves relegated to neglect, exclusion or denial, if not by former comrades (in the novel, Adil is betrayed by Ahmed), then by family, the state or the rising Islamism. Perspectives' reading of situations was neither always right nor homogenous. But the core of their goal, namely to create an independent space for the progressive political and cultural practice of citizenship remained at the heart of protest and resistance in Tunisia since the 1960s. Perspectives were the product of

³⁰ Darwish, « Ana Yusuf », *ward aqal* (1986); Youssef Chahine, *Al-Masir* (Destiny) (1997); Mohamed Chouikh, *Youssef or the legend of the seventh sleeper* (1993).

the cultural and social modernization as well as the political, economic and social authoritarianism that ensued. They were Bourguiba's victims and his prodigal children at the same time. In Tabai's novel, Raja comments: We are the natural product of the ruling party, its illegitimate children perhaps, but its children all the same » (Tabai 118). Their effect was felt deep in the country and over a long period of time.³¹

31 This paper is dedicated to Youssef Hamrouni (his real name), my high school teachers who was exiled in the 1970s to my bitterly cold home town from his southern warm city, Gabes, perhaps because he was Perspectivist. I recall one memorable occasion, when he interrupted his explanation of an Arabic classical poem to a class of 14 year olds, pinned a picture they've never seen before on the board, looked at it in admiration and asked: « Tell me, Mona Lisa, why are you looking at me wherever I moved? Am I a child you are guarding? Am I your lost lover? »