

Spring 5-12-2021

The Cost of Freedom: Revolutionary Hopes & Realities Among Young Tunisians A Decade Post-Arab Spring

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The Cost of Freedom: Revolutionary Hopes & Realities Among Young Tunisians A Decade Post-Arab Spring



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Presented to the Department of International Affairs of Skidmore College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors
in International Affairs

May 7, 2021

ABSTRACT

The Arab Spring of 2011 was an incredible tale of desperation, defiance, and vast political transformations—of civil society across North Africa and the Middle East revolting against dictatorship, corruption, and demanding democracy and freedom. Tunisia gained widespread international attention following the revolutions as the sole country to attain democracy. Many Western scholars and news reports, however, have dismissed Tunisia’s triumph as a lucky break and lauded its attainment of democracy and especially, its newfound freedom of expression. Such a focus on “Tunisian exceptionalism,” however, ignores the nuanced consequences that have accompanied the country’s vast political transformation.

Situated a decade post-Arab Spring in Tunisia, this research explores the impact of the Revolution and democracy on one particular facet of society: freedom. The concept of freedom is a complex, charged, and fluid one, and this paper seeks to unpack it through three main strands: its acquisition, performance and manifestation, and costs, through the lived experiences of young Tunisian artists. This was the demographic central to catalyzing, and subsequently, benefitting from what is considered the Revolution’s sole gain: freedom of expression. This study is a primarily ethnographic one that consists of interviews and case studies from one performance arts space in urban Tunis. In discussing freedom and its nuanced expressions through lived realities, this study finds that there is much left to be desired in civil society today and implores a critical analysis of the framing structures of Western neoliberal democracy and postcolonialism that haunt the country.

Keywords: democracy, civil society, agency, freedom, Tunisia, Middle East, political change, revolutions, arts and culture, youth, religion, Islam, economic

PREFACE & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In September 2019, I moved to Tunisia during my semester of studying abroad. There, I witnessed the country's second-ever successful democratic presidential elections as well as the dynamic, resilient nature of Tunisians working to build a democratic society. There, I became deeply interested in understanding the concept of freedom as it exists in tandem to the country's dramatic political transitions.

This document is the product of travel, study, friendships, and research over the last year and a half, made possible by a number of people. First, I must thank my study abroad program director Mounir Khelifa and the rest of the School of International Training (SIT) instructors and staff for fueling my curiosity for this topic with their continuous guidance and support. Thank you to my interviewees, my friends, Adib Hamdi and Shayma Belhaj, whose kindness and passion both inspired and supported my data immensely. This is *their* project as much as it is mine. I am also indebted to the kind folks at Be Actor Studio in Tunis—instructors, staff, and participants—who welcomed me into the space as a fresh-faced camera intern and were my introduction into the world of the arts in Tunis. Thank you to my host family, *Omi* Jalilah and Rania, for allowing me to experience life in Tunis in their warm and welcoming home. Thank you also to Manelle Dridi for her help with the French and Arabic translations, as well as the John B. Moore Documentary Studies at Skidmore College, whose grants enabled me to pursue the translation process. And lastly, I would be remiss to not thank my thesis advisor Rachel Cantave for working with me through every step of the creation of this thesis, and whose kindness and patience I am so grateful for.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	5
HISTORICAL CONTEXT	6
Media and Arts Sector	7
States of (Un)Employment	9
Reflections on a Decade of Democracy	11
LITERATURE REVIEW	12
Unpacking Democracy	13
Civil Society and Acts of Resistance	15
Subaltern Perspectives: Operationalizing Freedom and Agency	19
Is There a Religious Agency in Resistance?	21
Conclusion	23
METHODOLOGY	24
Data Collection	24
Data Analysis	26
Limitations & Ethical Considerations	27
RESEARCH FINDINGS	29
Finding 1: The Acquisition of Freedom	29
Finding 2: The Performance of Freedom	33
Finding 3: The Cost of Freedom	36
CONCLUSION	40
WORKS CITED	42

INTRODUCTION

When Mohamed Bouazizi set himself ablaze in the middle of his town in central Tunisia, he could not have predicted that his demise would spark the 2011 Tunisian Revolution and catalyze the larger Arab Spring. Many believe that the 27-year-old fruit seller's plight represented the frustration of thousands of disenfranchised youth: often highly educated but unemployed, plagued by rapidly increasing living costs, uncertain economic futures, and stifled freedom of expression (Chomiak and Entelis 2011). Bouazizi's self-immolation became a symbol of desperation signaling the need for change, but the sentiments surrounding the act had in fact been growing for generations (Sherlock 2018). In 2011, young Tunisians mobilized across the country as organizers and protestors, demanding the destruction of old political structures and assuming an entirely new role within their autocratic political sphere.

The Tunisian Revolution was characterized by three main features: it was leaderless and populist, it was formidably aided by social media spearheaded by the youth, and it was a non-violent uprising. The only victor to emerge from the Arab Spring was Tunisia; after successfully overthrowing former technocratic dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia officially transformed into a democracy. The revolutionary hope was that a democratic political structure would heal the malaise of societal injustices created by the longstanding dictatorship. However, ten years later, the economy is still in dismal shape, joblessness is rampant, and corruption remains widespread (Caryl 2019). In that respect, it is debatable whether the Revolution's goals have been actualized; therein lies this research project's scope.

Ten years post-democratic transition, this project interrogates the relationship between the Revolution in Tunisia and its role in bringing about democratic ideals of freedom to investigate whether Tunisians' hopes from the Revolution have indeed been met. I am particularly interested

in unpacking the insights of young people and youth activists pertaining to this question. As key mobilizers of the Revolution, how have their civil liberties and rights shifted or remained the same throughout this decade of political upheaval?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

“There is an image [from the Revolution] that I can’t get out of my head. It’s the image of a young boy standing alone in Passage Plaza. Everyone had left and he was the only one there. I can’t tell you how much tear gas there was—it looked like a fire. The police had surrounded him. But the thing that shocked me most was that he wasn’t scared. He stayed there fighting and cussing. That guy, in my opinion, was a symbol of all Tunisians. You don’t have to worry about them because, that’s it: they’ve been freed from fear. I named him Mr. Kamikaze.”

Adib Hamdi, 28, spoke these words to me in December 2019. We were seated backstage at Théâtre National Tunisien in downtown Tunis where he works part-time as a stage actor. Hamdi’s account of “Mr. Kamikaze” is as enticing as it is thought-provoking. It highlights one individual caught in the crossfire of one of the many protests that comprised the 2011 Revolution. But what is central to my research is how this account captures so effectively the zeitgeist of the Revolution, of a tireless and collective fervor of youth activists. Additionally, Adib’s extrapolation of a collective Tunisian youth culture of resistance and activism as well as their unified hopes, dreams and visions for their country, rings as particularly astute. It is impossible to extricate the story of the Revolution from the agency of young Tunisians from various class, gender, economic, and geographical backgrounds who mobilized to reform the state. This is where my research is situated: not within the conflict and turmoil of the Revolution’s processes per say—but rather, in unpacking ruminations, longings, beliefs and the political and cultural shifts that post-democratization brought to young Tunisians.

This is a story of desperation, defiance, and vast transformation; the Revolution was not lead or recognized by a single leading figure, but rather by ordinary everyday Tunisians who overnight, turned into activists. Students became spies, and exiles emerged as politicians to reclaim the country's radical transformation and push the country towards democracy. In order to frame the youth-centered approach of my research, I will provide a historical contextualization of two aspects of Tunisian society that are salient to tracing how young Tunisians have been impacted by democratization: the media and arts sector and the state of (un)employment.

Media and Arts Sector

Tunisia is situated at the intersection of Algeria to its right and Libya to its left. Heralding a historical reputation as a country tolerant of multiethnic backgrounds, Tunisian arts and culture was defined by a pastiche of cultural influences amassing Arab, Muslim, Jewish, indigenous, and colonial French influences (under whom Tunisia was a protectorate from 1881 until 1956) as were other sectors in the country such as education and employment. It is important to note that this image of Tunisia-as-mélange blossomed under a modernization program intrinsically shaped around adopting models of European-French liberalism, instituted by Habib Bourguiba who came to power after the colony gained its independence from France (Saval 2016). This progress, however, was stalled under former dictator Ben Ali, whose regime from 1987 to 2011 prohibited access to freedom of speech and expression and monopolized the media as a vanguard for state propaganda (ibid). They also limited access to media on YouTube and human-groups' and opposition political movements' websites (ibid).

I begin my research by looking into how post-Revolution democracy has impacted artists and the arts and media industry today. Building and elevating their careers around newfound

freedom of expression, artists and media makers have stood to benefit the most from a revolution that was said to have succeeded primarily in this area—if not in any other. Agencies that were previously under state control or under tight government restrictions now assumed new roles in Tunisian society, which included defining for themselves new ways of documenting and representing the new democratic Tunisia, as well as sustaining momentum in the construction of a liberated media. New actors empowered by these freedoms similarly followed suit and entered the scene. Be Actor Studio, a performance arts teaching center in urban Tunis and the site of my fieldwork, emerged amidst this democratic wave as one such space. According to founder Taoufik El Ayeub, “in Tunisia, we need spaces like this, especially after the Revolution. It is better for the youth to be in artistic healing spaces than to express themselves through drugs and terrorism.” The fertile combination of new liberties, old frustrations, and a hunger to engage with and push the boundaries of art in the service of expressing Tunisian politics, news, and social life, has produced post-traumatic healing effects as well reshaped youth culture and convention.

Yet, it is important to unpack what these new post-Revolution cultures and identities are comprised of, as well as who gets to be in the orbit of the opportunity to reinvent them. When I interviewed Adib, he was rehearsing for his newest play *Le Nom du Père* at Théâtre National Tunisien, an adaptation of a French concept from psychologist Jacques Lacan set within the Tunisian context and language. This play is one example of many new “hybridized Tunisian-French” arts ventures emerging amidst this time and could signal that post-Revolution Tunisia is attempting to reclaim ties to its French colonial past. The enduring mark that French colonization left on Tunisian artistry, culture, and language is increasingly felt in the local art emerging during this time. As Prasad (2017) posits, decolonized people have developed postcolonial identities and

ideations based on cultural interactions pertaining to their colonial histories, either in tandem with or in resistance to notions of Eurocentrism.

Furthermore, Taoufik was enthusiastic about the arts as a social unifying mechanism; however, in analyzing the demographics of participants that attend Be Actor Studio for its services, it is clear the economic, social, and geographical privileges that participants hold in receiving access to such creative spaces: the studio is mostly made up of an upper-middle class, urban Tunisian, French-educated crowd. On a larger scale, this then begs a study of how artistic communities are formed, selected, invited, and sustained in Tunis—and the widening inequality that this sector also breeds.

States of (Un)Employment

Adib is a prime example of an individual who, since the Revolution, has been able to pursue his aspirations of working in the liberated creative arts industry. But when I first met him in November 2019, he was struggling to make ends meet as a young creative and was also working night shifts as a drama instructor at Be Actor Studio. The blatant reality was that he could not make ends meet as a creative with only one job whilst living in urban Tunis.

This unsustainability has spilled into other sectors beyond the arts industry. Owing to deadlock in Tunisia's post-revolutionary parliamentary system, there has been constant government turnover as political parties dominated by wealthy businessmen shuffle and reshuffle power (Yee 2021). This has made it impossible for leadership to tackle challenging but necessary economic reforms (ibid). In the past decade, one consistency that the successive democratically elected Tunisian governments have shared is a failure to address soaring unemployment and lingering corruption, to address pressing needs ranging from housing to health services, and to

provide for society's rising expectations and educational levels (Mbarek and Yerkes 2021). Notably, in May 2016, a bloated public wage bill, chronic fiscal deficit, and a heavily indebted economy were all factors that prompted Tunisia to seek a bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—with a potential repeat looming post-COVID 19 (ibid).

Opportunities for most people have become so scant that last year, more than a third of young people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four were unemployed (Mbarek and Yerkes 2021). Too many of Tunisia's brightest young people with the relative social and economic privilege to do so, have emigrated in search of better prospects elsewhere in Europe, while those without the means have resorted to hazardous options. Last year, at least 13,000 Tunisian migrants tried to enter Italy by boat, the overcrowded, poorly maintained conditions costing the lives of hundreds in the process (Yee 2021). On a darker note, Middle East analysts have found Tunisia to be a disproportionate source of recruits for the Islamic State (IS) group and attacks that have occurred from Berlin to Brussels in recent years — as well as multiple high-profile attacks on political leaders and tourists in Tunisia (DW 2020). Poor economic conditions are a main driver, but historic repression has also left its legacy in Tunisian political culture, according to Omar Safi, a researcher focusing on Tunisian security and politics: “That we have this prevalent element of radicalization is probably due to the fact that Tunisia has not developed the capacity to freely express its ideas yet” (ibid). Hence, here lies a paradox to the attainment of freedom of speech and expression, and how ten years on, many youth still struggle to reap the benefits of this central revolutionary goal.

Many rural and lower-income Tunisians have also been left wondering when the benefits of democracy will reach them. “When you impoverish the poor and middle class you undermine democracy,” says Jihen Chandoul, an economist and co-founder of the Tunisian Observatory of

Economy, a research institute (Daragahi 2018). “What’s hurting the democratic process are austerity measures we’ve been asked to implement to access loans. Tunisian democracy is in danger” (ibid).

Reflections on a Decade of Democracy

This sluggish economic progress is not only painful for Tunisians who have experienced ongoing personal economic hardship over the past decade, but also dangerous to the process of democracy. The optimism has mostly fallen away, exposing the fragility of this transition, and in its place, has evoked a nostalgia for the dictatorship, painting it as a time of lower unemployment and poverty while blindly ignoring the massive corruption and human rights abuses also perpetrated by the regime (Yee 2021). According to a September 2020 poll by the International Republican Institute (IRI), 87 percent of Tunisians believe their country is headed in the wrong direction and that the Revolution did not achieve its goals, compared to 67 percent in December 2019 (IRI 2020). While significant political progress and creative liberty has been achieved, many Tunisians are still frustrated by the lack of economic progress.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened that pain for a tourism-reliant economy (DW 2020). The sector has seen a 60% drop in revenue on last year and while the first wave saw 165,000 job losses in a country of 11 million, the country is now bracing for a second one (ibid). With a youth unemployment rate that is now likely more than double the national 16%, many place little trust in the political process to provide them with opportunities (ibid).

As Tunisians reflect on the last ten years, the Revolution’s greatest achievement is perhaps that Tunisians discovered the power of their collective voice to depose dictators, bring about political restructuring and regain their civil liberties (Mbarek and Yerkes 2021). The very fact that

people can freely and publicly express their criticism of the government without fear of harm or retribution is a dramatic achievement and one that has become so ingrained in Tunisian public life that it is often taken for granted (ibid). But there are also many reasons to be concerned about Tunisia's future—from the worsening economic situation facing many individuals and families to the weak institutions and political parties, whose leaders have shifted the tenor of dialogue from pluralism to heightened polarization, to the appeal of terrorism and life-threatening migration across the border to Europe (ibid).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the following sections, I unpack my research variable – *democracy*—and disentangle it from being wholly conceptual, tracing its development in Tunisia from the Revolution in 2011 through the decade that followed. Consequently, I assess a newly democratic civil society through the concept of *freedom* as one of the central outcomes of the Revolution. What is seldom problematized in conventional analyses of freedom—especially those that hold rather static, fairytale presuppositions reminiscent of Western liberalism—is that these presuppositions inherently limit the concept itself, depriving it of nuance. Here, I propose that the liberatory goals of the Revolution be rethought through a broadened definition of freedom to include the agency of young people, its key mobilizers. Lastly, I analyze the role of Islam within civil society and interrogate if religious perspectives can be disentangled from resistance practices in Tunisia. Ultimately, these key variables that I operationalize lend themselves to greater nuance and framing of my research question: dissecting the relationship between the Revolution in Tunisia and its role in bringing about democracy and revolutionary ideals in youth.

I explore existing literature that analyzes democratic transitions and acts of civil resistance from an African, and more specifically North African lens, as well as perspectives that employ religious, feminist, postcolonial, and poststructuralist lenses in analyzing my variables. Through each subsection, I reveal gaps that the subsequent subsections—and my own research—pick up on.

Unpacking Democracy

The timeliness of my research question could not be more significant; in September 2019, Tunisia held its second democratic election since the Revolution. This crucial moment served as a testament to measuring whether a successful democratic transition had indeed taken place through the fundamental unit of measuring democracy in a nation-state: free and fair elections. The concept of democracy itself serves both as a parameter for measuring and variable in my research question. Nigerian scholar Claude Ake, prolific for his study of development and democracy in Africa, defines the principles of democracy as consisting of, "widespread participation, consent of the governed, and public accountability of those in power" (Ake 1991, 34). As with other scholars of democracy, Ake grounds the concept in self-determination and essential civil freedoms. The outcome of this election based on this singular unit of measure, free and fair elections, was positive—the people won, successfully electing their president through constitutional means. However, to say that democracy is equal parts desirable and successful based on this condition alone requires further operationalizing. This is something that Ake considers when he asks: who was democracy—as we understand it—created by, and who does it serve? (Ake 1991).

Acknowledging the colonial underpinnings of democracy situates this concept differently. Symptomatic of a postcolonial world, Ake suggests that democracy was often not sourced from,

but rather imposed on colonized locations as a tool of domination under the guise of Western liberalism and perceived superiority of Western democracies; by extension, this kind of democracy firmly consolidates the hegemony of Western values globally (Ake 1991). As I interrogate democracy in Tunisia and the role of a postcolonial Tunisian civil society in shaping it, I analyze how political models from colonial powers, namely France, have informed Tunisian aspirations of democracy, primarily within the newly democratized arts sector.

Postcolonial scholar Frantz Fanon alludes to this relationship, suggesting that the falling away of colonialism in turn produces neocolonialism, a system that reproduces colonial structures onto elite classes and governance (Fanon 1968). This brand of neocolonialism espoused by “the national bourgeoisie” is ultimately insufficient for a complete revolution because such classes benefit from the economic structures of imperialism, linking the two in this statement: “[i]n its decadent aspect, the national bourgeoisie gets considerable help from the Western bourgeoisies” (ibid). Indian postcolonial scholar, Partha Chatterjee, similarly questions the effectiveness of the implementation of the Western model of democracy in India—and if sustainable transformations have been brought by it (Chatterjee 2001). He affirms Fanon’s suggestion that the postcolonial nation reproduces systemic oppressions seen during the colonial period rather than erases them (ibid).

The outcome of blindly adopting a hegemonic Eurocentric model then, could be bleak (Ake 1991; 1993). Instead of falling in line with populist aspirations, “if African democracy follows the line of least resistance to Western liberalism, it will achieve only the democracy of alienation” (Ake 1993, 244). It is essential to note the paradox that this brings: democracy appeals to the imagination—to zealous revolutionary hopes—while simultaneously clouding deeper, more sustainable manifestations of civil liberation and unity. Chatterjee alludes to such a paradox within

the Indian context; the “India” produced, as a result, is continuous with the values and culture of imperialism even or especially where it appears most critical of imperialist domination” (Chatterjee 2001). The postcolonial production of “Tunisia” is similarly paradoxical in nature; numerous scholars continue to assess if and how the imposition of a Western democracy post-Revolution has only sustained colonial productions of economic and social inequalities that have plagued the nation in the years of democratic consolidation.

Thus, geopolitics and postcolonial theory cannot be detached from a comparative approach of looking at Tunisian democracy vis-à-vis Western democracies. With these framings in mind, I operationalize democracy by counteracting what the concept is theorized to be, with the lived realities and ethnographies of Tunisian people and institutions. My case study of Be Actor Studio, a self-funded performance arts teaching and learning institution founded in 2014, three years since democracy was attained, offers perspectives on how media and arts are produced (often utilizing Western framings) under a larger scheme of democratic consolidation.

Civil Society and Acts of Resistance

As he sets the parameters for defining democracy, Ake further frames my scholarly intervention with his discourse on ordinary civil participation in the making of democracies. In analyzing the role of civil society, Ake situates his argument within an environment of African collectivity, indicating that a communal culture developed historically as a form of local resistance, first, against colonial forces, and later against incapable postcolonial governments (Ake 1993). This is the *process* of democratization. Disillusioned and oppressed, members of society band together to limit their vulnerability to a predatory state and improve their material well-being (Ake 1991; 1993). A sustainable African democracy, Ake alludes, is contingent upon active community

solidarity and participation in shaping unified political goals that can best serve all members of society (Ake 1993). Ake applies a broad stroke to explaining the meta-processes behind why and how democracy proliferated in the continent. However, terms like "contemporary Africa" and "an African democracy" throughout his work erase the specific, nuanced contexts of different African countries (Ake 1991; 1993).

Laryssa Chomiak and John P. Entelis (2011) pick up from where Ake's work leaves off, employing a more specific lens in portraying the sweeping of *intifadas* (uprisings) across North Africa in 'The Making of North Africa's Intifadas.' They hone in on protest and revolutionary civil action as a lens for viewing the process of democratization, affirming that it is crucial to center the particular lenses of ordinary youth and their concerns given their pivotal role as a demographic in engendering this process (Chomiak and Entelis 2011). It is similarly central to my research to rely on primary sources such as interview accounts in depicting an honest account of bottom-up resistance and democratization in Tunisia. This approach is a socio-historical one that rewrites the voiceless back into the narrative by disentangling them from larger institutions and nation-states.

This is also an approach that Partha Chatterjee subscribes to in his extensive work on nation-building post-decolonization. Chatterjee reconstituted class dynamics by shifting class conflict into the domain of a burgeoning political consciousness through the notion of the 'subaltern,' developing Antonio Gramsci's subaltern beyond its implied translation as the Marxist "proletariat" (ibid). Subaltern then, represents non-elites in a broad sense, inclusive of religious faith, gender, ethnicity, and race in addition to one's labor position (ibid). Chatterjee uniquely ties the subaltern to the formation of a political society, probing how and to what degree citizens participate in notions of nationhood particularly in times of rebellion, and equally, what democracy means in India for the peasant or subaltern classes (ibid).

Chomiak's solo endeavor published two years after 'The Making of North Africa's Intifadas,' takes on a more reflective tone, going several paces back to investigate "earlier moments of protest and communal organization that readied Tunisians for a re-engagement with public space" (Chomiak 2013, 70). 'Spectacles of Power' takes a reverse approach, working backwards in time to make sense of the present, and revealing underground workings of resistance against then-President Ben Ali's dictatorship. She states: "While the story of Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation is often credited with unleashing waves of protest across the Arab world, there is a thicker and more gradual backstory to Tunisia's escalating resistance campaigns" (Chomiak 2013, 73). She brings in public and social spaces such as public streets and soccer stadiums that, amidst censorship and control, facilitated coded acts of resistance and freedom, emphasizing the significance of spaces and institutions as rich hotspots of resistance before and during the 2011 Revolution (Chomiak 2013).

Chomiak uses language resonant of poststructuralist discourse, a framework that similarly cannot be detached from my research in subverting traditional spaces of resistance. As Chomiak reveals how traditional structures of the stadiums and streets are altered by individuals and reproduced to hold alternate meanings of resistance, I analyze the formation of such spaces like Be Actor Studio through my fieldwork there—and by extension, the democratization of the arts and media sector. I unpack how these spaces emerged amidst this democratic wave and are committed towards reflecting and enforcing new forms of Tunisian identities and cultures. With the goal of unsettling norms and traditional structures, my research develops through the vein of this theoretical framework, exploring how acts of coded resistance existed and continue to exist within such structures and institutions, which included defining for themselves new ways of

documenting and representing the new democratic Tunisia as well as sustaining its momentum for change.

Consequently, an explicit framing of the concept of resistance, particularly as it relates to a counterhegemonic civic consciousness, is vital to my research in locating the roles that young people played in engendering the Revolution. Elizabeth McIsaac states that for resistance to be considered a legitimate concept in the discussion of social agency, it is not a question of whether resistance is merely expressed, but rather, whether it is significant in either rearticulating or subverting dominant discourses (McIsaac 2000). McIsaac adopts cultural critic Henry Giroux's three primary assumptions in laying out the concept of resistance within her research (*ibid*). First, that resistance assumes a dialectical notion of human agency in responding to experiences of and structures of domination (Giroux 1983; McIsaac 2000). Second, that power is a layered concept that is displayed in both hegemonic domination as well as in acts of resistance (*ibid*). And third, that at the core of acts of resistance is an unexpressed hope for social transformation, for emancipation from a present condition of domination (*ibid*).

All three assumptions of resistance are closely intertwined with my own research. I utilize the second assumption, reconstituting the concept of power, to consider the ways that civil society in Tunisia took on a new political consciousness during the Revolution, and the third, which pertains to a revolutionary hope guiding acts of resistance, undergirds my entire research question. Through my fieldwork and interviews, I gain insights from my young subjects on how their resistance practices have shifted throughout a period of democratic consolidation, and conversely, the impact of democracy on their revolutionary hopes and ideals. McIsaac's first assumption of resistance that foregrounds human agency is an important intervention for my research, and I probe

further to unpack how concepts of freedom and agency are idealized, expressed, and codified in private and public spheres of resistance.

Subaltern Perspectives: Operationalizing Freedom & Agency

When it comes to operationalizing freedom and agency in social theory, Saba Mahmood is notable for critiquing Western secular liberalism and feminism. She renounces static, Western models of freedom, re-conceptualizing women's agency and political action as they exist within and not in opposition to the Islamic faith (Mahmood 2001). Through an examination of the women's piety movement in Egypt, Mahmood argues for uncoupling the notion of agency from that of a monolithic idea of freedom as it exists for women in the Western world as a necessary first step in thinking about forms of desire and politics that do not accord with norms of secular liberal feminism and their liberatory telos (Mahmood 2001).

Following Mahmood's lead, I similarly probe some of the conceptual challenges that arise with limited, often secular-liberal and Western associations of freedom as it pertains to being the central goal and outcome of the 2011 Revolution in Tunisia. Here, freedom looked like many things: freedom from the prior oppressive dictatorial regime, freedom to speak and express civil liberties, freedom to vote democratically in elections, and so on. Yet, what is seldom problematized are the normative, neocolonial assumptions about freedom against which such a movement as the Revolution is held accountable.

My intention here is not to question the profound liberatory transformation that the Revolution has enabled in people's lives, but to draw attention to the ways in which its presuppositions have come to be naturalized in scholarship that glosses over the successes of the Arab Spring in Tunisia. In the decade since democracy was achieved, the word *freedom* has

occupied an uncomfortable place within the lived realities of young Tunisians; the paradoxical effect of the freedom gained has been deeply felt and seems incongruous with the trajectory of the transformations that enabled them in the first place. Mahmood defines ‘negative’ freedom as the absence of external obstacles to self-guided choice and action, whether imposed by the state, corporations, or private individuals (Mahmood 2001). ‘Positive’ freedom, on the other hand, is understood as the capacity to realize an autonomous will, one generally uncumbered by the weight of custom, transcendental will, and tradition (ibid). Drawing this back to the Tunisian context, the negative conception of freedom here seems to be operative in aspects of the project of Western liberal democracy that rarely questions and critiques the neocolonialism and neoliberalism underpinning it. The positive conception of freedom, on the other hand, seems to undergird the active agency of Tunisian youth in engendering resistance.

Although there continues to be considerable debate over the formulation and coherence of these entwined definitions of freedom, what I want to highlight here is the concept of individual autonomy and agency in the Revolution. The liberatory goals of the Revolution should be reconsidered in light of other desires, aspirations, capacities, and especially, through a broadened definition of freedom to include agency (Mahmood 2001). Agency in my research, borrowed from Mahmood, is understood as the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of other obstacles whether individual or collective (Mahmood 2001). As such, I suggest that we think of agency not as a synonym for freedom, but rather, as the capacity for intentional choice to break away from subtle systems of socioeconomic domination that Western liberalism inherently enables and creates.

I choose to operationalize freedom and agency in my research specifically from the vantage points of the people who stood to gain the most from them: the artists. Building and elevating their

careers around freedom of expression today, this population of Tunisia has stood to benefit the most from a revolution that was said to have succeeded primarily in this area—if not in any other. Through my fieldwork and informal interviews with artists who watched their careers transform overnight, I harness poststructuralist theory once again, this time as a liberatory tool to move beyond rigid definitions and presuppositions of what a liberatory reality has meant for them. I analyze the way institutions such as Be Actor codify and expand and even shrink the concept of freedom.

Is There A Religious Agency in Resistance?

Analyses of democracy, resistance, freedom, and agency in the Tunisian context would be incomplete without a consideration of Islamic perspectives undergirding the politics of the region. Tunisian politics are more complex than a binary competition between secularists and Islamists. An opinion survey conducted shortly after the Revolution found that 48 percent of Tunisians preferred politics based on religion (IRI 2011). Of the 44 percent of Tunisians preferring secularism, only 27 percent felt strongly about their response (ibid). This indicates that most Tunisians still recognize the importance of Islam at the time of these transformations and did not advocate for a strict separation between the state and religion.

In Saba Mahmood's research that advances a timely approach to the study of identity, agency, and embodiment in postcolonial cultures that embrace Islam, she presents the practice of *sabr*: the capacity to endure without complaint and place acceptance of fate in the hands of God (Mahmood 2004). I have chosen to repurpose this idea towards considering acts of self-immolation by young Tunisian revolutionists, pioneered by Mohamed Bouazizi, the 27-year-old fruit seller who first set himself ablaze in 2010. He self-immolated in response to the confiscation of his fruit

cart—his sole source of income—and the harassment and humiliation inflicted on him by public authorities in his town of Sidi Bouzid. One striking feature that has continuously emerged from the discussion of Bouazizi's self-immolation is the influence of religion on his decision to self-immolate. Islam has a strong prohibition against suicide and the desecration of the human body, both of which occur during self-immolation (DW 2011). This is with the exception of *jihad*, which “justifies” this prohibition, so to speak. Nevertheless, Muslim suicide bombers who are impelled, in part, by the promise of salvation and self-defense to wage Holy War, stand in stark contrast to Tunisian self-immolators who appear to have been motivated more by anger and despair at their social and economic plight, as opposed to committing these acts in the name of Islam (Worth 2011). Was Bouazizi’s immolation a cry of resistance against *sabr*, against continued endurance of the system quo?

Bouazizi became a martyr to the political opposition and youth protesters rallied around him as a symbol for change as they took to the streets. In the struggle over the positioning, disposing of, and speaking for dead bodies, they can be reconstituted as agentival and changeful subjects themselves—speaking, gesturing, haunting, yearning, suffering, and demanding for change (Makley 2015). As revolutionary fervor engulfed the Arab world, dozens of youth, disillusioned and unemployed, similarly lit themselves on fire in front of municipal buildings, parliaments, and presidential palaces in what Mehdi Ben Khelil, a doctor at the Charles Nicolle Hospital in Tunis who studies the phenomenon, has termed “the copycat effect” (DW 2011; Sherlock 2018). Thus, Bouazizi's immolation was not an isolated act, and the collective nature of these acts points to a generation of youth in the Arab world triggered by hopeless social conditions, harnessing their burning flesh as a form of political protest to expose societal injustice and incite popular uprisings (DW 2011).

How, then, can the spate of self-immolations, which contradict both religious and secular conventions, be explained through an Islamic lens? How do religion and politics overlap in Tunisia, and what does the work of reforming the state look like when complicated by the lens of the country's dominant religion, Islam? Nevertheless, if the act was unequivocally political but neither in retaliation to secularism nor Islam, it currently exists in a liminal gray space. There seems to be a scarcity of literature linking religion to Revolution—and this research seeks to speak to this gap. This is due in part to the historically contentious relationship that Islamic societies have had with what has come to be called “the West,” but in part to the challenges contemporary Islamic movements pose to secular-liberal politics from which democracy has its roots (Mahmood 2001).

One thing is certain about the unresolved yet politically and socially constitutive meaning of self-immolated bodies though: it has a powerful generational impact (Makley 2015). Mahmood discusses a sense of embattlement and alienation experienced by an entire generation of young men and women on the secular left all over the Middle East in the face of the rising tide of neocolonial and Islamist politics and policies of the 1970s and 1980s (Mahmood 2001). I pick up on this notion by gathering perspectives from and about my target audience—Tunisian youth—to unpack the shared generational experiences that frame their existence in present-day Tunisia. In probing further, I interrogate the relationship between citizenship and being a pious individual in religious alignment with the state. Does the work of reforming the state comprise of reforming the religious self? Moreover, is there a religious agency that drives resistance in Tunisia?

Conclusion

Utilizing poststructuralist and postcolonial frameworks, ultimately, this research explores democracy by contextualizing what democracy is theorized to be against the lived realities of

Tunisian people and a backdrop of burgeoning civic political consciousness and resistance movements. To date, there is little research that explicitly links the two variables that I seek to bring into conversation with one another—hopes from the Revolution and the concept of democracy enacted in Tunisia today—through a primarily ethnographic viewfinder.

METHODOLOGY

Including narratives focusing on the experiences and agency of ordinary civilians seems to be among the central challenges of writing about the Tunisian Revolution that have cropped up in recent years. A broad, anonymous scope can explain the meta-processes behind why and how democracy proliferated but flattens robust socio-historical experiences of resistance and its resulting acquisitions of freedom. My point of entry into the question of how Tunisian revolutionary aspirations have translated into reality over the past decade, is essential precisely because it located in the ethnographic tradition.

My ethnographic tracings will sustain a running argument with and against freedom gained from the Revolution through which the movement is often analyzed. I chose to focus on and operationalize this variable from the vantage points of artists, for whom the stakes of freedom of expression were felt deeply. Freedom was operationalized, as elucidated previously, to be reconsidered through a broadened definition include the agency of the artist demographic, and more specifically that of young people within this demographic.

Data Collection

My first methodological goal was to operationalize freedom and agency through conducting field observation at Be Actor Studio, a private performance arts teaching and learning

space in downtown Tunis. While interning as cinematography assistant at the studio from November to December 2019, I took fieldnotes on company dynamics, performance and instruction processes, teaching pedagogy, marketing and funding structures, as well as on the informal conversations that occurred between participants and instructors. I was able to gain access to the inner daily workings of the studio in exchange for the technical services I offered free-of-cost.

Through the course of my fieldwork, I came to know two performance artists and instructors at the studio: Adib Hamdi, 28, and Shayma Belhaj, 26, who agreed to be interviewed for my study. Adib and Shayma were in their mid- to late twenties, from middle-class backgrounds, had participated in protests and marches that comprised the Arab Spring a decade earlier, and watched their careers transform overnight because of the Revolution. Notably, both also came from and presently live in urban Tunis, and neither of them came from particularly religiously devout upbringings. Developing individual friendships with them and hearing their stories led us quite naturally into my second methodological goal: conducting unstructured interviews. I employed an unconventional approach to my interviews; instead of structuring a set of questions, the interviews—which were also filmed and audio-recorded—were preceded by grounding conversations. I asked them what they wanted to share with me, which language(s) they felt most comfortable using, and where, spatially, they felt most safe doing so. Adib chose the black box theater space in Théâtre National Tunisien while Shayma chose the dance studio at Be Actor Studio. Having established mutual trust and rooted within the safe enclaves of spaces they had chosen, we collaborated on devising ten open-ended prompts, kept identical for each of them. They told me about their struggles in reckoning with the concept of Revolution and the merits of newfound democracy, but more importantly, with themselves in cultivating optimism and

perseverance throughout the process of democratic consolidation. Their uninterrupted responses lasted on average between three to seven minutes per prompt. This method allowed me to analyze the concept of freedom through the existential lens, hence that of subjective self-definition. Art also provides new ways of seeing and understanding revolutionary realities and aspirations. My interviews, therefore, were a way of consolidating and contextualizing my fieldnotes on the arts industry, fleshing out the social and economic costs tied to Revolution and freedom.

My goal, however, was more than to provide an ethnographic account of the Revolution; it was also to analyze secondary scholarship in order to support and strengthen my own data. I utilized a discursive approach in analyzing Tunisian scholar Laryssa Chomiak's scholarship as well as other literature on freedom, agency, and the challenges of neoliberal democracy being implanted outside of the West. In doing so, I hope to have continued a conversation initiated by numerous scholars that explores the tensions in attending to the complexity of the Revolution as an analytical, political, and personal project. In this way, these sources were used for a dual-purpose: establishing a critical framework through which to view the topic at hand, and elaboration and contextualization of causal/related factors.

Data Analysis

Mixed methodologies were utilized to analyze freedom in this study. I first analyzed my interview data using schema analysis to identify patterns in their shared cultural lexicon and draw conclusions from my coded data, about how the term Revolution and the by extension, the acquisition of freedom, were perceived by my interviewees (Bernard 2017). Furthermore, by viewing the Revolution and what it left behind as a process and not a moment suspended in time through interviews, I utilized narrative analysis to trace the ways my participants told their versions

of the story of the Revolution orally. This method of analysis, coupled with my documentation of the interviews both audially and visually, also allowed me to analyze how my interviewees performed and expressed themselves in their storytelling, noting moments of emotion, passion, fervor, and most importantly, the commonalities that ran through how they each told these stories (Bernard 2017).

Additionally, I employed performance analysis guided by the larger theory of dramatism in analyzing my fieldnotes from Be Actor Studio. Kenneth Burke's dramatism, which understands life through the lens of drama, played an essential role in guiding my analysis of human behavior and actions in the studio (Burke 1968). Using theater as a metaphor—literally and figuratively—I was particularly curious to analyze how actors, instructors, and other performers at the studio performed Revolutionary ideals, evoked their agencies, and revealed elucidations of their post-Revolutionary selves.

Limitations & Ethical Considerations

It is important to keep in mind the ethical considerations of this research, and particularly, what is represented as well as what is left out. I was aware that centering my data collection in the urban, middle to upper-middle class demographic would erase numerous other lived experiences, most notably, hindering my understanding of the Revolution through the lens of rural, lower-income youth who were among the first to mobilize. Furthermore, the arts industry already assumes relative financial security from its participants. Both distance and time limitations prevented me from delving deeper into these demographics. Hence, this research requires a more representative sample of Tunisian youth for a comprehensive understanding of manifestations of post-revolutionary freedoms.

Additionally, my desire to have my interviewees' responses be rooted in the language they felt most confident in using to ensure that they could express themselves fully, was not without its challenges. I hired a Tunisian translator to help me translate and transcribe Adib and Shayma's responses from Tunisian Arabic and French, respectively. In doing so, I was aware that in analyzing translated material—despite having my translations kept as close to the original versions—I would lose certain untranslatable nuances.

It is also important to keep in mind the ethical considerations of this research, in line with my own positionality and power. When Shayma asked me what difference my study would make, I found it a very compelling question. How would my research address the power differences between myself as a researcher (supported by an academic institution), and my research subjects, who expressed a feeling of vulnerability with respect to the institutions they occupy—and whose emotional contribution to my research cannot be ignored? What motivated me to undertake this study and why, and what did I envision as its result? How would my research benefit my subjects, and how would I balance my responsibilities to my academic requirement and the local communities I have worked with? These issues cannot be easily glossed over. Disenfranchised communities from the Global South have, for far too long born the brunt of extractive academic research. The more pertinent question for me, then, was how to make this study different. Furthermore, could my research contribute to a movement of expanding rigid representations of revolutionary aspirations and realities, and challenging and rupturing the very structures that I identify has rendered scholarship on the Revolution (especially from Western, liberal sources) static and monolithic?

In asking these questions, I inevitably implicate myself, the ethnographer as researcher. I considered my own positionality as a Southeast Asian researcher in the U.S., a young woman

myself. I also considered what is at stake for me, especially in carrying out research with people and within spaces where my external appearance allowed me to slip relatively easily into due to passing as Tunisian. However, I was still “the other,” and with my strategic otherness and privilege (U.S.-affiliated, academic institution-tied), I created a certain power dynamic as ethnographer to represent others. Indeed, a power dynamic between informant and researcher always exists, placing the former in a vulnerable position to the latter. But how that vulnerability is negotiated is of prime importance. Designing research methods that sought my participants’ eager consent, in addition to this research being a collaborative one, were some ways I could affirm and validate the emotional and deeply sensitive data my participants shared with me.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Finding 1: The Acquisition of Freedom

What’s in a name? And especially a name so endemic to the region of my study, as the mechanism that brought about freedom and democracy in Tunisia: Revolution. The term fluctuates within the various contexts in which it inhabits. For the purpose of this research, the significance of this lexicon was used as a way to operationalize and measure the acquisition of freedom in Tunisia among my interviewees.

In Tunisia, the name adopted was ‘Dignity Revolution,’ which is a translation of the Tunisian Arabic name ثورة الكرامة (Thawrat al-Karāmah) (Béziat 2011). In Western media however, these events were dubbed the ‘Jasmine Revolution’ or ‘Jasmine Spring’ after Tunisia’s national flower and in keeping with the geopolitical nomenclature of color revolutions (Carvin 2011). The name Jasmine Revolution, coined first by American journalist Andy Carvin, was not widely adopted in Tunisia itself (El Amrani 2011). In fact, Tunisian philosopher and anthropologist

Youssef Seddik deemed the term “jasmine” inappropriate to be attributed to the events as it washed out the violence that was present that was “perhaps as deep as Bastille Day.” (Béziat 2011).

The controversial, co-optive origins behind the nomenclature of the Revolution led me to question what the term means when rooted in the lived understanding of Tunisian peoples themselves. Indeed, it is much more complex than Western framings have led us to believe. In fact, in analyzing the discourse used to term the Revolution, it is clear that the sweepingly positive Jasmine Revolution has perhaps clouded us from viewing its darker consequences. This is also unsurprising considering how, from a Western, neoliberal point of view, the West has traditionally viewed uprisings motivated by goals of democracy against non-Western dictatorships as highly commendable. But there is another reason to stray away from using the name Jasmine Revolution: it was the term that deposed President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali used in 1987 to describe his own takeover, in those initial years of his reign that offered some hope for a democratic transition (El Amrani 2011). To reuse Ben Ali's propaganda phrase at this point seems perverse and contradicts sharply with any ideas of freedom acquired in the 2011 context.

Thus, in order to avoid situating my research in pre-conceived models of the West's framings, I operationalized the word Revolution itself and the multiplicity of meanings it carries with my interviewees Adib and Shayma, to unpack how the acquisition of freedom looked like for them.



Figure A.

This visual from the prompt “what did the Revolution mean to you?” highlights the multiplicity and complexity of the term aforementioned. The words in black at the center of Figure A represent the most used words in response to the prompt and are also direct translations of “Revolution” in Arabic and French—the two languages my participants responded in. Those on the periphery in red represent their responses with the color and size becoming lighter and smaller as frequency of use decreased.

Through both my interviewees, the term Revolution is not substantially present in their daily lexicon. However, in how they responded to the prompt, Adib and Shayma had similar schemas for understanding and articulating what the Revolution meant for them. Within their schema and in contrast to the emphasis placed on the nomenclature by Western analysts, they expressed first and foremost that they do not refer to the series of events that transpired in 2011, in any case, as a “Revolution” to begin with. It is also interesting to look closely at the cluster of words and phrases that represent the realities of the Revolution, as well as the juxtaposition of what is at the center versus at the periphery. The overlaps in phrases that Adib and Shayma share are bolded: “revolutionary path,” “it isn’t a revolution,” “not a complete revolution,” and “not successful yet.” These overlaps yielded two major findings: that what occurred in 2011 was more

process-centered rather than a singular, defining, static moment, and that the loose “end” of this process is rooted in the idea of attaining an ambiguous perceived success. From a poststructuralist approach at this point, these findings break down what conventional structures of the term point to and run it through lived experiences of post-revolutionary contexts (Prasad 2017).

Revolutions are, by necessity, disparate movements. As such, the question of when a revolution should end, is disputed and is often left unresolved. Underscoring process, fluidity and non-linear ebbs and flows to this series of events are, therefore, not unusual perspectives to posit. As Adib expressed about the Revolution through this exemplar:

“It started from before January 14th. It started with an entire idea that older generations and cultured Tunisians started... with Tunisian theater, Tunisian cinema, Tunisian books. It started with professors, university professors or even high school teachers.”

Chomiak and Entelis, as do other local poststructuralist scholars who write about the Revolution, similarly frame the process of the Revolution with this intervention:

“Most analyses of the uprisings, finally, begin at the moment when thousands of ordinary citizens occupied central urban plazas in the glare of the global media. It is important to start the timeline earlier and enter the stories of the intifadas through the back door” (Chomiak and Entelis 2011, 15).

Put in conversation with each other, both interventions background the uprisings in 2011 as being truly transformational and foreground the foundational work that went into engendering these transformations that began earlier, which were likely ignored by Western news media reporting. The repetitive quality of Adib’s exemplar (“It started...”) coupled with Chomiak and Entelis’ emphasis on winding the timeline back earlier than previous analyses of the uprisings have suggested, considers these events through a different frame—one that is essentially rooted in the agency of the “citizens,” “professors,” and “high school teachers.” Furthermore, Adib highlights the salient role that the arts as an institution had in this work, in culminating the “culture” and models necessary to catalyze these moments of resistance.

These findings left me with more questions than answers: what does the potential ‘success’ of the Revolution constitute? And how has this current process failed civil society thus far? Drawing from this data, if the goal of the Revolution was freedom, something about the fact that the term was either negated or very much underscored as a process—and an “unsuccessful” one at that—to my interviewees, gestures towards how they feel about the concept of freedom in the first place. Despite Tunisia having achieved freedom of expression on paper, it begs a deeper consideration of the term, the ideal, beyond its superficial neoliberal democratic qualities. It also lends us into unpacking a possibility that perhaps, ten years on, a sustainable and lived acquisition of freedom remains to be desired.

Finding 2: The Performance of Freedom

With a more nuanced, realistic perspective to the acquisition of freedom in mind, I sought to dissect the qualities that accompany this version of freedom as it exists in the lived realities of performance arts spaces today. Especially after considering the complexities that arose with analyzing the acquisition of freedom, I looked at how artistic institutions and their members are “performing” their newfound freedoms through their artistic practices by constructing, codifying, and influencing new social realities.

Be Actor Studio’s mission statement, as advertised on its social media pages and website, emphasizes the need for fun, exuberance, and friendship, and highlights the goal to go “beyond training...[and] to make you savor life through this magnificent means of expression, that is art.” Yet, through the fun and joy, its mission is significantly twofold. Founder Taoufik Ayeb aims to “bring back culture” to Tunis, where the studio is presently located. At its core, the formation of such spaces like Be Actor, and by extension the democratization of the arts and media sector, are

committed towards reflecting and enforcing new forms of Tunisian identities and cultures as they deem them in the new post-Revolution context.

This further begs a question of what constitutes these post-revolutionary identities—and where this “culture” stems from. Language use played a significant role in my analyses of performing arts teaching pedagogy and practice. I found the strategic employment of French and Tunisian Arabic within certain contexts to be indicative of a greater cultural pattern. For instance, it was immediately evident within the demographic of participants who the Francophones were, their respective educational backgrounds, and what factors specifically had led them towards preferring to and being more comfortable in using French as their medium of creative expression. Greater preference is typically afforded to the French language as a mode of transaction, prestige and formality in social or business contexts, and these standards seemed to reproduce itself in the studio. While allowances were increasingly made to include and elevate the Tunisian Arabic dialect as a valid language of the arts, theatrical texts that were more “complex” as well as higher level performance arts classes were held almost exclusively in French, with more introductory classes held in Tunisian Arabic. A dichotomy was significantly felt between how French continues to be propagated as a language of greater prestige and value in Tunisian contexts, amplified further by the arts sector that claims to subvert societal norms.

Pedagogy-wise, the studio used translations of classic Western-origin texts such as works by Shakespeare and Greek mythology classics in French and Tunisian Arabic adaptations and re-appropriations. Some adaptations were even reframed within Tunisian social contexts and settings such that the messages and cultural references may be authentically digestible to a local audience. From one angle, these efforts signify a greater institutional push towards promoting the arts—and most notably, theater—as a medium to be enjoyed by all in Tunisia. From another angle, as these

Western-origin texts are increasingly performed for the mainstage and made accessible for commercial viewership and enjoyment, the reframing of such art forms to suit the Tunisian context highlights that Western ideals still function as the foundational models for the country's growing arts scene.

This also feeds into the artistic techniques that the studio has employed for its instruction—particularly, as I observed, during the contemporary dance and theater classes. Within the contemporary dance classes taught by Shayma, she often referenced Trisha Brown to her students, as a model of the American postmodern dance movement. These references came up as casually as in conversations among students and teacher, as well as for inspiration in creating choreography for the class. In the theater classes, assistant theater coach Adib frequently used the methodology espoused by Russian theatre practitioner Konstantin Stanislavski as a teaching tool to assist participants in ‘experiencing’ or getting into their characters for a scene. As arts spaces such as Be Actor have adapted to their newly liberated playing field, it is evident how this freedom is “performed” or modelled on Western influence, a sign that to some degree, Western artistic influences are viewed more respectably.

Indeed, the restructuring of the public media and arts sector in Tunisia is a work in progress, namely in erasing the age-old stains of regime control and censorship and in galvanizing artistic freedom. Taoufik is deeply proud of the independence that Be Actor established, having received no external state funds or support initially. For him, this separation from the state or state-supported artistic initiatives was vital in establishing Be Actor's autonomy in its construction of artistic processes for its participants. However, the sustenance of the studio is dependent on straddling a balance between “playing [their] cards right” in order to receive the necessary state funding to supplement their profits and independent sources of monetary funding. And this tricky balance has

been achieved: in early 2020, the studio received a large monetary donation in early 2020 from the Ministry of Culture, a new initiative that Taoufik mentioned, signals how there has been greater economic and symbolic support of the arts and independent artistic initiatives by the ministry. Ultimately, for the welfare of Be Actors Studio, Taoufik knows that a delicate balance between receiving governmental support and maintaining their autonomy is vital.

Be Actor as an artistic space has managed to strike a strategic balance between independence and from and reliance on the state; it is interesting to unpack these decisions through a poststructuralist lens—especially considering how complete subversion may not be possible for the space to function. Furthermore, as Chomiak revealed how traditional structures of the stadiums and streets in Tunis were altered by individuals and reproduced to hold alternate meanings of resistance, I unpacked how spaces like Be Actor are committed towards reflecting and performing their newly acquired freedom of expression through the culmination of new forms of identities in the process (Chomiak 2013). Dramatism both literally and figuratively placed me in the ‘theater’ of freedom as I looked at the ways participants redefined their creative agency (Burke 1968; Ashcroft 1998). Hence, I have found that the performance of freedom holds multiple meanings as observed through the processes of performing newly acquired freedom of expression in performance spaces, as well as constructing new meanings and identities in the process, often “performed” on the models of Western influence.

Freedom 3: The Cost of Freedom

I propose that one of the costs of freedom in post-Revolution Tunisia has been its unsustainability in galvanizing a secure and prosperous livelihood for many of its citizens. “What’s the point of all this freedom... freedom of expression, freedom to practice the arts, when it’s a

struggle to put food on the table every day?” Shayma responded when asked about what she sees as the merits of newly acquired freedom in Tunisia. She went on to qualify:

“Freedom of expression, which is the one gain, to be honest, from the Tunisian Revolution... that was a huge gain for us. It is both positive and negative. The negative is the worsening political, economic, and social situation. Any politician can take a seat in office who doesn’t think of the country. Unemployment increased. A lot of rioting, looting, theft, violence. Suicides increased. Marginalization, poverty—as in extreme poverty.”

Both Adib and Shayma have articulated to different capacities that their singular careers as an actor and dancer, respectively, are economically unsustainable. As a result, they work multiple jobs, with Adib still living in his familial home as he is unable to pay rent to live independently. As I have signaled in the Historical Context, though the 2011 revolution brought Tunisia democracy and freedom of expression, this did not translate into an improvement in living standards or economic opportunity. Shayma further stated:

“I think most artists... struggle not just financially but also psychologically. To be an artist in Tunisia, you have to be determined and hold onto a great deal of hope. You have to struggle to achieve just a fraction of your dreams. I know that’s a bit cynical, perhaps. But it’s reality, you know.”

In further evaluating this cost of freedom—or, as Shayma put it, “a poorly acquired freedom of expression,” I analyzed the psyche of the Tunisian youth and how they have coped with these costs. As with Shayma and as previously mentioned in the Context, various economic insecurities have bred cynicism towards the very systems that were once hopeful and had bred freedom.

Beyond economic cynicism and unsustainability, the cost of freedom has also born more sinister repercussions. Shayma stated during our interview that there was a sort of “catharsis” that grew “along with the acquisition of freedom of expression.” Continuing, she said:

“In terms of psychology... there was a complexity that was so repressed with the previous system, that it started to come out. So we began, without even realizing it, releasing those complexes, anxieties... those experiences and trauma or traumatic experiences.”

With a background in psychology in addition to her dance career, she works a second job in dance therapy and psychometry and frames her understanding of the social repercussions of freedom using psychoanalysis. These “releases” she says, have happened in uncontrolled and unmediated ways, often manifesting through an outpouring of negativity and tangible violence.

*“These complexes are coming out, as we’ve seen, with **terrorism**. With young Tunisians committing heinous acts like rape, violence, and sexual harassment. So they take it out on other people because the Revolution and this freedom to express oneself however they want, has been essentially misunderstood.”*

Tracing Shayma’s exposition of freedom of expression being released through violent means highlights an unfortunate trajectory in Tunisian post-Revolution life: deep-seated pain, trauma and frustration bubbling to the surface in recent years in the form of various forms violence. The subject of terrorism, specifically, is a significant one—and, as questioned previously, I wondered if there was a religious self that was motivating young people towards these movements. Indeed, Tunisia merits scrutiny for terrorism because of its status as the highest source of foreign fighters for Salafi-jihadist groups in Syria, Libya, and Iraq (Cook 2018). After my analysis, I conclude that instead of religious zealotry, it is in fact unfulfilled democratic and economic promises of the Revolution that seems to play a significant role. This disillusionment coupled with the democratic freedom of organization and ease of travel have facilitated fighter recruitment and travel (Cook 2018).

To further understand how the costs of freedom have manifested in civil society, I used Be Actor Studio as a case study and found that the studio was astute about weaving their members’ real-world sentiments into the classroom. One day, a heated lounge conversation centered around a young boy who had been murdered at a local nightclub after a petty dispute, occurred among

participants as they waited for a theater class to start. The participants also engaged in a passionate discussion about a greater culture of violence that had been steadily growing in the years post-Revolution, catalyzed by heightened frustrations over the high rates of unemployment and economic inequality. In the spirit of improvisation built into the studio's teaching pedagogy, the instructor Khaled Houissa, decided to construct the lesson around the conversation. He deftly structured the assignment for the day such that each participant would have the opportunity to present a spontaneous monologue piece to the camera, in which they reacted to receiving this news and openly shared their emotions in processing the events. The lesson was a successful (and tearful) testament to real world political issues being incorporated into the teaching and expression of the arts. The greater philosophical dialogue that emerged out of this lesson shed light on the seeping of violence into modern day social culture, as my conversations with many youth participants in the studio revealed that such instances of violence in everyday life—be it in the service industry or in local law enforcement—have quickly become normalized. Petty theft and minor public tiffs can very quickly escalate within this environment of heightened tension. It is undeniable that economic tensions and frustrations are enmeshed within this culture of violence, and freedom of expression under this unstable democracy have furthered them.

Artistic spaces such as Be Actor, as Taoufik says, are vessels for encouraging free expression in creative, safe and intellectually stimulating ways, training young people—once again, with the privilege with to access the arts—to steer their emotion and post-traumatic sentiments in productive, even healing ways. Taoufik is a strong believer that this healing will prevail as the arts gains legitimacy in society as a valid form of therapy and a conduit for political discourse. “This is what we aim to do every day. To train youth to be mindful of their emotions and actions and learn not to inhibit these sentiments, but rather cultivate and manifest them it in

more productive ways.” For those without the privilege to engage with the arts, however, these traumas are, as a result, inadequately worked through in other spheres such a religious or in familial settings. This points to the discrepancy between youth with privilege and those without—and how the costs of freedom manifest themselves differently based through such dichotomies. Increasingly in Tunisian society today, the existence of free speech and expression has birthed polarized results: violence and healing, one a weapon, the other an antidote.

CONCLUSION

In January 2021, it was as though an echo of the wildfire protests that brought down Tunisia’s dictatorship exactly ten years ago had begun again. Young people poured into the streets of more than a dozen Tunisian cities over multiple nights (Yee 2021). Fury over corruption, foundering public services, and a prolonged scarcity of jobs erupted, again. (ibid). Clashes with security forces led to thousands of arrests (ibid). Only this time, the endgame is unclear.

Through my research, I have found that the concept of post-Revolution freedom in itself requires much more nuanced operationalizing, has born both positive and negative effects, and, that the larger political framework of democracy guiding this freedom is deeply flawed. Yet, as much as there is much left to be desired from the aftermath of 2011, both Adib and Shayma reminisced on and acknowledged the optimism they feel towards youth and their agentival capacities for resistance and change—the word “optimism” surfacing and resurfacing multiple times in my interviews with them. This optimism begs the question: what is next for Tunisian civil society? I am particularly interested in the avenues for future research to explore Tunisian civil society’s potential to create a post-democratic world, breaking down flawed neocolonial and neoliberal structures. Tunisia has already seen—and continues to see—the capacity for civil

society, and especially young people in mobilizing and engendering change. Perhaps the ‘solution’ for the present climate of economic malaise, violence and societal frustrations, is a complete restructuring of the political system and starting from the ground up, enacting local, indigenous methods of governance away from Western neoliberal imprints.

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