

INTRODUCTION

TRASH IN THE DUSTBIN, CLUBBING STORMTROOPERS, AND A PHOENIX THAT STRUGGLES TO RISE AGAIN

Abstract

The Introduction presents metal, rap, and electro in Tunisia. A first comparison between the three music scenes gives the reader a glimpse of what “the underground” is in the country. By sketching some of the troubles and events happening in the local underground in 2011-2014, the Introduction then poses a question that constitutes the starting point of the research: why did the metal scene decay after the Tunisian revolution, at the same time in which the rap and electro ones began to flourish? The chapter proceeds by summarising the key events in recent Tunisian history, and provides some theoretical frameworks to put the regime of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, and the subsequent popular uprising, under a sociological light. The last part of the Introduction presents the methodology that informed the research. It discusses the ethnographic methods employed, and the ways in which the Tunisian ethos guided the methodological enterprise across the spectrum of informants and social formations gathered under the metal, rap, and electro scenes.

1. Sounds from the *Underga3*

WE REGRET TO ANNOUNCE THAT THE BAND HAS SPLIT UP!!!

THANKS TO EVERYBODY WHO HAS BEEN SUPPORTING US ALL ALONG THESE YEARS!!!

[Facebook message by the band Deadmoon, 18/10/2013. Translated from French]

After mature reflection, it's with big regret that we announce the end of the group.

We care to thank all the people who have supported and encouraged us, directly or indirectly, all along our path...

[Facebook message by the band Wrong Side Out, 07/11/2013. Translated from French]

Happy new year 2014 metalheads!!!

The band is actually on hold. I'm getting a break (and a loooooong one), and I'm sorry about that. But heck, you don't give a fuck do you?

As you can know we were working on a new material, but the sessions were stopped some months ago.

Wait. It was last year. Damn...

The reason? Bah. Who cares?

Maybe Vielikan will be stopped. Maybe the band is just getting a break. Maybe and maybe...

I'll be back guys, for some news... maybe?

Fedor

[Facebook message by the band Vielikan, 01/01/2014]

Deadmoon, Wrong Side Out, and Vielikan were three of the most incisive metal bands in Tunisia. They had built a following between the late 2000s and the early 2010s. Those years witnessed a historical transition in the small North-African country: 2011 saw the twilight of the regime of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, which had dominated Tunisia for 23 years, and the dawn of an unprecedented revolution, which sparked the so-called Arab Spring and was followed by a complicated phase of “democratisation”.

When I first went to Tunisia to research local metal (from November 2010 to June 2011), Deadmoon, Wrong Side Out, and Vielikan embodied the diversity and liveliness of Tunisian metal. During that period, I had seen them live several times, talked to them and got a picture of their future plans, artistic desires and career perspectives. All had just released new music right before they disbanded: Deadmoon had published their debut EP online in 2012. Vielikan was the prominent extreme metal band in the country: it had marked the days of the revolution with *Corpses and Still no Life*, the main anthem about the Arab Spring produced within the scene. The band was now struggling to get gigs and promote their debut album “A trapped way for wisdom” – furthermore, they were in the process of writing new songs. Wrong Side Out was recording and publishing their first album: indeed, their goodbye message on Facebook was accompanied by a link to the song *Singing about this world*, a last gift to their fans.

Those three bands were just the tip of an iceberg. ApostoL, Cartagena, Flagellation, Infinity, 13 Years Later were just a few of the other groups that split up or were put on hold in the same period. Some of their members accomplished their dream of leaving Tunisia and kept on creating music from their new cities around the world. Some others re-made themselves as cover band musicians and played songs by Stevie Wonder or System of a Down in the bars of the northern *banlieue* of Tunis. Someone discovered DJing or started producing dubstep music. Somebody got married and dropped out. A few embraced Salafism, a radical current of Islam.

It is impossible to say that such a collapse of the Tunisian metal scene came out of the blue. The basic conditions of its existence had always been precarious, and the revolution was followed by a series of small losses, disappearances, and subtle signs of decay. And yet, if one looks at the time frame of

the three messages above, their coincidence is striking. Why did so many bands (indeed, *nearly all* of the prominent metal bands in the country) split up at the same time? How was it possible that a music scene, however weak, had passed from feeble and yet constant presence to almost complete silence in a couple years?

This shift is all the more striking if we consider the post-revolutionary musical panorama in a broader sense. The events of 2011 had put Tunisian youth on the map, with its political struggles and cultural shout-outs. Countless journalists and academics stormed the country in order to document the revolutionary youth – the hipster cyberactivists, the angry poor males, the bearded Islamist radicals, the graffiti artists, the b-girls, the students in hijab and Converse All Stars, the emergent political leaders and the permanent political losers. And along with the media, there came the money. NGOs, international agencies, foreign states, and private corporations began investing in Tunisian youth, financing projects that would foster capacity building, improve the conditions of the devastated inland regions of the country, promote the rights of women and minorities. Art was often seen as a strategic weapon, especially forms of art that were most related to street culture – rap, graffiti, and breakdancing in particular. The idea that these kinds of art were inherently akin to the spirit of protest, and to the lives of disadvantaged youth, made them valuable as an alternative to the material poverty and political silence that had affected local youth for decades. This assumption did not come from nowhere: after the success of the political anthem *Rayes Lebled* and the arrest of its author, the rapper El General, in the latter days of the Ben Ali regime, rap came to be celebrated as *the* music of revolution, and knew an unprecedented surge in the following years.

Upon my arrival in Tunisia, in March 2014, it was seemingly impossible to avoid listening to *Houmani*. The song, by Hamzaoui Med Amine and Kafon, kept on blasting from taxi speakers and shop radios, invading the streets. It had already received some five million views of Youtube, and its success would grow relentlessly, making it one of the strongest successes in the history of Tunisian popular music. *Houmani* focuses on the hard life of youth from the *houma* [“quarter” in Tunisian; the word mainly indicates the disadvantaged neighbourhoods], who were described through metaphors such as “Zebbla fi poubella” [“trash into the dustbin”]. Therefore, the song totally fit with the post-revolutionary narrative that apparently put poor, revolutionary youth at the centre of Tunisia’s national consciousness. Kafon himself – released from prison in the days of my arrival, after a ten month sentence for minor drug offences – perfectly represented the stereotype of the Tunisian rapper from the *houma*: a boy of modest origins that was cracked down on by the police for his streetwise lifestyle and, implicitly, his art.

Barely a month before, a musical event had shaken Tunisia, seemingly inaugurating a new era in the country’s pop culture and its musical (and tourist) industry. Les Dunes Electroniques [The Electronic

Dunes] brought international DJs and clubbers to the desert outside Nefta, at the south-western border of the country. The festival was hosted at one of the locations where the 1977 movie *Star Wars* was filmed, and consequently the marketing of the festival borrowed the iconography of the movie, casting it into the imaginary of the Tunisian Sahara: images of the film's stormtroopers and robots dancing in the desert were key elements of the event's advertising. The festival was actively endorsed by the new "technical" government set in place after the celebrated launch of the new, democratic Tunisian Constitution, at the beginning of 2014. The new Minister of Tourism, Amel Karboul, promoted Les Dunes Electroniques as a giant party for the accomplishment of the democratic transition. The year 2013 had been shadowed by the terrorist murders of two prominent political figures and by a wave of unrest that put the very national cohesion of Tunisia in danger. Now the risk was over: Tunisia had the most progressive constitution in the Middle East and North Africa, and nothing could stop its modern and democratic youth from celebrating. Those modern youth – the narrative went on – would naturally oppose, with their coolness and joy, the backward brutality of Islamic terrorism. While several members of the rap and electro scenes criticised *Houmani* and Les Dunes Electroniques, it was hard not to consider them as "signs of life" for these two scenes, and milestones of an interestingly shifting cultural landscape.

The pacified atmosphere of Tunis was also visible in the signs that testified to the removal of the state of emergency for the first time since 2011. No military tanks were present on the central Avenue Bourguiba anymore, but downtown Tunis still retained some barbed wire fences and a curious ambiance of suspended tension. A couple days after my arrival I attended a spectacle by the avantgarde electro musician Ynfl-x: a live sonorisation of the movie *The Seventh Seal*. Two days later an amazing performance by the electro/metal artist Fusam took place in the city centre. During the same week, I also witnessed a quite different musical event: it was The Rise of Metal II, a metal festival crowded with teenage bands and black-clad fifteen-year olds. The event had the ambition to re-establish the glory of Tunisian metal after years of decadence. Its Facebook event disclaimed:

For All The Tunisian Metalheads. This is our second concert lml [an "emoticon" signifying the "horns" hand gesture typical to metal]

After The Heinous Collaps Of Metal Music In Tunisia, We Decided To Rise The Metal Again And Forever! Because Metal Is Our Beloved Music, Metal Is Art, Metal Is Culture, Metal Is A Part Of Our Lives. We Should Fight And Rise The Metal High In This Country Because METAL Is The LAW! So, We Decided To Make This Concert As A Revenge For Our Glorious Music And It's Time To Show To People Who We Are! lml If You Are A Real Metalhead Be There!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Other concerts and festivals, with a similar aim and titles such as The Phoenix, would be organised

in the following months. Soon, I felt the urge of disentangling the contradictions of such a cultural scenario. What made metal decline at the same time in which rap and electro were booming? How did these processes of ebb and flow interact with the wider cultural mechanisms of post-revolutionary Tunisia?

The context and questions described above set the stage for my research on the Tunisian metal, rap, and electro scenes in 2014 and 2015. Metal, rap, and electro were commonly acknowledged to be part of the Tunisian musical “underground”, or the *underga3* as it was sometimes called mixing English and Arabic. They were more or less widespread and well-known realities in the local youth environment, but they lacked the support and interest of public and private institutions working in the musical and cultural domain – ministries, unions, labels and the like. Members of each scene usually had some knowledge and some opinion about the other scenes. Such opinions often formed sketched *ethnosociologies* of those scenes: scenesters’ efforts to the “sociological” comprehension of those scenes and their members (see Chapter 7). There existed a degree of collaboration and exchange between the scenes: electro producers sometimes worked as beatmakers for rappers; metalheads could be part of hip hop crews; and certain venues hosted patrons and shows from all the three scenes.

Moreover, some Tunisian scenesters shifted from one scene to another, following at least partially standardised paths: after 2011, metalheads in their twenties often quit metal in order to join the electro scene or the rap scene, while I never saw any examples of rappers or clubbers becoming metalheads. Although this could be seen as a global tendency, and thus not limited to the Tunisian context, such a tendency was certainly shaped by the ebb and flow of these scenes as described above, and by particular features of metal, rap, and electro in Tunisia. I will explain those features in the course of the book.

Besides these elements of continuity and integration between scenes, metal, rap, and electro were to some extent separate social worlds presenting different conditions of existence, different internal discourses, and a different interplay with the political, social, and cultural institutions of the country. Metal had been a “trendy” scene in the 2000s: the Tunisian scene had hosted some international concerts and a growing number of local bands for a while, before suffering the decline I described. Rap existed for more than ten years before the revolution: in the following years, it quickly became the most visible and popular youth culture in Tunisia. Electro enjoyed a less widespread popularity than rap, but it became a constant and growing presence after the revolution. Clubbing, which in different forms had always been a tourist attraction in the country, came to be a culturally diverse form of leisure, catering to different audiences through a varied palette of musical styles.

Each of the three scenes had to confront a complex local environment. This environment was marked by an array of specific features: the political quakes that followed a 23 year regime and a revolutionary

process; the economic and social hardship of a country belonging to the global south; and the diverse cultural influences of a State situated between the Arab/Muslim world and Europe. Throughout the book, I will present the formation and reproduction of the three scenes as related to the above-cited aspects of the Tunisian environment.

2. (Post-)revolutionary dispatches

Youth cultures such as metal and rap took roots in Tunisia during the early 1990s, amidst the era of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali as the president of the country. Ben Ali came to power in 1987, through a coup that ousted Habib Bourguiba, the glorious *zaim* [leader, warlord] who had guided the independence struggle against French colonialism, founded independent Tunisia, and shaped the nation through the politics of his authoritarianism.

The Ben Ali era was initially saluted as one of democratic opening and political renaissance. However, no long after his arrival, the new president reacted to the rise of an Islamic political opposition by consolidating his dominion on the country. Oppositions – in particular Ennahdha, the Islamic party – were stifled, and hundreds of their members were incarcerated and tortured (Perkins, 2014). Along the 1990s, the Ben Ali regime configured a control on the country that was at the same time subtle and brutal. Police, and the structures of the ruling party – the RCD (*Rassemblement Constitutionnel Democratique*; Constitutional Democratic Rally) – became omnipresent. Whoever needed an economic benefit, a favour, the bypassing as well as the full application of law, had to pass through the RCD. At the same time, this network of clientele functioned as a powerful information gatherer for the regime. In sum, these features made it the veritable *mediator* of Tunisian society, which could promote obedient conducts and easily repress opponents through the lever of violence and, more often, through obliteration and boycott of their social life (Hibou, 2006).

According to scholar Béatrice Hibou, economy was a crucial instrument for this role of the Ben Ali regime. “Creative” manipulation of economic figures fostered the idea of a “Tunisian economic miracle”: international organisations such as the IMF and the World Bank, the United States and the European Union praised Tunisia as an apt pupil of liberal globalisation. At the same time, these international allies closed an eye on the tortures and freedom denials of the regime, which were seen as a residual evil that the constant reform path of the country would erase in its steady march towards reform and democracy. The play on figures was just one of the economic tools used by the regime in producing internal and external consent. It worked along with other economic levers, such as the above-mentioned client networks established by the party-State, and the role of bank credit in sustaining consuming lifestyles and, at the same time, subjecting citizens to political governance. As

noted by Hibou, the Ben Ali system did not solely rest on coercion, yet it exerted power through a sort of voluntary servitude: the dominated had an interest in safeguarding domination. This interest took the shape of a “security pact”: a promise of safety from danger (be it Islamic terrorism or everyday crime), social security, consumption and modernity that rested on the omnipresence of the State and its penetration within economy and society. Ben Ali’s family, and a small clique of cronies, had the lion’s share of this system, infiltrating every significant economic activity with mafia-like rapacity.

The cracks in the security pact, its limited inclusiveness, and its unsustainability became all of a sudden evident on the 17th of December 2010, when Tarek Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire. Bouazizi was an informal street vendor from Sidi Bouzid, a city in the dispossessed Tunisian inland. When police sequestered his fruits and vegetables cart and humiliated him, he reacted by immolating himself. A wave of protest followed Bouazizi’s act, growing bigger and bigger as the disadvantaged masses of the centre and south of Tunisia felt the young vendor’s death as the least outrage to their dignity, and went on the streets crying for bread and freedom.

Riots reached Tunis and the country’s main cities in the first week of January 2011. Ben Ali initially responded with violence and refused to acknowledge any of the protestors’ reasons. However, the revolt did not calm down, and the president quickly found himself in the corner: on the 14th of January, having lost army support and much of his international consensus, he escaped the country, seeking refuge in Saudi Arabia. Ben Ali’s departure consecrated the Tunisian revolution as a peaceful and powerful mass mobilisation, whose apparently spontaneous and leaderless character inaugurated a new era of political dynamics (see Allal, 2012). Protests quickly spread, in what has been celebrated as an “Arab Spring” of revolts and regime changes all over the Middle East.

Unforeseen by most of the region’s analysts, the Tunisian revolution actually revealed the fragility of the system that ruled the country. While, in the beginning, international observers praised cyberactivism and the role of new technologies and social networks in iconising and spreading the revolt², more nuanced analyses have later appeared. Authors such as Habib Ayeb have put regionalism at the centre of Ben Ali’s demise. Tunisian asymmetric development had enriched Tunis and the coastal area (the Sahel) at the expense of the extremely poor inland of the country: this produced an unbearable fracture in the social tissue of Tunisia, which resulted in a string of popular unrest (Ayeb, 2011).

As the worldwide crisis kicked in, the “Tunisian miracle” bubble had exploded, revealing the true face of a mode of growth that did not signify rising employment rates. One of the results of this situation was the problem of “unemployed graduates”: Ben Ali had invested in producing generations of highly educated youth who, in the context of 1990s and 2000s Tunisia, had increasing problems in

being absorbed by a saturated public sector and an underdeveloped job market (Chouika & Gobe, 2015). As the country's economy deteriorated, the mass of people outside of the security pact became unbearable to the system, and the pact itself lost its credibility. Tunisians started feeling like their very "dignity" was being prejudiced by the failing regime, and new forms of community and political legitimacy came to be developed upon the ruins of the security pact (Ayari, 2011a; Hibou, 2011).

The Tunisian revolution was followed by a complicated phase of regime change. Protests continued after the departure of Ben Ali, and prevented the RCD nomenklatura from managing the political transition. The ruling party was declared illegal, and elections for a Constituent Assembly were called for October 2011. The legalisation of oppositions produced a myriad of new political subjects, among whom the Islamic party Ennahdha – once the strongest opponent of the regime – arose as the only one capable to attain a mass support. Ennahdha eventually won the elections, and formed a government with two smaller, secular parties: this majority was known as the Troika.

While the world saluted Tunisia as the only spark of democratic hope amidst an Arab Spring turning bleak, Tunisia's path towards a new Constitution proved constantly on the verge of catastrophe. The Troika government knew a fierce opposition, that gradually converged around the secular party Nidaa Tounes, which hosted some of the previous regime personalities. Conflict between government and oppositions became quickly understood as a battle between Islam and secularism over the future of Tunisia. Contrast upon women's condition, personal rights, and the role of religion in public affairs hegemonised political confrontation and blocked the constituent process. Some critics denounced this binary opposition for it obscured the growing economic problems and authoritarian risks in post-revolutionary Tunisia (see Hmed and Yousfi, 2012). The debate on political Islam could not be limited to Ennahdha alone: a diverse field of Islamic politics flourished after the revolution. Parties and movements wanting to establish a Caliphate appeared: most of them privileged predication and political propaganda as their means within which to engage in political struggle, while others turned towards terrorism (Merone, 2015). Initially targeting the army and political figures (such as opposition politicians Chokri Belaid and Mohammed Brahmi), jihadism further revealed the fragility and insecurity of the State apparatus.

Terrorism and the political stalemate precipitated the situation to the edge of chaos. In the Summer of 2013, the oppositions organised a sit-in to chase the government, which, in turn, responded urging its supporters to take the streets. The risk of a coup, in the vein of the one ending the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt some months before, seemed dramatically at hand. The situation was resolved by an agreement between a "quartet" of institutions – the powerful union UGTT, UTICA (the organisation of the entrepreneurs), the Lawyers' order and the League for Human Rights – which mediated the political confrontation allowing a political compromise towards the signing

of a new Constitution (Ben Salem, 2016).

Consensus between Ennahdha and Nidaa Tounes marked, in an ambiguous way, the subsequent phase of Tunisian history. The Islamic party receded from its purpose of characterising the new Constitution in any Islamic sense: the document has been celebrated as the most progressive one in MENA region. As some observers noted, anyway, the Constitution was less the reflection of an agreement of the basic ideological principles of the new State than the fruit of an “armed peace”, and incoherent, mutual concessions between opposed political forces (see Mezghani, 2014). Another consequence of the “national dialogue” was the technical government led by Mehdi Jomaa. The new government had the aim of supervising the transition to the first parliamentary and presidential elections in the country, scheduled for late 2014. Furthermore, it was charged to safeguard the neoliberal economic policies required by Tunisia’s international stakeholders in order to support the country during its critical post-revolutionary phase (Hanieh, 2015).

While elections re-proposed the virulent confrontation between seculars and Islamists, their output ended up refashioning national consensus: a practice of democracy based on consent rather than dissent, in which stronger parties guarantee their mutual coexistence and discredit any opposition in terms of an attack on national unity (Marzouki, 2015). Nidaa Tounes formed the new government, led by president Beji Caied Essebsi (an elder politician who had served under Bourguiba). Ennahdha supported the government, which still proved feeble because of disputes within the ruling party, the permanence of economic crisis, and external challenges. The authoritarian temptations, and the ties to the old regime of the Essebsi government were challenged by diffuse grassroots movements – in particular those fighting against economic obliteration in the country’s inland and those pushing “civil society” issues in the city, from civil rights to the fight for the memory of the past regime’s injustices (Del Pistoia & Ledrissi, 2015).

My fieldwork took place amidst this complex historical phase, in which the anguish of State failure and massive violence coexisted with the hope of, and fights for, freedom. Social life was fashioned by contradictions. My informants lived in a country in which one could be arrested for possessing self-rolling cigarette papers or a bottle of alcohol during Ramadan, but in which terrorist cells seemed able to operate in a totally unrestricted fashion. Women suffered a climate of diffused rape culture and police arrogance, while homosexuals were in constant risk of imprisonment. Islamists were harassed by police because of their visual appearance and stigmatised by many in the wider society as public enemies; for many youth in the interior, radical Islam meant the only opportunity for a social revolution (see Merone, 2015). Still, forms of creativity and social activism were relentlessly weaved through the fabric of a chaotic securitarian State.

3. Ethnography and the Ethos

Upon my arrival in Tunis, I quickly realised what I had read in many sociological books: the social structure is perceived by the body well ahead of being understood by reason. Tunisia is a diverse country hosting a range of possible lifestyles, welcoming foreigners, and even offering the possibility of a fully “European” existence to those who can afford it, and are happy to live in a social bubble. Still, the experience of a walk in Tunis suddenly unfolded as a dense lesson in sociology, and to some extent an exploration of alterity.

First, life in Tunisia conveyed to me a new discipline of the body. I needed a slightly new way of walking – walking on the sometimes uneven road surface; walking through the irrational car traffic. I needed to learn *not to wander*: wandering around the city centre meant being a gullible tourist, and gullible tourists attracted *beznessa* – men who baited foreigners pretending to be travel guides, offering a wide range of services and relentlessly asking for money (Collins, 2012). This also meant adopting a particular gaze, using one’s eyes in a specific way and not looking in everybody’s eyes (which was all the more true for female visitors).

Besides walking techniques, my body required a new sensory discipline: tactile, auditive, olfactory stimuli shaped a distinctive urban experience in Tunis. This urban experience had points of contact with what Hilary Pilkington (2004, p. 123) writes about Russia: “contemporary city living is not characterised by speed, intensity, organisation and punctuality so much as disorganisation, negotiation, dysfunctionality and dust”. From mutton carcasses hanging from open-air street butcheries and bees crowding pastry shops, to the frequency of bodily contact with strangers, city life in Tunisia had a sensually intrusive aspect that is somewhat “sterilised” in many western cities³.

The social organisation of the Tunis area required its own share of apprenticeship. Every city in the world has a geography of social difference, and articulates inequality through space. In Tunis, this geography was hypostasised and overcharged with symbolic relevance. The neighbourhood one came from would, in common sense, say *everything* about that person. The northern *banlieue* was for the bourgeois, and places like La Marsa were the hotspots for night-time fun, Europe-savvy supermarkets, and high-class resorts. Ennasr and the Lac were the places for the well-to-do Muslims: they offered fancy cafes with no trace of alcohol, and, in some cases, sported an extravagant architecture which reminded one of Dubai’s luxury. Houses for the foreigners were in Menzah or Mutuelleville. Ettadhamen, Douar Hicher, Cité Intilaka were the “hot quarters”: they had an unshakable aura of poverty, insecurity, dangerous youth and Islamic radicalism. When I mentioned areas such as Jbel Lahmar, Sidi Hassin, Mellasine to taxi drivers they were taken aback: “Well, why would you want to go there?” they would ask me in laughter. The sharpness of those categories was

even more striking when measured against the actual distances occurring in a small city like Tunis: it simply took a short walk to pass from the First World to the Third World, from villas to the slums⁴. Hence, fieldwork did not only mean doing interviews or going to concerts; it also implied tuning my own *habitus*⁵ to life in Tunisia and managing to grasp the tissue of localised assumptions, commonsensical notions, ways of doing things, that stood in the background of Tunisian social life – I will call this sociocultural tissue the *ethos*.

Such a concept – with its correlated ones of common sense, and cultural hegemony – is one of the most slippery in the social sciences: trying to define *what* the ethos of a people is always proves to be a highly vague, speculative exercise⁶. On the other hand, it is often tempting to find examples of such an ethos. In the Tunisian case, one could notice how the chaotic car traffic, in which every driver tried to take advantage by violating the rules, seemed to have points of contact with equally chaotic queues at public institutions, and with the entire political economy of corruption I examined in the previous section. A common ethos, here, could be seen in the low credibility of “universal” rules and models, in a country which, throughout its history, has been characterised by the privatisation and bureaucratisation of power (Bono *et al.*, 2015).

Taking the ethos into account meant being able to consider the anti-mainstream stances of musical scenes. This did not require a monolithic vision of cultural hegemony: Tunisian society was a polyphony of voices and points of view. Still, some of these points of view were more “central” in the public debate; they had an agreed position as signifiers of common sense and their strength was consolidated by the relation to ambits of values – media stereotypes, laws, religious folklore, “tradition”, political discourses. As a consequence, such an ethos was not at all coherent. To illustrate this point, I will now offer an example of how this fluid ethos was articulated in and out of Tunisian music scenes.

For most of my time in Tunisia, I used to live in a house in Montfleury, a central area of Tunis that was composed of middle class as well as “popular” neighbourhoods, and bordered the Kasbah (the place where most government buildings are) and the medina. My house was close to the Bab Jdid [New Door] neighbourhood – a quarter which had the fame of being “hot” and disadvantaged, but also had a rich cultural heritage: it was the cradle of Club Africain, one of Tunis’s foremost soccer teams, and hosted a generation of beloved rappers, such as Klay BBJ, Sniper, and Phenix. My house was thus a privileged observatory for the diverse lifestyles and niches of urban life in Tunis. And so it was on the inside: I shared the place with a Tunisian family that included two young women and one young man, aged eighteen to thirty years old. This cohabitation gave me some interesting glimpses on family life and youth experience in Tunisia. At the same time, the family rented the ground floor of their house to a continuous flow of strangers – journalists, Arabic students, and many

young scholars: these flatmates allowed me to reflexively discuss the Tunisian reality we were immersed in, starting with everyday family life.

One day I invited the two daughters of my landlady to a concert at Whatever Saloon, an “alternative” café in the city centre. After a moment of enthusiasm, the girls’ parents denied them the authorisation to come with me to the concert. While on that precise day parental decision was met with rage and sadness, the day after, Rim⁷, the youngest girl, started yelling at me: “My parents were right, you were crazy to go there and to invite me! Are you serious? A schoolmate of mine showed me a video, it looked like another planet!” Rim went on complaining about the girls in the video, who smoked cigarettes, cursed, and dressed “like prostitutes”; she said that the Saloon was full of “delinquents” who “have no respect”. This conversation illuminated to me the many discourses circulating within scenes, about *reputation* and public morals. While the elaboration of a sense of marginality was in part a strategy of distinction, it also revealed the tribulations of Tunisian scenes in articulating a persistent intrusion of “official” morality and social control into their cultural production. It would be mistaken to identify Rim’s opinions with public morals tout-court, but still they sounded striking, in that they came from a fairly youth culture-savvy girl, situated in a family of casual metal listeners, and who paradoxically used to smoke herself.

Besides informing my thoughts on scenes and distinction, apprenticeship of the ethos was a methodological resource. It helped me in refining my expectations about interviews, informants’ rhetorics, and things that went unsaid. I could better understand what to do when informants did not show up after the first thirty minutes of our planned meeting, or see beyond their apparent enthusiasm when they accepted – on the phone or on Facebook – to do an interview. Interpreting the ethos gave me a sense of what my position as a foreigner implied in my exchanges with research participants: what were my advantages, my duties, and their ideas about my role.

My entire ethnographic method was tentatively shaped by such interpretation. It consisted of three main research methods: interviews⁸; participant observation at concerts, DJ sets, festivals, open mics, rehearsals, cafes and other scene situations; and the analysis of media and secondary sources. The asperities of the local ethos guided the transformation of my own enquiry as members of the three music scenes interacted with it in different ways: this instilled in my research a continuously mutating and adaptive strategy.

Electro and rap scenesters seemed, at times, to be the opposite ends of the spectrum (even though they often intermingled). Electro musicians were the easiest ones to interview: they were enthusiastic about my project, mastered the interview situation (interpreting questions almost in the same way as the interviewer), and in some cases they were even aware of my research’s theoretical and methodological backgrounds. Interviews with rappers, on the other hand, were the most difficult part

of my research. It was hard to organise interviews with them: they would often be late, not answer the phone, or not come to our appointments. They were often wary of the interviewer, and did not focus on the interview, preferring to fuse it with the ordinary activities with their friends and crew. I had to learn how to “chase” them in their typical cafes, turn the semi-structured interview in an even looser activity which sometimes included turning off my recorder. What was at stake, here, was a difference in habitus, with electro producers being closer to the western researcher’s habitus and rap scenesters close to the habitus of young men from the *houma* with their routines of coffee drinking, time killing, and crew-related activities (this seemed true whatever the social background of rappers, as we will see in Chapter 7). Such a variety of interactions between scenes’ habitus and the ethos guided my fieldwork activity, urging precarious shifts in my methods as I attempted to make them resonate with the local ethos and with each scene’s relation to it.

This book is organised in two parts. Part One presents the metal, rap, and electro scenes and discusses their internal dynamics. Chapter 1 sets the theoretical framework I will employ in such analyses, rethinking the category of music scene through the frameworks of *fragility* and *sceneness* as keys to understanding the precariousness and mutating character of scenes in the precarious Tunisian reality. Chapters 2 to 4 present, respectively, the case studies of metal, rap, and electro. Each scene is analysed with reference to its *structure* and its *construction*, two categories proposed by Keith Kahn-Harris (2006) in order to indicate, respectively, the institutions present within scenes and their underlining discourses. Chapter 5 then examines the role of State bureaucracy in influencing the three scenes under investigation, and offers a comparison of the interplay of construction and structure in each one of them.

In Part Two, I relate Tunisian scenes to different aspects of the local and its ethos. Chapter 6 discusses the cultural context of Tunisia: its main themes are religion and irreligiousness; and the cultural heritage of Tunisia in its “oriental” and national forms. Chapter 7 explores social inequality and lifestyles in Tunisia and their relation to the metal, rap, and electro scenes. Chapter 8 deepens the analysis of those scenes in the context of post-revolutionary politics. I conclude Part Two by returning to the key concerns raised in this Introduction, that is, the demise of metal in Tunisia and the simultaneous flourishing of electro and rap, suggesting a series of reasons as to why this happened.

¹ See the Facebook page of the event: <https://www.facebook.com/events/244214652423912/> Accessed 04/06/2018.

² See Ayari, 2011b, for a critique of these social media-centred analyses.

³ It must be said, however, that some of those traits were not totally unfamiliar to me, as somebody who grew up in Sicily, where such sensory stimuli are well present. And yet, they are often less pronounced, being nuanced by a different context of governance (a different presence of the State and of supra-national organisations) and by higher wealth.

⁴ More about this spatial organization will be said in Chapter 7.

⁵ In Bourdieu's (1984) terms, the *habitus* is a set of unconscious dispositions which orient social life. See Chapter 1.

⁶ As such, ethos has a very uneven shape and theoretical status across social sciences. Even retracing a coherent history of the concept would be very complex. The usage in this book refers to a theorisation of ethos that has Geertz (1957) as a classic point of reference.

⁷ All names have been replaced by pseudonyms in order to protect the privacy of my informants.

⁸ Semi-structured interviews were the main source of data. My sample comprised seventy participants, aged 18 to 35. Participants were figures of the metal, rap, and electro scenes: musicians, producers, DJs, VJs, band managers, venue managers, label owners, journalists, radio animators, and fans. Only ten of those participants were women. Interviews were often carried out with more than one research participant (eg, several members of one band); they lasted one hour and a half on average. The main interview language was French, followed by English and Tunisian Arabic. Most interviews were collected in the so-called greater Tunis region, which included Tunis and its outskirts. Interviews were also collected in other Tunisian cities such as Sfax, Sousse, Nabeul, Nefta, Tozeur, Gafsa, and in two cases Paris. Three interviews were conducted on Skype. Although the bulk of data comes from my 2014 and 2015 fieldwork sessions in Tunisia, some data used in this book come from my 2010/2011 fieldwork on Tunisian metal, and from a one-month fieldwork trip I took in May 2018.

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