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978-0-521-10901-7 - Tunisian Peasants in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

Lucette Valensi

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Studies in modern capitalism • Etudes sur le capitalisme moderne

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the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries**

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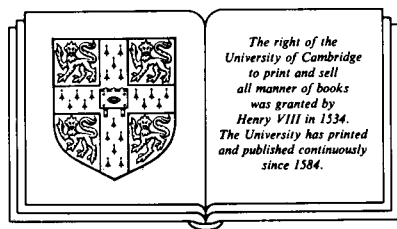
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LUCETTE VALENSI

École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris

Translated by Beth Archer



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Introduction

The origin of this study of Tunisian peasantry before colonization has to be placed within the context of an event, or a series of events. For when I began this work Tunisia and Morocco had just achieved their independence. War was raging in Algeria. Those years of *histoire chaude* revealed fundamental realities in all three countries that had long been disguised by the *pax gallica*: among these revelations were that the peasants, the people – until then ignored and despised – had been the silent guardians of their culture, “The National Library” of North Africa (in the felicitous expression of an Algerian writer) and that the interior, considered backward and ignorant, had kept alive more than anachronistic values. Once independence was obtained, the burdensome heritage of underdevelopment remained, along with the ever-present question of how to overcome it. Historians, as well as everyone else, asked, Why such poverty, why such dependency?

I had just come out of the Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines in Paris, where I had studied history. The notion of “kings and battles” was under constant attack. The concept of *l'événementiel*, denoting political and diplomatic history, was universally condemned, however one pronounced it. Economics and history took over its terrain. Ernest Labrousse introduced us to economic history, initiating us into the study of demographic and economic fluctuations, the history of prices, and the construction of a model for the economy of the ancien régime in France. As for social history, after Marc Bloch's death, historians remained faithful to him and his works became our gospel. Demography discreetly made its way into the Sorbonne with an optional and introductory course by Marcel Reinhardt. Thanks to junior faculty and to the “extracurricular” questions that cropped up in our oral examinations, we learned about the existence of pioneering reviews (*Annales*), important books (Braudel on the Mediterranean), and research in progress, particularly that of Pierre Goubert and Pierre Vilar.

Armed with the instruments of research and interpretation forged by these historians, we set out to conquer new lands in history, to plow new

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fields. For me, it was to be precolonial Tunisia, with the mid-nineteenth century as my ultimate destination. The later period had become known through the work of Jean Ganiage, Jean Poncet, and the geographers. Had there been archives, I would unhesitatingly have chosen the sixteenth century as my starting point and taken up where Robert Brunschwig left off – at the arrival of the Turks. But sources were lacking up to the very end of the seventeenth century. Chance thus determined my chronological framework and obliged me to begin in the eighteenth century. There were, in fact, other reasons for this choice. The seventeenth century, as related by Ibn Abi Dinār Al Qairawāni or Paul Lucas (1712), had witnessed a series of massacres and internecine struggles. By comparison, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries enjoyed relative stability. To begin with, the Husaynite dynasty, founded in 1705 by Husayn Ibn Ali, remained in power until the twentieth century. It is true that there was no dearth of conflicts within the reigning family, the first among them having caused serious consequences for the entire country: From 1729 to 1740 a civil war bloodied the land. Ali Pāsha, nephew of Bey Husayn, thought he would succeed him to the throne. However, he was eliminated from the succession when the bey fathered his first son. Ali Pāsha's rebellion, supported by Algeria, completely divided the country. Bey Husayn, under long siege in Kairouan, was finally vanquished and replaced by Ali Pāsha. His reign (1740–56) was in turn agitated by the revolt of his son, Yūnis, in 1752. But the rest of the regency remained unaffected by it. In 1756 the Algerian army invaded Tunisia, devastated the capital, returned to power the sons of the first bey of the dynasty – Muhammad (1756–9) and Ali Bey (1759–82) – and forced them to pay a tribute. This episode, though very serious, was similarly localized and brief, as was the revolt of Yūnis's son Ismā'īl between 1759 and 1762.

As for foreign relations during this period, French naval demonstrations in 1728, 1731, and 1770, followed by a Venetian naval engagement in 1784, were limited to a few shellings without major damage. In 1741 Yūnis recaptured the island of Tabarka from the Genoese, who had been exploiting it since 1540. The war with Algeria, which lasted from 1807 to 1813, had no significant effect on Tunisia. On the whole, the eighteenth century seems to have been a period during which the country was spared both foreign and domestic upheavals, despite the dynastic struggles. The power of the bey took root and gained strength, reaching its apogee with the reign of Bey Hammūda, the son of Ali Bey, who governed from 1782 to 1814.

In contrast, the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the reestablishment of peace in Europe altered the balance of power between Western countries and the entire Muslim Mediterranean. Tunisia, like other parts of

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the Ottoman Empire, and later Morocco, was subjected to ever greater European domination. But at least within the country, the succession of sovereigns (unlike Algeria and Morocco) took place smoothly, and their control over the country remained unchallenged. Othman, the son of Hammūda Bey, reigned three months in 1814, followed by his brother Mahmūd Bey (1814–24). The throne then passed to Mahmūd's sons, Husayn Bey (1824–35) and Mustapha (1835–37). The next sovereign, Ahmad Bey (1837–55), tried in vain, under pressure from the outside, to strengthen his army and modernize the country. The effect of his failures on the country, the equally disastrous attempts of his successors to resist the European intrusion and to restore or reform the political and fiscal systems, the reactions of the population – all these factors were already present in the process of alienation that I propose to describe.

Since the only political regime during the entire period under study was undisputed by internal or external crises, I had before me a chronological framework ideally suited to examination. And since the geopolitical framework also remained unchanged during this time, the overall conditions were favorable to analysis.

Tunisia, with approximately 155,000 square kilometers, a large part of which is barren, is comparatively tiny. Morocco today is two and a half times as large, and Algeria, admittedly with its uninhabitable Sahara, is fourteen times larger. Tunisia is a particularly homogeneous territory. The Berber language and the institutions that prevail in Berber-speaking regions have receded to the outer limits of the country and are restricted to the jabals of the south and the island of Jerba, or to such inaccessible mountain reaches as Jabal Waslāt. This tiny kingdom is therefore relatively easy to encompass, though part of the much larger geographic, political, and cultural spheres of the Maghreb, the Ottoman Empire, and the Arabic-speaking and Muslim world color any interpretation of Tunisia.

There was no dearth of documentary material, and the voluminous archives of the Tunisian government looked very promising. Historical “fieldwork” was thus begun in the government archives, pursued in the Mediterranean ports with which Tunisia had commercial relations – Marseille, Leghorn, Venice, Valetta – and continued in Paris, where not only consular and commercial correspondence had been preserved, but above all, the first systematic investigations of the different regions and tribes of the country, undertaken by the French army at the beginning of the protectorate.

Elaboration of the empirical data required similar methodological displacements. I had first planned a decidedly serial and quantitative history. This soon appeared impossible. It is not enough to raise the right questions for a research project; one must also find the means to answer

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them. Thorough examination of hundreds of ledgers for the purpose of reconstructing price curves resulted in impure, heterogeneous, and largely unacceptable material. In the account books of the state, when prices were indicated, the volume of merchandise was missing. Or else, dissimilar commodities appeared together under a global figure. In the case of payments in kind, it was impossible to determine whether they were in toto, which made reconstruction of any system of accounting completely arbitrary. Scribes had the habit of mixing categories. Charitable contributions, funeral expenses, or the cost of clothing were listed in the same column as the purchase of foodstuffs for the Bardo. Data concerning primary commodities are buried in the mass of all the others. There is also a confusion of wholesale and retail, market prices, those paid by the bey, and so on. It was similarly impossible to reconstruct fluctuations in population or land rent, which accounts for the consistently fragmentary, often descriptive, character of the results obtained and the hypotheses that take the place of conclusions.

This direction consequently led to a dead end. Instruments of measurement provide a tool that is not adaptable to all societies. In an economy in which self-subsistence and nonmonetary exchange play an important role, market prices do not have the same meaning as in distinctly market economies. Salary scales make no sense where manpower is not a commodity, any more than measurements of productivity are applicable where a domestic organization of production prevails. In other words, figures allow one only to measure performance, and thus to compare it in time and space. But it is no more than a symptom, and like a fever curve, it says little about the anatomy or physiology of the subject under scrutiny.

Since those traces visible on the surface proved insufficient, it became necessary to take a comprehensive view of Tunisian society, to open up its structures and analyze the relationships between its constituent parts. This goal sent me back to the definition of a social and economic formation. The initial answer seemed to suggest that I was dealing with a pre- or noncapitalist system: in which case, a feudal society. Let us not blame – or at least not exclusively – the Marxism of the time and its paradigm of the unilinear development of societies for this simplistic view. Even outside that school little else was discussed, and recently the most well-informed historians who queried me on precolonial North Africa continued to ask the question that contained its own reply: “Was it not a feudal society?” I therefore looked for serfs, feudal landlords, a weak political power, fragmented for the benefit of the landlords, and so on. If one wished, such things could be found. *Khammās* could be disguised as serfs, caids as feudal barons, and the substance of the whole structure ultimately juggled away.

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In the 1960s, discussions regarding the concept of modes of production turned the model of the 1930s upside down. The publication and introduction by Eric Hobsbawm, in 1964, of texts by Marx on precapitalist formations and their translation into French in 1967 and 1970, although not providing answers, at least made it possible to discard false solutions, allowed for a more rigorous and comprehensive definition of modes of production, and encouraged new interpretations. I was unaware at the time of the debates that were taking place among economic anthropologists over Karl Polanyi's propositions. My belated reading of those important works provided me with a confirmation of the analyses I had obtained.

This set of problems required the modification and multiplication of investigative methods and the use of various techniques that may seem somewhat syncretic to a historian of the Western world. It became necessary to go beyond the chronological limits originally set, adopting instead the regressive method dear to Marc Bloch, and when the past turned out to be too reticent, to question the present. For an understanding of the past, direct fieldwork was required, as well as the kind of information to be found in geographic and ethnological publications. It also became necessary to go beyond the boundaries of history, if history has any, and to study from within the functioning of that society. Instead of thinking *about fellahs*, I began thinking in their language. Such developments as the organization of the tribe, agrarian traditions, and food habits may fall under the rubric of ethnology. But if one wishes to concentrate on structures, permanent features, and endlessly repeated formulas, these procedures become indispensable. With regard to rural history, I still consider them legitimate.

Admittedly, the ultimate result is a phenomenological description rather than a formalized elaboration. What I am proposing is a factual history in which epidemics, plants, and tools have replaced the events of our history books. If a theory of underdevelopment is yet to be evolved, this picture of the Tunisian countryside should at least provide the rudiments for an explanation of the Maghreb's paralysis.

This presentation follows two paths. The first, the synchronic, stresses the inhabitants, then the economy and the material culture. The second, the diachronic, studies the Tunisian countryside in terms of its relations, on the one hand, with the central government and, on the other, with the other provinces of the Mediterranean basin.