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Delinking, food sovereignty, and populist agronomy: notes on an intellectual history of the peasant path in the global South

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ABSTRACT
The article examines the weakness of discourses around food sovereignty in Southwest Asia and North Africa, and examines some older currents resembling the food sovereignty discourse. The author first historically situates the emergence of food sovereignty. He discusses agro-ecology – the 'technics' (or social embeddedness of technology) of food sovereignty – and its national-popular content, before then developing elements of the delinking paradigm. He goes on to discuss Tunisian national-popular and Third Worldist agronomists' and economists' efforts to develop technics and frameworks for food sovereignty in the 1970s and 1980s. The article compares the food sovereignty paradigm with auto-centred, self-reliant development proposals, and the proposals of the Tunisian economists and agronomists.

KEYWORDS
Agro-ecology; Via Campesina; delinking; endogenous development; Slaheddine el-Amami; Samir Amin

MOTS-CLÉS
Agro-écologie ; Via Campesina ; déconnexion ; développement endogène ; Slaheddine el-Amami ; Samir Amin

Déconnexion, souveraineté alimentaire, et agronomie populiste : notes sur une histoire intellectuelle du parcours paysan dans le Sud

RÉSUMÉ
Cet article examine la fragilité des discours portant autour de la souveraineté alimentaire en Asie du Sud-Ouest et en Afrique du Nord, ainsi que d'autres arguments plus datés sur le même thème. L'auteur commence par situer historiquement l'émergence du concept de souveraineté alimentaire. Il débat l'agroécologie - les « techniques » (ou l'inclusion sociale de la technologie) de la souveraineté alimentaire - et son contenu national-populiste, avant de développer sur le paradigme de la déconnexion. Il examine ensuite les efforts des agronomes et économistes national-populistes tunisiens ainsi que ceux des tiers-mondistes pour développer les techniques et l'encadrement suffisants afin d'aboutir à une souveraineté alimentaire dans les années 1970 et 1980. Cet article compare le paradigme de la souveraineté alimentaire aux propositions de développement autosuffisant, autocentré, ainsi qu'aux propositions des économistes et agronomes tunisiens.

Introduction

Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in the central Tunisian governorate of Sidi Bouzid is engraved as the tragic suicide story of a young street vendor facing police harassment, a

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kind of archetype of distorted development under dictatorship leading to urban rebellion. Less familiar is Bouazizi's work on a family farm which the National Agricultural Bank had repossessed. The Bank evicted him from the land, pushing him into work as a fruit seller (Fautras 2015). Perhaps because the first tale dominates and the second does not, the links between the 2011 revolts which briefly buffeted the Middle East–North Africa (MENA) region's dominant order and the agrarian question – capitalism's political consequences for the countryside – are severely under-known (McMichael 1997).[1]

They should not be. People in slums are often rural people that have been displaced. Peripheral towns, woven into the fraying weave of rural economies, often hosted rebellions. They thus revealed an elusive yet enduring agrarian question, one long in the making (Ayeb 2011; Nour 2015). The early Arab republics certainly attempted agrarian reform. But agrarian transformation posed problems which industrial transformation did not. With spare capital, states can spark import-substitution industrialisation (ISI), create jobs *ex nihilo*, and increase the size of the social pie. But it is very hard to make more land.

In Tunisia, the Neo-Destour political party was born in 1934 in the coastal town of Ksar Hellal under the leadership of the Sahelian and Tunisoise petty bourgeoisie. It guided the national liberation struggle and, after 1956, post-liberation planning. It saw the rural question as most urgently one of unemployed labour, and answered it through a development project hinging on industrial growth. From independence to 1959, the state tried to entice domestic capitalists to invest in industry. It deployed work groups to sponge up the countryside's unemployment, banked on industry to resolve structural joblessness, and hoped to increase agricultural production through modernisation.[2] The state scarcely considered giving serious quantities of land to the landless, a result for which many who had sacrificed in the anti-colonial struggle, suffering imprisonment or worse, had hoped.

But private capitalists were reluctant to invest in heavy industry. By 1959 the state saw the need for more planning (Salem 1976). In 1964 the Neo-Destour became the Socialist Destourian Party (PSD) as it shifted to its own brand of socialism, a combination of cooperative, private and state sectors. Loans and linked aid enabled the state to summon up new industry (Romdhane 1981). The state also set up cooperatives, gathering peasants around land it expropriated from colonists. Industrialisation worked – unevenly (Stolper 1978). Cooperatives had less success, alienating smallholders who lost control of their labour while seeing little improvement in their lives. Aggravating the cooperatives' internal problems was a lack of accessible land to scale up the project. Logically, the techno-bureaucracy around Ahmed Ben Salah (by the late 1960s he had four ministerial posts, and managed a state within a state) tried, through expropriation, to extend the cooperatives nationwide. Landed power pushed back, especially in the coastal areas near Sousse, the long-time bastion of small-to-medium farming, and reservoir of the Neo-Destour/PSD's support, as did the Bank for International Reconstruction and Development (Amrani 1979). Habib Bourguiba soon sacked Ben Salah. Former cooperative members lacked the capital to return to small-scale farming, or could not regain their land. ISI gave way to export-oriented industrialisation. As the state dismantled the coops, capital-intensive irrigation and a US-planned Green Revolution burst across Tunisia's countryside. The eastern coast's olive groves grew ever thicker, held in ever fewer hands. Large facilities dominated olive processing. Vegetable and fruit gardens blanketed the peninsulas and central steppes. The state invested little in small farmer development, and next to nothing in sustainable or labour-intensive 'technics'.[3] At least one

consequence of the country's inability to provide a good urban or rural life was massive immigration to France and Libya.

Tunisia was part of a North African and Arab pattern. After the republics' attempts at agrarian reform, in country after country rural social differentiation continued (Springborg 1977; Halperin 2005). MENA has one of the world's most unequal agrarian structures: a bimodal land distribution, high countryside Gini coefficient, lopsided concentration of the poor in rural areas, and systematic lack of state interest in egalitarian development (Bush 2016). From the 1990s, comparative advantage became the watchword of development agencies, the condition for loans, the monotonic argot of state policy, and the fait accompli imposed on smallholders. Local production chains became linked to extra-national markets – themselves the creation of core states (Friedmann 1982). Subsistence production suffered neglect by the state. Inequality worsened amid an onrush of foreign investors (Elloumi 2006; Bush 2000; Mundy and Pelat 2015; Mundy, al-Hakimi, and Pelat 2014). Yet while rural poverty led to a blossoming of peasant movements in Latin America, Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, the MENA region has yet to see such a bloom. La Via Campesina (LVC), the international peasant confederation, in 2013 had just one member in the entire MENA region – Palestine's Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC). In 2017, Morocco's National Federation of Agricultural Unions and Tunisia's One Million Rural Women joined.[4]

Because LVC has only just begun to root itself in the region, its programme, ideology, technics and organisational methods are new – although questions of agrarian futures are not, because crisis has so disfigured the agrarian present and past. The development project failed to bring about widespread – let alone sustainable – well-being for the region's peoples. Failure to build up strong food systems has turned the Middle East and Africa into net food importers, vulnerable to commodity price increases (Patel and McMichael 2009). Food issues are agrarian issues, and so the agrarian question remains central.

This article brings LVC's programme into dialogue with interlinked strains of North African and especially Tunisian thought that burgeoned in the 1970s and 1980s. I first establish LVC's social roots and programme. I emphasise how LVC addresses the redistributive, national, and ecological questions. I examine delinking – the calculated and partial withdrawal from global capitalism – and its relationship to endogenous national development, taking Samir Amin's and Fawzy Mansour's frameworks as exemplary, and particularly relevant to North Africa. I focus on that programme's agricultural components. I then examine Tunisian agronomists' and economists' plans for national food self-sufficiency. Finally, I juxtapose those calls, primarily from the 1980s, with LVC's programme for grassroots rural resurgence, and its efforts to blend the agrarian question's national component with an ecological programme – agro-ecology – alongside agrarian reform and support for small peasants. I assess the lights and shadows of the North African agronomists' and economists' calls, the vexed relationship between political sovereignty and rural developmentalism, and explain regional movements' comparatively belated mobilisation around agricultural concerns.

Food sovereignty and La Via Campesina

LVC emerged in Latin America as the state stopped stewarding rural reproduction. Continental democratisation opened political space in the 1980s, which became the incubator

for the Movement of Movements – the endless meetings from which LVC emerged after a gestation that lasted more than a decade.

LVC carried the traits of its parents and ancestors among the Latin American anti-systemic movements: indigenous cosmovisions, agro-ecology rooted in small-farmer production, liberation theology-infused peasant struggles, and the Left taking the mantle of state power and securing the logistical scaffolding and political space to protect and support such movements. At LVC's second conference in 1996 in Tlaxcala, Mexico, it developed the concept of food sovereignty. It placed gender front and centre, and called for female leadership within the organisation and the construction of rural programmes. In 1996 at the Rome World Food Summit LVC described food sovereignty as: 'the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity' (La Via Campesina 1996). The emphasis on 'cultural diversity' reflected a strong *indigenista* influence, which crystallised politically, and ensured itself protection under radical regional governments (Peña 2016; Wittman 2015). The 1996 call demanded 'genuine agrarian reform which gives landless and farming people – especially women – ownership and control of the land they work and returns territories to Indigenous peoples' (La Via Campesina 1996, 2). It posed the social question, attentive to internally colonised peoples and gender. Food sovereignty called for the state to secure rural social reproduction and to reallocate social power. LVC's vision of food sovereignty emphasised ecology, entailing 'the sustainable care and use of natural resources especially land, water and seeds' (La Via Campesina 1996, 2). LVC rejected a capital-intensive model using imported inputs. Finally, they confronted international institutions' hand in hardening global hierarchies: 'Food sovereignty is undermined by multilateral institutions and by speculative capital' (La Via Campesina 1996, 3). Hot capital flows could burn through domestic democratic structures, incinerating the integuments binding control of production to the people.

The 2007 Nyéléni Declaration, LVC's official conference statement, detailed the negative nature of imported technics – their role in safeguarding the interests of others, particularly the interests of the monopolies, above those of the people. It criticised 'technologies and practices' that damaged local capacities, including the environment, the soil within which metabolically sound agriculture takes root. Against this top-down agricultural revolution, LVC would 'value, recognize and respect our diversity of traditional knowledge, food, language, and culture', highlighting different knowledges' value, especially those which antedated colonialism and capitalism's envelopment of the global South's countrysides.[5] It defended a peasant path to modernity and development, and focused on 'decent jobs with fair remuneration and labour rights for all, and a future for young people in the countryside' (La Via Campesina 2007). It insisted on the rural world's centrality, contradicting urban-developmentalist narratives positing the countryside's end as necessary for the global South's development (Ajl 2014; Bernstein 2006; Moyo, Jha, and Yeros 2013).

LVC argues for the synergy of sovereignty's social elements and agro-ecology's technical elements. As a South Korean delegate to LVC had stated: 'Agroecology without food sovereignty is a mere technicism. And food sovereignty without agroecology is hollow discourse' (cited in Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2014, 8). Such tensions reflect a struggle between technicist–productivist and radical interpretations of sustainable rural technics. To treat them as another gewgaw to be transferred, an injected technical catalyst, into

prevailing property relations would evacuate them of meaning, and insulate them from the political questions which give them resonance, and without which such technics could be close to useless – a concern, too, of the other currents I will examine.

The 2017 Euskal Herria document is LVC's most recent declaration. It focuses on food sovereignty as a plank in an anti-systemic programme reflecting the interests of the dispossessed in field and factory, and those whom history had turned into the reserve army of labour unable to make claims through the productive apparatus. The statement clarifies the civilisational aspect of the countryside's crisis: 'Faced with barbarism we urgently need to build another future for humanity' (La Via Campesina 2017b), and it highlights the question of war, noting LVC's mandate to 'sow peace'. The document 'Notes from the VII conference: political context and struggles in Middle East and North Africa', drawn from the same Euskal Herria conference, refers to 'capitalism and imperialism' and their incitement of regional war and destruction of regional food systems, as well as the Maghreb's unique problems – its 'fertile lands' as 'cheap market gardens for Europe' (La Via Campesina 2017a).

These are the key dimensions of LVC's programme: first, food sovereignty focuses on the small producer, rooted in community and place, as the subject of social change. Second, the locus of food sovereignty shifts, reflecting shifts of the movements whose discourse and practice the phrase crystallises. In 1996 the nation; in 2003, peoples; in the 2013 Jakarta call, 'all peoples, nations and states' (La Via Campesina 2013). The sovereign's institutional parameters are perhaps helpfully catholic, allowing a thousand struggles to bloom. But the parameters are also unhelpfully nebulous, not demarcating the arena of struggle and practice. As Edelman (2014, 968) asks, 'What political institutions will administer "food sovereignty"?' Food sovereignty may be a brilliant means to meld the interests of rural landless people in the Brazilian countryside and urban foodless people in the *favelas* – combining the former's demands for the means of production (with their need for market outlets) with the latter's need for increased incomes in order to consume. Food sovereignty means something else for those stateless, occupied, and with settlements gobbling their land, like Palestinians in the UAWC. Food sovereignty has emerged against an assumption that *sovereignty* is possible. But in MENA, anti-systemic struggle is often at the stage of securing sovereignty, not imbuing it with social meaning. In this context, LVC's newly strong emphasis on matters of war and peace, especially regionally, is significant. Furthermore, 'The nature of "sovereignty" itself, similarly, is rarely scrutinised in the food sovereignty literature or by food sovereignty movements, most of which find themselves in adversarial relationships with the states in which they operate' (Edelman 2014, 974). Still, it is crucial to historicise each statement. The 1996 calls were a reaction to an attempt to 'globalise' – place under the aegis of global North monopolies – national food systems. The 2017 call emerged against a background of mounting global violence.

The third crucial aspect is agro-ecology as food sovereignty's technic. The fourth is constraining trade to harness it to the needs of peoples, rather than peoples to the needs of trade. The fifth is a complementary confederal vision – since countries do have ineluctable ecological endowments. Environment is not destiny. Nor are all environments the same. A final point is the extremely radical nature of LVC's declarations in a context where investment in the countryside is difficult amidst chronic global South capital shortage, and international institutions' dislike for preferential rural interest rates. As a corollary, sovereignty

and financial architecture are linked – a post-Bretton Woods system of uncontrolled currency flows makes global South currencies vulnerable to systemic pressures, chipping away at their sovereignty (Gowan 1999). If a global South state were to carry out a radical agrarian reform, unless exchange controls were in place there would be capital flight. It is likely that there would be more flagrant coercion to push for a policy reversal. These systemic constraints inspired earlier theorists and planners to push for distancing from such global pressures. One theory of distance was delinking.

Delinking

For Amin, 'delinking' was necessary for the global South's development. Delinking did not mean a productive system sealed from global trade flows or technological and financial interconnections. It was a framework for rupture, and the 'logical political outcome of the unequal character of the development of capitalism' (Amin 1990, xiv). Delinking meant breaking from the maldevelopment which the regnant 'law of value' imposed on the world (63). It was the 'condition for autocentric development', or the 'national control of accumulation' (18). Delinking had three central components. First,

> Strict subjection of external relations in all fields to the logic of internal choices without regard to the criteria of world capitalist rationality. Second, political capacity to introduce profound social reforms in an egalitarian direction. The latter is also a precondition for delinking, since the hegemonic classes *in situ* have no interest in it, and a possible consequence of it, since it evidently implies transfers of political hegemony. Delinking has little possibility of coming about without reform, and if it occurs conjuncturally it will end up at an impasse. Third, capacity for technological absorption and ingenuity, without which the autonomy of decision that has been won cannot be put into effect. Clearly such a capacity cannot be developed through a few educational tricks; it implies an ideological opening up. (Amin 1990, 60)

The criteria to which he referred place pressure on countries to make productive choices according to their 'comparative advantage' (Patnaik and Patnaik 2016). The core states of the world system – the US and the EU – reserved for their monopolies the capacity to modify comparative advantage through state succour at their whim. The non-core states were faced with 'adjustment or delinking' (Mahjoub 1990a). Adjustment meant rejigging internal production to reflect global prices and the production lines to which footloose capital might go. Wheat production ought to be abandoned inducing a difficult production shift if prices plummeted on global commodity markets, maybe hurriedly replanted during price rises. Delinking meant denying the exterior impetus a dynamic role and primacy. Amin distinguished between delinking as the 'condition for autocentric development', and autocentric development itself: the 'national control of accumulation' (Amin 1990, 18). His three conditions for delinking demanded also the political capacity and strength to carry out the needed changes.

Politics means we are dealing with the realm of power, and who heads the state. Linda Matar calls this the 'agent of investment', the sector in charge of deciding policy, including the geography and socially hierarchical or redistributive, internally or externally oriented, distribution and deployment of capital (Matar 2017, 27). Finally – most opaquely – Amin advocated a capacity for absorption and ingenuity. Clearly, delinking in a world of poor peasants meant a peasant-centred developmental process, alongside massive land

reforms. The autocentric option meant 'the abolition of the dominant forms of private ownership of land and factories, and taking agriculture as its base … not envisaging any forced appropriation from the peasants to "hasten industrialization"' (Amin 1990, 63).[6] States would not seize a surplus via under-pricing or compulsory sales of agricultural goods. Finally, Amin's delinking did not focus on ecology and gender, leaving others to take those turns.

Fawzy Mansour was an Egyptian economist who taught at Cairo University in the 1950s until his criticisms of the economic policies of the Free Officers movement grew too strong. He was later imprisoned, until the Nasser government started to warm to socialist planning. He was in dialogue with Amin and wrote amidst and contributed to global conversations about appropriate technologies, the New International Economic Order, the possibilities for petroleum monies to be used for social well-being, Arab and global South developmental interlacing, and an ascendant debate about technology's role in development. He called for a 'self-reliant auto-centred strategy of development' (Mansour 1979a). At that time, 'development' was coming to connote a hodgepodge of rural aid programmes more about social counter-insurgency than anything else. He clarified that this strategy was not an arbitrary confection of helter-skelter measures, developing this region, that village, this hinterland, and that coast. It was a 'coherent whole' encompassing the right to work, the right to determine the social organisation of production, and the right to determine the technical pattern of production. He took issue with narrowly conceived projects for rural transformation. He emphasised that 'purely local or partial' schemes for 'engaging the peasants' enthusiasm, organisational ability, work capacity, and creativeness for communal productive endeavours' which ignored the macro context 'are doomed to failure or frustration' (Mansour 1979a, 231). He did not take issue with local planning, but emphasised that it could not be purely local. There had to be a broader vision – looking to the state, which under the right circumstances, with the right leadership, protects or constructs the larger fiscal and trade architecture within which local projects might flourish.

Mansour's central planning was based on self-management. He noted that changes at the meta-level demanded 'control by those producing masses themselves', a complex question he did not delve into but which he obliquely raised amidst his focus on channelling the peasantry's energy – an insight which is likely to have emerged from his unease over the Egyptian developmental state's democratic deficits. Democratic control of production within agriculture would, perhaps, build skeletal institutions for more democratic planning. More directly touching on two questions anticipating the issues LVC later raised, Mansour mentioned the programme was not about vacuum-sealed productive spheres, but 'a definite degree of keeping one's distance'. That meant reworking consumption and production. Once there was national control over the productive apparatus, next was the evolution of an 'appropriate technology … appropriate both to national factor endowments and to the mode of life' which the people had chosen (Mansour 1979a, 233). Sovereignty is the harvest of struggle: for the nation's control over production, the people's control over the nation, then determining what mode of life they wish for themselves and setting in motion plans to achieve it. It is also a rebuttal to developmental plans which foist upon people a way of life for which they did not ask.

Mansour linked delinking to a dependency question, a matter of national finances, and thus a question of staunching an outflow of value – a mechanism of control which

dependency thinkers considered symptomatic of externally oriented maldevelopment. National control was a preliminary 'step toward stopping the outward drain of surpluses'. Mansour did not limit the call for auto-centric development to the nation. He argued for confederation, through Third World countries' economic cooperation: direct trade, direct payments, not routed through North-owned banking or transfer systems, 'Third World producers associations; technology transfer at free or at-cost' and higher tariffs on imports from and export to non-Third World countries (Mansour 1979a, 236). Billions of petrodollars then sloshing through global South central banks would lubricate this process and enable re-linking on terms less akin to recolonisation. By the mid 1980s, the oil price plunge put paid to any such expectation.

Elsewhere, Mansour expanded on such a transformation's social and technical aspects. This meant national control over economic and natural resources, working towards the satisfaction of basic needs, mobilising the masses, and technologies to be 'evolved and adapted which are related to these aims and which are consonant with economic independence'. He called for a reasonable town–country equilibrium, allowing for food self-sufficiency (Mansour 1976, 2). His discussion of agricultural dependency most closely anticipated the diagnosis and remedy which LVC would later systematise and scale up into a global social movement. He dissected Western agriculture's transformation into an industry reliant on external inputs, and strongly criticised the Green Revolution. Perhaps most centrally, in terms presciently and precisely foreshadowing LVC's programme for agro-ecology, he praised pre-capitalist agricultural systems. He highlighted their key traits. First, they were sustainable and focused on feeding. Second, 'the techniques evolved elicited from nature its self-regenerating powers rather than destroyed those powers' (Mansour 1980, 24). In this sense he understood good farming as agro-ecology – a smooth integration, not abrasive interruption, in the ecology. Even great hydraulics, in the pre-capitalist and pre-colonial era, were based on 'intricate, highly technical systems of land service and land utilisation, evolved by peasants through centuries of practical experience' (24). He focused on the knowledge built up through place-based techniques. He clarified these systems' resilience, capable of '*restoring their own viability*', and which '*contained in-built technical and social mechanisms for moderating the disruptive effects of natural calamities*' (26, Mansour's italics). Mansour contrasted these prelapsarian systems with calls focused on trade and comparative advantage based on 'the difference in immutable factor endowments and non-essential specialization' (31). In this context, transnational corporations' penetration of the countryside and their seizure of the productive apparatus meant a new form of dependence, based on three intersecting dynamics. First, the peasant economy's decline. Second, unequal exchange. Third, 'the increasing dependence of Third World countries on the advanced centre for that most essential of all human requirements: food' (32). Finally, he identified auto-centred development's social base. It was an

> affair of the masses for whom no other way of salvation exists: the poor and middle peasants, the marginalised unemployed in town and countryside, the non-privileged sections of the working class, the petty bourgeoisie to the extent that it is not mystified or won over by the opposite alliance of the international and local bourgeoisie. (Mansour 1979b, 22)

Those barely eking out a living within the productive system, or those excluded or languishing on its margins.

To recap, the delinking paradigm and the programme for auto-centred self-reliant development had seven crucial planks. One, its social agent: the poor of city and country. Two, its scope: the whole national formation. Three, its tool: the state. Four, its attitude towards the external: modulated and subject to internal control, but not aspiring to withdrawal into a self-sufficient Crusoe's island. Five, its attitude towards peasants and agriculture: a peasant path. And six, the technics: appropriate technology, not clearly understood, but quite unlike capital-intensive technology transfer. Complementing that, an occasional embrace of ecological agriculture. And seven: a vision of social change based on countries' cooperation. Like LVC's notion of food sovereignty, delinking was a mechanism for filling formal sovereignty in the Westphalian sense with social meaning. Again, I note the moment of Amin and Mansour's work: the 1970s and 1980s, when developmental states still tenuously reigned over MENA and the nature of those state's policies was the challenge, not whether such states could carry out policies at all – well before external violence had sought to evaporate those states, or reconstituted them as sectarian states saddled with endless wars. What in that context was radical is, of course, in the current one nearly unimaginable, as the Arab republics of Syria, Iraq and Libya no longer can carry out developmental programmes amidst or in the aftermath of US-sowed war.

The Tunisian School

I speak here loosely of a school. Many if not most of the researchers whom I touch upon here passed through the University of Tunis, especially its Manar campus for the study of economics, which was a regional centre for heterodox economics in the 1970s and 1980s. Most if not all were Tunis-based during the 1980s. Many were collaborators: for example, in the GREDET project which culminated in the brilliant and belated – because too late to affect development planning – volume *Tunisie : quelles technologies ? Quel développement ?* (GREDET 1983). Although I cite some of the relevant literature, it would take this article too far afield to discuss how Tunisian social scientists anatomised Tunisian accumulation, dependence, and production. They ranged from the pre-colonial system of tax farming, in which state tax collection was privatised to individual collectors, to French colonial capitalism and artisanal and agricultural disarticulation amidst the solvent of imported commodities and systematic and violent land theft, to post-colonial import-substitution and export-oriented industrialisation.

Tunisian social science brilliantly analysed this history, but did not stop at criticism of the past. Tunisian economists such as Azzam Mahjoub and Abdeljelil Bedoui, technicians, and above all ecologically inclined, populist agronomists drafted outlines for auto-centred industrial and agricultural development. They crafted plans for African endogenous agro-ecology and Tunisian food self-sufficiency, and investigated the creation of a national matrix for research into long-term sustainable intensification. Furthermore, much of this was in implicit or explicit dialogue with Amin – for Tunisian social science he is a touchstone, with works on the region citing him again and again.

I begin by discussing the broader frameworks, as Mahjoub, a professor of economics at the University of Tunis's Manar campus, raised them. He authored a series of works on Tunisian colonial and post-colonial underdevelopment (Mahjoub 1983, 1990b). He did not merely chronicle the past but traced the intellectual faults that lay, he felt, at post-

colonial Tunisia's foundation. These faults had weakened it and rendered it structurally unsound. He rejected the dominant Western lens of development, primarily modernisation theory, which reached theoretical apotheosis in Rostow's stages of growth required for what he called economic take-off (Rostow 1956). The modernisation theorists saw development as akin to a biological system, evolving to ever-higher stages. At the core of their notion of the role of man within this system was a belief in the omnipotence of reason, capable of mastering and conquering nature. Techno-economic growth was at the model's heart. Needless to say, redistribution was off the agenda. In the words of Bourguiba, 'the distribution of land is a utopian solution' (Mahjoub 1982, 13).[7] Since the Tunisian modernisers rejected a peasant path, one of techno-productivity prevailed, focused on the imitation and transfer of the dominant model. Mahjoub distinguished between three paths to industrial modernity: liberal, reformist, and neo-Marxist, Third Worldist accounts.[8] But he found the latter lacking in imagination, whether they called for industrialising industries, an ensemble of plants and factories which would induce structural shifts, or other partial programmes. In agriculture, he lambasted 'energophage' modes (31), which mimicked industrialisation, turning agriculture's traditional logic – gathering energy for human use through photosynthesis – on its head (Martínez-Alier 2011). That path eviscerated local peasant modes, destroying animal breeds, landraces and hydraulics. At the core was a modernising ideology which scorned other ways of doing things:

> The qualification 'traditional' translates to a grip simultaneously ideological and practical of the dominant technological systems and discredits, too, all the historical receipts (the patrimony) in terms of knowledge more or less systematised and accumulated through local human experiences long since elaborated and which is largely adapted to the geographic and socio-cultural texture of the country concerned. The dominant diffused ideology tends to assimilate the peasant world to ignorance and obscurantism. (Mahjoub 1984, 114)

The peasant world was the world of Tunisia's periphery – Le Kef, Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, and the South, those areas far from the country's historically wealthier eastern coast. Colonialism had ripped these regions from national labour and commodity exchanges and dissolved customary subsistence systems, including provisions for harvest failures. It rewove the social fabric into market dependence. Thereupon these regions slid sharply into poverty throughout the colonial period, wracked by periodic famines (Mohamed Moncef 1979). The Neo-Destour/PSD spoke for them. But they also spoke in their place. The political leadership saw the peripheries' peasant way, pastoralism, traditionalism, and millenarian revolts, and conceived of them as objects – not subjects – of development, to be pushed pell-mell and used as human material for a project conceived according to the needs or values of the global North and its allies in Tunisia who were charged with manning the development project. Casting them as ignorant was a way of turning them into human putty for coastal planners' remoulding.

Slaheddine el-Amami was the outstanding figure of Tunisian populist agronomy. He worked at the Centre for Research in Rural Development, at the National Institute for Agricultural Research, and with several development institutions. From more straightforwardly agronomic and narrowly technical concerns, he evolved a world-view concerned with questions of self-management, productivity per hectare, agro-ecology, and peasant-led and employment-creating growth. In his chapter 'Technology and employment in agriculture', he wrote 'Autonomy in the management of available resources [had been]

replaced by dependence with respect to a gigantic hydraulic and energetic network and a limitation in the taking of decisions by farmers' (El-Amami 1983, 24). Planners had replaced self-managed hydraulics using labour and available materials and local know-how with technologies using foreign capital and foreign knowledge. They stole decision-making power from farmers. State policy accelerated land concentration, a consequence of state calculations about technical norms concerning viability which were the output of modernisation ideology, not agronomy appropriate to Tunisia's pre-existing agricultural system and the knowledge which existed to maintain it. Amami wrote, the 'greater the plot size, the less the factors of production are mobilised'. The 'factors' included labour, which planners considered a 'cost to reduce' (in scale/magnitude), corresponding 'perhaps to the model of development of the industrialised countries, but it is in total contradiction with the reality of the country' (24–25). To see labour as a cost to control ignored other ways of seeing labour – a resource for the commonwealth, a means to subsistence, a precursor to demand, and a human need.

Tunisia during the 1970s and 1980s, and in the present, confronted – and now confronts – an unemployment crisis. Planners came to see migration to Europe as a way to release internal pressure for useful or remunerative work (CREA 1967). Furthermore, the problem of agricultural production was not really a yield gap. In the 1980s increasing portions of grain went to animal feed (Ghose, Jamal, and Raḍwan 1991). Insufficient grain production to cover what animals and people needed was linked to the balance of payments. But the state made policies which encouraged a sector of the population to increase meat consumption and subsidised the feed needed for certain production systems. One might call this a contradiction. One might state more accurately that policies oriented to closing the sections of the current account balance which cereal imports created were subsidiary to other policies.

The real issue was job creation when lack of state investment funds was perceived as the primary constraint on full employment.[9] In place of high-capital-coefficient projects, or projects which required a massive capital investment per worker, Amami called for a peasant path: 'Dispersed housing, decentralised hydraulic infrastructure (wells) [which] are adapted to the mobilisation and the exploitation of renewable energy and are also creators of employment' (El-Amami 1983, 25). He called for diversification of plantings, generally labour-intensive, and rehabilitation of traditional hydraulics, a labour-intensive and capital-light way of intensifying agriculture. Dispersed housing meant a planning policy oriented away from density and the urbanising logic that went hand in hand with the post-World War II development project. Finally, he called for a 'rationalisation of the occupation of soils', 'according to limited pilot experiences' which the Tunisian research institutions had carried out (26). Such rationalisation would rework the labour to land ratio. Through such a peasant-path Keynesianism, Tunisia could employ a number of people that was double its early 1980s population without precipitous population shifts from countryside to city.

The Tunisian natural and social scientists saw the problem in every one of the country's interstices and institutions. Bedoui wrote of engineers' training, 'formed in the dominant school' in 1982 as he set out schematics for an African response to neoliberalism (Bedoui 1982, 38). Agricultural engineers who steered and designed development projects had a uniform discourse. This had a 'reductive and simplifying character', and the 'technical and mechanical visions' which presented adopted technologies as the only choices for

society – no matter what their costs (41). Bedoui called for technical development based not in agro-industrial methods of meat and cereal production, copying Western models, but on improving yields of local landraces, and improving pasturing techniques for sheep, goat, and rabbit. He clarified that the problem was not a simple nutritive-additive notion in which protein had to come from feedlot animals fed by imports – Tunisia imports and subsidised bran and corn for manufacturing animal feed – but of producing needed amino acids, which could come from locally sustainable vegetable or animal species. He juxtaposed these systems with traditional ones, 'weakly developed' but adapted to local resources (100). They could be broadened and scaled up, while maintaining a certain 'equilibrium which assured social and ecological reproduction' (100). A pre-existing genetic diversity that peasants tended and refined *in situ* marked such systems. There had been little to no scientific research concerning the selection or increase of these local landraces. Instead, experts used the agronomic research as a laboratory to test introduced varieties, turning local production into a 'laboratory for subcontracting' (100). Bedoui's point was that policymakers crafted the entire framework using imported normative, practical and technical criteria. They did not start from Tunisia's ecological endowment, they did not use the knowledges accumulated to manage it for human survival and did not depart from the goal of properly feeding Tunisians. Instead, the policy-making apparatus – thoroughly permeated by staff from US agricultural research institutions and with research priorities often set by project funders linked to international institutions – started by assuming the fixity of existing socio-technical systems. Such systems were in truth the source of so many problems. Still, the treatment was to tinker with their technology, not to question their existence and the history which had brought them into Tunisia.

Bedoui also praised local and ecologically sustainable small hydraulic systems, a persistent interest of Tunisian populist ecologists, agronomists, and historians (Naceur 1985). Here Amami did the most ground-breaking work. His life's labour had been to canvass Tunisia's small-scale indigenous technics. He classified based on the biome in which peasants used them. The typology is based largely on isohyets – rainfall bands of 100 mm within annual precipitation is classified. Amami contrasted different zones, and the hydraulics which complemented the rainfall of such zones. In the sub-humid strip – the Tunisian Northeast, with more than 550 mm of rain annually – the problem was too much water – an issue of storage, not concentration. The indigenous technology was hill reservoirs and mountain lakes. In superior and medium semi-arid zones, with 400–550 mm, precipitation covered the needs of winter plantings and Mediterranean littoral silviculture – olive, fig and almond trees. Tunisian farmers used terracing and bunds, or raised earthen strips, but primarily as means of preventing run-off and disastrous erosion and mudslides. In the 200–300 mm zones, Tunisians 'harvested' run-off waters through *meskats*, which gathered water in catchment areas then channelled it downslope to trees. In more arid and montane zones, with 100–200 mm, they might use *jessour*, retention dams behind which fruit trees were cultivated on beds of well-watered soil. These dams would also collect water from slopes, with their size a function of precipitation. And in Central Tunisia – the city of Kairouan, the Gammouda Plain – directed flooding in arid zones permitted the 'development of a flourishing hydraulic civilisation' (El-Amami 1984, 5). In the Saharan, or desert, zones, they would directly tap springs or underground aquifers, allowing for the 'conquest of the Sahara', and the 'installation of innumerable oases' (7). Outside of the direct use of springs, the Sahara's two principal

techniques were the *kharig*, which would tap the aquifers through a tunnel, and the *ghout*, massive ditches, which allowed date palms to directly tap the water table through their roots. Agricultural modernisation induced the abandonment of those techniques, as they competed with modern pumping and digging techniques, which had dried up the springs, 'reducing the artisanry', and lowering the water table (7).

Bedoui criticised modes of mechanisation which created a metabolic rift between town and country (Schneider and McMichael 2010). He wrote of 'traditional' methods which used animals as a means of labour, soil rejuvenation, subsistence, and sustenance. The replacement of living horsepower with mechanical horsepower effectively created 'grand mining farms, favouring the augmentation of erosion and run-off, to the detriment of infiltration which fed groundwater' (Bedoui 1982, 101). They increased unemployment, since it took men to work animals and fewer men to work machines, and increased energy consumption, since such metal workhorses ate neither fodder nor forage but imported hydrocarbons. Bedoui was on solid ground vis-à-vis the excessive use of tractors, especially in the cooperatives, since they displaced labour to an extent beyond Tunisia's absorption capacity. Furthermore, the machinery was expensive – ruinously so at a time of chronic and structural capital shortage (Fetini 1981). The question, or accusation, of antiquarianism, or of nostalgia for a backbreaking Arcadia, is tougher. The appropriate degree of agricultural modernisation at any given time is an empirical and normative question. But certainly the criticism of excessive tractor imports instead of retooling land for more labour-intensive and productive production was then correct. Indeed, one mainstream report from that era called for a concentration of tractor use in the North and the minimisation of their use in the Centre and South, where the distance between farms made maintenance costly and nearly impossible, and their replacement by the underemployed camel herds (Lenoir 1967). Bedoui was aware of such a project's tensions. He lauded 'rehabilitating our technological patrimony', battling the people of the global South's conversion into 'pure consumers', in the framework of an 'autonomy oriented to the future' (Bedoui 1982, 103). Lacking dominion over their own technology could only lead to dependence and new forms of domination. Bedoui knew that treating technology as a positive good in and of itself would orient social production and exchange to the acquisition and use of such technics, which only had true value when judged with respect to the full scope of their social and ecological consequences, and found worthy, not wanting. Yet he was also wary and aware that such a project could be perceived and received as merely a lingering interest in things past, seeking to 'negate the actual scientific contributions'.

Amami and his collaborators Taher Gallali and J.P. Gachet called for an appropriate cropping and planting programme reflecting Tunisia's distinct bio-regions alongside the country's unique genetic bequest. Barley had covered much of the North and nearly all of the Centre and South immediately after Independence. It was in 'grave regression' amidst the national research centres' disinterest in the dryland landraces (El-Amami, Gachet, and Gallali 1979, 136). Chickpeas and lentils, sources of vegetable protein, were equally placed to the margin – 'all of the crops specific to the arid and underdeveloped countries were ignored or neglected' (136). The research institutes were bending to foreign funders' priorities, which were setting agendas heedless of what other lands and peoples needed and what was unique about them. Amami, Gallali, and Gachet called for a granary on 300,000 northern hectares, with permanent prairies and forage crops

on the hillsides, instead of ruinous attempts to plant subsistence cereal patches on precarious slopes. They advocated the rehabilitation of barley. For the North, they pushed for integrated pasturing techniques and winter complementary irrigation in the best cereal lands. For zones receiving less than 350 mm of rain they called for barley planting, and for the rehabilitation of spate-flooding in the Centre and the South. They estimated that Tunisia could produce all the cereals it needed.

In a seminar on food self-sufficiency – the dominant Tunisian term for food questions – Bedoui expanded on the framework for such reforms. He attacked productivist visions of self-sufficiency, calling instead for a 'real autonomy … of the agricultural sector', linked dynamically with industry (Bedoui 1986, 114). Such a recomposition of internal production, which had been 'extraverted and dependent', ought to be posed in terms of 'the mastery of social and economic production of society' (114). He was clearly echoing Amin's delinking framework. Bedoui, writing when technology was a touchstone of development debates, saw that the crux of the issue was preventing the weaponisation of technology or knowledge for renewed external domination. But the internal balance of social power was more fraught. He phrased the question of agrarian reform delicately, hesitantly, elliptically, writing of the 'distribution of lands' and then:

> All these measures will not have any impacts if the peasant himself is not rehabilitated and associated with this task by substituting for social conditions of domination the conditions of a genuine social dynamics … finally [this raises the issue of] power itself which cannot but be affected by the previous measures. This brings us to classes, to new class alliances which must rehabilitate the peasantry in the social and political plan, and hence to the very nature of the State. (Bedoui 1986, 115–116)

Land reform (and the ownership and redistribution of other forms of capital) is at the core of social differentiation. The rehabilitation of the peasantry must have meant its centring. in an economy as state-directed as Tunisia was and is, the orientation of developmental programmes and direction and size of capital flows can seriously shift overall class power. State support could nourish and encourage the growth of social classes as irrigation could feed a crop. Indeed, the development of heavy industry was itself the fruit of state investment.

But agriculture is different. It is a biotic technology, whereas industry is abiotic and capable of carving up or burning up the past's ore and hydrocarbons to temporarily expand production in the present. Irrigation, credit and other social and technical tools can intensify production, in effect multiplying the quantity of land. But for some to gain land others must lose it, and 'genuine social dynamics' or 'new class alliances' may gesture at such redistribution, or point towards the new 'agent of investment' and agent of policy, in Matar's words, which would carry out such redistribution. But such phrases shy away from calling for it outright, a hesitance which must have been intentional.

I now summarise the Tunisian economists' and populist agronomists' positions. First, they directly addressed the environmental question through agro-ecology, including the indigenous question's knowledge component. On the national question of dependency, they called for self-provisioning. On the democratic question, they called for self-management. On the political question, the responsible institution would be the state. They did not meaningfully address the gender question. The social question they often dealt with

obliquely, depending on audience. As with Bedoui, they often clouded calls for breaking landed power in circumlocution. Amami often rejected the political possibility of changing land ownership patterns. Yet they more straightforwardly insisted on full employment. Thus, we can say they were equivocal in respect of the social question, aware of its importance and centrality, but circumspect in addressing it. Much like Amin or food sovereignty, it was a given that wars would not violate sovereignty. The question was what to do with the political institutions responsible for shifting a country's productive capacities, not defending them from foreign assault meant to evaporate them, or reconfigure them on terms imposed through the violence of core states. What was radically difficult in the 1980s could now seem mirage, hallucination, waking dream.

Conclusion

I have addressed various schools of thought concerning agrarian and food issues, with respect to a range of issues central to social transformation. These currents of thought are quite different from one another, as is the analysis I chose as representative. Food sovereignty is not one school but a school of schools (Patel 2009). So I took programmatic statements as indicative, if not representative, and focused on the food sovereignty movement's Latin American origins. The discourse is one that movements and their embedded thinkers collectively crafted, rather than one which can be identified with – but not reduced to – the misleading figure of the lone intellectual.

In Table 1, I place the schools' 'answers' to 'questions', reified as separate although in reality and implementation linked – an 'X' in the table below means the school fully considered the issue, whereas 0.5 means they did so partially.

One objection – certainly a proviso – is that Tunisian popular agronomy is intellectually tributary to delinking, although far richer in its specifics. I justify my classification this way: in Tunisian socio-political conditions, the soil within which ideas fight for survival, wither, or flourish, delinking set a specific research agenda. It was highly attentive to the state's role in facilitating populist technics, detailed and path-breaking in its articulation and delineation of agro-ecological methods for rural production, perhaps unique in the degree of its attention to hydraulic patrimony. And it was more circumscribed concerning states' or social movements' role in taking from others so more might have enough.

These three modes of thought substantially overlap. Each was also of their time. Food sovereignty emerged in antagonism to states which, even when formally democratic, were

Table 1. Food sovereignty, delinking, and popular agronomy's approach to key issues.

	Food sovereignty	Delinking	Popular agronomy
Ecology/agro-ecology	X	0.5	X
Land reform	X	X	0.5
Full employment	X	X	X
National question (dependency)	X	X	X
Indigenous question	X	N/A	N/A
Gender question	X	0	0
Political question (state)	0.5	X	X
Self-management	X	X	X
Confederal-regional question	X	X	X

hostile to popular ambitions centred on land redistribution and the shattering of ossified structures of rural differentiation. After 1997, social movements' attitudes to the state started to shift, accounting for the shifts in LVC. Meanwhile, Amin's delinking has not been petrified in the amber of 1970s *dependista* thought or tricontinentalism, but has continued to evolve, lately taking up food sovereignty (Amin 2017). Nevertheless, I chose to take the ideas in their time. Food sovereignty and popular agronomy both learned from ecological and environmental turns of the 1970s. Meanwhile, amidst a burgeoning French ecological movement, ecological theory influenced Tunisian popular agronomy. Similarly, Marxism's feminist turn was only beginning to accelerate as delinking emerged.

Also crucial is the moment when the Tunisian popular agronomists and economists were writing. They could do so, but not just as they pleased. They did so amidst the autocratic structures of post-1963 Tunisia, wherein certain avenues of intellectual inquiry were wide open and others barricaded. A noticeable and major gap is the occasional and mostly hesitant, if not apprehensive, mention of agrarian reform. The PSD's links to the landed bourgeoisie had been strong, especially after 1969 when Bourguiba eliminated the PSD's radical-statist elements (Amrani 1979). Such links limited or foreclosed the political space for calls for a different distribution of land and power, especially from state workers like Amami. Finally, for Amin, the delinking school in general, and the radical agronomists, the state would catalyse social change. They assumed state power and its use. For LVC and food sovereignties, things have not been so simple. Nevertheless, in practice and where possible, especially in Latin America and elsewhere where the state has recently been more friend than foe, the state has played a supportive – if complicated role – in projects for food sovereignty.

Additionally, I have noted the omnipresent and fraught interactions between (food) sovereignty, the state, violence, and the question of the political. I suggest two reasons that in the MENA region, the popular and ecological keystones of LVC's programme have found little place. First: a paucity of independent regional small peasants' associations – LVC's backbone. Second: suffusing violence, which has 'disfigured' regional 'social structures and stripped their working class of the security necessary for development', while resistance to such foreign violence has often emerged within and through communal sodality, not class solidarity (Kadri 2014, 85). Such strife is not an ideal incubator for class-based movements, LVC's main components. North Africa is an exception, in part because only there, in Tunisia and westward, has US- and Saudi-midwifed winter not followed the Arab Spring: 'Small-scale farmers have had some successes: local seeds have been preserved and exchanged, and food sovereignty can feed the local population even in dry regions such as the south of Tunisia' (La Via Campesina 2017a).

In assembling these three strains of thought, my aim has been fourfold. First, I have taken North African and Tunisian researchers and agronomists, and the communities to which they are or were accountable, as a starting point. In mostly amplifying their work, I have hoped to counter epistemologies and methods which take such social scientists as raw data and information for theoretical construction and reconstruction whose priorities, methods, aims and points of reference are set elsewhere (Al-Hardan 2017). Second, I have excavated buried and certainly little-known North African heterodox thought, which not only addressed the problems of their time, but of ours. Third, I have aimed to offer resources for an emerging regional conversation about food sovereignty, one still newly born in Tunisia, but which may become ever more centre stage

as struggles in the country's periphery increasingly take on the environmentalism of the poor's rhetoric and framing (Martínez-Alier 2003).[10] Such struggles, repressed under authoritarian lumpen-developmentalism, are developing and deepening. In their demand for changing rural power, they offer a path towards a sustainable modernity that desperately needs reconsidering, in Tunisia and indeed everywhere. And, fourth, I have sought to highlight the continuing centrality of the agrarian question and small family farming to questions of development and underdevelopment in the MENA region and especially Tunisia. The country's decision to push too hard and too early towards high-capital technics brought with it a bevy of costs with which the country is still reckoning. The solutions some thinkers then pushed almost certainly still speak to the present moment and its needs.

It is with those needs in mind that in this article I have offered an intellectual history of some seminal contributions to Arab anti-systemic thought, and sought to understand what they might offer and what they might be offered from the movements clustered around the slogan of food sovereignty. In so doing, I have sought to chronicle and pay homage to brilliant and path-breaking attempts from the regions' peoples at understanding the world in front of them and, in interpreting that world, casting light on what could be done to change it.

Notes

1. The indeterminacy of the 'new' agrarian question vis-à-vis state power as McMichael posed it reflects/reflected the indeterminacy of how the 'new' social movements themselves grappled with that old bugbear, conquest versus destruction of state power.
2. Ben Salah has claimed that the cooperatives meant to absorb excess labour as well, although Fetini, 1981 shows how the assumptions and targets adopted made labour absorption impossible.
3. I use the word 'technics' rather than techniques, following Lewis Mumford, to refer to technology's social embeddedness.
4. Thanks to Salena Tramel for this information.
5. An extensive and productive literature exists engaging the (strategic and contingent) essentialisms or reifications in notions of 'the local', 'traditional/indigenous' knowledge, and kindred terms within LVC's discourse. Rather than litter the text with endless quote marks around such terms and burdening the footnotes with cautions, I note and acknowledge here the relevance of those critiques in general while focusing on taking movement discourse on its own terms, as used by movement participants.
6. Some might point out that peasant-path-centred delinking is incongruous in an increasingly urban world with an ever-increasing percentage of the planet resident in cities (Davis 2007): but see Brenner and Schmid 2014.
7. Bourguiba was essentially a liberal, but one may mine his extensive production for various political postures, and he did occasionally – depending on the political currents at play – threaten, but only threaten, the distributive structure: see Zribi 2009.
8. For a summary and critique of industrial paths to socialism, see Duncan 1986, although Duncan blames 'Stalinism' for simply carrying through on the general European consensus of how to contend with the agrarian question: see Moyo, Jha, and Yeros 2013; Mitrany 1951.
9. The models used for arriving at such conclusions can, of course, be called into question; certainly they did not envisage, for example, a peasant-path-centred rural intensification programme creating jobs through agrarian reform, rural investment, credit and infrastructure development, all of which were cheaper than creating jobs through capital-intensive industrial investment.

10. The cinematographic efforts of Tunisian researcher Habib Ayeb deserve particular mention here, alongside his efforts to kick-start a conversation around food sovereignty in the country.

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