

TUNESS Interview of the Month August 2015

Guest: Dr. Laurence Michalak

Dr. Laurence Michalak is a cultural anthropologist of the Middle East and North Africa. He has spent over ten years in Tunisia and has also travelled in other countries of the Middle East, Europe, Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. After his undergraduate studies in the US, he was an English teacher in Tunis at College Sadiki in 1964, lived with a Tunisian family to learn Arabic, leaving in 1969. He received his Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley in 1983 after spending 1977-79 in Jendouba to study weekly markets. He was Vice Chair of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at UC/Berkeley for 23 years, from 1979 to 2002. After that he returned again to Tunis as Director of CEMAT, a research office, from September 2006 to May 2010. He has been returning to Tunisia for a month or two every year. He lives with his wife and children in Berkeley and is working on a book about informal commerce in Tunisia.

Q: In your opinion, is there such a thing as a Tunisian identity? How does it stand out from both Arabic and Islamic identities? Do you consider Tunisia a homogeneous nation?

A: Yes, there is such a thing as Tunisian identity. It contains elements from the Arab, Islamic and Mediterranean worlds and it has influences from many past civilizations. Tunisians are more homogenous than most Arab countries because Tunisians are almost all Sunni Muslim Arabs, and I think that this is an advantage. Other Arab countries have large religious or ethnic minorities such as Shi'a Muslims or Copts or Berbers or Kurds and I think this makes national unity more difficult. Like Tunisia, Libya is also relatively ethnically and religiously homogenous, but it has persistent tribal differences, while tribal differences in Tunisia have almost completely disappeared. At the same time, Tunisia is not completely homogenous. Tunisia has differences of social class and regional differences, and there is a small Berber minority.

Q: How do you describe the “religiosity” of Tunisians? How do you estimate the impact of the media (left and right), the West, the Middle East and the rebels of ISIS on Tunisia’s Islam?

A: Tunisians are very religious in the sense that they all identify as Muslims. Even Tunisians who do not practice all five obligations of Islam will tell you that they believe in God and Mohamed as God’s prophet. Even the so-called secularists in Tunisia identify as Muslims, which is very different from the secularism, for example, of France. Bourguiba did not completely separate Islam and the state, as Ataturk did in Turkey, because Tunisia’s constitution recognizes Islam as the religion of Tunisia, and Tunisia has retained Islamic law for some things, such as

inheritance. So Islam is an important part of Tunisia's identity. Regarding media, the impact of the media in Tunisia is great—especially the impact of television. Tunisians are very tuned in to what is happening in the world. Tunisians are also critical consumers of media. They do not believe everything they read in the newspapers and see on TV, and sometimes they devise other hypotheses. Regarding the violent forms of Islam, such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda, these have an influence on Tunisia, as we have seen with the terrorist events in Bardo and Hammam Soussa, although these movements count only a small minority of Tunisians. However, even a small number of jihadi Salafists can do a lot of harm.

Q: How do you describe what happened in Tunisia in January 2011? Was it a revolution? Social unrest? Military coup?

A: Tunisia has experienced not just an uprising and certainly not a coup, but a true revolution. A revolution involves deep changes. It is not enough to expel the old autocrat. For a true revolution, you must replace the old autocrat and the old order with a new order. Tunisia has been successful in doing that—in writing a new constitution and holding parliamentary elections twice and one presidential elections. Of course, problems still remain because elements of the old regime remain, although not everyone from the old regime was corrupt. The revolution is still continuing and things are still changing and we don't know for sure where things will lead. However, I think that Tunisia will retain democracy and freedom of speech and of the press, and these are certainly fundamental changes.

The Revolution is made difficult by the problems of the Tunisian economy. Tunisia's economic problems are partly external, because the whole world is in a continuing economic crisis. This is true especially in Europe. There is zero economic growth in France, 25% unemployment in Spain, and in Greece things are so bad that the suicide rate has tripled. Another part of Tunisia's economic problems is internal, because strikes have hurt the country a lot. It is terrible that, although the world price of phosphate has been going up, Tunisia's phosphate production has gone down. Also, the strikes by the teachers at several levels of the educational system have hurt Tunisia. The country has to find a way to determine fair wages without recourse to strikes.

Q: Have you seen the Tunisian revolution coming?

A: Frankly, no, I did not see the Revolution coming. The Tunisian revolution took everyone by surprise, even the Tunisians themselves.

Q: Witnessing Tunisia in the late sixties and early seventies and especially the rise of Islamic movement and the confrontations it had with the leftists, how would you assess the way the Tunisian government had managed the situation back then, and if you retroactively give it a thought, what could have been done otherwise to avoid the route to dictatorship the country has taken?

A: I came to Tunisia in 1964 and was here until 1969, so I remember very well the early years of independent Tunisia, when Bourguiba was healthy and Ahmed Ben Salah was promoting socialism. I spent substantial time in Tunisia in every decade, including more than a year in 1977-79 and the four years immediately before the Revolution. Tunisia in the 1960s was very different from now. When I arrived, the population was only 3.5 million, and since then it has nearly tripled, despite an effective family planning program. People today are nostalgic for Tunisia of the old days and indeed I think that was a wonderful time, but in many ways it was not. Tunisia in the 1960s was very poor. When I lived in Jendouba for a year in 1978, Tunisia was still very poor. Many families in the Northwest lived in gourbis, had no electricity, rarely ate meat, and the rural roads were bad. The quality of life in Tunisia today, and especially in the Northwest, is much better.

What could have been done differently? Bourguiba was a great man but he was not very democratic and did not prepare the country for democracy and, although Bourguiba himself was not corrupt, there was a lot of corruption in his entourage. Tunisia lost opportunities for democracy twice--in the early years of Bourguiba when he refused to share power, and in the early years under Ben Ali, when he said that Tunisia was ready for democracy, then did not keep his promises but became corrupt instead. That Tunisia remained closed to Islamist participation in politics was part of the general denial of democracy by the regime. Another thing which could have been done differently is that the Troika government should have cracked down on Tunisia's Salafists, instead of letting them organize.

Q: How do you assess the Tunisian general public political awareness before 2011? Have you noticed any evolution in the interest the general public exhibited toward public affairs and politics since the sixties?

A: The general public had little say in politics under Bourguiba and Ben Ali. The parliament was a rubber stamp, the UGTT was crushed in 1978, the press was closely controlled, and there was very little freedom of speech. The Tunisian people rose up in 2010 and 2011 in the Revolution and new representatives were elected. Unfortunately, Tunisia is becoming less enthusiastic about democracy. Participation has gone down in each election. The youth seem especially alienated.

I hear many Tunisians say that they do not trust their representatives and consider them opportunists. One Tunisian friend told me, “Once there were ten million Tunisians and Ben Ali, and now there are ten million Ben Alis.” But I think that things will get better.

Q: How do you evaluate the Tunisian democratic transition 4 years after the “revolution”?

A: The transition is experiencing problems but moving forward with democracy nevertheless. I think that the current government shows promise because the Prime Minister and most of the ministers are technocrats rather than party members. The Constituent Assembly was distracted by having to write the constitution, but the new National Assembly, can concentrate on making good laws and good policies, continuing the reforms and fighting corruption.

Q: In your opinion, is Tunisia ready for democracy? Is it trying to create a customized concept of democracy in line with its conditions and realities, or rather adopt the Western views of democracy? In the latter, which approach would be better? If succeeded, will the democratic regime last?

A: Of course Tunisia is ready for democracy. Tunisia has been both ready for and hungry for democracy for a long time. Tunisia’s democracy is still evolving, but it will not be like Western democracies. Every democracy is different. Democracy has certainly never been an exclusive property of the West. Democracy has to come from within a country. It cannot be imposed from outside, and it is wonderful that democracy indeed came from within Tunisia. Like national cuisines, each country invents its own form of democracy, and that is what Tunisia is doing now.

Q: Compared to African, Arab and Muslim countries, how well is Tunisia suited for democracy and what are the major barriers to fully establish a long lasting democratic regime?

A: African, Arab and Muslim countries are all different among themselves. As a region, Sub-Saharan Africa is currently the most unfortunate part of the world because of AIDS, tribalism and economic problems. Yet there are some countries there that are making good progress toward democracy. The Muslim world has many countries with high degrees of democracy—such as Indonesia and Turkey. The Arab world has until recently lagged behind the rest of the Islamic world. There are eight Muslim countries that have had women presidents or prime ministers, but not one of them is Arab.

A democratic movement has finally come to the Arab world, and Tunisia has the most progress

toward democracy. Yet, some people are saying that the Arab Spring is over, that it was short and did not live up to its promise, and that it is now Arab Winter. I disagree. Tunisia is doing very well. Other Arab countries—Libya, Syria, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain—are having problems sustaining their democratic movements and will need time, but the process has begun.

People should remember the French Revolution took a long time to bring democracy. The French Revolution started in 1789, and soon met great difficulties. The Revolutionaries killed nobles and priests and then began killing each other. After a few years they had an Emperor, Napoleon, so the regime was even more autocratic than before, and then they restored the monarchy. Almost a hundred years after the French Revolution, Napoleon III was proclaimed President for Life, just like Bourguiba. It took a long time for France to become democratic. It will take a long time for the Arab world to become democratic, but certainly less than it took France, but the process has begun, and Tunisia is in the forefront of this process.