

Extractivism and Resistance in North Africa

by Hamza Hamouchene



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1. Introduction

Extractivism¹ as a mode of accumulation and appropriation in North Africa² was structured through colonialism in the 19th century to respond to the demands of the metropolitan centres. This accumulation and appropriation pattern is based on commodification of nature and privatisation of natural resources, which resulted in serious environmental depredation. Accumulation by dispossession has reaffirmed the role of Northern African countries as exporters of nature and suppliers of natural resources – such as oil and gas- and primary commodities heavily dependent on water and land, such as agricultural commodities. This role entrenches North Africa's subordinate insertion into the global capitalist economy, maintaining relations of imperialist domination and neo-colonial hierarchies.³

The neo-colonial character of North African extractivism reflects the international division of labour and the international division of nature. It is revealed in large-scale oil and gas extraction in Algeria and Tunisia; phosphate mining in Tunisia and Morocco; precious ore mining - silver, gold, and manganese - in Morocco; and water-intensive agribusiness farming paired with tourism in Morocco and Tunisia. This plays an important role in the ecological crisis in North Africa, which finds its clear expression in acute environmental degradation, land exhaustion and loss of soil fertility, water poverty, over-exploitation of natural resources, pollution and disease, as well as effects of global warming such as desertification, recurrent heat waves, droughts and rising sea levels.⁴

Concurrent with this dynamic of dispossession of land and resources, new forms of dependency and domination are created. The (re)-primarisation of the economy (the deepened reliance on the export of primary commodities)

is often accompanied by a loss of food sovereignty as a rentier system reinforces food dependency by relying on food imports, as in the case of Algeria; and/or as land, water and other resources are increasingly mobilised in the service of export-led cash crop agribusiness, as in Tunisia and Morocco. Extractivism finds itself mired in serious tensions, which generates protests and resistance. This paper documents some of these tensions and struggles by analysing activist grassroots work, including the participation in alternative regional conferences and 'International Solidarity Caravans' where representative of grassroots organisations, social movements and peasant communities met and travelled together to sites of socio-environmental injustices, providing a space to strategise together and offer effective solidarity to their respective struggles.

The rural working poor and the unemployed in Northern Africa are the most impacted by the multidimensional crisis. Comprising small-scale farmers, near-landless rural workers, fisherfolks and the unemployed, the movements emerging in the five case studies presented here are resisting the looting of their subsoil resources, the despoliation of their lands, pervasive environmental destruction and the loss of livelihoods. The paper asks the following questions: should we see these protests, uprisings and movements as mainly environmental, or are these fundamentally anti-systemic – anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, decolonial and counter-hegemonic protests? Are these circumstantial episodes of resistance, or do they rather represent the latest development in the historical trajectory of class struggle against the latest capitalist offensive in North Africa? The paper presents an assessment of the nature of these movements which grapple with tensions and contradictions that face them.



The Phosphate Chemical Factory in Gabes, Tunisia was installed on the shores of the coastal oasis in the early 1970s. Air and water (sea) pollution can be seen in the picture. Photo Credit: Hamza Hamouchene, March 2016.

2. Extractivism, primitive accumulation and imperialism

Extractivism refers to activities that overexploit natural resources destined particularly for export to world markets. As such, it is not limited to minerals and oil: it extends to productive activities which overexploit land, water and biodiversity, such as agribusiness, intensive forestry, industrial fish farming and mass tourism.⁵ As for the latter, the luxury golf courses in arid and semi-arid regions in Morocco prove Fanon's critique of tourism valid: this quintessentially neo-colonial industry turns the national elites into '*the organisers of parties*' for their Western counterparts in the midst of overwhelming poverty.⁶ Alberto Acosta defines extractivism as '*an activity whose social and environmental costs are not included in the prices of products. These are externalised and carried by a society without democratic rights in a transnational entrepreneurial world*'.⁷ The environmental economist K. William Kapp goes even further by arguing that capitalism itself is '*an economy of unpaid costs*'.⁸

For example, In Salah in Algeria is one of the richest gas towns on the African continent but its infrastructure is very poor. Residents call the one hospital they have the 'hospital of death'. The oasis of Gabès in Tunisia has been ravaged by a phosphate chemical factory that pollutes and pillages water.⁹ These two examples expose the 'paradox of abundance': poverty, unemployment, toxic waste, flares, dumped poisons, and resource pillaging take place in areas rich in natural resources, which are appropriated and exploited through neo-colonial and imperialist relations.¹⁰

Agricultural extractivism in North Africa is particularly damaging to water resources. Export-led water-intensive mono-crop agribusiness in arid regions like the Sahara depletes precious, non-renewable groundwater and the conversion of arable land away from food production and into the production of energy (agro-fuels), flowers and produce destined for cosmetic use in Europe (Jojoba in Tunisia) constitutes virtual water exportation.¹¹ For instance, Morocco's 2008 Plan Maroc Vert (Green Morocco Plan, PMV), supported by the World Bank and setting out the country's agricultural plan for the period between 2008–2020, aims to quintuple the value of export-oriented crops by shifting land-use away from staple cereal crops, promoting private investment in agriculture, and removing restrictions that stand in the way of private property rights.¹² Similarly, the traditional and small-scale fishing sector has been facing an offensive by industrial fishing that threatens biodiversity and fish stocks. This is facilitated by neoliberal plans

such as Halieutis and fishing agreements with the EU which allow European big boats to over-fish Moroccan waters at the expense of small fishermen.¹³



Picture of an anti-fracking protest in Ouargla, February 2015. The sheet of paper held by the boy says: "Enough Contempt, Enough Marginalisation". Credit: BBOY Lee.

Extractivism is largely incompatible with social justice due to its disastrous social and environmental consequences.¹⁴ It creates what Naomi Klein calls 'sacrifice zones', areas disproportionately ravaged by extraction and processing, inhabited by people whose bodies, health, land and water are sacrificed in order to maintain the accumulation of capital.¹⁵ This goes hand in hand with the racial character of capitalism.¹⁶ The five cases presented below exemplify broader patterns of primitive accumulation¹⁷ in the global South, where accumulation by dispossession takes the brutal form of the extraction and pillage of natural resources, and the degradation of environments and ecosystems through the privatisation and commodification of land and water.¹⁸ This has intensified in recent decades, following the neoliberal restructuring of the economy and the infiltration of transnational capital, including the extractive type.¹⁹

'Accumulation by dispossession' cannot be dissociated from the pivotal role of imperialism and colonialism in the process of capitalist development. In the regions

discussed here, capitalist agriculture was introduced during the 19th century, as were the mining industries, such as in the Gafsa mining basin in Tunisia where phosphate was discovered in 1883 and oil operations in Algeria pioneered as early as 1894. The aim of imperialism is '*access to loot (the extracted resources), land and labour and the mobilisation of capitalist development of these resources for the sake of private profit.*'²⁰ Furthermore, the concept of 'accumulation by dispossession' cannot obscure the centre-periphery structure of imperialism.²¹ According to dependency theory, ongoing imperialist domination, super-exploitation, unequal trade relations block industrial development in the South, trapping these countries in a state of permanent under-development.²² For Amin, capitalism is intrinsically imperialist and the nations of the global South, despite being formally independent, are

neo-colonies as they remained politically and economically subjugated to the former colonial powers. Ghassen,²³ an unemployed youth from Gafsa mining basin, expressed his outrage at the situation by saying:

'I think the colonisers were more clement than the Tunisians ruling us'.

Sofiane, another unemployed activist from the movement Mafrat in Tamanrasset, Algeria expressed the same feelings:

'we are treated like we are colonised, if not worse'.

Here neo-colonialism interfaces with internal colonialism, facilitated by an extractivist model of development that dispossesses populations and shifts socio-environmental costs to them.²⁴

3. The political economy of extractivism in the Maghreb/North Africa

The Maghreb region plays a geostrategic role when it comes to the extractive sector, due to its proximity to Europe and the richness of its soil. Algeria is the third largest provider of gas to Europe, while Morocco and Tunisia are very important players in the production of phosphates, which are used as agricultural fertilisers, feeding global agrarian capitalism. Moreover, Tunisia and Morocco export considerable quantities of agricultural produce to Europe. This strategic importance is reflected in the North's attempts to control these resources through political, military and economic pressure. The latter is seen in the use of 'free trade' deals, such as the ongoing negotiations around the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements with Tunisia and Morocco.²⁵ This (re)-primarisation of the economies of Maghreb countries and the reinforcement of extractivism are hallmarks of the political economy of development in the region and in peripheries in general.²⁶

Three decades of neoliberal reforms and structural adjustment programmes facilitated the transfer of public resources to the private sector through the dispossession of rural and marginal people, facilitated by comprador ruling classes within the peripheral state. The incursion of transnational capital into the extractive sectors in the Maghreb is undeniable. Multinationals are present and heavily involved in all three countries (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia), but there are some differences between

them. While multinationals have an important presence in the Algerian hydrocarbon sector, the national oil and natural gas company, Sonatrach dominates, owning roughly 80% of all hydrocarbon production. The sector saw gradual liberalisation since the 1990s at a time of a war against civilians, which provided the opportunity to sign lucrative contracts with companies like BP and Total for thirty years.²⁷ Re-primarisation of the Algerian economy has been taking place since the 1980s, with hydrocarbons currently constituting around 97% of exports and more than 60% of GDP. By law, Sonatrach is given majority ownership of all oil and natural gas projects in Algeria. However, several attempts have been made in the last two decades to open up the hydrocarbon sector and liberalise it further by undermining the 51-49% ownership rule that represents the absolute minimum of resource nationalism.²⁸

In contrast, in Tunisia, transnational companies can own up to 100% of oil and gas concessions. Shell, the largest gas producer in the country (after it acquired British Gas in 2016), supplying approximately 60% of Tunisia's domestic gas production through the Miskar and Hasdrubal operations, holds a 100% interest in the Miskar gas field, the most productive in the country, and sells the gas to the State Electricity and Gas Company at international market values and in hard currency.²⁹

However, unlike in South America, transnational extractive capital plays a marginal role (if any) in the mining sector, where national capital (private and public) dominates. Some of the biggest players are: two public companies controlling the phosphate sector in Tunisia (CPG) and Morocco (OCP), and Managem (a subsidiary of the Royal Holding Company SNI that monopolises the mining sector in Morocco, extracting metals and minerals). Moroccan capital (including extractive) has expanded outside the national borders into other African markets. This process of internationalisation went through the phases of concentration and centralisation of wealth in the hands of big capitalist groups, as a result of neoliberal restructuring dictated by the World Bank and IMF following the debt crisis in the 1980s.³⁰ Managem is developing mining projects in Sudan, Gabon, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burkina Faso. In DRC, it entered into a partnership with Chinese group Wanbao Mining for the exploitation of Kalukundi, an important copper concession. Similarly, the Moroccan phosphate giant OCP is conquering the African continent by opening 14 subsidiaries.³¹ In the agribusiness sector, some industrial groups such as the Algerian Cevital and the Moroccan Sefrioui have participated in land grabs in other African countries.³²

Northern African countries have not been at the forefront of resistance against free market fundamentalism in the way, for example, Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador have.³³ The latter three countries represent a more statist form of 'progressive extractivism'³⁴, also understood as post-neoliberal developmentalism.³⁵ However, none of these regimes have been able to escape the development trap of the 'new extractivism', which is serious dependence

on Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs), penetration of foreign capital and dealings with the agents of extractive capital. Algeria can be seen as a precursor in this respect as its progressive and inclusive development project in the 70s was highly dependent on hydrocarbon exports, which facilitated its dismantling and brought its delinking project to a halt when oil prices crashed. In the age of neoliberal hegemony that followed, this paved the way for a predatory form of extractivism where various comprador fractions of the ruling class compete over oil and gas rents with a greater level of exploitation, social destruction, and environmental degradation.³⁶

Northern African states facilitate the entry and operations of transnational extractive capital by passing laws favourable to extractive industries. They build neoliberal extractivist economies which are reliant on the export of primary commodities, including agricultural produce, for the benefit of private capital. All three countries opened the way to fracking and offshore drilling, and offer enticing incentives for private investors. However, while Tunisia and Morocco, more akin to Mexico and Colombia, with relatively advanced integration in the global economy, are strictly neoliberal in their approach to extractive capital and national development, there is still an ambiguity about the Algerian case, which can be best described as 'neoliberalism with state intervention' on behalf of capital to use the words of Jan Lust about Peru.³⁷ In Algeria, the state is inclined to serve the interest of transnational extractive capital, through several concession made to multinationals, but at the same time it undertakes large state spending on infrastructure and agriculture, albeit with endemic corruption.

4. Case studies of resistance to extractivism in the Maghreb

Case 1

Southern Algeria: energy colonialism, environmental racism and the unemployed movement

The uprisings and the social movements that the Saharan regions in Southern Algeria witnessed in the last six years are in a way an insurrection by the victims of fossil capitalism, the age of addiction to burning fossil fuels under the imperative of capitalist accumulation.³⁸

Resistance shows that extractivism and its logic of deepening underdevelopment and accumulating capital is not being passively endured by dispossessed communities. While Algeria's wealth stems mainly from Saharan oil and gas, the Saharan regions remain the poorest in the country and have suffered decades of underdevelopment. The ruling elites exhibit a corrupt, rentier attitude towards the South, perpetuating the pattern of uneven development where Northern Algeria is relatively 'developed' at the expense of the peripheral



Anti-fracking Protest in In Salah, February 2015. Photo credit: BBOY Lee

South and its people.³⁹ Southern Algerians do not accept such a state of affairs, which is often socially mediated as racism against them, mixed with contempt for the rural way of life predominant in the south. Salah, one of the community leaders of the anti-fracking uprising in In Salah in 2015 expressed this feeling:

'you see the dire situation of our town and its infrastructure and now they have the audacity to come and pollute our water. They want to sacrifice us and I say it: this is discrimination and racism and we won't be silent in face of this injustice'.

Fethi, a young activist from the same town concurs:

'the decision-makers and the people of Northern Algeria in general think we are naïve and we don't have the capacity to understand what's going on. Our citizen movement proved them wrong.'

The 'unemployed movement' - under the leadership of the National Coordination for the Defence of Unemployed people's rights (NCDUR) – which is an informal network of thousands of unemployed youth from all over the country,

especially from the South – came to the public attention in Ouargla in 2013, 85km away from Hassi Messaoud, one of the wealth oil poles of the country and the first energy town in Algeria.⁴⁰ The movement succeeded in mobilising tens of thousands of people in important demonstrations, especially the huge protest of 13 March 2013, followed by another seventeen demonstrations between February 2014 and March 2015 and documented in the press.⁴¹ Demonstrators demanded decent jobs and protested against economic exclusion, social injustice, the underdevelopment of their region as well as, in 2015, against the exploitation of shale gas.

As put by Karim, one of the movement leaders in Ouargla, a central question posed was

'Why are we not the beneficiaries of the oil wealth that is lying under our feet?'

While state authorities responded by attempting to crush, discredit and co-opt the movement, it has played an important role in bringing an anti-imperialist dimension to the anti-fracking uprising that started in January 2015. Amine, another leader of the unemployed movement

expressed his dismay when they learnt that some French companies (including Total and GDF Suez) could be fracking in Algeria after they were banned from doing so in France:

'This is just another form of colonialism and it angers me to see our decision-makers going down this path.'

Displacing the costs of such a destructive industry from North to South is one strategy of imperialist capital that is bound up with racial and class hierarchies, where environmental racism is wedded to energy colonialism.

In early 2018, the CEO of Algeria's state energy firm Sonatrach announced that oil majors Anadarko, Total, ENI and Statoil have expressed interest in helping Algeria start offshore drilling and, on 30 October 2018, Sonatrach signed the first contract with British BP and Norwegian Equinor (former Statoil) to exploit 'unconventional hydrocarbons', including shale gas and oil.⁴² The Algerian regime is once again perpetuating Algeria's dependence on hydrocarbons, dangerously exposing the economy to the cyclical rise and fall of oil and gas prices. This shift to a more destructive form of extractivism can be explained, on one hand, by the desire to maintain the flow of foreign exchange into national coffers in order to meet the shortfalls in income levels caused by the decrease in oil prices and, on the other hand, by the EU's aggressive attempts to grab and appropriate more Algerian gas. Moreover, the technological fix, i.e. the use of more destructive technologies – such as fracking and offshore drilling - to extract natural resources in Algeria is an attempt to expand the frontiers of primitive accumulation viewed from the angle of transnational extractive capital, which manifests itself as '*a qualitative erosion of the conditions of human, never mind extra-human, well being*'.⁴³

Case 2: Isles of Kerkennah, Tunisia: frontier of climate change and resistance against extractivism

The isles of Kerkennah lie off the east coast of Tunisia in the Gulf of Gabès. Given the aridity of the isles, fishing is one of the key economic activities. Kerkennah is also known for the activities of oil and gas multinationals such as Petrofac. Kerkennah archipelago is being doubly-dispossessed and doubly-threatened, first by the effects of disruptive global warming⁴⁴ and second by the extractive operations of oil and gas companies, bent on

making super-profits at the expense of the archipelago's development and ecosystem.

In March 2016, a socio-ecological conflict erupted between fishermen and the oil company Thyna Petroleum services (TPS). The fishermen were protesting a significant oil spill and attributed the leakage to a submarine pipeline. The fishermen were angry at what had happened, not just because it was killing fish, endangering marine biodiversity and thus threatening their livelihood, but also because TPS attempted to underestimate the impact of the spillage and even to cover it up. Hassan, a fisherman, affirmed that:

'this is not the first time this has happened. The oil companies have repeatedly polluted our sea.'

Chafik, another irritated fisherman, said:

'TPS must take its responsibility for the spill and environmental damage it has caused. Our authorities need to hold it accountable'.

The Tunisian Minister of Environment had indeed been dispatched to the island to reassure the population that an investigation would be carried out and measures would be taken to clean the spillage. However, his visit seemed less focused on addressing the fisherman's grievances than on protecting the interests of the oil industry by helping to prevent escalation and a radicalisation of protests. This was especially important at a time when another oil and gas company was beginning to be the target of people's anger.

Ten years after acquiring the Chergui gas concession in Kerkennah through a corrupt deal, and five years after Tunisia's revolution, the British oil and gas company Petrofac faced growing discontent on the island in 2016. In the first two weeks of April, Kerkennah suffered violent police repression of protests.⁴⁵ The protests and repression that ensued came after the police violently dismantled a two-month peaceful sit-in held by the Kerkenni unemployed graduates, represented by the national union of Unemployed Graduates (UDC) in front of Petrofac's gas factory, partially halting production. Soumaya, one of the unemployed graduates present at the site in March 2016, said:

'I am highly qualified but I have been forced to work as a secretary in a public administration. These inappropriate jobs as well as hundreds of others were made possible by the development fund that Petrofac was contributing to. Now that it has decided to stop the payments, I with others have become jobless. This is really unacceptable and humiliating.'



Oil leak on Sidi Fraj beach in Kerkennah, March 2016. Photo Credit: soseau.net

The resentment and anger must be understood in a context of intense discontent with neoliberal and neo-colonial attacks on the country's sovereignty and despair at the broken promises of the Tunisian revolution.⁴⁶ This is felt particularly in the hinterland regions of Tunisia, which are marked by underdevelopment.⁴⁷

Case 3 Moroccan and Tunisian hinterlands and phosphate: Khouribga and Gafsa

Tunisia and Morocco are major world producers of phosphate. In 2017, Morocco (including Western Sahara) was the third biggest producer of phosphates in the world,⁴⁸ its reserves amounting to over 70 per cent of global supply. The sector in Morocco is monopolised by the public company Office Chérifien des Phosphates (OCP).

Khouribga is the biggest phosphate mine in Morocco and, while phosphate was discovered there in 1923 by the French,⁴⁹ the town is not a wealthy centre. Khouribga town shows a clear division in two sections: the well-off neighbourhoods where engineers and the rich live, composed by villas and remaining colonial buildings once owned by Europeans; and a working class neighbourhood, built against a hilly background of phosphate waste.

Khouribga is known for the repeated assault on trade unions and the mushrooming of sub-contracting companies, which are symptomatic of the brutal exploitation, precarization and flexibilisation of labour in Morocco.⁵⁰ Amina, a local activist asserted that:

'not only workers are exploited and their working conditions are becoming very precarious, we also see the youth of Khouribga risking their lives to reach Europe.'

The paradox of accumulation and dispossession is further reinforced by the phenomenon of *harga* (undocumented migration) to European countries where the town has an important emigrant community, mainly in Italy. Resistance to this state of affairs comes in different forms: children of former mine workers asking to be integrated into OCP, protests against subcontractors who impose very precarious working conditions in order to maximise profits, demands to be incorporated into OCP, etc.⁵¹

As for Tunisia, phosphate was first discovered in Gafsa by the French colonialists in 1883. Its exploitation a few years later, the development of industrial towns (Redeyf, Oum Laarayes, Metlaoui and Mdhilla) and the radical transformation of people's livelihoods away from subsistence agriculture and nomadism to wage labour, all constituted an act of primitive accumulation.⁵² Since



A picture taken in Khouribga in January 2016. Hills of phosphate waste can be seen in the background. Photo credit: Hamza Hamouchene.

the colonial era, the Sfax-Gafsa was the main axis of phosphate exploitation in the country, with Gafsa being the production zone, and Sfax the shipping port to Europe. The few years prior to independence witnessed the birth of the phosphate-chemical industry with the creation of the first plant of the Chemical Group in Sfax. Another one in Gabes would follow in 1972.

The communities in these regions suffer from the extractivist model of development that only regenerates itself through resource pillaging, marginalisation and further environmental degradation, especially after the reconversion from underground to open-pit mining in the late 1990s.⁵³ Local residents are disproportionately affected by earthquakes caused by dynamite explosions of rocks. The most crucial issue is, however, water grabbing as Gafsa is a semi-arid region where water supply is frequently cut for weeks, particularly in the summer, forcing inhabitants to buy water cisterns. Gafsa Phosphate Company (CPG) drains more than three quarters of the exploited capacity of 565 litres per second of the Oum Laarayes-Redeyef groundwater table to proceed with the leaching process in order to separate the minerals from the ore.⁵⁴ This is followed by the discharge of untreated water directly into farms, causing pollution, contamination

of water reservoirs and damage to the soil's fertility⁵⁵ in a region with a decent agricultural potential.⁵⁶

This export-oriented extractive sector creates neither wealth nor jobs for local residents. In 2008, unemployed people protested over corrupt hiring practices at the mines. Police blockaded the protesting communities in a siege-like occupation that lasted for six months.⁵⁷ The events that were violently repressed by Ben Ali's regime are considered to be the first spark that ignited the 2011 revolution.⁵⁸ Since the uprising of 2011, several factories and mines in the area have been repeatedly occupied by unemployed youth, halting production. In March 2016, production in the Oum Laarayes and Redeyef mining towns was completely brought to a halt by a more than six month long occupation by youth protestors who erected tents, not allowing production to proceed.⁵⁹ Brahim, one of the young protesters declared:

We want jobs but they are not listening to us. We have been in this situation for months now and we are determined to get listened to'.

Tewfik, the head of Association 'Bassin Minier pour l'Investissement et le Développement' in Oum Laarayes, told the people and organisations participating in the international solidarity Caravan that visited their town in April 2017 that:



Visit to the washing area for the mined phosphate in Redeyef, April 2017. The area is in close proximity to the town centre where people live. This has been the case since colonial times. Photo Credit: Nada Trigui.

'what we realised today six or seven years after the revolution is that social turmoil still takes place as if nothing changed since 2008, as if the question in the mining basin... is basically a phosphate train leaving and coming back without development. Today the CPG pollutes the environment without any respect to people. The company must re-consider its responsibility when it comes to development and pollution.'

To appease the local rebellious youth, Tunisia's successive governments hired thousands of unemployed people, continuing Ben Ali's system of buying loyalty through recruitment in the public sector. Shockingly, this can amount to the creation of fictional jobs, for example in the case of some 'environment companies' that hired thousands of unemployed youths without actually providing any work.⁶⁰ The state-controlled mining conglomerate CPG hired approximately 8,000 new employees, although its profits have been declining in the last seven years. As of February 2018, there were 13,500 employees in the CPG who received a salary without providing any work.⁶¹

All of the protests mentioned above had a significant impact on production. In 2010, Tunisia was the 5th largest exporter of phosphates in the world; by 2017 its exports have been halved, downgrading its ranking to 11th, because of the recurrent stoppages of production.⁶²

As Ben Khelifa argued when analysing another unemployed youth uprising in the oil rich region of Tataouine in southern Tunisia between April and June 2017, these protests are more effective when they target capital and sources of wealth, either land or natural resources.⁶³ The Unemployed of Tataouine did just that by halting oil production, to which the state reacted with violent repression before settling the conflict by offering hundreds of jobs. In May 2017, the Tunisian President Essebsi announced that he will not tolerate any more blockades at economic hubs, allowing the military to intervene. In November 2017, strategic production sites were declared a military area, allowing the military to protect them from social movements and other disturbances through the use of force.⁶⁴ State intervention was necessary in order to maintain unfettered access to resources needed by global markets.



A beach in Gabes where locals fish. The nearby factory, however, has had a negative impact on fishing yield and biodiversity. Photo Credit: Hamza Hamouchene.

Case 4

Gabes and Safi: the phosphate twins in the extractivist hell

Gabès, the only coastal oasis in the Mediterranean, came to be named ‘paradise on earth’ because of its outstanding natural beauty.⁶⁵ In 1972, a chemical industrial complex was constructed on its shores to process the phosphate from the mining basin of Gafsa. The factory has inflicted toxic pollution, decimated flora and fauna and plundered water, affecting every layer of the community’s social fabric, especially those on the front line of poverty. Interviews undertaken with fishermen during the visit of the international grassroots solidarity caravan to Gabes revealed how their catch had decreased significantly in the past few years and how biodiversity has been severely affected by the waste the factory is pumping directly in the sea. Daoud, a local activist from SOS Gabes told us:

‘Nowadays, the families live off the income of two or three boxes of fish, in fact small fish: nothing really!’

Ahmed, a farmer from Chenini, at the margins of Gabes said:

‘There is destruction in Gabes, not development... We used to have around 30 water sources from Chenini till here. These covered the entire oasis but after the company dug deep wells, the sources dried up.’

Safi in Morocco hosts a phosphate factory and a cement factory as well as a coal-fired power station being built on

its shores. The OCP phosphate factory is only seven kilometres away from Safi’s city centre, situated in an industrial zone that includes some of the remnants of the fish canning industry that has been decimated by the massive pollution generated from the phosphate factory, causing significant decrease of fish population.⁶⁶ The pollution has also taken a toll on workers’ and other inhabitants’ health. The town is known for the high occurrence of respiratory disease, bone fragility and teeth yellowing.⁶⁷

Notwithstanding its position as an industrial town, unemployment, poverty and marginalisation are also rife in Safi.⁶⁸ Idris from Douar Bourate, a village less than a kilometre away from the chemical factory, told a story of how this small rural community, once thriving, saw its numbers dwindling as its people were forced to find other livelihoods

‘because the subsistence agriculture and pasturing has been deeply impacted by pollution.’

Besides labour conflicts and struggles that have erupted at the phosphate complex OCP throughout the years, groups of local residents mobilised against a coal-fired thermal power project. The last protest occurred in 2014, but the project went ahead anyway.⁶⁹ In October-November 2016, Safi hosted an alternative international conference against the climate talks (COP22), which brought together anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist activists from the Maghreb and beyond. For the activist movement, this conference represented a moment of clarification and consolidation of ideas and plans to continue working at a regional level against extractivism and neo-colonialism.⁷⁰



Industrial waste from the phosphate factory in Safi directly thrown to the ocean, decimating fish and sea-life. The newly constructed coal-fired thermal power station can be seen in the background. Picture taken in January 2016. Photo Credit: Hamza Hamouchene.

Case 5

Imider and Jemna: peasant resistance against dispossession

The fight of Imider Amazigh agro-pastoralist communities against the largest silver mine in Africa is an emblematic struggle against extractivism in Morocco and in the Maghreb in general. On their land sits the Imider mine which is operated by La Societe Metallurgique d'Imider (SMI) and owned by Societe Nationale d'Investissement (SNI), a private holding company owned by the Moroccan royal family. It is Africa's most productive silver mine, which placed Morocco among the top 20 biggest silver producers in the world in 2017.⁷¹

The mining company has not only failed to generate employment for the local youth, but is also accused of polluting the environment, depleting water sources by digging wells in the communities' land and thus having a devastating impact on local farming. The mine has had a ravaging effect on Imider's khettara system, a traditional underground canal network that has provided water to farmers in the desert region since the 14th century.⁷² Imider's environment is being destroyed and the health and livelihoods of its poor rural population are being sacrificed in order to produce jewellery and electrical items for the rich.

For nearly three decades, the near-landless peasants/agro-pastoralists, the unemployed youth and the migrant workers of Imider have engaged in various means of protest against the mine: marches, sit-ins in front of the mine, and occupations of the mine. The state has responded with repression, violence and imprisonment of activists.⁷³ Since 2011, some youth - mainly students, unemployed or semi-proletarianised rural workers – have held a protest camp on Alebba Mountain in what is believed to be the country's longest-ever protest.⁷⁴ Protesters demanded the end of water pillaging and urged the company and the authorities to deliver on local development and jobs, which have so far mainly benefited outsiders.

The community association they set up, the Movement on the Road of 96 – Imider, has managed to maintain its resistance partially by linking up with international movements and attending the international Climate Talks in Marrakech (COP22) to put their struggle in the spotlight.⁷⁵ However, this dynamic of resistance is currently at a deadlock due to the lack of clarity in its vision and demands. The mine continues its operations – protected by the authorities – ignoring the Alebba protest camp while any positive rapprochement between the protesters and workers looks uncertain to say the least. Moreover, the movement is not homogeneous and witnesses some culturalist tendencies that like to portray the struggle as



Amazigh women of Imider protesting against the silver mine that has drained their water reserves for decades and devastated their agricultural community. Photo Credit: Nadir Bouhmouch

mainly an identitarian one, adding to the complexity of the situation and creating further dividing lines that hinder effective solidarity.

The situation is not much better in the oasis of Jemna in Southern Tunisia, a region famous for its excellent quality dates. It has witnessed in the last few years an important and inspiring struggle around rights to ancestral land. **Through occupying and working their long-confiscated land, local activists engaged in an experience of self-management and voluntarism that emphasised the centrality of the right to access land and other natural resources in revolutionary times.⁷⁶** The peasants of Jemna have been despoiled of their land by French colonists in 1912. Their status as landless peasants has been perpetuated in the post-colonial period as the ruling elite nationalised the land instead of giving it back to its original and historically legitimate owners. With the liberalisation of the agricultural sector and the generalised corruption and cronyism in the Tunisian economy, the public company that was managing the oasis of Jemna went bankrupt in 2002. This opened the door for two private investors who reaped extravagant profits while paying derisory sums to the state as rent.

It took a revolution and a popular uprising to reverse this state of affairs. The Tunisian revolution of 2010-2011 emboldened the people of Jemna and led their 'Revolutionary

Committee' to recover the confiscated land and expel the two profiteers just two days before Ben Ali fled the country on 14 January 2011. What ensued was a remarkable case of people taking control of their livelihoods and collectively self-managing their lands and resources for the benefit of the community. They set up a community organisation called the Association for the Protection of Jemna's Oases (APJO), which took care of the agricultural management, the investment of revenues and the implementation of developmental projects in the wider community. Production doubled between 2011 and 2014 and the oasis currently employs around two hundred workers compared to twenty before 2011. Taher Etahri, president of APJO said:

'The experience is rich in lessons. We are no longer under the tutelage of the state; we act for public good. Everybody is looking up at Jemna, which makes us stronger and in more solidarity with each other.'

This social solidarity experience is perceived as a threat to the class interests of the elite, who reject land redistribution and collectivist reorganisation of production. Several attempts have been made to curtail the experience (freezing of APJO's bank account, for example) and to discredit its leaders.⁷⁷ Negotiations with the government are currently ongoing to push for cooperative management of land and production. More important than these



The oasis of Jemna in southern Tunisia has been dispossessed of its lands since colonial times. After the 2011 revolution, it has seen an inspiring community struggle to recover the land and work it collectively. Picture taken during an international solidarity caravan to southern Tunisia in April 2017. Photo Credit: Nadir Bouhmouch.

external threats, the experience of Jemna faces a serious challenge: the growing tensions between the agricultural workers and the association APJO, which has been reluctant so far to actively involve them in its operations and

decision-making. Without a central focus on the people who directly work the land and who should be at the vanguard, the experience risks disintegrating, exposing itself to opportunistic attempts to undermine and derail it.

5. The new manifestations of class struggle and their limitations

Primary evidence presented in this paper has highlighted that accumulation strategies bring with them resistance and contradictions between the interests of capital and those of communities, peasants, fishermen, workers and unemployed people. The past decade has seen a rise in relatively new social mobilisations surrounding resource extraction, connected to global environmental justice movement. These five cases represent the *environmentalism of the poor* which ‘grows out of distribution conflicts over the use of ecological resources needed for livelihood’.⁷⁸ This environmentalism is not so much about the conservation of exotic species or pristine nature. It is rather a quest for environmental and social justice and a fight against the social exclusion, the violence and authoritarianism of neoliberalism and its elites.

While the cases presented here feature a strong ecological element, this is always secondary to more pressing issues of socio-economic rights such as jobs, development of urban and rural infrastructure, distribution of wealth, and democratisation of decision-making. Laabidi argues that ‘when environmental concerns are raised, it is done in a way to reinforce the bargaining power with the company and authorities.’⁷⁹ The mobilisations analysed in this paper see local residents pitted against agents of global capital and against the nation-states where they are located. Their efforts can be understood as attempts at keeping natural resources outside the orbit of capitalist accumulation, albeit temporarily.

These anti-extractivist (to a certain extent) social movements in North Africa are not only, and not predominantly, environmental movements, but are better understood as the latest development in the historical trajectory of class struggle against capitalist exploitation and imperialist domination. Riahi and Ben Khelifa argue that we need another language to accurately describe the social contestations, conflicts, protests and occupations that took place in the last six to seven years in Tunisia. Rather than describing them as social movements, they argue that we should be talking about social mobilisations instead, as these tend to be ephemeral, localised, lacking solid organisational structures and without a strong popular base or a clear political horizon.⁸⁰ For example, radical demands made by the unemployed youth in Tataouine (Tunisia) such as the nationalisation of oil and gas companies and the allocation of twenty per cent of oil and gas revenues for local development were dropped when negotiations started with the authorities. Similarly, the unemployed movement in Algeria withered away after some jobs were offered by the government, including in the police forces.

Two exceptions to this pattern can be noted, however, with some longevity and sustainability of struggle, albeit with serious limitations and contradictions. These two exceptions share a strong attachment to land: Jemna (Tunisia) as its rural landless people managed to enforce popular management and access to land within the framework of a social solidarity economy; and Imider (Morocco), rooted in its culture and land while gaining national and international solidarity, strengthening their resolve to continue fighting. Omar, one of the young activists who spent two years in jail, reflecting in April 2017 on the international solidarity caravan that visited Imider in November 2016 said:

'that caravan gave a new breath to our movement, really. With all the different nationalities that came, people felt that their cause was global, not just Moroccan.'

The movements led by unemployed youth analysed in this paper do not organise their struggles on a class basis. The objective of their mobilisation is not revolution or radical transformation but insertion into the capitalist system through jobs, no matter how precarious. In this respect, '*the struggle is defensive and not offensive*'⁸¹ as it is making it very hard for capital to accumulate, while begging for some crumbs from the pie; when those crumbs are provided,

the movements often disintegrate and disappear. Typically their leadership lacks a radical vision of the movement's struggles and thus fails to link up with other movements nationally or regionally, which traps their demands in a narrow local context. The position of unemployed people outside the sphere of production makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to advance the class struggle into a higher form where political and class consciousness are made more explicit.⁸²

Resource extraction is a capital-intensive sector which employs a minimal number of technically skilled labourers, a situation that tends to be amplified with evolving technology. As a result, very few jobs are offered to local residents who are usually hired short-term and on low wages, while promised infrastructure and services never materialise. Extractive companies are thus able to realise extremely high profits through rapacious appropriation of resources and externalisation of costs. Often, companies gain their concessions through coercion, bribery and corruption. When resistance does spring up, they rely on a plethora of strategies to neutralise these, including co-opting movement leaders, dividing populations, and undermining struggles through social and environmental responsibility programmes. Failing that, they pressure the states where they operate to violently repress resistance, as documented in several conflicts above.

Demanding jobs in industries that externalise environmental and social costs, which are borne disproportionately by communities living near the extractive site, is a very thorny issue. These movements are divided around priorities, as employment generation and environmental issues are both pressing. Ghassen, an unemployed youth from Oum Laarayes, told the visiting solidarity caravan in April 2017:

'for this region, the deepest and the bloodiest wound is unemployment. After the 2008 Intifada, which lasted six months of struggle against the Ben Ali regime, and with all the repression and broken bones, it's no time to talk about the environment.'

While Wassim, an activist from Redeyef disagreed:

'there is a real problem and a real contradiction with this company [CPG]. It doesn't just have to do with the social and economic. It has to do with life and the right to life....so the issue shouldn't be just employment.'



The picture shows graffiti of slogans of the unemployed movement: 'No phosphates without employment'; 'Give me my right'; 'We will resist'. Photo Credit: Nada Trigui

This contradiction might be partly explained by the phenomenon of the creation of a labour aristocracy in CPG in Tunisia. The salaries offered by the company are particularly high, which is very attractive to the unemployed youth who do not see any other alternative. This reinforces the economic and cultural dependence of the population on the company and positions this kind of development as the only one possible in the region, closing the door to alternatives like sustainable agriculture.⁸³ At the same time, this creates deep tensions and resentment between workers and unemployed youth when production is stopped by protests and occupations.

Ultimately, this type of resistance is fundamentally anti-systemic and counter-hegemonic and can be explicitly anti-imperialist in certain cases and at specific junctures (Unemployed Movement in Algeria, the mobilisations of youth in Tataouine in their initial demands for nationalisation). However, it is not anti-capitalist as such. In any way, these social movements or mobilisations against the status quo, as Riahi argues, are '*carving for themselves an independent space through which they can intervene... they have the ability to open new spaces of experimentation that could lead to the creation of alternatives*'.⁸⁴ These mobilisations bring the internal contradictions of extractivism and capitalism into the open, thus helping

to forge the class consciousness necessary to overthrow capitalism and build a sustainable alternative in its place.

In this context, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) tend to depoliticise their target audiences and grassroots partners – such as social movements and grassroots organisations – while turning them away from a class analysis of their predicament and helping them adapt to the realities of capitalist (under)-development and extractivist plunder. Fieldwork interactions with NGO workers highlighted that some of the NGOs and coalitions encountered, environmental or otherwise, adopted a class collaborationist discourse, steering away from any politics of mobilisation of forces of resistance. These tried to carefully channel the demands and the discourse of the social movements in a way that was accommodating and not threatening to capital and the existing political and economic structures of power.⁸⁵ This is coherent with Amanor's argument that the concept of civil society has been refashioned to replace class interests and the interests of the marginalised where NGOs tend to focus on political and civil human rights, rather than social justice and economic rights based on redistribution.⁸⁶

Similar to other countries in the African continent and the Arab region, several claims are made about the weakness of 'civil society' in the Maghreb by international NGOs, aid and development agencies in order to justify their active role in recruiting and grooming civil society organisations to represent the poor and working people.⁸⁷ For example, the 'NGOisation of resistance'⁸⁸ was evident in the transitional period in Tunisia after the uprising in 2010-2011. NGOs catalysed action to turn people away from the streets, avoid an escalation of demands and a radicalisation of the revolutionary process that could threaten the profits of transnational capitalist elites as well as the interest of imperial states. While NGOs are supposed to empower civil society, these rather contribute to the creation of an artificial and non-independent civil society sphere which deepens the '*marketisation and privatisation of the social*'.⁸⁹

Manji & O'Coill argued that the widespread resistance to a myriad of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) in the global South forced multilateral and bilateral agencies

to rethink their approach to development promotion, particularly, *'how to present the same neo-liberal economic and social programmes with a more "human face"*'. This was repackaged into the 'good governance' agenda and NGOs and other civil society organisations were co-opted to that purpose of social control, acting as a substitute for state welfare programmes that were undermined by an externally-imposed austerity agenda. As a result, they actively participated in expanding and consolidating neoliberal hegemony.⁹⁰ For James Petras, the NGOs' role is to '*mystify and deflect the discontent (with SAPs) away from direct attacks on the corporate/banking power structure and profits*' toward local micro-projects and apolitical initiatives that '*avoid] class analysis of imperialism and capitalist exploitation*'.⁹¹ In North Africa, most international development agencies and NGOs have firmly sided with the counter-revolution and acted to depoliticise struggles, demobilise social movements, undermine resistance and divert attention away from imperialist and neo-colonial relationships.

6. Conclusion/Alternatives

The metabolic rift between capital and nature, or the compulsion to accumulate ever more capital, undermines the metabolic equilibrium that would allow a society to live sustainably and in harmony with its environment.⁹² This rift is threatening the entire planet as a place of habitation for humanity and other species. These five cases show how small scale farmers, fishermen, the unemployed and rural residents in Northern Africa's frontiers of extraction resist the crushing weight and catastrophic convergence of despotism, neoliberal capitalism and the ecological crisis, all entangled in imperial and neo-colonial relations of domination.⁹³

While for more than three decades, successive governments in the Maghreb have banked on a neoliberal extractivist model of development, we argue that extractivism is not the route to take towards development, capitalist or otherwise. Without inward looking industrialisation, there will be no development.⁹⁴

The 'new extractivism' championed by progressive or post-neoliberal governments in Latin America is not the solution either. This model – not new - already showed its limitations and contradictions in the 70s in countries like Algeria, which engaged in radical attempts to delink from the imperialist-capitalist system, relying

on its wealth of natural resources to push the engine of its autonomous and auto-centred development model. Today, we see the same contradictions manifesting themselves in Latin America: a mix of FDI flows and the continuing subordination of the economy to globalised production and value chains; while at the same time, we see tougher state regulation and environmental rules for transnational companies, i.e. a dose of resource nationalism and a measure of inclusionary development. The 'new extractivist' governments are basically striking a better deal with capital while maintaining the mechanisms that generate inequality, domination, exploitation and pauperisation. The argument that this is only a transitional phase has been debunked by several radical thinkers who insist that this is a trap. The current reality in Latin America, where progressive states have failed to escape the contradictions of capitalist development or the pitfalls of extractivism, vindicates their point.⁹⁵

This paper has documented an upsurge in the forces of resistance in North Africa, accompanied by '*the entrance of new actors onto the scene*' who demand that wealth be shared and distributed equitably.⁹⁶ This resistance to extractive capital is led by the communities most directly affected by its destructive operations, as well as by the 'new proletariat' formed by the process of 'accumulation

by dispossession'. However, the battles of social movements and rural communities can only be won if they are transformed into a fight against capitalism and imperialism and if they can go beyond the local and reach the national and international levels.

This is why opening up new horizons of thinking and framing is paramount. Construction of anti-colonial and anti-capitalist discourses will allow the forces of resistance to start asking the right questions, and linking up different struggles (climate justice, environment justice, food sovereignty, trade justice, anti-racism, anti-patriarchy, anti-militarism, anti-war, anti-austerity...). All of these struggles are intersectional and interconnected and the issues they are facing are only expressions of the logic of accumulating wealth in the hands of the few while dispossessing the majority from what is theirs. They represent various aspects of resistance to a system that has no respect for human and non-human natures. The struggles need to converge to create a space and a horizon for an emancipatory alternative. In this vein, several regional networks, such as the newly founded North African Network for Food Sovereignty and the Maghreb Popular Education School for Social and Environmental Justice, are constituted in order to exchange information, share experiences, strengthen alliances, coordinate strategies and articulate collective demands in the face of extractivism.

Any exploration of 'alternative development' must necessarily deal with extractivism. One direction that this can take is post-extractivism, a perspective pioneered by South American committed intellectuals like Eduardo Gudynas, Maristella Svampa, Alberto Accosta, Miriam Lang and others. Post-extractivism can be reached through stages. The current form of 'predatory extractivism' can transition to a 'reasonable extractivism' that is seriously regulated, in which social and environmental norms are rigorously respected. This first step will hopefully put an end to the social and environmental ills caused by big extractive companies, will allow an important decrease in the dependence on exports and will give the state a greater margin for regulation as well as for some fiscal reform (tax on multinationals). The second step consists of moving towards an 'indispensable' or 'basic' extractivism where only extractive projects necessary to satisfy national and regional needs are carried out.⁹⁷

Reduction of the extractive sectors must be accompanied by diversification of the economy, focusing particularly on

agriculture, farming, industry and services at the national level; and by reorganisation at the regional level, to avoid economic strangling by the boycott of international buyers. In that respect, regional integration, in an autonomous way (not subordinated to globalisation) is necessary. In North Africa, this autonomous regionalism could take the form of a federation between the three countries: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, where economic and political cooperation, resources sharing and important decisions on the future of the Maghreb are made together. This would need to confront the political systems in all three countries, where authoritarian, corrupt and comprador elites are imposing their rule and are complicit in the organised looting of their nations. Such a systemic change can only result from a protracted struggle for radical participatory democracy, where elites will have the political will to engage with a paradigm of post-extractivism and allow their people to organise and build strong social movements and trade unions that will strengthen the democratic base and allow for an adequate social participation in decision-making and in the fight around pressing issues such as food and energy sovereignty. The struggle for environmental and climate justice and for just transitions towards post-extractivist development models will be therefore fundamentally democratic.

Such a radical project can hardly be imposed overnight. Insisting on the difficult transition from a model based on export of raw materials to one that is a clear departure from capitalist logic, René Ramírez Gallegos notes that 'to leave this model overnight is not viable, and it is necessary therefore to outline a medium- and long-term road map'.⁹⁸ This will be a protracted process fraught with contradictions and will need to take into account the correlation of forces that defines the framework of the possible.

A utopian vision does not mean a utopian politics that underestimates power relations and the need to struggle, negotiate and even compromise. As Atilion Boron argues, a utopian imagination '*has to be one of real utopias that seek out the possible but do not fall victim to possibilism'* (there is no alternative).⁹⁹ Ultimately, the emancipatory experience will spring from the historical praxis of people and, to paraphrase Ana Esther Ceceña,¹⁰⁰ will necessitate profound cultural change that would install non-capitalist visions of the world where '*Mother Nature once again becomes the subject of history*'.

Endnotes

- 1 This article is dedicated to the memory of Samir Amin, a towering scholar-activist who dedicated his life to the emancipation of the African continent. It is also dedicated to the memory of Mohamed Abdelmouleh, a dear Tunisian friend and comrade who helped and participated in some of the grassroots work documented in this paper.
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