

Roundtable on the MENA Region

Political science and digital technologies in the MENA region:

State of the art

Maryam Ben Salem

Assistant professor of political science

Faculty of Law and Political Science of Sousse

Introduction

I have recently attended a conference on “Facebook and politics” and a friend of mine, a communication specialist, told me: "Political science is becoming a sub branch of communication." Beyond the correctness of the statement, this remarks arises a question of great relevance to the subject which is of particular interest to us here namely digital technologies and political science. The question is that of disciplinary boundaries about which E. Morin says: "The disciplinary boundary, its language and its own concepts will isolate the discipline in relation to the others and in relation to the problems that are overlapped within the disciplines. The hyper disciplinary mind will become a spirit of propriety which forbids any foreign incursion into its field of knowledge "(Morin 1990). I must say that it was this question that guided my whole approach here. The roundtable that I have the honor of chairing, by presenting an overview of the teaching and research in political science in the MENA region and Africa on the prism of digital technologies, is indeed an excellent opportunity to reflect more generally on the state of the discipline in the region.

Digital technologies are beginning to introduce a new object for political scientists, and it is useful to recall here this region is lagging behind in comparison with Western countries. Indeed, academic interest for digital technologies has actually started only since the so-called Arab spring. In Western democracies, the interest in digital technologies and their impact began in the 1980s, with successive changes of research problems, developing alongside the technical evolutions of these tools (moving from the digital divide, to the uses of these technologies, to digital democracy). In the Arab countries, we have witnessed a plethora of works revolving around this issue from the so-called Arab Spring, with media and

scientific enthusiasm about the role that social media played in the advent of these revolutions and social movements. Certainly, there were some works before this "historical" turning point, but their number was too small compared to what can be observed today.

By analyzing scientific production in political science in and around the MENA region in relation to digital technologies, one quickly realizes how this object can disrupt the discipline understood as "an organizational category within scientific knowledge" (Morin 1990). This means that this specific object brings to light the disciplinary compartmentalization and the difficulties for the discipline to appropriate and use techniques and theories exogenous to the political science. On this point, I would like to draw attention to the perspective of my presentation. The latter is based on a non-exhaustive census of the academic work on the region; thus I cannot claim to generalize without having a precise knowledge of the state of the discipline in the other countries of the region, which, I have to recall, do not constitute a monolithic block, the realities and contexts being very different from a country to another. My point is more relevant to the case of Tunisia, even if the blind spots of the literature that I noticed would be an opportunity to exchange and discuss the challenges of the discipline in some of these countries.

With regards to the teaching of political science, which will be the second part of my presentation, I will focus on the specific case of Tunisia which I know best without dwelling on this point since it is to be developed by my colleague.

I- The state of research in and around the MENA region: what challenges for the discipline?

I have first tried to make an inventory of published academic works (books, collective books, journal articles) that apprehend digital technologies in their political dimension and that revolve around the following issues: the role played by the digital technologies in the Arab revolts, the political and citizen uses of digital technologies, citizens' relationships with politics, the identities that these tools generate, as well as general works that deal more broadly with the transformations of media landscape in the Arab countries, the intra and across national digital divide and its impact.

It should be noted that in the countries of the region, there are little room for scientific publication in political science which is met with international recognition, such as reviews and specialized publishing houses. Besides, there is not a single Arabic political science

journal among the 431 journals of political science and international relations classified according to the SJR / scimago indicator.

The list of works I have drawn up, which includes 120 titles, is of course not exhaustive, but it positively informs us about an important fact: only 16 of the works recorded are written by political scientists, i.e. 13% of the production in and about the Arab world. The other example comes from the specialized journal “CyberOrient”, which is published by the American Anthropological Association and the Faculty of Arts of Charles University since 2006. In this journal, six articles were published by political scientists out of a total of 58. Similarly, out of the 26 issues of the journal *Siyaset arabiyya* (Arab politics) published by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, only one article deals with digital technologies, and it is entitled "cyber attacks". The Arab Media & Society which is an online journal published by the Adham Center for Television and Digital Journalism in the School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the American University in Cairo, lacks considerable academic works in comparison with the number of podcasts and journalistic articles.

In Tunisia, most of the conferences and symposia organized since 2011 are interdisciplinary¹, in which very few political scientists participate, and this conveys the difficulty encountered by the discipline to appropriate this issue.

The questions that arise are the following: why is this object neglected by political scientists while it isn't by specialists in other disciplines? Secondly, why is it so often centered on an exclusive problem: the role played by digital technologies in the revolution?

The literature on Internet in the Arab region is largely devoted to cyberactivism as an online activist activity, focuses on determining what Arab Spring revolutions owe to social media and online activism (Lecomte 2013, Khatib 2015, El-Nawawy Khamis 2012, Kuebler 2011, Rahimi 2011, Chomiak 2014). Against the enthusiastic vision that confers to digital technologies a decisive role in the rise of the uprisings in the countries of the region (Khamis, Vaughn 2011, Abdulla 2011), a more critical and nuanced approach discusses the mobilizing potential and the values of democratization, pluralism and transparency that have been attributed to it by many authors (Bécher Ayari 2011, Médias special issue 2011, De Angelis 2015, Gonzalez-Quijano 2015).

¹ Colloque international, « Les médias tunisiens face à la transition digitale », Centre Africain de Perfectionnement des Journalistes et Communicateurs, Tunis, mars 2017 ; Conférence « Facebook : faiseur de politique ou espace public », Association Tunisienne des études politiques, Tunis, mai 2017

After the euphoria around the role played by these technologies in the revolution, and facing now a new context, with democracies being consolidated (Tunisia) on the one hand and aborted transitions (Egypt) on the other hand, the problematics need to be displaced. The point is to examine: what the transformations of the relationships of the citizens with politics and democracy, their behavior and political opinions, their relations to the conventional political institutions of the representative democracy, the renewal of the modes of participation and of political expression, owe to digital technologies. Yet, very little attention has been paid by political scientists to these fundamental issues which necessitate a change of focus towards the ordinary or profane uses of the Internet in these countries, bearing in mind that digital technologies have considerably enlarged the spaces for the citizens to express themselves. This issue, widely studied in Western democracies by focusing on the role of online participation in the re-invigoration of the political landscape and democratic legitimacy, has been little explored in the countries of the region, if at all, at least by political scientists.

The blind spots of the literature in this geographical and cultural area that I have noted are the following:

If many authors have concluded that digital technologies have had no significant impact on political practices and relationships to politics, it is because they have focused their attention on online activism, which has proved to be a continuation of offline activism (De Angelis 2015, Badr 2015, Tohamy 2017). However, analysis of the ordinary uses of digital technologies would make it possible to provide opportunities for participation in democratic or public debate, depending on the contexts (Manrique 2011). This type of problematic focusing on ordinary uses requires the use of critical analysis of discourse which remains devolved to communication specialists, anthropologists and sociologists and totally shunned by political scientists, with the exception of a few. As noted by Koren, the concept of "conversationalization" which refers to what is perceived as "oralized writing", and which is capable of introducing directly any speaker into the egalitarian sphere of verbal interactions of the Web "is nevertheless of interest to political scientists insofar as the subject who expresses himself on the Web sees his status and his mode of address being transformed" (Koren 2010).

Even though researchers are interested in the emancipatory and participatory potential of digital technologies, they remain centered on the Habermassian ideal of public space (Hammami 2006, Mejri 2017), based on the normative requirement of equal access to speech

and rational argumentation. It is often concluded that digital technologies reproduce the inequalities of real life and that modes of expression are far from corresponding to maximum rationality. For example, Hammami questions the possibility of using the concept of public space to analyze the historical evolution of mediated communication in Arab societies, and its relationship to ICTs given that the historical experience of modernity is behind the emergence, formation and evolution of communication in Western societies. From this distinction with the West, the author concludes that analyzing the organization of mediated communication in Arab societies should be done through the notion of neo-patriarchy which Sharabi explains as: “a hybrid traditional and semi-traditional structures [...] where modernity and patriarchy coexist in a contradictory union” (Sharabi 1996). This perspective makes it possible to bring forth the weight of tradition insofar as it favors in the field of communication forms of regulation which are embodied in speeches of prescription, injunction and in censorship and coercion (Hammami 2006).

However, in spite of authoritarianism, inequalities in terms of access, skills and argumentative capacities, digital technologies have made it possible to broaden the possibilities of expression and to request the right to speak. Accordingly, the political potentialities that digital technologies would favor, would be better understood through the prism of “dissensus” from a Rancierian perspective. The notion of controversial space (Rancière 2014) is, indeed, the proper one to grasp online political discussions and public opinions that are not structured by the police order. These discursive exchanges are characterized by disagreements on the identity of the subjects recognized as legitimate interlocutors, on the one hand, and disagreements on the very subject of the political discussions on the other (Rancière 1995). On-line political exchanges in the MENA region offer interesting cases of study insofar as they allow us to see in which way les “sans part”², impose themselves as beings of words and call into question the existing order.

The transformation of political institutions in this region under the influence of digital technologies as well as the appropriation of institutional rules by individuals, are other unrecognized issues that would make it possible to see how public communication via digital

²Sans part refers to those whose speech is rendered inaudible, following a split between those legitimately allowed to express themselves politically and those whose words, status, visibility and the right to be heard are actually denied.

devices, the establishment of e-government affects the relationship of citizens to institutions and politics. Besides, the issue of the performance of political parties and militant organizations, their strategies of action and mobilization is surprisingly more studied by sociologists than by political scientists.

In addition to disciplinary compartmentalization, these blind spots of political science are, in my view, also the consequence of the predominant approach in political science, particularly in this region, which privileges the macroscope over the microscope and the macrological or mesological level over the micrological one (Sawicki 2000). We find, however, works focused on a dense description of a case, but mostly from a macrological perspective that seeks to identify patterns in the social and political structure rather than in the individual logics of action. For example, M. B. Ayari addressed the issue of the web 2.0 revolution in Tunisia from class divisions perspective, and M. Khoury Machool attempted to demonstrate how the modes of expression favored by digital tools make it possible to transform the modes of resistance and the political culture of young Palestinians, linking the socio-political conditions of the Palestinians to the use of the Internet as a cyber-resistance tool (Khoury-Machool, 2007).

By addressing the above mentioned issues, political scientists would be compelled to change scales and methods. The transdisciplinarity of digital technologies, coupled with a micrological approach (centered on behavior, individual attitudes and social interactions, rather than on structures), would in fact require the borrowing of theories, concepts, observations techniques from other disciplines, mainly sociology, ethnology and communication. For instance, the analysis of discourse exchanges and visual representations requires the use of linguistic discourse analysis techniques and visual and iconographic methods (Kovacs 2015, Lacquaniti 2015) and therefore calls for a poly-competence on the part of political scientists.

For what reasons political scientists, especially local ones, remain confined (whatever the object is) to a globalizing and state-centered approach? The possible element of explanation could, in my view, be the institutional anchoring of the discipline. Political science in the Arab region has struggled to assert itself as an autonomous discipline, and Tunisia is perhaps the most illustrious case here, or at least about which I feel more entitled to speak. Authoritarianism has indeed led to the marginalization of political science, which, although taught in Tunisian universities, was long perceived as a discipline with high subversive

potential and is still avoided by students who cannot not perceive the job opportunities it can offer. The obvious outcome of this has been to make political science a sub-branch of law, from which it has not achieved its own autonomy. Political science teachers are under the aegis of the public law department, although they are recruited as political scientists. There is currently no Bachelor degree in political science in public universities, but only a Master's degrees. As a result, a Tunisian political scientist find himself constrained to work on the classical objects of political science in which law and politics are intertwined. For example, out of a total of 257 Ph. D Theses defended at the Faculty of Law and Political Sciences in Tunis, only 48 (i.e. 18%) are into political science, and the most remarkable fact is that the main topic chosen is usually international relations and international law; in other words topics that fall within the competence of jurists. Students are still reluctant to work on the objects of exclusive political science or to adopt its methods and concepts lest they be penalized by the jurists who dominate the discipline.

Hence, what Tunisian political science suggests is not the risk of hyper specialization which would be detrimental to the advancement of science according to Morin because it prevents seeing the bonds of solidarity of a " an object dealt with in other disciplines (Morin 1990), but on the contrary to the dilution of political science in law.

II- The teaching of political science in Tunisia: what are the contributions of digital technologies?

In terms of teaching, the digital revolution has not had a major impact in Tunisia. E-learning programs are provided to students at the Faculty of Law and Political Science in Sousse but remain limited to law education. A virtual university also exists in Tunisia, but it does not include modules for teaching political science. Indeed, universities have very few means to develop these technologies and make them accessible to the teaching staff and the students. Although compulsory pedagogical training for newly recruited Tunisian teachers includes an e-learning module, few teachers are practicing it, as many do not find it useful.

In the practice of classical education, the use of digital technologies remains weak and limited to exchanges of emails between the teacher and his students, Dropbox and the Facebook groups created by the Master students. It should be noted that the digital divide in Tunisia is a reality that must be taken into account (Tunisia is ranked 78 in terms of individual use of technologies (score value 3.9). Many students have no access to Internet and even when it is

the case, we quickly find that they have a more recreational use of these tools, rather than a professional one.

In terms of the contents of the teaching of political science, there isn't any crucial innovation apart from the integration of a Master course on media and communication in which the questions related to new media and visual technologies are taught.

Finally, the marginal status of political science as a discipline, the inadequate resources of higher education institutions and the State, the economic conditions of students and a certain resistance to change are the main factors that explain the little impact/ use of digital technologies in teaching programs.

Conclusion

The challenging points for political science in the MENA region and more specifically in Tunisia are twofold: on the one hand, the necessary autonomy of the discipline which would enable it to produce knowledge and to develop instruments independent from the law and, on the other hand, the recourse to interdisciplinarity which would foster it. It is only by this double movement of delineating its field and reaching out to other disciplines that political science would succeed in turning digital technologies into a legitimate object for the discipline, and to go beyond the sole problematic of revolution. A moot question would be: does the confinement of political scientists in this problematic replicate an academic representation about the Arab world as being inevitably confronted to two alternatives: to submit or to rebel (Badie 1987)?

This is an essential point for the development of political science in the MENA region: breaking up with the supposedly exceptional character of this cultural area. Chraïbi and Fillieule point out very well the contradictions related to the subject of Arab revolts, and which could be perfectly applied to our subject, since the literature on digital technologies remains focused on social movements and resistance patterns: "After having long questioned the "causalities of a lack" of democracy, we should now ask why the events of 2011-2012 sound the knell of the "exceptionality" of the Arab world and announce a new threshold in the process of universalization of the revolutionary fact. They are often the same "defects" and the same "anomalies" that were previously identified as the locks of democratization which, by the dint of the rise of real history, become the causes of revolt and its success." (Chraïbi, Fillieule 2012).

What would be beneficial for the development of political science in the region, would be not only to achieve interdisciplinarity but also to outgrow the thesis of exceptionality that makes the MENA region an irreducible space to the conceptual tools elaborated by the West.

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