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The Struggle for Meanings and Power in Tunisia after the Revolution

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In light of the chaotic and current situation in Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen, international observers consider the Tunisian experience to be the reference model of political change in the region. In spite of assassinations, tensions and conflicts that emerged within and outside of its Parliament, Tunisia managed to free public speech, to create a pluralist political arena and to obtain a democratic constitution adopted by the National Constituent Assembly. This second transitional phase resulted in the upholding of parliamentarian and presidential elections. Glowing reports of the international community and local self-triumph put aside, the Tunisian trajectory should be scrutinized in order to go beyond simplistic interpretations of the dynamics at work.

The 2011 uprisings have initiated a continuing process of redefinition of political forces and alliances. Key elements of this process include the institutionalization of political Islam through the Ennahda party, the assertion of the Salafi movement in the public sphere, the shift from one type a collation of former opponents to the Ben Ali regime in the years 2011–2014 (the “troika” of CPR-Ettakatol and Ennahda) to an alliance between Islamists and the anti-Islamist party of Nida Tounes. However, competition for power does not by itself explain the dynamics that have unfolded within the Tunisian political sphere. Since 2011, the observable political struggle tightly correlates with disputes over the introduction of new narratives and new interpretations about the revolution. The widespread celebration of consensus, for example, does not merely reflect an objective balance of power among political forces. It also contributes to naturalizing an interpretation of Tunisian politics, in which dissent is a threat to national unity rather than an ingredient of democracy.

To the regime's fall is hence tied a struggle for meaning, one that is inseparable from the struggle for power. It has divided the country along multiple lines that oppose business elites to the "people"; Islamists vs. secularists; the upper class and urban elites to the rural "inland" regions; the North to the South; Political Islam to Tunisianity; the national to the diaspora, etc. This special issue seeks to examine this very relationship between the battle for power and the competition over truths and narratives.

Social scientists and experts have not remained insulated from these disputes around the interpretation of the transition. While scholars of Tunisia have suddenly multiplied after 2011, they have been confronted with fundamental ethical and epistemological questions. In addition to the difficult task of trying to ascribe some stable meaning to a process in the making, the high emotional charge involved in the study of a revolution and a transition has been a major challenge. Until 2011, the social scientific literature on post-independence Tunisia, and more specifically on the Ben Ali authoritarian regime has been scarce.¹ The difficult condition of doing fieldwork in the repressive context of a highly policed state is the main explanation for this seeming lack of interest. After 2011, given the relative scarcity of the corpus of political and sociological analysis of post-independence Tunisia, several experts have elaborated analyses of the post-revolution dynamics that were based on external models (drawn from Eastern Europe, Asia or Latin America), rather than on the consideration of Tunisia's own history.²

The sudden outburst of academic enthusiasm for Tunisia has undoubtedly contributed to a better understanding of the complexity of the current transformations. Tunisia, however, regularly appears in these works as a case of study, the function of which is to allow scholars to test and verify theories that have been elaborated for very different contexts. Moreover, a gap

1 Michel Camau, ed., *Tunisie au présent : une modernité au-dessus de tout soupçon ?* (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1987); Michel Camau and Vincent Geisser, *Le Syndrome autoritaire : Politique en Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2003); Jean-Pierre Cassarino, *Tunisian New Entrepreneurs and their Past Experiences of Migration in Europe: Resource Mobilisation, Networks, and Hidden Disaffection* (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2000); Béatrice Hibou, *La force de l'obéissance : Économie politique de la répression en Tunisie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006); Eva Bellin, *Stalled Democracy: Capital, Labor, and the Paradox of State Sponsored Development* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002).

2 Nataliya Gumenyuk, "How Framing of Revolutions (the Arab Spring and Maidan) Takes Us Away from Their Roots During and After the Protests," *SciencesPo Centre de Recherches Internationales*, January 2016, <http://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/content/dossiersduceri/how-framing-revolutions-arab-spring-and-maidan-takes-us-away-their-roots-during-and-after?dio>.

quickly became visible between the growing number of scholars and experts (Tunisian or non Tunisian) based in Western universities who began to write about the revolution and the transition process, and the Tunisian youth that has experienced the whole process, but has had a peripheral part in the academic and policy conversation. In other words, the political earthquake triggered by Bouazizi's self immolation has not been followed (yet) by a decisive change in the power dynamics defining the production of knowledge about Tunisia (and, possibly, the Arab world more broadly). The well-entrenched repartition of tasks whereby local scholars provide data, and scholars based at Western universities define theories has continued. Very early on, Mona Abaza has denounced the unequal relations of power in the economy of the nascent expert industry on the Arab revolutions, and has mocked the growing number of "Academic tourists sightseeing the Arab Spring".³ Since Abaza published her article, some young Tunisian or Tunisia-based academics, experts, journalists, activists and artists have actively taken part in debates, and proposed original ideas, or artistic forms. The broad political economy of academic and policy expertise however continues to make it more difficult for them to have access to prestigious international journals, universities, and venues where a new normative knowledge about Tunisia is being made and written, without them. Raising this issue is not meant at justifying any form of academic nationalism, whereby only Tunisia based scholars could legitimately write about their country. It does not mean either that one should indulge into narcissistic introspection, and replace the study of Tunisian politics with the sole analysis of one's positionality. Finally, it does not seek to give credit to the binary view according to which Western academics and politicians keep exploiting the South. The grandiose congress organized in May 2016 by Ennahda shows very well how Tunisian political actors have quickly learned to instrumentalize the new appetite of Western scholars for Tunisian politics. Ennahda carefully invited a selection of Western scholars, journalists, and experts, and omitted to invite many Tunisian social scientists. It is important, therefore, to acknowledge the fact that scholarship and authoritative discourse about the Tunisian revolution and transition is being produced in a highly politicized context, and that any claim to the scientific neutrality of this expertise should be approached critically.

The Tunisian revolution has opened up a unique space for free speech. From this open space, however, many stereotypical representations and speeches have promptly emerged. A post revolutionary mainstream culture has formed

3 Mona Abaza, "Academic Tourists Sight-Seeing the Arab Spring," *ahramonline*, September 26, 2011, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/22373.aspx>.

that implies a commodification of icons (such as the portraits of Bouazizi), symbols, martyrs, and slogans (such as “*dégage/irhal*”) of the revolution. No matter how trendy or idealized, this new normative semiotics needs to be seen critically. Fanon has shown that the codification of the indigenous culture into a set of folkloric stereotypes was instrumental to the spread of the colonial rule.⁴ With his observation in mind, one may suggest that, in Tunisia’s present context, the inevitable transformation of revolutionary disorder into a normative and commodified culture implies an analogous risk of perpetuating relations of inequality between the producers of these new codes (young artists, civil society activists...) and the Western NGO’s, foundations, or associations (however well meaning) that seek to fund such a culture. An effect of the codification of the post-revolution culture is to neutralize the power of dissent and critique by turning it into a cool and artistic commodity. While no one writing about revolutions and transitions can claim to speak from a perfect position of neutrality and objectivity, it is important for scholars of Tunisia to look critically at the depoliticizing impact of this new culture. As Fanon has argued, intellectuals and academics may contribute to the transformation of the “power of invocation” expressed through popular art and culture into a “power of convocation”.⁵

A Conservative Revolution

While a lot of ink has been spent on whether the events of 2011 should be labeled as a revolution, a social movement, an uprising, it seems more productive to both acknowledge the radicalness of the 2011 break and to try to understand the post 2011 changes as the effects of internal mutations, beyond the rhetoric of the *tabula rasa*.

The articles gathered in this special issue offer an interpretation of Tunisia’s transition that breaks away from common evaluative endeavors that seek to define the degree to which the country has succeeded or failed. While acknowledging the significance of the 2011 rupture, this issue is more interested in understanding the 2011–2014 period in relation to former decades of authoritarian power and modernist-secularist rhetoric. The Tunisian revolution is part of a *longue durée* trajectory that includes the pre-colonial, colonial, statist and the neoliberal moments. Authors of this issue insist on the constitutive ambiguity of the revolutionary moment and process. Rather than seeing

4 Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961; repr., Paris: La Découverte, 2002), 211.

5 Ibid., 231.

the revolution as a clean break from the past and an uncontested founding moment of a democratic phase, the authors show, from different perspective, the looming impact of past historical structures. The possibilities of change undeniably opened by the 2011 revolution have to be understood within these specific constraints of Tunisia's political history. Asef Bayat defines a revolution as "rapid transformation of the State, driven by popular support".⁶ From this point of view, what has occurred in Tunisia is not a proper revolution. State institutions and the pillars of the deep state (corrupt businessmen, police, bureaucracy) have remained untouched. The new legal instruments planned by the 2014 constitution in order to reinforce the protection of the rule of law (the constitutional court, the transitional justice) face numerous challenges and critiques. Very early on, the political leaders from the major parties have defended the need for the continuity and safeguarding of the state. The shared panic caused by the idea of a possible state collapse has contributed to the affirmation of reformism as the legitimate horizon of politics. This is how a trend that has characterized Tunisian politics since the 18th century has ironically been reinforced by the 2011 revolution.⁷ Five years after the revolution, the Tunisian state appears at once as oddly resilient –especially when compared to other Arab spring countries- and failing. The spread of informal economy, the weakening of borders, the proliferation of corruption, the increase of strikes and social movements represent a significant challenge to the ideal of state consolidation. In order to understand what makes the Tunisian revolution so singular, it's important to examine the slow and chaotic process of transformation of the state and society, and to show how structures and memories are renegotiated rather than eradicated. By emphasizing the enduring influence of some political norms and discourse, the essays gathered here suggest that the 2011 uprisings gave birth to a conservative revolution, and to a democracy that is partly governed by forces of restoration.

Hegemony

Very early on after the first uprisings of 2010, two interpretations of political change competed in the political sphere. For some political parties and

6 Asef Bayat, "Revolution in Bad Times," *New Left Review* 80 (March-April 2013), https://newleftreview.org/11/80/asef-bayat-revolution-in-bad-times#_ednref8.

7 Béatrice Hibou, "La formation asymétrique de l'Etat en Tunisie : Les territoires de l'injustice," in *L'Etat d'injustice au Maghreb. Maroc et Tunisie*, ed. Irène Bono, Béatrice Hibou, Hamza Meddeb and Mohamed Tozy (Paris: Karthala, 2015), 99–150.

social movements the 2011 revolution was a radical break from the past and the foundation of a new political order. Other social and political players saw the uprisings as an episode of violence that simply called for the reform of the state (notably the ministry of Interior), and a better redistribution of resources. This second view has become the main currency of the official political discourse since 2014. Widely celebrated as peaceful and relatively transparent, the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2014 have in fact opened up a new period in which the notion of consensus has become a stifling norm of the political transactions between new and old political elites. The pluralistic compromise painfully achieved during the 2011–2014 period in the Tunisian Constitutional Assembly gave way to a “rotten compromise” between the two former enemies, Ennahda and Nida Tounes.⁸ In the context of the multiplication of terrorist attacks and the weakening of security at the borders, notions of national unity, stability, and consensus took precedence over ideas of dissent, contestation, and pluralism.

In order to analyze this shift between pluralist openness and closure, and the competition between two interpretations of the uprisings, a number of authors of this issue resort to the Gramscian notion of hegemony. The concept,⁹ describing the moral and political leadership through which a dominant class manages to obtain consent from a large part of society, and to defuse conflict through pacific means, seems well adapted to describe the practice of power by the new Ennahda-Nida coalition. An essential aim of the post 2014 official rhetoric was to delegitimize political dissent and to criminalize social protest.¹⁰ Officials from Nida Tounes and Ennahda both called for the postponing of divisive political debate about key issues such as economic reform, transitional justice, or the constitutional court. The settlement of such divisive issue, it was argued, should be postponed and priority should be given to preserving stability, security and unity as attested in the “Carthage document” signed

8 Nadia Marzouki, “Tunisia’s Rotten Compromise,” *Middle East Research and Information Project*, July 10, 2015, http://www.merip.org/mero/mero071015?ip_login_no_cache=cb1fef92401f5e5597089a6bfb62865d.

9 John Schwarzmantel, *The Routledge Guidebook to Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks* (Routledge, 2015), 96–104; Antonio Gramsci, “Hegemony, Relations of Force, Historical Bloc,” in *The Gramsci Reader, Selected Writings, 1916–1935*, ed. David Forgacs (New York : New York University Press, 2000), 189–222.

10 In September 2015, the mufti of the republic, a highest official religious authority announced a fatwa saying that social protests are religiously “haram” because they are harmful for the country and they delay economic recovery. A fatwa that has been criticized by the civil society organisations and mocked by activists and Young people in the social media.

by political parties and national organizations that accepted to participate in the negotiations for the implementation of a National government unity. The only acceptable objective for political and social actors is to work for the reconstruction of the supposedly specific Tunisian synthesis between Islam and modernism. Sami Zemni shows how the ruling coalition has resuscitated the idea of “*tunisianité*”. It refers to a form of collective consciousness supposedly based on an inherent inclination toward moderation and reform, rather than violence. According to Zemni, the reiteration of this reference aims at creating hegemony: “it creates consent to the ruling classes and social groups, their leadership in ruling the nation because of their apparent ability to address and resolve societal problems and their prestige”. Similarly, Mathilde Zederman explains that the celebration of Bourguiba across ideological groups also serves to foreclose the space for political debates, and to consolidate the hegemony of the ruling coalition. She argues that some Islamists – even though they had suffered the most from the authoritarian modernist secularism defined by the first President of Tunisia- now seek to present themselves as the sons of Bourguiba. Retracing the ways in which governments have resorted to emergency law since the independence, Brahim Rouabah and Corinna Mullin show how the definition of modernity as a norm, and the exceptionalization of all forms of solidarity (tribal, regional, ideological) that could threaten the modernist ideal of the national state, have reinforced the hegemony of Bourguiba and Ben Ali’s regimes. Loes Debuysere demonstrates how the discourse about “*the Tunisian woman*” (always in singular) has been an integral part of the modernist mythology, and of the hegemony of the ruling party.

The Gramscian concept of hegemony is relevant to think about Tunisian politics not only because it adequately describes rhetorical and practical mechanisms of neutralization of dissent. It also allows us to interrogate three dimensions of political change that the narrative of the Tunisian democratic miracle has obfuscated. First, Gramsci’s conceptualization of hegemony is closely related to the concepts of class and violence. Second, his reflection on hegemony opens up on a critique of the use of dogmatic historicism to justify colonialism. Finally his theory of the neutralization of dissent leaves open the possibility of subversion. Hegemony is often wrongly reduced to a strategy of cultural influence through which a dominant elite strives to obtain popular consent.¹¹ This widespread interpretation tends to obscure the fact that the struggle for hegemony is inseparable from a class struggle. For Gramsci,

11 On the various usages and (mis)interpretations of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, see Gianfranco Rebutini, “Cultures, Hégémonies et Subjectivités : ‘Traductions’ de Gramsci dans les Sciences Sociales Critiques Anglophones,” *Actuel Marx* 57 (2015): 82–95.

a hegemonic apparatus is the ensemble of means, institutions, discourse and practice through which a class (either bourgeois or working) succeeds in translating its power in civil society into a power in political society. Moreover, the consent produced through hegemony should not be mistaken with social peace: it is merely a recodification and provisional neutralization of social aggressiveness. In Tunisia, an unfortunate effect of the overemphasis on consensus and reform in political and historiographic discourse is the tendency to expurgate violence and class struggle from political history.¹² Resorting to Gramsci's concept of hegemony to discuss Tunisian politics is relevant not only to understand the production of consent, but also because it may help reinstate social violence and class struggles as understudied and yet determinant factors of current changes. As a matter of fact, the invocation of consensus by the Tunisian ruling elite does not reflect a political and social context of peace and positive adhesion to a popular ideology. Rather it reveals a precarious equilibrium among fragile political forces that are increasingly alienated from social forces.

Gramsci's critique of the dogmatic historicism of the Marxist Italian philosopher Antonio Labriola is also pertinent to debunk the modernist mythology underlying Tunisia's history of nation building. In the *Southern Question*,¹³ Gramsci criticizes Labriola's determinist view of progress, and his defense of the colonization of the people from the South of Italy. While Labriola compared them to children in need of reeducation, Gramsci opposed the racialization and pathologization of the peasants from the South. Much of the discourse of the Tunisian elite that claims to defend the modernist legacy of Bourguiba sadly echoes Labriola's view on the South. Regions from the South and the hinterland have been consistently defined as a problem rather than as a resource. Their alleged backwardness has been attributed to the supposedly inherent features of their character or social structures, rather than to the asymmetrical process of state formation. The marginalization of the interior regions is the result of an enduring politics of subordination that started in the beylical era, and was reinforced under the colonial rule, and then willingly perpetuated by the development and investment strategies of both Bourguiba and Ben Ali's regimes 1956. In other words, the revival of Bourguibism does not only refer to the battle between secularism and Islamism. It also reflects

12 Béatrice Hibou, "Le Réformisme, Grand Récit Politique de la Tunisie Contemporaine," *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* 56–4 no. 4 (2009): 14–53.

13 Antonio Gramsci, "Some Aspects of the Southern Question," in *The Gramsci Reader, Selected Writings, 1916–1935*, ed. David Forgacs (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 171–89.

a historically well-entrenched and historical bias in favor of the urban coastal provinces and at the expense of the rural hinterland and South. Gramsci's reflection on the southern question offers important insights to think about the process whereby the Tunisian post-independence state has sought to affirm its sovereignty while at the same time reproducing some colonial and subordinating dynamics towards some segments of its people.

To some extent, the Tunisian conservative revolution bears resemblance with what Gramsci calls a "passive revolution":¹⁴ a political change that leads to the partial transformation of political institutions, but that involves the endurance of a pacifying power. In contrast with the French revolution that led to the political affirmation of large parts of the working classes, in a passive revolution, Gramsci argues, the revolutionary segments of society remain neutralized. In Tunisia, the key role that UGTT members or Ennahda representatives have played in the taming of protests wherever they have erupted; the progressive loss of influence of medium rank bureaucrats who used to act as mediators between local populations and the government; the cooptation of new Ennahda elites by old elites of the former regime; and the cooptation of key leaders of the popular class and interior regions into the political system through UGTT and political parties, all contribute to the pacification and neutralization of the revolution.

While Gramsci's thoughts help us build a sobering understanding of the present state of post-revolution Tunisia, they are equally valuable to think more positively about the possibilities of subversion. Gramsci sees hegemony as the moral and political leadership a class has gained by successfully hiding the unequal social relations that form the basis of its claim to defend modernity and equality. In other words, the creation of consent necessarily engages a distortion and mystification of reality. It is based on "a politics of the absence of truth".¹⁵ Subversion therefore implies an unveiling of the myths underpinning the hegemony of a class. The Tunisian revolution may not have succeeded in transforming state institutions or in politically empowering significant parts of civil society. But it has succeeded in debunking the mythology of modernity and Tunisianité, despite their persistent instrumentalization by political leaders. President Beji Caïd Essebsi has based its campaign in 2014 on the need to reinstate the prestige of the state, and has painfully tried to mimic

14 Antonio Gramsci, "The concept of passive revolution," in Forgacs, *The Gramsci Reader*, p. 263–67.

15 "The Gramscian Moment": An Interview With Peter Thomas," by Martin Thomas, *The Trim*, May 19, 2011, <http://thetrim1.blogspot.com/2014/03/the-gramscian-moment-interview-with.html>.

Bourguiba (through his clothing, glasses, speeches). Yet, there is not a wide support, let alone consent, to this Bourguibolatry cultivated by Nida Tounes and some members of Ennahda. Essebsi's attempts at imitating his predecessor are regularly made fun of. His decision to reinstall the statue of Bourguiba on his horse on the main avenue of Tunis has upset a large part of the youth.¹⁶

Tunisia's current politics seem defined by a negative or ironical form of hegemony that it is based on the neutralization of dissent much more than on a positive consent to an ideology. The narrative of Tunisian modernity functions as an ideology by default. The ruling coalition refers to it because it has nothing more substantial or programmatic to put forward. In that sense, there is not "politics of absence of truth", but rather, a politics of absence *tout court*. There is no positive ideology to debunk or unveil. This absence creates a space for subversion and possibly for the continuation of the 2011 revolution. In this issue, Charles Tripp shows how artists have appropriated the public space (with graffiti, performances, dance improvisation, songs, theater...): irreverence and provocation towards state authority (and notably the police) are an essential part of their art. Other scholars have argued elsewhere that despite the shrinking of the space for political conflicts within government or the ARP since 2014, social forces have remained quite active and have shown their capacity to organize protest.¹⁷ Other significant attempts at disturbing the status quo and projects of restoration of the *ancien regime* include the movement against the Reconciliation Bill, *Mnish msamah* (I won't forgive),¹⁸ protests and strikes in the mining area of Gafsa, strikes and riots in Tataouine and Kasserine. Street politics becomes the main channel for socio-economic demands, as the institutions are unable to mediate social conflicts. It remains unclear, however, whether these sectorial and fragmented movements can coalesce into a counter-hegemony to the present hegemony. The present uncertainty may not lead to the collapse of the fragile democracy or to the reverting into authoritarianism. Rather, it is very likely that the growing popular discontent will lead to the survival, for some time, of an unconsolidated and weak democratic order.

16 InelTarfa, "BourguibaStatueUnveiledDespiteCostConcerns," *Tunisia-live*, June 1, 2016, <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2016/06/01/borguiba-statue-unveiled-despite-cost-concerns/>.

17 Laryssa Chomiak, "The Revolution in Tunisia Continues," *Middle East Institute*, September 22, 2016, <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/revolution-in-tunisia-continues>.

18 This bill grants amnesty to the businessmen and bureaucrats guilty of having illegally financially benefited from the Ben Ali's regime.

Outline

This special issue is composed of six articles. The first four articles look at how some legal and discursive norms regarding national identity, security and gender have coalesced into hegemonic forms of speech and policy that have significantly reduced the space for pluralism and dissent. The two last articles examine sites and activities through which individuals have managed, since 2011, to challenge the hegemony of party leaderships or narratives about national identity.

Sami Zemni explains how, after Ben Ali's escape, the discovery of a conflict-ridden society led to a polarized debate about the definition of the Tunisian people. The discourse on *tunisianité* served as a hegemonic discourse that was meant to help bridging the gap between opposing views on who or what constitutes the people. However, *tunisianité* and the call for the restoration of the state's prestige (*haybat addawla*) also signaled the possibility of political closure; i.e. the rejection and de-legitimization of political subjectivities that do not subscribe to this view of national identity.

Extending the timeframe of analysis beyond the post-revolution period, Corinna Mullin and Brahim Rouabah retrace the way in which emergency law has been used by the state in the colonial and postcolonial era. Specifically, the article focuses on how the state of emergency contributes to the reinforcement of dominant narratives about national identity, tolerance, moderation, order, and state prestige.

Mathilde Zederman shows how the national narrative of 'modernism' conveyed by Bourguiba in the post-independence era has transformed into an arena of struggle over power and identity. She examines the ways in which the Bourguibist political idiom serves to legitimate certain ideological agendas and views on what is deemed the 'right' Tunisian national identity. Questioning the facile binaries that place Islamists and so-called 'secularists' in opposition, her article focuses on commonalities within their respective appropriations of the Bourguibist legacy in the post-revolutionary context.

Loes Debuysere shows how, ever since Habib Bourguiba made women the pivot of his modernist politics in post-independence Tunisia, Tunisian women have figured as a crucial pillar of a hegemonic discourse, celebrating the specificity of moderate and 'feminist' Tunisian identity. She goes on to explain why, four years into the revolution, this understanding of femininity ultimately survived and remains influential.

Deborah Perez offers a detailed analysis of the daily interactions among deputies of the Constituent National Assembly (2011–2014) in order to challenge micro-analyses that argue that the constitution was merely the outcome

of a pact among party leaders. She emphasizes the importance of contingency and improvisation that granted deputies a margin of autonomy towards the party leaderships.

Charles Tripp argues that through artistic interventions – graffiti, visual street art, performances, demonstrations, banners, slogans – citizens have appropriated the public sphere. Despite the monitoring of political dissent through persuasion or coercion, an activist public has created highly visible public spaces, assisted and encouraged by citizen artists. They have generated debates and have helped to give substance to competing visions of the republic.