

Part II

Analyzing Negotiations of Gender in different Dimensions of the Public Sphere in Tunisia (2011-2014)

This study investigates how gender relations are renegotiated in this multifaceted web of (counter-)publics, taking a variety of possible modes of communication into account, which challenge, build, interpret, and alter the different structures that define the hegemonic domain of power. Drawing on intersectional methodology, I put specific emphasis on different narratives that were voiced by the participants of this study. This responds to the need to further differentiate counterpublics in the regional context in order to do justice to the complexities of power structures creating subordinated positions. To introduce this relation empirically, I will give the example of locality and class hereafter. Departing from the framework of the public sphere within Matrices of Domination, I quote Amany Ltifi, a 24-year-old activist from Sidi Bouzid, who sees the capitalist system as the main cause of her oppression:

“I see for example that men and women are suffering on the same level with regards to the state. Here I speak from the perspective of class struggle. The day that the men will be liberated, the women will be liberated as well. Nevertheless, women suffer from a double colonization: first within the family in the region, and second from the nation as a whole” (Amany Ltifi, Sidi Bouzid, April 2014).

Ltifi points to a “double” oppression: she mentions the family situated within the region on one hand, and the state on the other. Weaving together the family and their locality points to the importance of regional disparities in internal family structures. The state appears here as a producer of marginalized localities. Ltifi thus sees how women and men [of her region] suffer from the state’s economic oppression and believes that ending this oppression will alter norms conveyed within the family as well. The specific feeling of oppression related to locality mirrors a systematic marginalization.

Amany Ltifi has clarified in the interview that she understands her activism within the broader framework of an anti-capitalist class struggle. Adding to that, she elaborates on the patriarchal structures affecting her activism, explaining that she is not happy with the situation and that her region offers almost no spaces for women, claiming that she would be the only woman in the meetings with her comrades from the workers party and the UDC. At the same time, she discusses how she empowers her female friends to take up a more active role in politics, demonstrations or their lives in general, and communicates this through social networks (see Interview Ameni Ltifi, Sidi Bouzid, April 2014, p.9 f.).

Her activism can be situated within the differentiation of counterpublics as laid out by Fraser, whereby “for some less privileged women, access to public life came through participation in supporting roles in male-dominated, working class protest activities. Still other women found public outlets in street protests and parades” (Fraser, 1992, p. 61). This understanding is problematic on the following grounds: Ltifi is not only engaging in a “supportive role” but leads marches herself and explains that she would often also act as a mediator, based on her experiences acquired during various demonstrations. Furthermore, she claims to be asked her opinion on different issues within the counterpublic owing to her actions therein. The workers movement constitutes a space of participation for her, and she participates actively within this counterpublic.

In light of this introductory illustration of the intersection between empirical findings and methodological and theoretical considerations, I will now turn to the part of the analysis presenting different women’s counterpublics encountering patriarchal power structures that I situate in the three dimensions of the public sphere: the structural, the representational and the interactional. In the following, I will provide an analysis according to several dimensions of the public sphere, their interaction with power and a closer examination of the relation between the hegemonic domain of power and counterpublic spheres for the period under investigation from 2011 until 2014.