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Market Logics and Moral Economies During Tunisia's Shortages Crisis

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Between 2021 and 2024, Tunisia experienced shortages across a range of foodstuffs, including flour, sugar, milk, rice, and coffee. Despite warnings to the contrary, these shortages did not result in the social unrest predicted by the bread riot thesis. To explain this empirical anomaly, this MECAM paper considers how these shortages were felt, negotiated, and made sense of in the everyday.

- Tunisians, while cognisant of food shortages as an expression of the failures of the national and international political economy, authored a range of local strategies to lessen the accompanying effects and redistribute goods.
- Shortages changed Tunisians' experience of economic exchange in both time and space. They were perceived to have deepened socio-spatial inequalities at the national, regional, and local level, leaving the poor most vulnerable to the maldistribution of foodstuffs. Shortages also produced a sense of time as both sped up – supply could not keep up with demand – and slowed down – customers spent their days queuing and waiting for deliveries.
- At the level of the neighbourhood, shortages were negotiated through a moral economy of supply, distribution, and consumption, combining ideas of market rationality with ethical justifications. In both recognising hierarchies of need among neighbourhood residents and the market logics of price and profit, customers and shopkeepers alike articulated local understandings of how food markets should operate in times of scarcity.

CONTEXT

Shortages in Tunisia have not resulted in the overt politics of bread riots. Nevertheless, citizens made ethical claims regarding the just distribution of goods. While this does not preclude overt political unrest in the future, it suggests that the bread riot thesis, with its prioritising of claim-making against the state, has overlooked the market as an arena of social intervention.



PERFORMING SHORTAGES

Mounir was proud of his grocery shop. Located in the centre of the popular Tunis neighbourhood of Cité Sfar, its tall shelves were usually well-stocked with goods.¹ Mounir was also a genial proprietor. Against the background hum of his old television, showing a rolling selection of football games, Tunisian soap operas, and religious programs, Mounir was keen to share in the everyday gossip, woes, and achievements of his regular customers. In the years between 2021 and 2024, the rhythm of everyday life in the neighbourhood had been joined by a discordant counterpoint. Cité Sfar, like all of Tunisia, had experienced extended and overlapping food shortages, brought on by combined domestic and international pressures and crises. At times, flour, sugar, milk, rice, and coffee had all been hard – if not impossible – to source, and Mounir often struggled to stock his shop.

For many mornings I had shared the same exchange with Mounir; after collecting my daily supplies I would venture a question to which I suspected the answer would be a negative: “What’s the news regarding milk?” Mounir would reply with a sigh and shrug, “no supplies today, *inshallah* tomorrow. Come to the shop early!” Sometimes, sensitive to being the bearer of bad news, Mounir proffered a gag to lighten the mood, “try the other shop ... or Ukraine!”; or bemoaned the conditions of the country: “What is this country? No sugar, but the wealthy still receive sweeteners.”

One morning, already assuming the answer Mounir would give and in a rush to start my day, I neglected to trouble him with my usual enquiry. As I went to pay, Mounir, uncharacteristically, asked me to hand over my bag. Somewhat puzzled, I watched as he crouched behind the counter and, out of view, bundle something into it, before handing the bag back and, with a conspiratorial wink, whispering “our secret.” Leaving the shop, I felt the satisfying weight of two sought-after cartons of milk.

Though Mounir’s acting out of this illicit transaction was partly done for comedic effect, our exchange elucidated the socio-economic dynamics of Tunisia’s food shortages and was revealing of how it performed these shortages as an economic relationship that is locally felt, negotiated, and made knowable. If shortages tend to be theorised as an economic exception – a moment of state absence and market failure – this MECAM paper considers how shortages, and their performance in the everyday, both exceeded and informed state regulations and market rationality.

BEYOND THE BREAD RIOT THESIS

Beginning in the late 1970s, North Africa witnessed incidents of “bread riots” precipitated by the removal of food subsidies and price hikes. Following the restructuring of welfare models along lines stipulated by the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) and World Bank’s structural adjustment programmes, Egypt (1977), Morocco (1981), Tunisia (1984), and Algeria (1988) all faced steeply rising prices for food staples. As a consequence, all experienced significant street protests and riots.

The dominant explanatory framework for these protests has followed the bread riot thesis, which posits that protest is a reflection of the breakdown in the “social pact” between rulers and citizens. If, in other times, loyalty and acquiescence are bought via welfare provision, most commonly – and symbolically – through subsidies on bread, when these subsidies are removed the chance of social unrest and protest increases. In short, “economic trauma brings political drama” (Yom 2020: 210).

Since E. P. Thompson’s (1971) discussion of eighteenth-century food riots (see also, Hossain and Kalita 2014), the concept of the “moral economy” has been used to analyse and explain citizens’ responses to related shortages. Nuancing the bread riot thesis, a

¹ To protect the identity of my interlocutors, I have used pseudonyms for both the neighbourhood (Cité Sfar) where this research was carried out and all interviewees. The research draws on ten interviews, as well as many informal conversations, carried out in the winter of 2023 and spring of 2024. All the quotations have been translated from Tunisian spoken Arabic into English by the author himself.

moral economy approach expands the ambit of moral claims, market interventions, and political demands that citizens articulate in response to food shortages. Rather than a direct causal relation between market pressures and sociopolitical upheaval, a moral economy approach demonstrates that markets themselves are sites of political struggle and social intervention. Market economies never solely function through the “invisible hand” of economic calculus, but combine market worth and moral values (Stark 2009). As José Ciro Martínez (2022) argues in his study of bread subsidies in Jordan, basic food subsidies do more than simply sate the people’s political appetite; they are embedded in a complex field of socio-economic meanings, expectations, and needs.

EXPLAINING TUNISIA’S FOOD SHORTAGES

Since 2021, food shortages have been the subject of intense public debate, with Tunisia’s radio talk shows regularly discussing the multiple reasons for, and potential pathways out of, these challenging circumstances. International commentators have explained Tunisia’s food shortages in terms of the combined effect of consecutive poor harvests brought on by climate change and Tunisia’s weak foreign currency reserves and indebted state-owned enterprises (Diwan, Alaya, and Meddeb 2024; World Bank 2022). Meanwhile, my interlocutors understood supply chain disruption as a “structural” problem that had “accumulated over many years” (Interview 11 February 2024b), one “manufactured” by “lobbyists and wholesalers” (Interview 24 April 2024). On top of viewing them as the result of long-term structural failings and corruption, they indexed such shortages in terms of a roll call of recent global crises that exceeded the Tunisian state, including climate breakdown, the COVID-19 pandemic, and war in Ukraine and Gaza. As a result, “[while] Tunisia had once been the breadbasket of Rome, now it can’t feed its own people” (Interview 12 April 2024).

Despite the severity of Tunisia’s current shortages being unique in the country’s modern history, the supply of staple foods has long been an object of governmental concern, intervention, and management. Since 1970, subsidies have been administered through the Caisse Générale de Compensation (C.G.C.), which sets the price of four basic food groups (wheat, vegetable oils, milk, and sugar), compensating domestic suppliers the difference with world market prices. Despite attempts since the 1980s by the IMF and World Bank to reform the C.G.C. and phase out subsidies (Chandoul 2017: 4–5), Tunisia has retained its subsidy regime – which cost the state 7.2 per cent of gross domestic product in 2023.

Politically, President Kais Saied framed shortages in terms of an elite / the people binary, blaming a business class who benefits from market instability, and declaring a “war” against “monopolists and speculators” (MEMO 2023). Saied’s comments reflected wider public anxieties around a wholesaler class and shady “lobbyists” (Interview 26 April 2024a), who were suspected of taking advantage of shortages for their own economic gain.

CITÉ SFAR, THE UNEVEN SPACE-TIME OF SHORTAGES, AND ECONOMIC AGENCY

The popular neighbourhood of Cité Sfar held a typical range of shops: three bakeries (one state, two private), two grocery shops, a café, two fast-food restaurants, and a *pâtisserie*. Like elsewhere in the capital, the owners, shopkeepers, and workers of Cité Sfar hailed from outside Tunis, with the majority from the southern town of Tataouine, but also Matmata, Gafsa, Gabes, and Beja. Since at least the 1960s, migrant labour from the south has been the backbone of Tunis’ shopkeeper class, with jobs and premises passed down via southern kin, familial, and business networks.

The residents and workers of Cité Sfar experienced shortages in terms of a changing distribution of goods in both space and time. Shortages were perceived as having deepened an uneven geography of supply and demand that left some regions, neighbourhoods, and

groups more vulnerable than others. At the national level, these shortages were seen by my interlocutors to follow Tunisia's historic core-periphery relations, which led to the north of the country being economically prioritised: "When I return home to Tataouine I take sugar with me ... interior regions have worse shortages than here" (Interview 12 April 2024). At the district level, meanwhile, it was suspected that more affluent neighbourhoods were both the first to receive goods and financially placed to take advantage of the black market. Finally, at the neighbourhood level, people expressed frustration at how goods were distributed between different shops and constituencies: "There's milk in the cafés but not in the grocery shop. A baby cannot drink a black coffee!" (Interview 26 April 2024b). At each spatial scale, shortages were understood to follow – but also deepen – pre-existing supply and distributive inequalities, and did not represent a simple break with previous forms of market organisation or state regulation.

Alongside reproducing a particular geography of exchange, shortages also transformed the time of exchange and consumption in the neighbourhood. Tunisia was perceived as having become a time-consuming "country of queues," requiring citizens to keep a sense of "patience" and creating a general feeling of "exhaustion" (interview 26 April 2024b). Bakers closed early after using up their supplies, grocers saw commodities "enter and exit in one morning" (Interview 14 April 2024), and a shopkeeper noted "I sleep with my phone on" in case of a "4 am delivery" (Interview 24 April 2024).

Finally, for shopkeepers, shortages also reduced their sense of economic agency. "You buy expensively and reduce your profit margin," the *pâtisserie* baker noted, "or you say to yourself I won't buy something, and your whole world stops" (Interview 26 April 2024a). Similarly, Marwa, who ran a small but highly popular *melawi* (Tunisian flatbread) shop, described the extra physical and emotional labour that she expended sourcing flour in times of shortage:

I go out first thing in the morning to look for semolina. Failing that, there are people called *dawarjiyya* [pedlars], who have a car and supply semolina, selling it to you at a fanciful price; but I have to buy it to work. Especially over Ramadan and Eid I would take a small amount of flour from them. (Interview 14 April 2024)

Shortages thus both narrowed opportunities for economic activity and simultaneously extended the working day, adding to it the arduous – and gendered – extra labour of sourcing basic food stuffs.

A MORAL ECONOMY OF SHORTAGES?

To counter shortages, citizens drew on a range of strategies that helped redistribute and save up goods. Stockpiling, networks of favours and credit lines, the informal transportation of items, and recourse to parallel economy were all ways to lessen the effects of shortages. The local negotiation of shortages occurred via the mixing of market rationality and moral claims: shopkeepers and neighbourhood residents both recognised, and claimed to be directed by, the market calculus of price and profit while simultaneously making moral statements regarding how supply chains and food markets should function. Shortages were, accordingly, often discussed in terms of an ethic of fair distribution that was ordered by perceptions of need. "The grocer," one resident approvingly noted, "he sells to locals [*wilad al-huma*] and to women with young children, he works with a conscience and makes sure everyone gets their share" (Interview 26 April 2024b). Similarly, the neighbourhood baker admitted he sometimes sold small quantities of flour to customers so they might "make some bread at home" (Interview 12 April 2024).

Shortages also animated folk memories of saving, reusing, and scrimping. The Amazigh practice of *al-'uwla* – stockpiling and regulating consumption in light of seasonal variations

and yearly yields – was cited as informing contemporary responses to food shortages (Al-Yafrani 2022), while Sumaya, a local café worker, remarked: “It’s *haram* to waste bread; I even collect crumbs from the dinner table for tomorrow’s meal” (Interview 13 April 2024). Residents of Cité Sfar devised ways to manage shortages for their individual and collective benefit, shaping a moral economy of distribution and consumption based on a hierarchy of need and ethic of abstemiousness.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to romanticise these practices, or to view them through the lens of non-capitalist forms of collective economic activity. As much as shortages animated modes of collective resource-sharing, they were also a source of conflict, competition, and friction that sharpened class hierarchies and distinctions within the neighbourhood. Speaking to Cité Sfar’s residents, it became clear that attributing blame for shortages was not a static thing but flowed in varying directions, pooling at different points in the supply chain. Shortages were described as like a “cake where some take a larger slice” (Interview 9 March 2024), with the Grain Board, wholesalers and suppliers, shop owners, and clients all suspected of playing the economy of shortages for their own gain.

The moral economy of need described above easily melded with the perceived existence of preferential treatment and networks of favour. “He has everything in his shop,” one resident complained of a local shopkeeper, “but he only sells to regular customers” (Interview 26 April 2024b). Similarly, customers suspected certain shopkeepers of unscrupulously “taking advantage” of shortages by putting up prices or selling goods on the black market.

Shopkeepers themselves pointed to the phenomenon of “stockpiling” as a key driver of the crisis, and when I asked one about the reasons behind the experienced shortages he stated the following:

Shortages are a manufactured crisis. In other neighbourhoods you will find basic goods, but in Cité Sfar, which is an overcrowded, popular neighbourhood, there is a lack of trust that goods will be in the shops next week, so people always buy more than they need. (Interview 24 April 2024)

Similarly, other shopkeepers spoken with noted their powerlessness in the face of customer demand: “All the neighbours speak among themselves ... when they hear there’s a certain good in a shop the telephone network lights up ... the whole family goes to the shops!” (Interview 14 April 2024a). While sympathetic to the pressures experienced by their customers, these interlocutors noted how their actions were ultimately driven by “economic necessity” (Interview 26 April 2024a). The baker who occasionally supplied flour to desperate customers admitted, for instance, that there was a “limit” to his altruism and that Tunisia’s food system operated by the “logic of the market, like in any country in the world” (Interview 12 April 2024).

Without wishing to underplay the international and national economic contradictions that produced and sustained Tunisia’s food crisis, nor President Saïed’s ability to obfuscate responsibility for the country’s shortages, it is at the localised scale of the neighbourhood that shortages were first experienced by its residents. The everyday accusations, counterclaims, and justifications that shortages precipitated in Cité Sfar combined the logics of the market and moral economy. Moral claims were used to admonish the apparent excesses of market speculation and, conversely, the logic of the market was used to reign in moral arguments. In such ways, competing everyday discourses around shortages reshaped the market and expectations regarding how it should ensure the supply, distribution, and consumption of basic foodstuffs.

Shortages are not simply a failure of the balance of market mechanisms and state regulations but caught up in, and work to renegotiate, ethico-economic relations

between producers, suppliers, and consumers. While a moral economy may appear fixed, unchanging, and rooted in tradition, as the case of Cité Sfar explicates, it is ultimately a malleable and negotiable thing. For instance, the residents and workers of Cité Sfar placed ethical stress on the *distribution*, rather than the *supply*, of goods, suggesting their changing relationship to food systems in Tunisia. Further research is hence now needed to explain how the moral economy of shortages reflects the current conjuncture and its combined crises of food, climate, and finance.

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INTERVIEWS

11 February 2024a	Café attendant
11 February 2024b	Journalist
12 February 2024	Café attendant
6 March 2024	Grocer
12 April 2024	Baker
14 April 2024a	Fast-food restaurant owner
14 April 2024b	Baker
24 April 2024	Grocer
26 April 2024a	<i>Pâtisserie</i> chef
26 April 2024b	Housekeeper



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