

**Benhafaiedh, Abdelwahab**

Applied Social Science Forum (ASSF), 4, rue de Damas, Tunis, Tunisie

emails: a.benhafaiedh@assforum.org

website: www.assforum.org

two most recent publications:

Ben Hafaiedh, Abdelwahab & Safi ,R. (2023). *Profils et trajectoires des migrants tunisiens de retour*, Observatoire National de Migration. Tunis (Tunisia)

Ben Hafaiedh, Abdelwahab :*The Tunisian Labor Market in an Era of Transition* “ M.

Boughzala (& al)- Oxford University Press 2019

**Michalak, Laurence.**

University of California, Berkeley (ret)

6425 Irwin Court, Oakland CA 94609

otis@berkeley.edu

two most recent publications:

Michalak, Laurence (2022). Legal and Illegal Sex Work in Tunisia: Before and After the 2010-2011 Revolution. In Foster, Angel and Wynn, L (eds), *Sex in the Middle East and North Africa*, Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 211-229

Michalak, Laurence (2021). Street Vendors in Tunisia: Encountering the Informal Economy. In Charmes, J. (ed.), *Research Handbook on Development and the Informal Economy* , Cheltenham (U.K.): Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 240-262

SOCIAL CLASS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN A NORTH AFRICAN SETTING:  
ANALYZING THE APPLICATIONS OF RETURNING MIGRANTS FOR API  
PROJECTS IN TUNISIA

**ENGLISH ABSTRACT:** This article suggests that the Ibadhite tradition (a minority stream in Sunni Islam present in southeastern Tunisia) has a central ethic that positively values commerce and that this can be seen in the economic projects developed by returning Tunisian migrants, especially from Southeastern Tunisia. We begin by discussing the applicability of European concepts of class analysis in non-Western settings such as the MENA region, specifically Tunisia. Regarding class formation, we suggest that at independence in 1956 Tunisia was a relatively egalitarian society based on rank, but since then Tunisia has experienced increasing inequality, class formation, and class consciousness. Our approach is inspired by Max Weber's ideas about the economic role of religion, including his argument that Islam was not conducive to capitalism and industrialization. Revisiting Weber, we suggest that Islam has a central commercial ethic and that Ibadite Islam in particular has been conducive to commerce. We support this argument with data from the Tunisia-HIMS (2021) study of Tunisian returned migrants and their economic projects, showing that return migrants from Southeast Tunisia, which includes the primarily Ibadite Island of Djerba, propose a high percentage of commerce projects. We also discuss the concept of entrepreneurship and barriers to the successful implementation of returned migrant projects

**FRENCH ABSTRACT:** Cet article suggère que la tradition ibadite (courant minoritaire de l'islam sunnite présent dans le sud-est de la Tunisie) a une éthique centrale qui valorise positivement le commerce et que cela se voit dans les projets économiques développés par les migrants tunisiens de retour en Tunisie. Nous suggérons qu'avec l'indépendance (1956), la Tunisie était une société relativement égalitaire basée sur le rang, mais depuis lors, le pays a connu une augmentation des inégalités, de la formation de classe et de la conscience de classe. Notre approche s'inspire des idées de Max Weber sur le rôle économique de la religion. En revisitant Weber, nous suggérons que l'islam a une éthique commerciale centrale et que l'islam ibadite, en particulier, a été propice au commerce.

Nous soutenons cet argument avec les données de l'étude Tunisia-HIMS (2021) sur les migrants de retour tunisiens et leurs projets économiques, montrant que les migrants de retour du sud-est de la Tunisie, qui comprend l'île principalement ibadite de Djerba, proposent un pourcentage élevé de projets commerciaux. Nous discutons également du concept d'entrepreneuriat et des obstacles à la mise en œuvre réussie des projets de migrants de retour

Keywords in alphabetical order: *commerce, entrepreneurship, Islam, Max Weber, migration, Protestant Ethic*

## INTRODUCTION

Drawing on the approach of Max Weber, this article suggests that some cultural traditions (such as *Ibadism*) favor more investment in trade and services to the detriment of industry. Beyond the purely cultural determinants, this choice is also explained by the patrimonial (or neo-patrimonial) nature of power and the weak development of the rational legitimacy of the State, considered by Weber as one of the pillars of modern bureaucracy. In this context, some varieties of Islamic Culture consider trade and services as a means of creating wealth, while avoiding too much interference from the state, the sole owner of goods. (*Mulk*). Through time management, the relationship to work and to grain (*Rizk*), the behavior of the Djerbian Ibadi does not differ from that of the Protestant described by M.Weber. In that sense, we can assume that Islam has a central ethic that places a positive value on commerce , and that this can be seen in the high percentage of commercial and services projects developed by returning Tunisian migrants, especially Ibadi migrants from Southeastern Tunisia, who can be considered part of an entrepreneurial Middle Class.

The political context, including the patrimonial character of the state, can be seen as an additional factor in understanding Weber's analysis of Islam and the economy. Weber argued that the patrimonial state, characterized by personalized and non-rational forms of authority, often found in traditional societies, could hinder the development of modern capitalist economic systems. In the case of Islamic societies, Weber noted the prevalence of patrimonial states where political power and economic resources were often concentrated in the hands of rulers or ruling elites. This concentration of power and resources could limit opportunities for economic entrepreneurship and hinder the emergence of a vibrant capitalist economy.

Weber believed that a rational-legal bureaucracy, which he saw as a characteristic of modern capitalist societies, was necessary to provide a predictable and rule-based

environment for economic activities. However, in the absence of such bureaucratic institutions and the prevalence of patrimonial rule, economic activities in Islamic societies might be subject to arbitrary decisions, favoritism, and limited legal protections. Therefore, the patrimonial character of the state, along with other cultural, religious, and institutional factors, can contribute to explaining Weber's analysis of the economic development in Islamic societies and their divergence from the Protestant-influenced regions where capitalism flourished.

In this article, we offer a brief account of the evolution of Tunisia from an egalitarian society based on rank to a society with social classes and class consciousness. We apply the approach of Max Weber in identifying a central ethic in Islam, arguing that there is a central commercial ethic in Islam and particularly in Ibadi Islam (a minority stream in Sunni Islam present in southeastern Tunisia). We support this argument with data from a recent survey, showing a strong tendency for Tunisian migrants to propose commercial projects, especially migrants from the Southeast of Tunisia with a high Ibadi population. We argue that religion is a significant variable for return migrant entrepreneurship and, like Weber, we acknowledge that there are other important variables as well. We conclude by returning to the topic of class differences and class consciousness and suggesting that Tunisia retains a residue of rank society.

#### HOPKINS AND THE APPLICABILITY OF CLASS ANALYSIS IN TUNISIA

Since the concepts of class and entrepreneurship which are central to our argument were developed by European social scientists for the study of Europe, an appropriate place to begin is with the question of to what extent can European concepts such as class, class struggle, class consciousness and entrepreneurship be usefully applied in non-European settings such as the MENA region—in this case, in Tunisia. Nicholas Hopkins usefully addressed the question of class development in Tunisia, basing his analysis on field research in the large Tunisian town of Testour in the 1970s (Hopkins 1977 ).

At a time when some scholars were attempting to apply socialist theory in Middle

Eastern settings in an uncritically doctrinaire way, Hopkins warned against “forcing human patterns into a procrustean bed,” stating that Testour at the time of his research was not--or at least not yet--a class society. The town and its hinterland had until recently been characterized by “rank,” with an emphasis on “vertical rather than horizontal links” in “a loosely knit structure held together by freely formed dyadic relationships.” Testour valued “independent work based on mutual respect.” The traditional view was that, in contrast to wage labor, it should be “effort that is rewarded” rather than “time that is bought.” Hopkins concluded that the traditional society of Testour was giving way to an “emergent” class structure, driven by a change in mode of production, increasingly characterized by mechanization, wage labor, market penetration and national integration. Horizontal links were displacing vertical links indicating the beginnings of class formation and class consciousness. Hopkins cautioned that his comments were specific to Testour and that more research was needed to see to what extent social phenomena in Testour could be generalized to other parts of Tunisia or to the broader MENA region (Hopkins 1977).

A rank-based society, as described by Hopkins, is the sum of many one-on-one relationships or dyads in which one person is either superordinate, equal, or subordinate to a second person. Status in such a society can be based on or inclusive of other variables besides wealth. We offer as another example of a rank-based society traditional Thailand, where people greet each other with a gesture called a “wai,” holding one’s joined palms hands higher or lower depending on one’s status relative to the person being greeted; in some cases (as with children) greetings are not given or are not returned, and in some cases one can joke or insult by exaggerating greetings (David Trocki, personal communication). In contrast with a rank-based society, a class-based society is more like a layer cake, in which one belongs to a horizontal layer or stratum, with an emphasis on wealth, rather than vertical relationships between layers.

#### CLASS FORMATION IN TUNISIA

In contemporary Tunisia, Hopkins’s predictions have clearly come true to a considerable extent. Tunisia was a relatively egalitarian society at independence in 1956.

Egalitarianism was an explicit part of the socialist policies of Ahmed Ben Salah, a labor leader who was given primary responsibility for economic planning by President Habib Bourguiba during the decade of the 1960s. The ruling Neo-Destour Party acknowledged socialism by changing its name in 1964 to the “Destour *Socialist* Party.” An example of the egalitarian spirit of the 1960s was that Tunisia had mostly two models of car--the Peugeot 404 pickup truck and the Renault 4L--both of them modest and practical vehicles assembled in Tunisia. Luxury cars were rare and mostly reserved for ministers and high government officials. There were few vehicles and one could usually find parking places on the main avenues of the capital city of Tunis. Consumer goods were modest. There was one main brand of shampoo—“Sunsilk”—although it came in different colors. When television was introduced in Tunisia in the late 1960s there was a single mass-produced model of television set, the “Carthage.” The country embarked on an ambitious plan to build modest and affordable public housing accessible to all of its citizens. Of course there were some differences in wealth within the population in the 1960s but in keeping with the spirit of socialism, wealth was not conspicuously displayed. After 1962, Tunisia was strongly influenced by socialism in Algeria, Tunisia’s large and petroleum-rich neighbor to the west.

In 1969, Ben Salah’s policies were repudiated by President Bourguiba. Ben Salah was imprisoned and Tunisia changed its economic policy. Beginning under Prime Minister Hedi Nouria, a banker, Tunisia turned to a policy of economic liberalization, gradually disbanding most of the socialist cooperatives and promoting private ownership of agricultural land and businesses. Wealth disparities widened and the numbers of luxury cars and spacious villas increased. Traditional “limited good” practices of hiding wealth began to give way to conspicuous consumption. In rural Tunisia, instead of hiding their wealth behind plain walls, some returning migrants began building a new kind of structure—the *balass*, or multi-story residence, sometimes ostentatiously decorated, as a testament to their success.

After Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali took power from Bourguiba in a bloodless “constitutional coup” in November 1987, differences in wealth became even greater. The president, his

family, his wife's family and their corrupt associates began amassing large fortunes. A confirmation that economic liberalism had replaced socialism came in 1988 when the dominant party, which was an instrument of the authoritarian president, dropped "socialist" from its name and renamed itself the "Democratic Constitutional Rally" (Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique, or RCD). With growing disparities in wealth came increasing class consciousness.

After the Tunisian Revolution of December 2010-January 2011 and the ouster of Ben Ali, class divisions sharpened further because of the declining economy and economic pressures on the middle classes. Another factor was the empowerment of the national labor union—the Union National des Travailleurs Tunisiens (UGTT). The UGTT had always been subservient to the ruling party, except for a brief and bloody union uprising that was suppressed in January 1978. For more than half a century, from independence to the overthrow of Ben Ali in 2011, wages had been held down. However, with the flight of Ben Ali and the abolition of the RCD in 2011 the restraints on the UGTT were gone and it became a militant defender of workers' rights. Thus the decade following the Tunisian Revolution became a period of worker-management confrontations and numerous strikes which further sharpened worker class consciousness.

The development of class differences and class consciousness in Tunisia is a complex topic to which we will return in our conclusion, but our main point here is that, in retrospect, Hopkins was clearly correct that Tunisia in the 1970s was entering a transition from an egalitarian rank-based society to one of widening disparities of wealth and growing class consciousness.

## WEBER IN AN ISLAMIC SETTING

The next part of our analysis is inspired by Max Weber's ideas about the economic role of religion. Weber is best known for famous argument that Protestant groups in Europe in the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries were motivated by a work ethic that was conducive to the development of capitalism and industrialization. Weber's great

overarching interest throughout his life was the question of why capitalism and the Industrial Revolution happened in Europe. His book on the Protestant Ethic (Weber 2009) was the first part of his answer to that question. The second part of Weber's answer, which is less known and less studied, addressed why capitalism and the Industrial Revolution did *not* occur outside Europe. In a series of works following *The Protestant Ethic* Weber attempted to explain why other major world religions—such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Ancient Christianity, Catholicism and Islam—had *not* been conducive to capitalism and industrialization.

Weber argued that Protestantism was an important factor but not the only factor in European capitalism and industrialization. For Weber, a religiously inspired work ethic was a necessary but not sufficient condition for capitalism and industrialization. Apart from religious considerations, other conditions were necessary that were lacking in non-European settings for capitalism and industrialization to take place. For example, Confucian China lacked a rational legal system and an impartial judicial bureaucracy. Another example was that predominantly Hindu India was hindered from advancing to capitalism by the caste system.

Weber addressed the question of why capitalism did not arise in the Islamic world. He held a generally negative view of Islam and critics have pointed to examples of apparently negative passages in his work. For Weber, the Prophet Mohamed was a sensual and wrathful man who displayed a tendency to withdraw from the world. For Weber, Islam developed into an Arab warrior religion, commanding its followers to engage in holy war to extract tribute from Jews and Christians until Islam should come to dominate the world. For Weber, Islam emphasized wealth from military campaigns, in contrast to the productive role played by wealth in the Puritan religion. For Weber, the economic aspect of Islam was feudal, the idea of salvation was alien, and the Islamic prohibition on gambling discouraged business. In Islam, Weber saw orgiastic and mystical elements and tendencies toward fatalism and magic which he contrasted with the scientific approach of the European Enlightenment.

One could continue with a catalogue of criticisms of Weber's understanding of Islam but, in his defense, we note that Weber was trying to understand Islam as a social system to determine why it had not given rise to capitalism and industrialization. It is likely that his research on Islam was incomplete. Islam was the last great non-Western religion to which he turned his attention. Weber had produced monographs on the other major non-Western religions but did not live to produce a monograph on Islam, leaving only scattered works. The time of Weber's research on Islam was probably 1911 to 1914, just before World War I (Schluchter<sup>xx</sup>), when Islam was popularly viewed by Europeans as an adversarial religion and when European scholarship on Islam was characterized by a negative Orientalism. Nor did Weber have access to accurate sources, since renderings of Islamic texts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were selective and distorted, often more for purposes of polemic than for understanding. Scholars of Weber have had to derive his views on Islam from scattered references.

In any case, our purpose in this article is not to criticize Weber's understanding (or misunderstanding) of Islam, but rather to take a fresh look at Islam, inspired by Weber's methodology. Weber exhorted social scientists to study social action through the meanings that individual actors attach to their own actions—advice which accords with the best traditions of contemporary social science. Especially in certain varieties of Protestantism, such as Calvinism, Weber identified a central ethic conducive to the rise of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution. We therefore ask: Is there a central ethic in Islam that is comparable to the Protestant ethic and, if so, what economic implications might such an ethic have with respect to capitalism and industrialization?

#### THE COMMERCIAL ETHIC IN ISLAM

The similarity between Ibadi ethics and Protestant ethics can be summarized through the following arguments: (a) Weber's theory of the Protestant ethic posited that the Calvinist belief in predestination led to a strong work ethic and a sense of duty towards productive labor. This work ethic, combined with the belief in the pursuit of economic success as a

sign of salvation, created a conducive environment for the emergence of capitalism in Protestant-dominated regions. By its appeal to work and gain as a form of relationship with God, Ibadism is close to the Protestant ethic. (b) Weber argued that Islamic societies, in comparison to Protestant societies, lacked the process of rationalization necessary for the development of a capitalist economy. Rationalization involves the application of systematic and rational principles to various aspects of life, including economic activities. This gap is due to structural factors: education, law and degrees of rationalization of the bureaucracy, more than to intrinsic religious values,

We argue here that the ethic of Islam—the Islamic counterpart to the Protestant ethic—is commerce. The Prophet Mohammad was a commercial figure, a merchant—an orphan boy who worked in the caravan trade, first for his uncle Abu Talib and then for a wealthy widow, Khadija, whom he later married. Mohamed was a merchant until at forty he began to receive revelations, and even thereafter he served as an administrator (*amin*) in the market. The first two rightly guided caliphs who succeeded Mohammed as temporal rulers of the Muslim community were also merchants: Abu Bakr was a cloth vendor and ‘Umar dealt in foodstuffs. To be a merchant was and is to be a respected figure in the Muslim world.

The basic sources of Islam—the Quran, the hadith and the sunna—reflect a commercial worldview and are permeated with commercial discourse. A prominent positive exemplar in the Quran is the honest merchant who gives you the weight you pay for and even a little more, in contrast to the negative exemplar of the bad merchant who cheats on weight and/or quality. Islam is filled with commercial metaphors—references to scales, bargaining and covenants. In Islam, life itself is a commercial transaction between man and God, in which man is the customer and God is the merchant.

Even in politics, the relationship to power is conceived, paradoxically, as a commercial transaction. (Bay'a), It refers to a pledge of allegiance or loyalty made by individuals to a leader or ruler. The term "Bay'a" is derived from Arabic and means "to sell" or "to give." It signifies a contract or agreement between the ruler and the subjects, in which the

subjects commit to obey and support the ruler, while the ruler promises to protect and govern them justly. Historically, Bay'a has been associated with the establishment of political authority and the transfer of power. It has been used in various contexts, ranging from the appointment of caliphs and sultans to the endorsement of religious leaders or scholars. The act of Bay'a can take different forms, such as verbal declarations, written contracts, or symbolic gestures like shaking hands or raising the hand.

At death another transaction takes place. Each of us has a cosmic balance sheet kept by two angels. One angel at our right shoulder notes down our good deeds and another angel at our left shoulder notes down the bad. At the Last Judgment, God will balance the ledger. If the good outweighs the bad, you are paid with paradise, but if the bad outweighs the good, you are paid with hell. The Last Judgment is presided by God and conducted according to double-entry book-keeping with angelic accountants. Life and death are commercial phenomena, the afterlife is a commodity, and the world is a marketplace. The ethic of Islam is commerce.

#### RUSSELL STONE: IBADI ISLAM AS AN ANALOG TO CALVINIST PROTESTANTISM

Without falling into a culturalist approach, some studies devoted to the study of entrepreneurship in Tunisia emphasize the impact of values (Smaoui, S. & Mzoughi, N. 2016), culture (Baccouche & Dridi 2019) or of cultural determinants that favor, or not, business creation in the Tunisian context (Letaief 2013). Local subcultures have, however, rarely been considered, except by social-cultural anthropologists fascinated by the richness of the local culture.

In 1974 sociologist Russell Stone published an article placing himself in the tradition of scholars who attempt to find “other religious groups for which [Weber’s] theory is valid, in other parts of the world.” He did so by “positing a relationship between religious ethic and capitalism among a group of merchants in Tunisia who are members of a distinct religious sect within Islam.” Stone is referring here to the Ibadite Muslim merchants of the Island of Djerba who at one time operated small retail grocery stores throughout

Tunisia. Ibadism is a school of Islam which emerged 60 years after the death of the Prophet Mohammad in 632 AD over questions of succession. Ibadies today are the largest denomination in Oman, with smaller concentrations in Zanzibar, the Mزاب in Algeria, the Nafusa Mountains in Libya, and the Island of Djerba in Tunisia.

Djerbians typically work in pairs, so that one brother runs a store somewhere on the mainland of Tunisia while the other remains with his family in Djerba. They rotate periodically, usually once a year, so that each brother spends every other year away from his family. Stone estimated that at the time of his research Djerbians accounted for a bit less than half of all small retail shopkeepers in Tunisia. At one time Djerbians had accounted for most of the small general stores in Tunisia, but in the 1960s Ahmed Ben Salah disrupted their livelihood by forcing private retail commerce into socialist commercial cooperatives. Stone compared the Djerbians to other commercial outsider groups in the world, such as Greeks, Armenians, Chinese, Jews and others. He provides an accurate description of Djerbian social and economic patterns and their work ethic, suggesting that they play a role comparable to the role that Weber attributed to Calvinists.

We agree with Stone that Djerbians exhibit a strong work ethic that is comparable to the Protestant Ethic in important ways. However, the Djerbian ethic is not one of capitalism. Like the ethic of Islam in general, the Djerbian Ibadite ethic is specific to commerce. Economy is conventionally divided into production, distribution and consumption. As such, commerce is only one part of the economy, and not the most important part at that. Commerce, which comes under distribution, is important but there can be no commerce without production. Production is important for there to be goods to sell, and production was the most important aspect of the economy in the Industrial Revolution in Europe. The Industrial Revolution was mainly about industry, and it was advances in the production of goods such as textiles, tools and machines that drove capitalism. .

Djerba is an ecologically marginal island that lacks natural resources, with an economy characterized by handicrafts but no industry and low level subsistence agriculture. It was no doubt the marginality of Djerba that led to the practice of commercial emigration in

the first place. Djerba is not comparable to Northern Europe during the rise of capitalism. Not only is Djerba without industry, but it is not even the locus of Djerbian commercial activity, since the Djerbian shopkeepers work on the mainland.

Djerba lacks the preconditions for capitalism. In the decades since the ouster of Ben Salah, some Djerbians have returned to commerce but others have diversified and accumulated substantial amounts of investment capital. The existence of a tradition of migration to the Tunisian mainland has also meant that Djerbians have figured disproportionately among the many Tunisians who migrated to Europe (and elsewhere) to take advantage of employment opportunities abroad, especially during the post-WWII period of European rebuilding and prosperity (Simon). Djerbians, who were once among the poorest people in Tunisia, now make up a significant part of Tunisia's middle class.

#### MIGRANT PROJECTS AND COMMERCE IN THE 2021 TUNISIA-HIMS SURVEY.

In this part of the article we provide evidence of an ethos of commerce among Ibadi Djerbians, using data from the HIMS (2021) study of Tunisian returned migrants and their economic projects, showing that return migrants from the Governorship of Medenine, which includes the primarily Ibadite Island of Djerba, propose a high percentage of projects in the category of commerce, compared with other kinds of projects and relative to migrants from other regions of Tunisia.

The TUNISIA-HIMS survey of international migration is part of a larger Households International Migration Survey in the Mediterranean project (MED-HIMS) conducted in Tunisia by the National Observatory of Migration (ONM) and the National Institute of Statistics (INS) with the support of the International Center for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) and financing from the European Union. This is the first survey of international migration in Tunisia to cover the entire country. From July 2020 to March 2021 the project conducted the project conducted 35,000 household in-depth interviews with both residents and migrants abroad, including both current migrants and those who have migrated before. The objectives of the survey were to strengthen the information system on migration in Tunisia; to develop, implement and monitor

migration strategies; and to study the causes, determinants, dynamics and consequences of international migration and the relationship between migration and development.

**Table:** Tunisian return migrants and investment by activity and region of residence

	Agriculture	Industry	Construction	Commerce	Restaurants-Cafes	Other Services	TOTAL
Greater Tunis	10.6%	14.9%	8.9%	43.6%	17.0%	4.9%	100%
Northeast	29.6%	0.0%	16.5%	11.3%	5.5%	37.1%	100%
Northwest	1.6%	0.5%	27.8%	12.8%	34.1%	23.2%	100%
Centereast	0.0%	20.7%	24.1%	20.7%	24.9%	9.5%	100%
Centerwest	0.0%	18.6%	13.7%	19.8%	43.8%	4.1%	100%
Southeast	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100%
Southwest	5.0%	11.4%	17.4%	22.0%	31.3%	12.9%	100%
TOTAL	5.0%	11.4%	17.4%	21.9%	31.3%	12.9%	100%

Source: Benhafaiedh (A) & Safi (R): 2023

The Tunisia-HIMS survey reveals a number of important findings, but we will go directly to findings that relate to the argument of our article. The Table divides return migrant projects into six categories. The overall distribution of the kinds of projects in order of frequency is: (1) Restaurant-Café 31.3%, (2) Commerce 21.9%. (3) Construction 17.4%, (4) Other Services 12.9%, (5) Industry 11.4%, and (6) Agriculture 5%.

Significant differences in migrant preferences emerge when we look at the distribution by region of residence. Each region has a different profile. Restaurant-Café is the most popular category overall, accounting for about a third of the projects (31/3%) and is the most popular category in four of the seven regions of Tunisia. The most frequent project in the Northeast is Other Services (37.1%). Commerce is the most popular project for the remaining two regions of Tunisia, accounting for 43.5% of the projects of migrants in the Greater Tunis area.

The most striking statistic in the Table is that 100% of the sample of migrants from Southeast Tunisia opted for commercial projects. We suggest that the commercial ethic of the Ibadite Djerbians is the main factor. Even Tunisians of Djerbian origin who have settled in other parts of Tunisia for the most part enter commerce, services and finance, and rarely enter industry, agriculture and other non-commercial activities. Djerbians are the main ethnic group of the Governorship of Medenine, which in turn makes up 74% of the regional sample of the Southeastern region. However, the Southeast also includes non-Djerbians, and we acknowledge that there are no doubt regional factors besides the ethic of Ibadism that also contribute to this strong preference for commerce.

Commerce is the main interest of returning migrants in the Southeast partly because that is the traditional activity of the area and also because there are no other significant opportunities. There are no opportunities for projects in industry because industries are synergistic and tend to locate where there are other industries (Ben Cheikh 2102); the only existing industry in the Southeast is phosphate refining which has been severely hit by strikes and has declined in recent years. The restaurants/cafes category is not promising because it is closely related to tourism, which has in the past been an important in the Southeast, but tourism has been hard hit by terrorism scares and Coronavirus pandemic, and the tourism sector in Djerba was overbuilt, with the consequence many of the hotels and restaurants of the region have closed or are only open for part of the year. As for agriculture, this is a pre-Saharan area which is ecologically marginal and where water is scarce. Commerce is the category of choice partly by default.

There is a strong correlation to support our hypothesis about the propensity of Ibadites to engage in commerce. This does not mean that all the migrants from Djerba or from Medenine Governorship who enter commerce are devout Ibadites. Weber pointed out that in the case of the Protestant Ethic, those who exhibited this ethic (including Benjamin Franklin) were not necessarily practicing Protestants; rather, capitalism for Weber was a kind of secular religion with Protestantism accounting for the origin of the ethic. Similarly, commerce can be viewed as the secular religion for Djerbians. We also note that among Tunisian migrants as a whole, Industry and Agriculture, the two kinds of endeavor that most accord with productive activity, are the two least popular categories (at 11.4% and 5%, respectively). This is not a profile of activities that suggests an industrial Revolution.

## ENTREPRENEURSHIP

We began by discussing the applicability of European categories of social class to non-European settings. Another term of European origin that is frequently used in analyzing non-European areas, and especially in migration studies, is “entrepreneurship.” Using the simplest definition, an “entrepreneur” is a person who sets up a business, but the term comes with ideological baggage. Entrepreneurship is a central value in capitalism such that many conservative economists tend to describe entrepreneurship using positive terms such as “innovation,” “creativity,” “vision,” “energy,” “resilience,” “resourcefulness” and “passion.” The first well-known scholar of entrepreneurship was Joseph Schumpeter, who wrote approvingly that the entrepreneur helps the economy by playing a role of “creative destruction,” replacing outmoded practices with newer and more efficient approaches (Schumpeter 1947).

Just as we should be careful about uncritically applying class analysis to the MENA region, we should also be cautious with the concept of entrepreneurship, which is often used loosely in the scholarly literature on return migration. This is especially true in cases where migrants have low levels of capitalization and are often part of the informal sector, patching together low-level jobs at the economic margins. For example, there is

not much that is innovative, creative or noble about a return migrant whose small business is to sell used clothes from a plastic bale on the street, running from the police or paying them bribes to keep them from confiscating his goods.

Cassarino brings greater precision to the concept of entrepreneurship by distinguishing among three degrees of returned migrant entrepreneurship: (1) employers, (2) independent workers in the liberal professions, and (3) other independent workers. In a study of over 700 Tunisian returned migrants between 2006 and 2012, Cassarino found that 16% of returned migrant “entrepreneurs” in his sample worked in the informal sector (presumably in low level jobs) (Cassarino 2015).

Similarly, in a study in Jendouba Province in Northwestern Tunisia in the late 1980s, Michalak offered a four-level typology of returned migrants with implied levels of entrepreneurship. The highest level is the *batron* (“super-émigré”) with ample capital who meets the subsistence needs of his family and also employs workers. The two middle levels are the *ayache* (“celui qui arrive a se faire vivre”) and the *mitqa’ad* (“le retraite”). The fourth and lowest level is the *mzammarr* (“malchanceux”) who returns with no capital or loses his capital in an unsuccessful enterprise and cannot meet his subsistence needs, becoming dependent on others--usually family (Michalak 1997).

## CONCLUSION: CLASS, RANK AND AN INCIDENT ON A BRIDGE

We conclude by returning to the issue of social class in Tunisia as seen through an incident witnessed by one of the authors. In northwestern Tunisia just west of Bou Salem there was once a narrow bridge (it has since been widened) where traffic could only cross in one direction at a time. Priority went to the first vehicle to start across the bridge. Drivers coming from the other direction would have to pull over and wait until the bridge was clear before starting across. One day an elderly man on a donkey started across the bridge. He had gone only a short distance onto the bridge when a man in a black Mercedes entered the bridge from the other direction, drove across the bridge, pulled up in front of the man on the donkey, and honked his horn impatiently for the man on the

donkey to turn back or move aside and let the man in the fancy car cross. Instead of retreating, the man on the donkey dismounted, walked up to the car, raised the stick he was using to prod his donkey, and brought it down hard on the hood of the car. Visibly alarmed at the prospect of damage to the finish of his shiny car, the driver immediately began backing up, gesturing to the drivers behind him to do the same. The line of cars backed up and the man on the donkey continued across the bridge and went on his way.

Our interpretation of this incident is that in this dyadic confrontation the man on the donkey successfully asserted egalitarian principles from rank-based society, refusing to accept subordinate status based on wealth and class. The man on the donkey had priority over the man in the Mercedes, even though the Mercedes driver was of a higher class, because the donkey rider had entered the bridge first, and he successfully imposed his priority. The man on the donkey was still the poorer of the two after they had both crossed the bridge and gone on their respective ways, but he had demonstrated that wealth isn't everything. Hopkins was correct in predicting that rank would give way to class in Tunisia. However, class differences can take different forms in different societies, and we would argue that, although Tunisia has become a society with considerable differences of wealth and class consciousness, Tunisia still retains the residue of an older, resolutely egalitarian society based on rank rather than class.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baccouche, M. & Dridi, S. (2019). Entrepreneurial intentions and cultural values: The case of Tunisia. *Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, 8(1), 6.
- Ben Cheikh, Nidhal (2012). La survie des entreprises à l'épreuve des dynamiques structurelles territoriales. [www.turess.com/fr/wmc/118949](http://www.turess.com/fr/wmc/118949). accessed 12 May 2023.
- Ben Hafaiedh, Abdelwahab & Safi, R. (2023). Profils et trajectoires des migrants tunisiens de retour, Observatoire National de Migration. Tunis (Tunisia)
- Cassarino, Jean-Pierre (2015), Relire le lien entre migration de retour et entrepreneuriat, à la lumière de l'exemple tunisien. *Méditerranée*, 124, 67-72.
- Hopkins, Nicholas S. (1977), The emergence of class in a Tunisian town. *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 8, 453-491.
- Letaief, A. (2013). Entrepreneuriat et culture en Tunisie. In *Économie et société en Tunisie après la révolution*. Tunis (Tunisia), Karthala Editions, 135-150.
- Michalak, Laurence O. 1997 Les migrants de retour en Tunisie: Typologie, actions et impacts. In Bencherifa, Abdellatif et. al. (eds), *Migration internationale et changements sociaux dans le Maghreb*, Tunis (Tunisia), University of Tunis Press, 43-56
- Schlucter, Wolfgang. (1999). Hindrances to Modernity : Max Weber on Islam. In Huff, Toby E. and Schluchter, Wolfgang. *Max Weber & Islam*, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 1-52.
- Schumpeter, Joseph A. (1947). The Creative Response in Economic History. *Journal of Economic History*. 7(2), 149-159.
- Simon, Gildas (1979). L'espace des travailleurs tunisiens en France : structures et fonctionnement d'un champ migratoire international, Université de Poitiers
- Smaoui, S. & Mzoughi, N. (2016)/ Entrepreneurship in Tunisia: A cultural perspective. *Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, 5(1), 7.
- Stone, Russell A. (1974). Religious ethic and the spirit of capitalism in Tunisia. *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 5 (3), 260-273.
- Weber, Max. (2009). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism with Other Writings on the Rise of the West* (fourth ed.). Kalbeg, Stephen (transl. and intro). New York, Oxford University Press