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## From ‘dégage!’ to ‘dégagisme’: the travel of the political thinking of the Arab uprisings between Tunisia and France

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### ABSTRACT

The shout of the slogan ‘dégage!’ – ‘to clear’, ‘to release’ – was central to the language of the 2010–11 Tunisian revolution. In 2017, the word was appropriated and reinterpreted by the French presidential candidate, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and transformed into the political phenomenon of ‘dégagisme’. In following the travel of *dégage* from Tunisia to France, this article demonstrates how the political thinking of the Arab uprisings intersects with spatio-historical differentiations and orderings. I argue that the meaning of *dégage* was made in the connections and constitutive differences between metropole and colony, West and non-West. As *dégage* rubbed against historical representations, it both worked to reinforce and contest such distinctions. In turn, such travel recapitulates our understanding of the Arab uprisings in the present, connecting struggles and presenting openings onto transnational solidarities.

### KEYWORDS

Arab uprisings; Tunisia; France; revolution; left populism; travelling ideas

On 5 February 2017, the leader of the leftist popular party France Insoumise, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, held a ‘double meeting’ in Lyon and Paris. Made possible by the technological gimmickry of a hologram, Mélenchon hoped to transcend the bodily-geographic limits of the campaign trail. During the speech, he located himself in contentious distinction to the ‘ethnic communitarianism’ of Marine Le Pen and ‘liberalism’ of Emmanuel Macron, before turning to the central, animating idea of his campaign: ‘dégagisme’. Mélenchon outlined the term as such:

But [this presidential campaign] is chiefly a wave that I have named ‘dégagiste’, with my Tunisian friends in mind. Dégagisme consists of getting rid of [*dégager*] them [the elite]. But this *dégagiste* wave, we have to give it substance, it’s about mobilizing the French people [*peuple*] (Premat, 2019, p. 288).

Over the course of the campaign, Mélenchon referred to the neologism ‘dégagisme’ as a useful description of the political mood in France and a reflection of the French people’s desire to remove the country’s political and economic ‘elite’. *Dégage*, translated as ‘to free’, ‘to clear’, ‘to release’ (Collins French Dictionary, n.d.), had come to prominence as a political idea some six years earlier during the Tunisian Revolution of Freedom and Dignity, where its enunciation as a street protest slogan was emblematic of the Tunisian people’s collective will to remove the country’s president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Mélenchon, in his evocation of the term, made frequent reference to his ‘Tunisian friends’ and their initial articulation of *dégage*, explicitly connecting current frustrations within the French demos to a Tunisian precedent. If on 5 February 2017 Mélenchon attempted to be in

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two places at once, his use of *dégagisme* hoped to perform another spatial sleight of hand; both acknowledging his debt to his Tunisian comrades and appropriating the term to the French context.

In recent years, scholars have looked to uncover the global circulation of theory, political thinking and ways of being (Euben, 2006; Hendrix & Baumgold, 2017; Mignolo, 2000). Concurrently, there has been a move to excavate the way that political events, ideologies and movements are imbricated in global networks of influence and solidarity (Byrne, 2016; Christiansen & Scarlett, 2013). Both these strands of work seek to foreground thinking from the Global South, demonstrate its influence in the North and return epistemic and political agency to actors who have been historically silenced.

The travel of *dégage* from one shore of the Mediterranean to the other invites us to consider the Arab uprisings as a process of non-linear and inter-connected meaning making, which might both reinscribe and contest global borders and their ordering power. Though, since 2010–11, *dégage* has been used politically in multiple Francophone countries, including, Senegal, Morocco, Belgium and Algeria, here I limit myself to the travel of the term between Tunisia and France. I find this travel particularly politically and analytically generative because of the geographies of power and domination that the term travelled across, and Mélenchon's attempts not only to appropriate the term but engage with Tunisia as an interlocking site of political struggle and solidarity.

I argue that there are two, related, spatio-historical effects to the travel of *dégage*: (i) the travel of *dégage* interceded in the post-colonial relationship between Tunisian and France, and (ii) it affects the ways in which the Arab uprisings are reimaged and recapitulated in the present. The first speaks to how ideas are embedded within, but also rub against, geographies of power. The travel of *dégage* was imbricated in the asymmetries of power that connect Tunisia with France, as well as the representations that obscure such historical inequalities. With regards to the second point, the use of *dégage* in France in 2017 intervenes in an historical understanding of the 2010–11 Arab uprisings and its political meaning in the present. As such, we can take the travel of *dégage* as contributing to the 'afterlives' of the uprisings, connecting popular forms of mass mobilization in the Global South with European leftist populist politics.

The article proceeds as follows: I begin by noting the uprisings' global aftereffects as a nascent field of enquiry. Drawing on thinkers that consider the travel of ideas and practices across difference, the article forwards an interpretation of the travel of *dégage* that takes meaning as relationally produced but lodged in historical and material contexts. The second half of the article turns to the specifics of the case at hand. I explore the inter-connectedness of meaning between the Tunisian revolution and 2017 French presidential elections. To do so, the article draws together a number of instantiations of *dégage* by ordinary citizens, protestors and politicians. These are used to argue that, in Tunisia, *dégage* was articulated via bottom-up popular protest; a performance of the Tunisian people's refusal of the Ben Ali regime. In contrast, in France, '*dégagisme*' presented a form of leader-led leftist populism that encouraged the replacement of an elite by the people. This leads to a consideration of the ambiguous political work that is stimulated by the divergence between these two operations, both contesting and upholding the categories and distinctions that order our understanding of the metropole and ex-colony, West and non-West. I conclude by imagining what a progressive transnational borrowing might look like and its potential to uncover the global interconnectedness of political struggles in particular times and places.

### **Travelling ideas, relational comparison and the Arab uprisings**

In the aftermath of the 2010–11 Arab uprisings a number of scholars explored the uprisings' global modalities, wishing to question and destabilize approaches that take the state as the privileged

container of revolutionary praxis and transformation. Scholars demonstrated that protestors' grievances were often neo-imperial in bent, aimed at the alliance of a domestic ruling class with international capital and institutions (Brownlee, 2011; Hanieh, 2013; Mullin & Patel, 2015). While others uncovered the transnational solidarities that linked the uprisings into a moment of global protest and revolt (Castells, 2012; Mason, 2012) and argued that activists' repertoires of resistance articulated a cosmopolitan public, constructing new subjectivities that worked across borders and identities (Bray, 2017).

This work has been of central import in demonstrating how the Arab uprisings precipitated a profound reconfiguration of the relationship between the local, national and global. There remains, however, an academic bias towards synchronicity between movements and their proximity (both spatially and temporally) to the Arab uprisings; whereas our understanding of their asynchronous and non-linear spatio-historical trajectories remains somewhat undertheorized. Donatella della Porta, in her consideration of the ebb and flow of the Arab uprisings, identifies this lacuna, and argues that, '[protest] frames and repertoires often spread in distant and diverse places and are adapted to different situations with varying degrees of mobilizing capacity' (2017, p. 14). Likewise, Jillian Schwedler, in a roundtable discussion of the 2019 protest wave that played out across Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon and Iraq notes there remains 'a kind of methodological and epistemological nationalism – [which] obscures other processes, dynamics and explanations that link or distinguish these uprisings across both time and space' (Schwedler, 2019, n.p.).

To uncover the asynchronous spatio-historical effects of the uprisings requires approaches that stress the processual, comparative and relational vis-à-vis the Arab uprisings. Like '79 or '68, ideas, discourses and tactics continue to reverberate and slide between scales; their history and meaning constructed via comparisons, analogy and affiliation. That being said, travel is neither boundless nor frictionless but intricately related to geographies of domination, authority and imperialism (Cooper, 2005, pp. 91-93). Through everyday translations and appropriations, the thinking of the uprisings may be furthered and made to speak to and about new struggles or, equally, work to obscure political connections and prior uses.

In a bid to engage the multiple spatio-historical scales to the Arab uprisings, this article borrows from post-colonial, critical ethnographic and Marxist methodologies that reckon with questions of travel (whether material, epistemological or social) across uneven spatialities of power and domination. Since Edward Said's call for the study of 'traveling theory' (1984) an array of often highly innovative methodologies have been proposed for conceptualizing the reception and resistances produced by encounters across difference. While this article does not claim to offer a review of these developments (for this see Bachmann-Medick, 2014), I wish to pick up the threads of two theorists who will help expound the relational and contextual use of the political thinking of *dégagé*.

The geographer Gillian Hart, in a synthesis of Marxist-Gramscian and postcolonial thought, develops the notion of 'relational comparison' (2006, 2018) as a non-Eurocentric analytic of comparison. While sensitive to the comparative method as an 'apparatus for apprehending and disciplining otherness', Hart maintains that, when put in the service of decentering Western knowledge and contesting teleological modernization discourses, it 'can operate as a means of critical engagement' (2018, p. 372; see also Stam & Shohat, 2009).

Hart explicates the analytical method of relational comparison as follows:

Instead of comparing pre-existing objects, events, places, or identities, the focus is on *how* they are constituted in relation to one another through power-laden practices in the multiple, interconnected arenas of everyday life. Clarifying these connections and mutual processes of constitution—as well as

slippages, openings, and contradictions—helps to generate new understandings of the possibilities for social change (2006, p. 996).

For Hart, relational comparison enables an excavation of the divergent – but interconnected – processes across which social spaces are co-constituted at a number of different sites and scales. It both resists approaches that take each case to be an instantiation of wider global forces, and is skeptical of a retreat into accounts of the local as bounded units of analysis.

Throughout her work, Hart is concerned by how neoliberal forms of capitalism work in tandem with historical representations of the metropole and colony, delineating geographies of knowledge and power that work to obscure historical connections and difference. In the words of Fernando Coronil (one of Hart's key theoretical interlocutors), such discourses 'disaggregate [the West and non-West's] relational histories' and 'turn difference into hierarchy' (1996, p. 57). Relational comparison challenges such representations, demonstrating the asymmetrical relations of power that they work to obscure and the historical connections that might present openings for social transformation.

In a later extension of her thinking, Hart, alongside Stefan Kipfer, brings relational comparison into dialogue with a Gramscian theory of language and translation, arguing that Gramsci advocates 'politics as translation', which acts as a 'subject-modifying practice' (2013, p. 330). Noting the etymological root of translation in both 'tradition' and 'traitor', they observe that translation is 'not just a matter of transmission but of transformation that may well be "traitorous" to the original (con)text' (2013, p. 327). The traitorous-ness of translation is useful for a theory of the travel of political thinking and practices in that it highlights how such language interventions work both within and against global epistemological hierarchies. It illuminates the appropriation of ideas from the Global South as implicated in the production of space, with the potential to both reinforce and naturalize hierarchies of difference and, alternatively, denaturalize taken-for-granted representations of the West and non-West.

While Hart offers a set of theoretical tools for thinking through the relational construction of meaning and practice, and how this interacts with the production of space, Anna Tsing's ethnographic work presents a useful complement to Hart's conceptual interventions. Studying the cross-cultural and long-distance connections that met around the struggle against deforestation in Indonesia, Tsing proposes the metaphor of 'frictions' to describe 'the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference' (2005, p. 4). For Tsing, it is this friction, the 'grip of encounter' (2005, p. 5), that is politically, socially and culturally generative. Exploring the ways that social movements, non-governmental actors, scientists and students spoke to – and often across – one another, Tsing identifies spaces 'where words mean something different across a divide even as people agree to speak' (2005, p. xi). Tsing proposes that the conceptualization of travel and its relational modalities requires a sensitivity to the misinterpretations, ambiguities and contingencies that muddle global interconnections and communications. Transnational struggles may gather around similar objects of concern and draw on a shared language but it should not be assumed that this signals a convergence of meaning and cause.

Read together, Hart's analytic of relational comparison and Tsing's metaphor of frictions aid a reading of the travel of political thinking across space and scales. In applying relational comparison to the co-constitution of struggles, it is possible to follow the spatio-historical connections that link particular struggles into wider geographies and processes. Tsing, meanwhile, I find useful for her incorporation of contingency and agency – the productive awkwardness of seeking to make

ideas speak across multiple groups, places and struggles. Travel is never smooth but rubs against the rough ground of context. Moreover, both Hart and Tsing help us think the Arab uprisings beyond a state-centric lens and take their meaning as constructed through the sites, actors and practices where the uprisings, and its animating ideas, are re-articulated. Building on these insights, in the following empirical discussion I consider how the meaning of *dégage* was constituted in its travel – its acts of translation and moments of friction – between Tunisia and France.

### ‘Dégage!’ and the Tunisian revolution

The protests that turned into the Tunisian revolution began on 17 December 2010, in the southern interior town of Sidi Bouzid, when a local street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, after being humiliated by the police, set himself on fire outside the town’s municipal buildings. In response to Bouazizi’s act of resistance, an ‘embryonic revolutionary network’ (Del Panta, 2020, p. 641) took shape in the town, linking up the more radical components of the local branch of the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT, Tunisian General Labour Union), Sidi Bouzid’s unemployed youth and local lawyers. As more Tunisians heard of the events in Sidi Bouzid, protests spread, first to towns and villages in the local governorate (Meknassy, Bir el Hafey, Menzel Bouzaiane and Regueb) and then to other cities and towns across the country (Kasserine, Redeyef, Gafsa, Kairouan, Sousse), before culminating in the general labour strike and mass protests that forced President Ben Ali and his family to flee the country on 14 January 2011. While initially a revolt around a set of particular economic and social grievances that did not directly challenge the authority of the regime – demands for employment, bread, and an end to marginalization – as the uprising gained momentum it took on a revolutionary form, with the political horizon of the movement transformed from ‘social and economic demands to political claims’ (Ayeb, 2011, p. 476), so that by 14th January the protests had developed into a ‘cross-class and cross-ideological revolutionary convergence’ (Del Panta, 2020, p. 639).

Ideationally central to the move from localized acts of revolt to revolutionary action was the demand for the wholesale removal of Ben Ali. The imperative verb ‘*dégage!*’, chanted during mass protests in Tunis and other cities, and its accompanying gestural representation – an open palm raised aloft, sweeping the air, shooing away the regime – were potent symbols of the people’s refusal to continue under the status quo. Alongside the slogan, *al-sha’b yurid isqat al-nizam* (the people want to bring down the regime) it articulated the Tunisian people’s historic desire to remove Ben Ali and his regime and offered a ‘call to arms that blended prior social antagonisms into a new-found, national community’ (Ayari, 2011, p. xi). For example, in a video clip uploaded to the Internet by Lotfi Abdelli during the revolution he seeks to persuade his fellow citizens of their shared condition and communicate his rejection of the regime:

Zine El Abidine [Ben Ali], if you have a little *humanité*, if you have a little *insaniyya* [humanity], let the people live. It’s clear: for the young, for the old, for the educated and the uneducated, who say to you: ‘Dégage! dégage!’ Old, outdated clown, you are like a yoghurt that has reached its sell-by date [*délai*]. When you are eaten, you make people throw up; the people are dying, the people are sick of you. 20 years you rule and are you not yet in pain from sitting in that chair? Out [*barra*]! You have the money, go shopping outside the country! Go, do what you want! Leave [*sayyab*] the country and let us build it alone.<sup>1</sup>

In his speech, Abdelli – actor, comedian, and here a firebrand critic of the regime – combines persuasive rhetoric with his comedic talents. Amusing juxtaposition, understatement and simile all

help to draw a picture of the Ben Ali regime as comically out of time. Abdelli finds *dégage*'s revolutionary purchase in its ability to diagnose the rottenness of Ben Ali and his regime. He expresses the affective and bodily reaction that Ben Ali produces – like a pot of gone-off yoghurt, the regime induces an expulsion from the body (politic) as the people rejected (and ejected) his rule.

Notwithstanding the wish to remove Ben Ali, his party the RCD (Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique) and the security state, the revolution also contained a critique of the international networks of capital and post-9/11 security discourses that intersected with Ben Ali's particular form of neoliberal authoritarianism. Ben Ali's model of capital accumulation followed an 'outwardly – and upwardly-oriented neo-colonial ... accumulation model' (Ajl, 2019, p. 9) that saw accumulation by dispossession in Tunisia's comparatively resource-rich south, and the promotion of industries oriented towards Europe in the country's north (namely the tourism and garment industry). While these policies left Tunisia's poor vulnerable to external shocks and the effects of EU protectionism, the Ben Ali and Trabelsi (Ben Ali's family-in-law) families were able to manipulate trade liberalization to seize the most lucrative companies and create profitable monopolies (Murphy, 2013, pp. 48-49). On top of this neoliberal economic consensus, the regime looked to activate post-9/11 anti-terror securitization discourses to their own end, with the violent repression of Islamist activism within the country and the pursuit of security co-operation with the US, France and EU (Shahshahani & Mullin, 2012, pp. 76-81). In a sign of France's support of Ben Ali to the last, days before he fled the country, the French government authorized a shipment of tear gas canisters to Tunisia and the French foreign minister, Michèle Alliot-Marie, offered French security expertise.

Why in those final days of the revolution, did protestors and ordinary citizens reach for a French rather than Arabic word? And what does the use of a French loan word tell us about power, protest and language? Mundanely, it represented the arrival of protests to the Francophone north of the country and, joined by its Arabic (*irhal*), English (Game Over) and Tunisian dialect (*barra*) approximations, suggested a growing international outlook to the protests, speaking to a global audience that was increasingly taking notice of events in Tunisia (Hawkins, 2014, p. 45). The chant was also implicated in Tunisia's colonial and post-colonial experience, connecting current injustices to a history of exploitation and domination. As the Tunisian linguist Nabiha Jerad speculates, *dégage* would have first been heard as an order from the colonizer to the colonized (2013, p. 243). As part of the logic of colonial authority it was used to demarcate where the colonized could and couldn't be, what they could and couldn't do. During January 2011 this was radically upturned when protestors appropriated the term and reversed its authority. Now, it was authored by the people to demand the expulsion of the neocolonial figures, apparatuses and dynamics of the Ben Ali regime. That being said, the use of a French term also produced its own differentiations and silences. Its rise to prominence during the revolution followed an internal centre-periphery logic, which was reinforced by class, racial and geographic distinctions that had their origins in French colonial discourses (Challand, 2020). More specifically, the appearance of *dégage* as a central animating idea of the revolution denoted the arrival of protests in the country's more affluent, Francophone north and the discrepancies between different Tunisian subjects' ability to 'speak' the revolution. *Dégage* appeared to contribute to the obscuring of the original economic grievances of the country's marginalized south and west, as these demands were increasingly joined, and then replaced, by the civic-democratic demands of the middle classes in the country's urban centres (Ayeub, 2011, p. 476).

On the 14 January, the UGTT called a two-hour regional strike across Greater Tunis. After assembling in Place Mohamed Ali outside the UGTT headquarters, protestors made their way

down Avenue Habib Bourguiba and towards the Interior Ministry (Del Panta, 2020, p. 648). Concurrently, members of the Tunisian Order of Lawyers marched from outside the Ministry of Justice (Gobe, 2011, p. 192). Workers, unemployed youths from the city's *banlieues*, *gauchiste* militants, student activists and urban middle classes all joined the growing crowd. Central to the logic of protest on January 14 was the collective chant of 'dégage!'. It both fitted nicely with a picture of January 14 as a mass, leaderless protest where ideological differences appeared, for a moment, set aside, and could be used collectively to target objects and symbols of the regime. On arrival at the Interior Ministry, a building notorious as the central node of the regime's state security and surveillance apparatus, the chant of 'dégage!' was directed at the building. Like other symbols of the Ben Ali regime and his cult of personality that were targeted and defaced – the ubiquitous public posters of the President, roads and streets named after the date of his ascendancy to power (7 November 1987), police stations, and buildings associated with the Ben Ali and Trabelsi families – the aiming of dégage at the Interior Ministry suggested a desire to re-order public space along more egalitarian lines. As Judith Butler notes, in reference to Tahrir Square during the Egyptian revolution, 'the collective actions [of the crowd] collect the space itself, gather the pavement, and animate and organize the architecture' (Butler, 2015, p. 71). The affective and performative valences of dégage are captured by the actor, writer and activist Leila Toubel, who, writing about her experience of January 14, comments on the uniting experience of dégage shouted in unison:

Reuters estimated that 8000 people assembled in central Tunis ... I personally had the impression that there were millions ... I involved [*participer*] my hand in the most beautiful choreography I have ever seen ... thousands of hands stretched out towards the sky ... frank ... unsubdued [*insoumis*] ... going from the back to the front ... accompanying the word DÉGAGE ... I wanted to open my arms and embrace [*enlace*] this immense crowd (Bettaïeb, 2011, p. 36).

To conclude, dégage acted as a public performance of the Tunisian people's collective refusal of the Ben Ali regime. In attaching the chant of 'dégage!' to different subjects and symbols, dégage worked to dis- and re-aggregate antagonisms, demonstrating how they had similar internal logics and uncovering the composition of Ben Ali's power and its domestic and international networks of alliance. That being said, it also worked to silence particular grievances and, in its apparent popular and collective sentiment, belied Tunisia's internal geographies of power and authority and their relation to the country's colonial history.

### Dégage after the revolution

It may appear that the demand of 'dégage!' was circumscribed by the time and place where it was voiced and its particular object of removal. The departure of Ben Ali, though, did not mark the end of the political use of dégage in post-revolutionary Tunisia. Dégage has been central to debates around the continued relevance of non-representational forms of political engagement both during and after the revolution and is referenced in two primary ways: first, dégage is invoked in discussions around the historical meaning and import of the revolution. It has been rejected for its tendency to efface both the southern beginnings of the revolution and the revolution's substantive demands, namely economic and social justice, as well as the use of a French word being viewed as inconsistent with a representation of the revolution as a uniquely 'Tunisian' or 'home-grown' event. (See, for example, when the politician Mabrouka M'Barek was gently ridiculed by the President of the Assembly, Mustapha Ben Jaafar, for her suggestion that dégage might be included in the country's new constitution.) Second, dégage offers an ideation resource that continues to be deployed by Tunisians in the present. At protests it is performed as a means to demonstrate

continuing injustices and inequalities, and a profound distrust at the only ever partial replacement of the country's political elite. It was directed at both domestic political parties 'Ennahda dégage!' (Ben Saad-Dusseaut, 2015, p. 259) and foreign actors 'Hillary Clinton dégage!' (Shahshahani & Mullin, 2012, p. 68).

Beyond Tunisia, in France, dégage has been picked up as an idea that might travel to new political settings. Shortly after Ben Ali's ousting, Mélenchon published a blog post where he outlined his thoughts on the Tunisian revolution. In the piece, Mélenchon locates Tunisia and the demand of dégage within a global constellation of progressive politics, noting that a sentiment of removal first 'crossed the Atlantic' and was now circulating 'in the Maghreb and in Europe' (Mélenchon, 2011). He notes the similarity between the slogan from the Argentinian Piquetero movement, 'they must all go' and 'Ben Ali dégage!', before ending by stating that the demand of dégage 'is not an exotic story' and 'it will translate' (Mélenchon, 2011).

In the following years, Mélenchon depicted the Mediterranean as a shared political space that presented opportunities for alliance and collaboration. In 2013, he visited Tunisia as a part of an international tour of conference dates around eco-socialism. Mélenchon noted that he hoped the visit would offer an 'antidote' to those who strove to 'import the logic of a clash of civilizations between the two shores of the Mediterranean' and instead 'measure the extent to which the peoples of the Maghreb and Southern Europe, in a number of aspects, form a common society' (Mélenchon, 2013). Following the assassination of the Tunisian leftist politician, Chokri Belaid, some days before the conference, Mélenchon made sure to express his solidarity with the Tunisian left, meeting with the Belaid family and paying his respects at Belaid's grave. Moreover, in 2015, Mélenchon returned to the country to attend a memorial to Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi (Brahmi, also a politician on the Tunisian left, was assassinated five months after Belaid). On his return to Tunisia, Mélenchon wrote, 'I wanted to be beside [Basma Khalfaoui (Belaid's wife)] and with her on this anniversary. Political action is also made of loyalty to people and their journey when they become entangled in such a total way with their militant commitment' (Mélenchon, 2015).

Mélenchon has also nurtured a political friendship with the leftist couple of Hama Hammami (leader of Tunisia's *Jabhat Shabiyya* (Popular Front)) and Radhia Nasraoui (human rights lawyer), sharing stages with Hammami in both France and Tunisia. Out of this engagement with Tunisia's post-revolutionary trajectory and the forging of political solidarities and friendships with figures on the Tunisian left, Mélenchon developed a sense of Tunisia not only as a site of radical political struggle but a space that retained important, and often exploitative, connections with France. This is most obviously expounded in France Insoumise (FI), Mélenchon's party, foreign policy proposals, which subscribed to an ethos of 'alt-globalization' and wished to recenter French foreign policy away from the Atlantic and towards the Mediterranean and Francophone world. In reference to Tunisia, and again in collaboration with *Jabhat Shabiyya*, FI have called for an audit of debt accrued by Ben Ali and a proposal for Tunisian debt relief from European countries (Mélenchon, 2018).

### Dégagisme, Jean-Luc Mélenchon and France Insoumise

Previously a politician with Parti Socialiste, in 2016, Mélenchon established his own party, France Insoumise. FI pursued a populist strategy that located the French 'people' in antagonistic opposition to an out-of-touch 'elite'. This was combined with a discourse that set FI apart from the French

old left, including prioritizing *La Marseillaise* over *L'Internationale*, the tricolour over the red flag and frequent evocations of a French national community, or *la patrie* (Fassin, 2018; Premat, 2019, pp. 291–294). The turn towards republican, patriotic and Jacobin imagery, symbolism and discourse, appeared to sit awkwardly with Mélenchon's internationalism, and, for some critics, exposed populism's – even when articulated on the left – essentially nationalist, chauvinistic and neo-imperialist tendencies (Fassin, 2018; Marlière, 2016). Mélenchon, and FI, were seen to bear many of the hallmarks of populism (the centralizing of power in the party leader, prioritizing of the nation as the site of radical transformation, and the use of nationalist rhetoric), which was at best strategically unsound and ran the risk of reinforcing the xenophobia of the populist right (Fassin, 2018). For others, the use of the nation and its symbols did not preclude the construction of an anti-racist, pluralistic and internationalist project (Chiocchetti, 2020, p. 123). Rather, the aim of a project such as Mélenchon's was to refurbish populism for progressive, leftist aims and thus 'combat the xenophobic policies promoted by right-wing populism' (Mouffe, 2018, n.p.). Mélenchon's use of *dégage* sat in an uneasy space between a more internationalist outlook and a domestic politics that flew close to (and sometimes appeared to overlap with) a history of French right-wing populist politics. While Mélenchon located *dégage* within a global milieu, stressing its Tunisian origins and noting its resonance with contentious politics in Argentina, it also spoke to a tradition of reactionary rejectionism that can be traced through the anti-tax mobilizations of Pierre Poujade in the 1950s and back to nineteenth century nationalist anti-Republicanism (Boulouque & Petaux, 2017).

At the end of January 2017, it became clear that, for the first time since the start of the Fifth Republic, no candidate from France's two major political parties (Les Républicains and Parti Socialiste) would advance to the second round of the presidential election. Mélenchon responded to the failures of the centre left and right by arguing that it was a manifestation of '*dégagisme*' as an explicit rejection of both wings of France's political system (Mélenchon, 2017a). Over the course of the election campaign, the term became something of a keyword in contemporary French politics. It was noted by a range of political actors from both the left and right (Marine Le Pen also used the term, although without reference to Tunisia (Premat, 2019)) and was frequently referred to by the media to sum up the political atmosphere of the election. Extending into political culture, *dégage* was also the subject of a protest track by the French-Argentinian Marseille rapper Keny Arkana, who, in the track's refrain, demanded: 'oligarchs, clear [*dégagez*] / graduates [*énarques*], off with you [*dégagez*] / fascists get lost [*dégagez*]'.<sup>2</sup> Like in Tunisia, the term was used to articulate a range of grievances and antagonisms, including, inter alia, increasing job precarity, growing disparities between the urban and rural, the EU's neoliberalism, the power of global financial capital, French military interventionism abroad and President François Hollande's betrayal of socialist principals.

The articulation of *dégage* by FI was not only a question of how to give voice to overlapping antagonisms but, in the process, build a French left populism. Chantal Mouffe's recent writings are illuminating in this regard. The thinking of Mouffe was central to FI's project, offering a key intellectual and strategic touchstone; in turn, Mouffe offered her support to Mélenchon appearing alongside him at rallies and demonstrations (Marlière, 2019, p. 100). A critic of the non-representational politics of the 2011 global protest wave (Mouffe, 2013), Mouffe argued that such movements unduly limited themselves to extra-parliamentary struggle when what was needed was the construction of counter-hegemonic projects that could occupy the institutions of the state. In *For A Left Populism* (2018), Mouffe moves to outline what this would look like. In contrast to a 'revolutionary politics', which 'seeks a total rupture with the existing sociopolitical order',

Mouffe advocates a project of ‘radical reformism’ that ‘accepts the principles of legitimacy but attempts to implement a different hegemonic formation’ (Mouffe, 2018, p. n.p.). To build such a hegemonic formation, Mouffe, returning to her earlier work with Ernesto Laclau, argues that ‘left populism, understood as a discursive strategy of construction of the political frontier between “the people” and “the oligarchy” constitutes, in the present conjuncture, the type of politics needed to recover and deepen democracy’ (Mouffe, 2018, p. n.p.).

For Mouffe (as too for Mélenchon) the popular demand of *dégagé* should be mobilized in relation to the state form and its institutions. Rather than pursue a wholesale refusal of pluralist liberal democracy, parties such as FI must be aligned to ‘recover and deepen democracy’ (Mouffe, 2018, p. n.p.), working to make the state responsive to its citizens. Central to such a project is the construction of the collective will of ‘the people’ via ‘chains of equivalence among manifold struggles’ (2018, p. n.p.), connecting a heterogeneity of democratic subjects through affective bonds (Mouffe cites the demands of workers, immigrants, precarious middle class and LGBT community). These chains of equivalence can then furnish a more progressive vision of nationalism, ‘[mobilized] around a patriotic identification with the best and more egalitarian aspects of the national tradition’ (Mouffe, 2018, p. n.p.)

Mélenchon took *dégagisme* to be symptomatic of the country’s wider ‘crisis of democratic participation’ and that it behoved FI to create ‘new forms of political participation and engagement’ (Hamburger, 2018, p. 103). Here is Mélenchon expanding on what he means by *dégagisme*:

[A vote for me] is an effective vote [*vote efficace*]. It turns the page on an old world that everyone feels is at an end . . . The limit has been reached and I am the symptom. Ten years ago, I was not in the running [for the French presidential election]. *Dégagisme* is a huge wave of exasperated people [*gens excedés*]. My candidature offers a series of points to people who want change, but want to control what will happen. It will be me or an unheard of disorder [*un désordre inouï*] that awaits you. (Verrier, 2017)

Mélenchon combined a ‘crisis’ discourse of resentment and antagonism with a self-aggrandizing vision of his ability to harness and direct these popular antagonisms. Again, according to Mélenchon, *dégagisme* acted as a bellwether, signalling a need for a representative replacement wherein ‘the people’ are substantiated through his candidacy and the party. Similarly, in an interview with *L’Humanité*, Mélenchon argues that, ‘[*dégagisme* is] a blind force of rejection of everything and everyone. Our role is to open a positive outcome. It is not waiting for all to collapse into chaos’ (Mélenchon, 2017b.). In both articulations, Mélenchon warns of *dégagisme*’s unproductive disorder and the need for the taming of the antagonisms of *dégagisme* by connecting them to political participation and his candidacy.

As I have argued throughout this section, Mélenchon refurbished *dégagisme* to work politically in relation to the institutions of the French state. Mélenchon was clear in his commitment to democratic politics: ‘I am a republican, I believe in representative democracy and in elections. That is why I call for a citizen’s revolution *through the ballot box*’ (Marlière, 2019, p. 96, italics added). While also, in the spirit of Mouffe’s call for ‘radical reformism’, running on a manifesto that argued for constitutional reform and democratic renewal – including the creation of a Sixth Republic that is more responsive to its citizenry and the renegotiation, or potential withdrawal, from European Union treaties. The refusal of the entire regime (as in Tunisia) had to be tempered such that it would encourage engagement with democratic politics and produce representational replacement rather than non-representational refusal. In explicit acknowledgement of this, FI instigated a voter registration campaign with the slogan *Je vote, ils dégagent!* (La France Insoumise, 2016), followed by a variety of different statements that highlighted the record of Sarkozy and Hollande in government

(one more unemployed every two minutes; ten tons of pesticides each hour; a school closed every day), before stating *'c'est leur bilan'* [it's their score sheet]. Mélenchon's *dégagisme* spelled out a variety of economic, social and political ills that could be revealed and refused through *dégage*, though these were always depicted as largely domestic in nature and solvable through the party and state.

In Mélenchon's formulation – read through Mouffe – *dégagisme* was not an end in itself but rather an expression of antagonisms that needed to be transformed into productive agonisms; identified and channelled through democratic procedures and institutions. *Dégagisme* was made concomitant with a people/elite logic that is the central ontological assumption of populist strategy and brought into service in the discursive construction of a chain of equivalence. Furthermore, Mélenchon's use takes 'the people' as a static and pre-conceived group that straightforwardly maps onto the shape of the state. This not only has repercussions for who is and isn't seen to be a part of the demos but also flattens and distorts our understanding of democratic grievances and their relation to the global. Left populist politics' insistence on the nation as the privileged site of politics meant that *dégagisme*, as articulated by Mélenchon, obscured the sorts of relational and globally interconnected operations that the meaning of *dégage* was constructed through, as well as the international nature of the antagonisms it was used to uncover.

## Conclusion

This article has pointed to two, connected, ways that the use of *dégage* in different contexts produced relational effects: (i) it intervened in the post-colonial relationship between Tunisia and France, provoking us to consider these two countries' interlocking histories, and the frictions produced by travel across such uneven geographies of power and knowledge. And (ii) it recapitulates the historical meaning of the Arab uprisings in the present.

As Hart reminds us, ideas are caught up in political economic and cultural processes and accrue in meaning through the relational dynamics of space. Surveying such geographies of difference is made all the more critical when such locations – as in Tunisia and France – are the product of histories of colonial and neo-colonial domination and hierarchy. The term's popular use in Tunisia was caught in, but sought to work against, the country's history of colonial and neo-colonial apparatuses of power. Likewise, and resisting a West-to-the-rest direction of travel, Mélenchon's utilization of *dégage* drew inspiration from, and moved to engage with, Tunisia as a site of radical thinking and practice. To ignore these connections risks further reifying and naturalizing colonial difference and distinction, rather than seeing it as constructed through historical and spatial relationality.

The travel of *dégage* contributed to the ongoing, global construction of the Arab uprisings as a store of ideas, discourses and symbols that might be aligned to a range of political projects, often in quite different locales. Mélenchon's references to Tunisia during the election campaign brought Tunisia onto the political horizon of ordinary French citizens and encouraged them to reconsider the uprisings and their relevance today. From this we can infer that it also produced important effects in terms of the global afterlives of the uprisings – their collective, popular meaning in the present. The travel of *dégage* between Tunisia and France forms a part of the 'long ebb' (della Porta, 2017, p. 9) of the conjuncture of 2010-11; the transnational diffusion of the thinking of the uprisings and its re-contextualization in a variety of locations. We should not, however, see

this ebb as inevitable or even. Instead, this article has demonstrated the numerous frictions that shape the appropriation of the thinking, terms and symbols of the uprisings.

Dégage was not a frictionless, free-floating idea, but rather the product of historical contingencies and the agency of individuals as they made everyday political claims, which were, all the time, co-constituted in relation to other places. There were notable moments when dégage was made to fit, and thus reinforced, nationalist framings and an inward-looking politics. That being said, and perhaps precisely because of such failures, the travel of dégage invites us to think a more progressive form of appropriation. Hart maintains that grasping such historical and geographical connections ‘can do political as well as analytical work’ (2006, p. 988) in that it conceives of lines of solidarity across what may appear disparate arenas of struggle and ‘speak[s] to the very hard political work of forging alliances together’ (Goswami, 2020, p. 268). Such appropriations-through-alliance do not, however, escape hierarchies of interpretation and definition. Though dégage might be read as an example of the political voice of ordinary Tunisians, its critical bent and interpretive potentialities were often viewed through the lens of, and made legible by, Western experience and thinkers.<sup>3</sup> I am keenly aware of my own complicity in such interpretative authority and the potential to reinscribe epistemic relations of domination. Seeking to push Hart’s thinking further, I wish to end by considering how the travel of dégage suggests openings onto paths not taken; more progressive appropriations that ally solidarities of meaning and cause.

Taking an often-used term in Tsing’s *Friction*, it was the ‘awkwardness’ of divergent uses of dégage across different contexts that points to the potential for transnational forms of association and struggle. Stressing the awkward meetings of people, ideas and places resists the ‘common-sense assumption that solidarity means homogeneity’ (Tsing, 2005, p. 245) and rather stays with the moments where the neat fit of an idea into a new context begins to fray. The political task then becomes to reckon with the frictions of travel not as an unhelpful roughness that is in need of smoothing out, but as the very texture that enables connections and solidarities. In the co-constituted meanings of dégage in Tunisia and France, we find a number of moments of such awkwardness: the question of whether the use of a French word betrayed the Tunisian and Arab character of the uprisings; Mélenchon’s wish to ‘fit’ the collective popular demand of ‘dégage!’ into his leftist-popular programme; the translation of street politics into an electoral party strategy. Each of these produced distortions and distinctions that, if recognized rather than downplayed, might offer the grounds for new solidarities that are rooted in difference and heterogeneity. Such an approach both demonstrates the transnational connections that co-constitute the language of struggles in different places, while also acknowledging the material, institutional and discursive relations of power that such uses are immersed in; producing certain forms of knowledge, ways of voicing political ideas, and interpretations of events as more or less authoritative. The old English meaning of ‘awkward’ – ‘turned the wrong way around’ – is a fitting description of how such an awkward sensibility to the travel of ideas seeks incessantly to reverse the direction of travel and denaturalize hierarchies of authority, directing attention towards new emancipatory connections and horizons.

## Notes

1. Abdelli’s speech can be found at, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gf-OFroM2Kw&t=1s> (accessed 7 February, 2022).
2. The track can be found at, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZH02unhDEk> (accessed 7 February, 2022).
3. I am grateful to the referee for noting this important element to the travel of dégage.

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