

# The need for teaching transnational history in Tunisia after 2011:

## A balancing factor between the national and the global and a tool for openness and acculturation

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**Abstract-** Today, more than ever, the Tunisian society seems to be torn between nationalism and the annihilation of national identity. The Tunisian School is at the heart of this ideological quarrel and the question of educational choices in the future reform has not ceased to be controversial. But, beyond ideologies, School must contribute to appease the conflicts and to support the dialogue of cultures. The teaching of history saturated with political, civic and critical ends remains the most sensible way to accomplish this mission of connivance. It is therefore now a question of realizing a real change which eliminates from the historical narrative any ethnocentric approach and is capable of giving an open, comparative history which takes into account the interrelations and the relationships between groups.

**Key words-** Transnational history - teaching history - educational research - national identity - cultural openness.

### INTRODUCTION:

Now, in Tunisia, the school history to which we assign the power to fix the problems of society finds itself under the obligation to renew its subjects and orientations.

In fact, after all, a camouflaged debate about school history began to cover a pedagogical conflict, but above all, ideological within the community of historians and politicians. On the one hand are those who consider that teaching must be that of a national narrative: the students must soak up the deeds, key dates, and characters that have forged the Tunisian people for three millennia, on the other side, there are those who defend a Tunisian history dissolved in a muslim territory having religion and language as a common denominator. The relationship to identity is then at the heart of the quarrel between the two clans. Supporters of the national narrative fear a crumbling of the Tunisian national identity in the discourse of Islamism. The defenders of the rival clan consider that religion is the essential basis of the Tunisian identity (Kouttoub, 2017).

School history thus finds the right crossroads where this quarrel manifests itself. The choice of its purposes and the content of its future official programs seem to be a difficult mission because the controversies relate to overwhelming questions: What kind of history teaching do we want in the present context? Is a fantasy identity story really the solution? Is it possible to protect the history to be thought from the danger of conflicting ideologies who are trying to get their hand on the field of education? Does the solution lie in a plural dimension that takes into consideration all its rivalries? But how to teach the history of a Tunisia anchored in its plural dimensions – national, maghrebian, arabo muslim, mediterranean and global without presenting the student with a heavy and loaded content?

New programs should conceive a content that allows for the appropriation of a Tunisian national history anchored in a larger context with broader historical dimensions and which is interested in exchange and interactions between cultures and even between civilizations. For us, the teaching of a school history based on a mix of national and world history can present, in the next programs to be published, one of the effective solutions to the problem of the relationship to identity. We then plan the teaching of transnational history and we believe that it will be able to guarantee Tunisian students a balanced and fascinating historical content.

But before presenting such an educational project, is it not necessary to ask the question about the definition of the origins of this transnational approach? Should we also examine its applications in the fields of education and other contexts?

### **A – Challenges and obstacles to the use of transnational history in the international context : A contrast between didactic research and political attitudes**

Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a tradition of transnationalized American history existed in the United States of America and tried to occupy a place in universities and school curricula. As early as the 1910's non western forms of history teaching existed, justified by the consideration of immigration flows and by the role of the United States in the world. During the 1960's, transnational history has experienced a new impetus thanks to historiographical reflexions and practices dating back to the interwar period following the application of the comparative method whose paragon is *Marc Bloch* with his synthesis on feudal society (Bloch, 1939 – 1940, p. 287).

Only, the first university courses in world history were recreated in the early 1960's by *Loften Stavrianos* and *William McNeill*. From the 1980's, historians became more sensitive than those of the past to the need to take an interest in global developments as well as transnational themes. This new approach then gradually imposed itself towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century like a new

spectrum which mixes the national dimension and the world dimension. It has become one of the most fertile historical branches which haunts American and European historians.

Nowadays, on a theoretical level, the transnational history insists on the study of phenomena that occur beyond the action of the United States and to interstate relations. It then implies the idea that exchanges and influences between societies and cultural eras are two-way. In fact, it borrows from the comparative history developed by *Marc Bloch* the idea of establishing comparisons between distinct societies or even between distant places and times. It also borrows from the history of cultural transfers the idea that one should not conceive of the societies that one compares as closed compartmentalized entities but that the elements of a culture, by moving towards another culture, undergo modifications.

In a general way, this approach makes comparisons between global phenomena and tries to deduce the points of convergence and differences. In this respect, it should be noted that the great vogue of the term "transnational" has led to several attempts to define it in particular by situating it in relation to the terms "international", "globe" or "world" history.

In 2009, *Pierre-Yves Saunier* explains that a small number of historians including *Ian Tyrrell* began to explore the concept of transnational history in the early 1990's to design studies on exchanges, interactions, contacts and groupings on both sides across national borders between cultures and even between civilizations (Iriye, 2013, p. 97). In the same perspective, *Aline Charles* specifies that this approach is interested in what crosses and transcends borders and nation states. For her, transnational history observes individuals or organizations whose field of action extends beyond nations and scrutinizes the interactions established between communities politically constituted or carrying a national project (Charles, 2015, p. 5).

In general, we can consider that transnational history is located at the junction of the history of transfers, comparative history and global history. Currently, transnational history is defined as a history that emphasizes interdependencies beyond national borders and cuts across all cultural, economic, social, intercultural, political and religious fields, etc.

In the field of education, from the 1990's, it was a project defended by UNESCO. Between 1993 and 1996, at the request of this world organization, a report on education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century presented by a commission chaired by *Jacques Delors*, requested the project of a school history based on the transnational approach. The report calls for overcoming the tendencies towards identity withdrawal, in favor of an understanding of others based on respect for diversity (Delors, 1996, p. 46 – 47). Reflection on this theme developed further during the annual Congress of the Society in 1997 (Society for History Didactics, 1998), and again on the occasion of the 19<sup>th</sup> *International Congress of Historical Sciences* in Oslo in 2000.

In line with these new trends, the Russian Ministry of National Education launched an operation in 2003 aimed at anchoring school history in universal history. It should be noted that in Russia, until the 1990's, anarchy reigned in school textbooks and in history classes in which teachers mainly transmitted European history and left students to learn their own in their manuals. In 2009, a guide to courses, teachings and publications on big history (directory of big history courses, instructions and publications) was created during an international meeting. Indeed, a particular form of history on a world scale was beginning to make progress in curricula and bookstores (Berelowitch, 2003).

In Japan, a research institute for world history was created in 2004 in Tokyo, which brings in foreign specialists, translates works, launches research programs, and organizes world history seminars. Regarding teaching, (world history summer schools) are organized for teachers, with the support of the Japanese Ministry of Education. In school curricula, the global approach has already marked its presence since the 1990's (Akita, 2010).

In Europe, the situation is different. Because of nationalist political attitudes, world history was generally poorly accepted. In Germany, world history has not been able to establish itself in secondary education, due to the low number of hours reserved for history lessons and the risk of marginalization of the history of Nazism and the Holocaust. In the Netherlands, the place of non-European history is still in decline (Osterhammel, 2009). In Italy, the coalition led by *Silvio Berlusconi* and by a new wave of patriotism refused the integration in 2001 of world history into school curricula (Cajani, 2004b).

In Australia, the project launched in 2008 to set up the first national history curriculum, in which the historian *Stuart Macintyre* took part, was to prepare young people for a future marked by globalization, social and cultural diversity, and Australia's growing place in the Asia-Pacific region. However, hostile attitudes towards this reform have hampered the project (Bonnell & Crotty, 2008).

Contrary to the refusal that marked the European political scene, the teaching of transnational history found good echoes in didactic research. It was first defended in 1995 by the French specialist in history teaching *Henri Moniot*. The latter called for teaching that takes into account the comparative and intercultural approach (Moniot, 1995). The project of teaching transnational history does not mean for *Henri Moniot* the suppression of the national dimension. It is an overlap between what is national and what is international. He considers that this project in no way threatens the identity consciousness of the learner. On the contrary, the teaching of a universal history constitutes a good protector of the idea of otherness which presents an essential link in the identity formation of the learner : « An idea of universality can cover and protect the plurality of societies and cultures, recognizing and relativizing singular identities. » (Moniot, 1998, p.8).

For *Moniot*, teaching a detailed, ideologized and politicized national history cannot result in inculcating in the learner the political and civic values and principles that we want to transmit to him. Moreover, school history does not mean the transmission of hardened and isolated definitions. The successful teaching of historical knowledge requires the choice of brief, meaningful and exciting historical knowledge.

In Italy, the teaching of global and transnational history has been defended since the year 2000 by the specialist in history didactics *Luigi Cajani* (Cajani, 2002). This researcher even thinks that it is necessary to draw up a diagram of the curriculum of world history which refers to the achievements of research and which can serve as a point of reference in the different national contexts, while safeguarding their particular educational requirements (Cajani, 2004a, 2007).

At the light of this work and these debates, we can say that in the Anglo-Saxon world, the theme of transnational history has for several decades exerted a certain attraction in school circles. But, if the impulse coming from this world must be taken seriously and questioned, it must be recognized that this approach is still weakly taken into consideration in the teaching programs of history in France

and in some other European countries because of the resistance of defenders of national history. Astonishing situation, in view of the effervescence which animates not only the English-speaking academic world; but also French, Italian and German universities, etc.

Starting from 2011, because of terrorist threats in these countries, from all sides, school history is indicted. Lively debates oppose didacticians, historians, journalists, popularizers and politicians on how to teach history. A first clan defends a teaching more anchored in the national dimension. Leading politicians who do not hide their desire to impose national narratives, highlight the Christian roots of these countries, and a somewhat curious vision of secularism. A second clan calls for teaching the relationships between states while establishing comparisons in order to deduce cultural similarities and differences. They believe that in the face of terrorist attacks, intercultural education is part of the remedy.

### **B - The transnational approach to history teaching in Tunisia : A proposal to solve the crisis of teaching school history**

In Tunisia, school history has often been marked by the demands of overloaded programs and the logic of a memorial accumulation of factual data presented in a linear fashion. Curriculum designers and textbook writers have always devised a history to teach, whether national or global, felt to be boring, off-putting, unsuited to developing the curiosity and critical sense of its audience.

In fact, the didactic research carried out within the framework of end-of-studies dissertations, master's dissertations and doctoral theses in history didactics have proved difficulties in learning historical knowledge among students in primary, college and secondary education. Our research, which is part of the master's theses defended at the *Higher Institute of Education and Continuing Education*, proved in 2005 that baccalaureate students in the arts section do not succeed in identifying the space of the Arab world nor to define its substitutable concepts. This research has also shown that these students have difficulty assimilating the elements of the history of Arab countries during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Farjallah, 2005).

Tunisian students are thus unable to establish the link between the events that have marked their country and those that have marked the rest of the countries that make up the Arab world during the contemporary era. One of the researches on the relationship of Tunisia with the Arab-Muslim world in medieval times in the history program for 5<sup>th</sup> year basic students has recently consolidated what we have already proven in 2005 (Arfaoui & Bouzidi, 2019). Indeed, it demonstrated that the majority of these students failed in either to specify the space of their country, nor to delimit its geographical location in the Arab-Muslim world, nor to identify the elements of this history, nor to define its civilizational characteristics during this period. Another research that looked at the learning of history among these same students showed that they have misconceptions about the Prophet *Muhammad*, the most influential figure in Arab-Muslim history (Bittouhemi & Felhi, 2019).

With regard to learning the modes of formal thought, our same research has shown that the success rate of teaching the different stages of historical thought to baccalaureate students in the Arts section did not exceed 8.33% in 2005 (Farjallah, 2005, p. 180).

Our doctoral thesis, which deepened our research on the subject of learning the historical method, demonstrated that these difficulties have their origin in the anomalies of programs and school textbooks and especially in the training of teachers and inspectors (Farjallah, 2017). The research of *Néjib Zaoui* (Zaoui, 2004) and *Sami Belhaj* (Belhaj, 2004) defended in 2004 has already highlighted the difficulties at the level of the appropriation of the elements of historical thought in the classes. In fact, they reveal real difficulties in terms of learning the two concepts of "Cold War" and "Industrial Revolution" among students in 4<sup>th</sup> year and 3<sup>rd</sup> year secondary Arts section. This problem of conceptualization was also demonstrated by our work supported in 2017 which was interested in the teaching of the concept of "Totalitarianism" to baccalaureate students (Farjallah, 2017), as well as in a research about the teaching of the concept of "Prehistory" to 5<sup>th</sup> year basic students (Gharbi & Naffouti, 2019).

The teaching of the historical document considered as the mainstay of learning history was also not immune to problems. According to *Belgacem Jemni's* research, the processing of historical documents in middle school represents a real obstacle for students, which prevents them from assimilating historical knowledge (Jemni, 2004). This same problem arises in elementary school and manifests itself in the practices of teachers (Amara & Bouhdida, 2019).

All these recorded problems and difficulties have put the teaching of history in the hot seat for several years. Journalists, education experts, academics, etc., wonder how school history can be reformed and constantly suggest substitutable themes. The teaching of the history of Tunisia, which occupies a primordial place in the official programs, in fact gives rise to more debate. In truth, in Tunisia, as in most Arab and European countries, and even other continents, it seems that we have returned to the era of polemics about the functions of the teaching of national history in the awakening of the feeling of belonging to the fatherland and in political consciousness.

To tell the truth, despite all the criticisms it has suffered and still faces, national history remains essential at school and in academic circles. However, the present fact of globalization, questioning of national states and an international context marked by new strategic issues and new international relations, encourages the development of analyzes that go beyond restricted national frameworks and to teach a school history that gives students the tools they need to understand everything around them and grasp this new global situation.

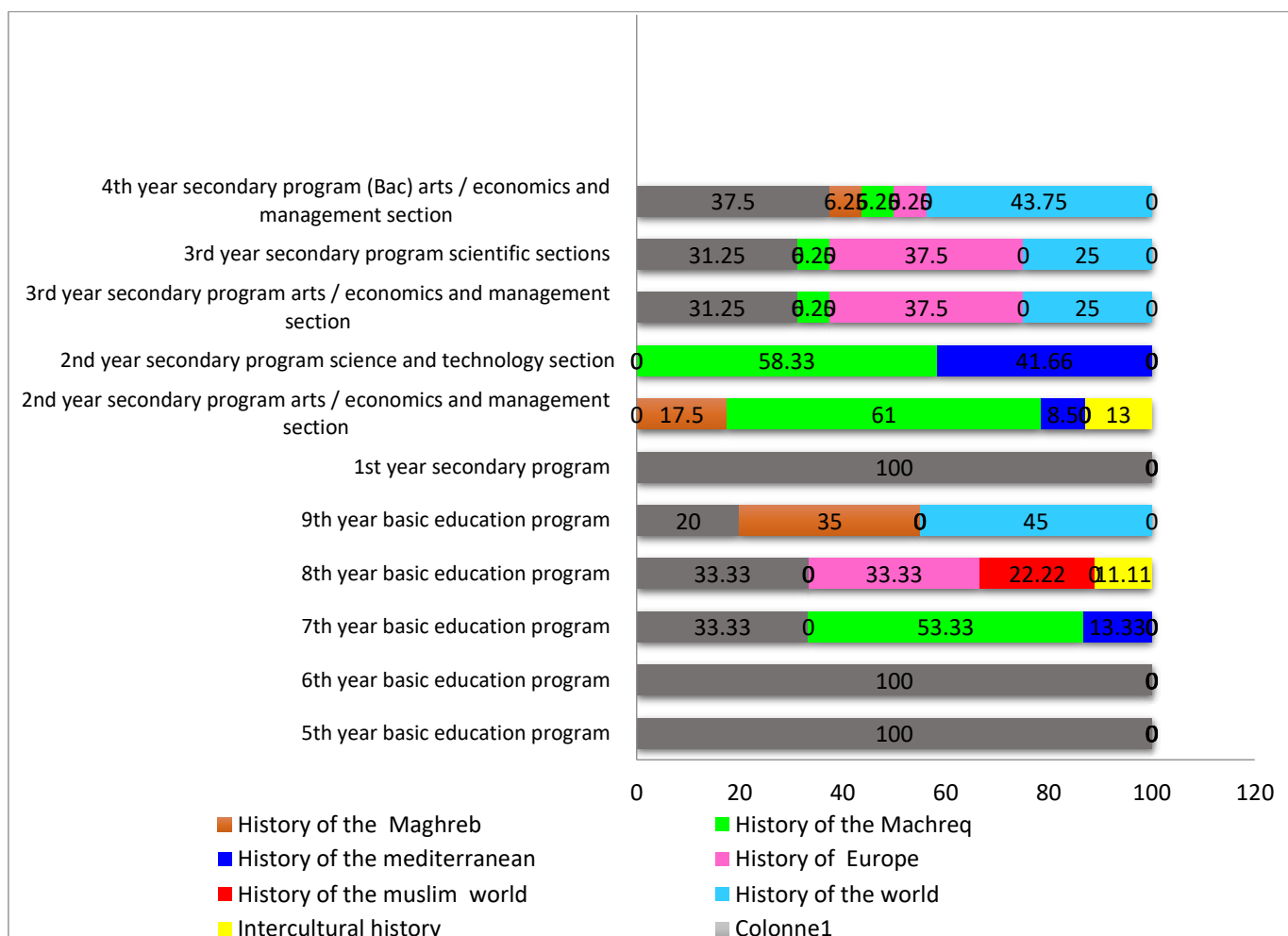
However, our analysis of the official program for the teaching of history in secondary education published in 2005 (Ministry of education and training, general direction of programs and continuing education, direction of programs and school textbooks, 2005), allowed us to highlight the weakness of the transnational approach. Its presence in the programs intended for students in the arts and economics-management sections varies between 4.34% and 9% and in those intended for students in the scientific sections, it is completely absent.

**Table 1 :** The object of school history programs published in Tunisia in 2005 - 2007

School level	Theme
5 <sup>th</sup> year basic education program	Teaching the history of Tunisia from prehistory to the 16 <sup>th</sup> century AD.

6 <sup>th</sup> year basic education program	The teaching of the history of Tunisia during the modern and contemporary era
7 <sup>th</sup> year basic education program	Teaching the history of Tunisia, the Mediterranean world and the Machreq during ancient times.
8 <sup>th</sup> year basic education program	The teaching of major civilizational changes in the Maghreb in medieval times and in Europe from the Renaissance to the end of the modern era
9 <sup>th</sup> year basic education program	The teaching of changes, problems and crises of the contemporary era: The world, the Maghreb and Tunisia.
1 <sup>st</sup> year secondary program	Teaching the history of Tunisia in the different historical periods (from the V <sup>th</sup> century BC. To 1987) with the aim to highlight its civilizational influence and its contribution in the construction of mediterranean and Arabo muslim civilizations.
2 <sup>nd</sup> year secondary program arts / economics and management section	Teaching of civilizational characteristics and major historical changes in the East and in the Mediterranean during the two ancient and medieval periods
2 <sup>nd</sup> year secondary program science and technology section	The teaching of civilizations and major historical changes in the East and in the Mediterranean world from the 5 <sup>th</sup> century BC. to XVI <sup>th</sup> century AD.
3 <sup>rd</sup> year secondary program arts / economics and management section	Teaching the history of Europe and the Muslim world and their interrelation during the modern era
3 <sup>rd</sup> year secondary program scientific sections	The teaching of major historical changes in the world and in Tunisia during the two modern and contemporary eras
4 <sup>th</sup> year secondary program (Bac) arts / economics and management section	Teaching crises and historical changes in the world during the 20 <sup>th</sup> century

**Figure1** : The place of transnational history in school history programs published in Tunisia in 2005– 2007



From January 2011, history once again became a major political issue in Tunisia. Politicians and media personalities have seized on it to try to recreate a discourse on the nation, a nation threatened today by the annihilation of its national identity because of religious extremism. Indeed, no one can doubt that after 2011 that extremist movements and terrorist actions threaten the cohesion of Tunisian society and deeply harm its development. Faced with this danger, the nationalists engaged in a collective movement to defend this national identity and the achievements of modernity.

Of course, fighting against violence and dogmatic thought presupposes strong and effective measures on the legal, economic and above all cultural and educational levels. The transition to democracy can only truly be achieved if schools succeed in disseminating political, civic and heritage culture and preparing citizens to be more aware than they are today.

While believing in the importance of its mission in this phenomenon of democratic transition, the Ministry of Education of post-revolutionary Tunisia has promised to assume in the future its full responsibility in the revision of the programs. Faced with the magnitude of the forthcoming educational challenges, it demonstrated its willingness to engage in a reform process aimed at setting up a new Tunisian school that is ambitious for democracy, openness and acculturation: « Thanks to the advent of the revolution, we intend to make the School a real and non-virtual space of freedom and openness, drawing inspiration in its mission from humanist ideals and the universal principles of freedom, tolerance, democracy and of social justice. Schools must therefore rethink their strategies, programs and teaching practices. » (Baccouche, 2011).

In a grim and hazy global situation, it becomes essential to prepare young Tunisians to live in a world where technological development and the clash of cultures will multiply latent conflicts of interests, changes in mores and identity crises. Indeed, it is necessary that the Tunisian school plays the role of laboratory of intercultural education in order to guarantee a better living together with democratic reference. Here, it is allowed to say that the teaching of the transnational approach remains a good solution to the challenges facing the post-revolutionary Tunisian school. This new school history would make it possible to maintain the balance between the teaching of national history and that of the world and to respond to the ministerial recommendations which aim to teach universal values and to form a citizen who is tolerant and open to others. It still remains a good tool for cultural openness and a remedy against dogmatism.

As we have already specified, this school history project that we defend proposes to combine, without opposing, the teaching of national history to the teaching of world history. Our choice is then explained by three essential factors: - Solve the crisis of the ineffectiveness of Tunisian school history. - Respond to ministerial recommendations aimed at teaching universal values and forming citizens who are tolerant and open to others. - Fight against the radicalism and violence that have threatened Tunisian society since 2011.

We believe that this project will allow Tunisian students to make comparisons, to deduce similarities and differences, thus allowing them to position themselves in the national, Arab-Muslim, Mediterranean and universal space-time.

## CONCLUSION:

After the 2011 revolution, the Tunisian School is at the heart of an ideological dispute and the question of educational choices in the future reform which has not ceased to be controversial. In fact, the idea is commonly accepted that the independent state succeeded in forging the national feeling among Tunisians, in particular through the teaching of history designed essentially by Bourguiba and his team of leaders. However, empirical studies have shown the opposite: it is the common sense constructed by the ideas, values and ideologies circulating in Tunisian society that manages to accomplish the mission of civility that the orientations of official programs do not succeed to be achieved in the student through teaching (Farjallah, 2005).

School history, to which the power to regulate the problems of society is often assigned, is then obliged to renew its subjects and its orientations. It is in this context that the project of teaching transnational history that we have defended in this paper is situated. We believe that this approach, which is in vogue in several countries, presents a good solution to the issue of school history in the next educational reform.

Has the time therefore come to shake up taboos and recognize that locking oneself into the idea of teaching a Tunisia rooted in its Arab-Muslim and Mediterranean dimension by dismissing universal and connected history has become an archaic vision of school history? In view of the data that we have presented, and in the face of the problems that we have raised, the objective of this reflection is to try to lay the foundations of a new history project to be taught in Tunisian schools.

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