

Sounds Like it Could Be True
By
Daniel E. White February 2, 2026

“In 1930s Tunisia, French doctors feared a “tea craze” would destroy society and formed a threat to colonial rule.” This heading for an article by Nina Studer in *Gastro-Obscura* (a subsidiary of *Atlas Obscura*) lured us into reading more.

Studer began: “In 1927, at a meeting of the Academy of Medicine in Paris, a French-trained Tunisian doctor, Bechir Dinguizli, sounded the alarm about ‘a new social scourge’ spreading like an ‘oil stain’ across Tunisia. [Tea has] ‘entered our morals’ with lightning speed, [Dinguizli warned] and if not stopped by French authorities, has the power to paralyze Tunisian society.”

The immediate alarm was triggered by a very large spike in tea drinking in Tunisia. In 1917, Tunisians consumed 100,000 kilos of tea. By 1926, that number had grown to 1,100,000 kilos. “Among French administrators, there was real fear that the colonial population was turning into tea addicts, with medical, social, and economic consequences for France’s *mission civilisatrice*.”

“French publications named the phenomenon ‘teaism.’ A few French doctors had written journal articles about the symptoms of the disease, the main one being a ‘lack of self-control in uneducated Tunisians.’ Dinguizli considered teaism an addiction akin to alcoholism. Addicts would do almost anything to satisfy their habit, including selling all of their possessions and resorting to stealing from others.”

By the 1940s Algeria had caught a bit of the hysteria. In 2026, tea is close to a national drink in Tunisia.

Studer posits a number of theories about the concern over the supposed beverage addiction. Most fun is one that does not relate to North Africa but to Europe. The British had been tea drinkers for generations, and it rankled some French people and their colleagues in Tunisia that the British habit of sharing a cup of tea should have infected the French colony.

I have experience with crazes. When Head of School at Sacramento Country Day, I was forced to become as informed as I could about electro-magnetic fields, all because of a provocative magazine article. The article noted clusters of cancer occurring around electric company substations and sounded the alarm about those tall, high-tension towers that bring electricity from sources of power to distribution points.

Country Day’s playfields were underneath the pathway of such towers. A few years before I arrived at SCDS, a young student had died of cancer. A memorial tree to the young man grew in the elementary school courtyard. Each of these unrelated facts became a part of a campaign by well-meaning folks for the school to abandon its fields, perhaps even move the school because of the proximity of the buildings to the towers.

In response, the school bought a gauss meter for measurement purposes. I looked into the electro-magnetic field around various household appliances and television sets. If the numbers

being touted by the alarmed were, indeed, dangerously high (by whatever standards), then using a hand-held hair dryer was more of a threat to one’s health. The facts that I found still were not enough to allay the fear that some in our community developed from reading that magazine article.

Someone suggested that I write to the President of the American Academy of Physicists, asking for his take on the matter. After all, he knew a whole lot more about electricity than I did. Dr. Robert Adair took the time to answer me in a personal letter (making me think that I was not the first person to ask him questions about electro-magnetic fields).

Dr. Adair observed that between 1945 and 1995 the use of electricity in homes, businesses and elsewhere in American society had increased by some enormous factor. In that same period of time, the incidence of the cancers so concerning to the magazine writer had not increased measurably. Hence, correlating electro-magnetic field-caused diseases with the spread of electricity failed the test of logic.

I don’t think the alarmists were convinced. But at least they stopped bothering me.

At the mall the other day, I saw a bumper sticker that made me think about my correspondence with Dr. Adair. It read: “It’s easy to believe in conspiracy theories when you don’t understand how things work.”

The idea of “teaism” is ludicrous (despite the apparent British belief that a cup of tea will solve everything). Banning the import of tea to Tunisia never happened. Tunisian society did not dissolve in a flood of tea. Experience showed the tea drinkers that the “teaists” were wrong.

But the idea had some staying power because of the influence of one Tunisian doctor and a few academic physicians in France. In the absence of understanding, a portion of the population deferred to a few men who had medical degrees.

My Sacramento antagonists were swayed by a magazine article that sounded authoritative. No doubt the author included the opinions of professionals who got a lot of attention by alarming people who didn’t understand electricity or cancer. Perhaps, they did not understand how most things in their lives work.

In this age punctuated by various conspiracy theories and “truthiness,” when few of us have time to delve deeply into much of anything, let alone understand, how easy it is to hear something, respond “well, sounds like it might be true,” and go on with the challenge of daily living in our complex society without much more thought?

Fertile ground for conspiracies.

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