



Towards an African Revolution: Fanon and the New Popular Movement (Hirak) Engulfing Algeria

By Hamza Hamouchene



During the upheavals that the North African and West Asian region witnessed a decade ago - what has been dubbed the 'Arab Spring' - Fanon's thought proved to be as relevant as ever. Not only relevant, but insightful in helping to grasp the violence of the world we live in, and the necessity of a sustained rebellion against it.

Fanon's wrote during in a period of decolonisation in Africa and elsewhere in the Global South. Born in Martinique, a French colony in the Caribbean, though Algerian by choice, he wrote from the vantage point of the Algerian revolution against French colonialism and of his political experiences on the African continent. Today, we might ask: can his analyses transcend the limitations of time? Can we learn from him as a committed intellectual and revolutionary thinker? Or should we just reduce him to another anti-colonial figure, largely irrelevant for our post-colonial times?

For me, as an Algerian activist, Fanon's dynamic and revolutionary thinking, always about creation, movement and becoming, remains prophetic, vivid and committed to emancipation from all forms of oppression. He strongly and compellingly argued for a path to a future where humanity 'advances a step further' and breaks away from the world of colonialism and European universalism. Fanon

represented the maturing of anti-colonial consciousness and he was a decolonial thinker par excellence.

Despite his short life (he died at the age of 36 from leukaemia in 1961), Fanon's thought is rich and his work, in books, papers and speeches, prolific. He wrote his first book *Black Skin, White Masks* in 1952, two years before Điện Biên Phủ (the defeat of the French in a crucial battle in Vietnam) and his last book, *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1961. His 1961 classic became a treatise on the anti-colonialist and Third-Worldist struggle, one year before Algerian independence, at a moment when sub-Saharan African countries were gaining their independence - an experience in which Fanon was deeply and practically involved.

In Fanon's intellectual journey, we can see the interactions between Black America and Africa, between the intellectual and the militant, between theory and practice, idealism and pragmatism, individual analysis and collective action, the psychological life (he trained as a psychiatrist) and physical struggle, nationalism and Pan-Africanism and finally between questions of colonialism and those of neo-colonialism.

Fanon did not live to see his adoptive country become free from French colonial domination, something he believed had become inevitable. Yet his experiences and analysis were the prism through which many revolutionaries abroad understood Algeria and helped to turn the country into the mecca of Third World revolution.

Six decades after the publication of his masterpiece *The Wretched*, Algeria is witnessing another revolution, this time against the national bourgeoisie that Fanon railed against in his ferocious chapter [‘The Pitfalls of National Consciousness.’](#)

Fanon and colonial Algeria

The Algerian independence struggle against the French was one of the most inspiring anti-imperialist revolutions of the 20th century. It was part of a wave of decolonisation that had started after the Second World War in India, China, Cuba, Vietnam and many countries in Africa. The wave of decolonisation inscribed itself in the spirit of the Bandung Conference and the era of the ‘awakening of the South’, the Third world as it was then known, which has been subjected to decades of colonial and capitalist domination under several forms, from protectorates to settler colonies.

Frantz Fanon methodically unpicked the mechanisms of violence put in place by colonialism. He wrote: ‘Colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state.’ According to him, the colonial world is a Manichean world (to see things as having only two sides), which goes to its logical conclusion and ‘dehumanises the native, or to speak plainly it turns him into an animal.’

What followed the insurrection on November 1, 1954, launched by nationalist forces against the French, was one of the longest and bloodiest wars of decolonisation, which saw the widespread involvement of the rural poor and urban popular classes. Huge numbers of Algerians were killed in the eight-year war against the French that ended in 1962, a war that has become the foundation of modern Algerian politics.

Arriving at Blida psychiatric hospital in 1953 in French controlled Algeria, Fanon realised quickly that colonisation, in its essence, produced madness. For him, colonisation was a systematic negation of the other and a refusal to attribute humanity to them. In contrast to other forms of domination, the violence here was total, diffuse, and permanent.

Treating both French torturers and liberation fighter, Fanon could not escape this total violence. This led him to resign in 1956 and to join the Front de libération nationale (FLN). He wrote: 'The Arab, alienated permanently in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalisation.' He added that the Algerian war was 'a logical consequence of an abortive attempt to decerebralise a people'.

Fanon saw colonial ideology being underpinned by the affirmation of white supremacy and its 'civilising mission.' The result was the development in the 'indigènes évolués' (literally the more evolved natives) of a desire to be white, a desire which is nothing more than an existential aberration. However, this desire stumbles upon the unequal character of the colonial system which assigns places according to colour.

Throughout his professional work and militant writings, Fanon challenged the dominant culturalist and racist approaches on the 'native': Arabs are lazy, liars, deceivers, thieves, etc. He advanced a materialist explanation, situating symptoms, behaviours, self-hatred and inferiority complexes in a life of oppression and the reality of unequal colonial relations.

Fanon believed in revolutionary Algeria. His illuminating book *A Dying Colonialism* (published in 1959) or as it is known in French *L'An Cinq de la Révolution Algérienne*, shows how liberation does not come as a gift. It is seized by the popular classes with their own hands and by seizing it they are themselves transformed. He strongly argued the most elevated form of culture - that is to say, of progress - is to resist colonial domination. For Fanon, revolution was a transformative process that created 'new souls.' For this reason, Fanon closes his 1959 book with the words: 'The revolution ...changes man and renews society, has reached an advanced stage. This oxygen which creates and shapes a new humanity - this, too, is the Algerian revolution.'

Bankruptcy of the post-colonial ruling elites

Unfortunately, the Algerian revolution and its attempt to break from the imperialist-capitalist system was defeated, both by counter-revolutionary forces and by its own contradictions. The revolution harboured the seeds of its own failure from the start: it was a top-down, authoritarian, and highly bureaucratic project (albeit with some redistributive aspects that improved people's lives in the reforms carried out in the first years of independence).

However, the creative experiences of workers' initiatives and self-management of the 1960s and 1970s were undermined by a paralyzing state bureaucracy that failed to genuinely involve workers in the control of the processes of production. This lack of democracy was connected with the ascendancy of a comprador bourgeoisie that was hostile to socialism, workers control and staunchly opposed to genuine land reform.

By the 1980s, the global neoliberal counter-revolution was the nail in the coffin and ushered in an age of deindustrialization and pro-market policies in Algeria, at the expense of the popular classes. The dignitaries of the new neoliberal orthodoxy declared that everything was for sale and opened the way for mass privatization.

Fanon's work still bears a prophetic power as an accurate description of what happened in Algeria and elsewhere in the Global South. Fanon foretold the bankruptcy and sterility of national bourgeoisies in Africa and the Middle East today. A 'profiteering caste', he wrote, that tended to replace the colonial ruling class with a new class-based system replicating the old structures of exploitation and oppression.

By the 1980s, the Algerian national bourgeoisie had dispensed with popular legitimacy, turned its

back on the realities of poverty and underdevelopment. In Fanon's terms, this parasitic and unproductive bourgeoisie (both civilian and military) was the greatest threat to the sovereignty of the nation. In Algeria, this class was closely connected to the ruling party, the FLN, and renounced the autonomous development initiated in the 1960s and offered one concession after another for privatizations and projects that would undermine the country's sovereignty and endanger its population and environment — the exploitation of shale gas and offshore resources being just one example.

Today, Algeria - but also Tunisia, Egypt, Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana, Gabon, Angola and South Africa, among others - follows the dictates of the new instruments of imperialism such as the IMF, the World Bank and negotiate entry into the World Trade Organisation. Some African countries continue to use the CFA franc (renamed Eco in December 2019), a [currency inherited from colonialism](#) and still under the control of the French Treasury.

Fanon predicted this behaviour of the national bourgeoisie when he noted that its mission has nothing to do with transforming the nation but rather consists of 'being the transmission line between the nation and capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the masque of neo-colonialism.' Fanon's analysis of the class basis of independence speaks to the contemporary postcolonial reality, a reality shaped by a national bourgeoisie 'unabashedly...anti-national,' opting he added, for the path of a conventional bourgeoisie, 'a bourgeoisie which is stupidly, contemptibly and cynically bourgeois.'

Fanon also noted in 1961 the international division of labour, where we Africans 'still export raw materials and continue being Europe's small farmers who specialise in unfinished products.' Algeria remains in an extractivist model of development where profits are accumulated in the hands of a foreign-backed minority at the expense of [dispossession of the majority](#).

The Hirak and the new Algerian revolution

Fanon alerted us sixty years ago that the enrichment of this 'profiteering caste' will be accompanied by 'a decisive awakening on the part of the people and a growing awareness that promised stormy days to come.' In 2019 Algerians shattered the wall of fear and broke from a process that had infantilised and dazed them for decades. They [erupted onto the political scene](#), discovered their political will and began again to make history.

Since 22 February 2019, millions of people, young and old, men and women from different social classes rose in a momentous rebellion. Historic Friday marches, followed by protests in professional sectors, united people in their rejection of the ruling system and their demands of radical democratic change. 'They must all go!' (*Yetnahaw ga'*), 'The country is ours and we'll do what we wish' (*Lablad abladna oundirou rayna*), became two emblematic slogans of the uprising, symbolising the radical evolution of a popular movement (*Al Hirak Acha'bi*). The uprising was triggered by the incumbent president Bouteflika's announcement that he would run for a fifth term despite suffering from aphasia and being absent from public life.

The movement (Hirak) is unique in its scale, peaceful character, national spread - including the marginalised south, and participation of women and young people, who constitute the majority of Algeria's population. The extent of popular mobilisation has not been seen since 1962, when Algerians went to the streets to celebrate their hard-won independence from France.

The popular classes have affirmed their role as agents in their own destiny. We can use Fanon's exact words to describe this phenomenon: 'The thesis that men change at the same time that they change the world has never been as manifest as it is now in Algeria. This trial of strength not only

remodels the consciousness that man has of himself, and of his former dominators or of the world, at last within his reach. The struggle at different levels renews the symbols, the myths, the beliefs, the emotional responsiveness of the people. We witness in Algeria man's reassertion of his capacity to progress.'

The Hirak succeeded in unravelling the webs of deceit that were deployed by the ruling class and its propaganda machine. Moreover, the evolution of its slogans, chants, and forms of resistance, is demonstrative of processes of politicisation and popular education. The re-appropriation of public spaces created a kind of an agora where people discuss, debate, exchange views, talk strategy and perspectives, criticize each other or simply express themselves in many ways including through art and music. This has opened new horizons for resisting and building together.

Cultural production also took on another meaning because it was associated with liberation and seen as a form of political action and solidarity. Far from the folkloric and sterile productions under the suffocating patronage of authoritarian elites, we have seen instead a culture that speaks to the people and advances their resistance and struggles through poetry, music, theatre, cartoons, and street-art. Again, we see Fanon's insights in his theorisation of culture as a form of political action: 'A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people's true nature. It is not made up of the inert dregs of gratuitous actions, that is to say actions which are less and less attached to the ever-present reality of the people.'

The struggle of decolonisation continues

Leaving aside largely semantic arguments around whether it is a movement, uprising, revolt or a revolution, one can say for certain that what is taking place in Algeria today is a transformative process, pregnant with emancipatory potential. The evolution of the movement and its demands specifically around 'independence', 'sovereignty' and 'an end to the pillage of the country's resources' are fertile ground for anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and even ecological ideas.

Algerians are making a direct link between their current struggle and the anti-French colonial resistance in the 1950s, seeing their efforts as the continuation of decolonisation. When chanting 'Generals to the dustbin and Algeria will be independent', they are laying bare the vacuous official narrative around the glorious revolution and revealing that it has been shamelessly used to pursue personal enrichment. We see a second Fanonian moment where people expose the neo-colonial situation and emphasise one unique characteristic of their uprising: its rootedness in the anti-colonial struggle against the French.

Slogans and chants have captured this desire and made references to anti-colonial war veterans such as Ali La Pointe, Amirouche, Ben Mhidi and Abane: 'Oh Ali [la pointe] your descendants will never stop until they wrench their freedom!' and 'We are the descendants of Amirouche and we will never go back!'

The struggle of decolonisation is being given a new lease of life as Algerians lay claim to the popular and economic sovereignty that was denied to them when formal independence was achieved in 1962. In Fanon's prophetic words: 'The people who at the beginning of the struggle had adopted the primitive Manichaeism of the settler - Blacks and Whites, Arabs and Christians - realise as they go along that it sometimes happens that you get Blacks who are whiter than the whites and the hope of an independent nation does not always tempt certain strata of the populations to give up their interests or privileges.'

*This two-part long read is an extract from a chapter in a forthcoming book *Fanon Today: The Revolt and Reason of the Wretched of the Earth* (edited by Nigel Gibson, Daraja Press 2021).*

This article was first published in the [Review of African Political Economy Journal](#).

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