Algeria: November, or the Principle of Hope (On the Algerian Liberation Struggle)

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On 1st November, 1954, the Algerian national liberation movement got into the phase of armed struggle. A series of bombings in major cities across the country triggered what would become the longest and deadliest war of liberation in the continent. But this passage also marked an unprecedented "break" in history that has become the "tradition" of modern colonization: it injected into the consciences of the indigenous populations of Algeria and Africa, burdened by two centuries of European domination, a scheme perception of new the historical time. History was no longer a fate burdened by the past of defeats and closed to the future, but a collective construction of the future, even though it sometimes required the use of violence and sacrifice. This movement was initiated in the thirties by the Algerian People's Party (PPA) then led by the charismatic Messali Hadj. For more than twenty years, he had been committed to the "political", legal and peaceful claim for equality of all citizens first, then independence. For such a break, he was cornered by the vicious and arrogant refusal of the colonists in Algeria and the metropolitan State in France and their blindness vis-à-vis the future. These were in the rear of historical time, preserving and safeguarding the established privileges of the colonial conquest when the initiators of 1st November had turned their eyes toward the future to escape the "asthenizing" weightiness of the past. This turnaround look by the temerity of the first group, the FLN, will then be gradually adopted by the large majority of the indigenous population. It became "a people" while it engaged in the new historical dynamics, that of liberation. It is this infinite dose of energy than 1st November, 1954 set in motion and it managed to achieve this transformation by substituting the fate of the dominated for the hope and optimism of the rebels' will.

Writing these words, I am thinking of the sinister concept of "Afro-pessimism" created a few years ago to remove "the pessimism of the intellect", carried by theoretical research, from the "optimism of the will", without which it would sink into resentment, guilt and the determinism of accumulated failures, and without which it would especially close its perspective to what "may" happen, to time then, as history and not as fatality. And I think of Francis Fanon, this man from afar geographically, the Caribbean, but from so close given his condition as a dominated, and who managed to give to this political reversal conducted by 1st November, the theory it needed. The *Wretched of the Earth* remains one of the philosophical underpinnings of the revolution taking place, but also of the revolutions to come.

This text was written for Algerian readers on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the war of liberation in response to the pervading "Algerian-pessimism", a local form of the work of despair that affects many African intellectuals.

November or the Principle of Hope

It was on 1st November, 2009. I was 8 years old when it began, now I am 63. I was in Skikda, today I'm in Nantes. Here, it is raining like in the song of Barbara. From the window of my office overlooking La Loire, the rain is pouring down in rustling droplets on misted-up window panes. It makes a background like a choir and a veil, on the voice of Fairouz coming out of the computer. She is singing Kifak Anta.

In the city, almost everything is closed. People are in cemeteries to honor the memories of their deceased folks. "Here", in France, 1st November is the day of the "dead", All Saints' Day. But "there" in Algeria, it must be beautiful, sunny, warm, a different memory, that of the birth of hope that will take over seven years and claim hundreds of thousands of deaths later, not to subside, because a hope that subsides dies, but to embody the immense and Homeric joy of July 62.

Well, I read the Algerian press on the Internet this morning. Guess what, I found no trace of this hope. Has 1st November become by mimicry a day for the dead, a local "All Saints' Day". Hence these remarks, "my" untimely remarks that El Watan's editorial staff will enable me to publish in my column.

Officials, the first as always, monopolize the event and as ever and everywhere, in every 1stNovember of each country, they weigh it down with protocols, rhetoric, "chrysanthemums" and end up erasing in the boredom the memories whose "spirit" they pretended to revive. For, what is November, apart from the factual events of a few "attacks" that the colonial press also hastened to inflame to legitimize retaliations in return? And why November instead of December, why the 1st of the month and not the third, why 1954 and not 1955? Of course, historians have much to do to follow in the infinitely small and infinitely complex this small segment of time which inaugurates a new period. It's their job, that is not simple and which nobody can dispute, and it is not in such a pattern that I am writing these lines.

1st November, 1954 is a "limit" in the mathematical sense of the word, one that puts a quantity of a sign into the other, liquid to gas or inversely to solid, fetus to baby, life to death. It is inscribed in the continuity of time and at the same time, which is rather no longer the same time, produces a "break" in this continuity. But this is not as visible as water when it becomes ice, because it is located mainly in the consciences of actors first, then of populations. For the former, the irreversible has been done, we can no longer get back, we "dared", time is now arrowed. For the latter, ordinary people, we remain

enthralled by the recklessness of action, even if we remain fearful, anxious about its results: retaliation, for sure, but especially failure once again in the face of the disproportionate strength of the opponent. The father of Belaïd Abdessalam (former Prime Minister) said to his son: "*how you and your friends can imagine that you are going to fight and vanquish France, are you crazy!*" And they were crazy indeed, those "imaginative" adolescents who had thought the unthinkable? But is it not the peculiarity of any invention, new creation, "Ijtihad" (invention, a new creation in Arabic) to go beyond the visible limits that the routine of an orthodoxy, a tradition, a rule has set forever. Here, we are in the colonial "tradition", but this is valid in all fields: science, arts, politics always refer to "events" of this kind. I can hear Pope Urban VIII say to his friend and protégé Galileo who presented his findings to him: "But it's sheer folly!

For Algeria, 1st November means the birth of a new imagination, a new possible world, because, through this break, it inaugurated a new period in the country's history, a new possible world in the age-old routine of the colonial times , a new life, this time drawn by hope. I dream of an anthropological survey that would study changes in people's posture: probably, straightening shoulders, eyes no longer looking down when they meet those of colonists, a more assured, less furtive gait. Because "the spirit of November" certainly had an impact on people's bodies, dreams, emotions, for sure. It gave birth to a new society and a new form of individuals. In each slave, who had been submissive to their all-powerful masters since time immemorial, the same metamorphosis must have occurred at the moment they decided to free themselves, for they become free from the moment they decide to. Thus, they freed themselves from their own selves, their own fears, their self-submission.

This discontinuity and the openness to the possibilities it introduced makes this event yet factually less dense than 8 May, 1945 or 20 August, 1955, the "founder" of the new Algeria. And my thinking goes far beyond the fact itself. For what is November, if not the Algerian form of what all philosophers have tried to understand: the irruption into the consciences of the "principle of hope", of the "power within and not outside the human being" which Avicenna, the leftist in medieval Aristotelianism, had opposed to his master Aristotle, who thought it was external to him. "Power is within us", seemed to say that disciple to his master. As a philosopher, this is the message that I have grasped from the anniversary of 1st November. And it is towards "the principle of hope" that my eyes turn when I try to understand this strange alchemy that transforms and mutates, often against all predictions, human organizations of which Algeria is not the least.

Yet, Algerians, now exhausted by the chaotic pace of society, are transposing their pessimism to the anniversary day of their current existence as a free and independent society. And here they are, clumsily gone in search of anything that might bring back "the spirit of November", its "principle of hope" therefore, its exact opposite. To this end, everything is sought: amateur historians who are eyeing in keyholes to track down the intimate talks for, as Hegel said, "No man is a hero to his valet"; novelists who are unable or unwilling to write "pure novels", as Yasmina Khadra was able to do in his first phase, and who lean, like against a crutch, their fiction against historical facts quickly skimmed over; and finally policies which repeat ad nauseam the non-repetitive event on 1st November and invent or recreate on occasions, more than fifty years after, opponents who are "their size". I mean the "Blackfeet" (*pieds noirs*)* who are agitating in the South of France and causing in each of their seasonal agitations disproportionate reactions they use to increase their sphere of influence. Who are they and what is left? A small minority, often elderly, who live with their memories no longer shared even by their children who were born and grew up in France, a small group that has not aged well in its resentments and regrets towards a country where they used to be the dominants. And because they have lost everything in this story, they are the losers, the vanquished.

But for Algerians, the winners then, what is the interest in reacting so quickly and strongly to the agitation of the vanquished. The liberation war is far back, Algeria is independent. The senile "coloniality" of small agitated groups of Blackfeet, finding an echo in the strong reactivity of those who vanquished them, is anachronous: there is no more "War in Algeria", and coming back to it, we may fabricate small symbolic battles, we believe to gain in continuity (we hold the torch as they say) but we muddle the "spirit of hope" of the great battle, the founder of November 54. This goes on because, unlike the old Blackfeet whose eyes are riveted on their past, the eyes of young Algerians are riveted on the future.

1st November is a date in time, but the spirit of November is the horizon of time.

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* The *pieds noirs* are French people who were born in Algeria before independence, but left the country to settle in France after the Algeria National Liberation Front (FLN) won the liberation struggle.