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Algeria

Revolution, project and democracy - notes on the Hirak

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Now, in its seventh month of uninterrupted mobilization, the Algerian popular protest movement, *Hirak*, considering its spread, scale and lack of political resolution, can be seen as a long-term development generating a debate which is more conceptual than punctual. Terms like revolution, democracy, constituent process, social class, oligarchy, *issaba* and bourgeoisie, are the key words that structure debate and action.

To grasp this dynamic, critics and analysts use analogies with other phenomena which are similar or considered as such, those closest in time and space, such as the current Sudanese movement or the Tunisian revolution, to more distant ones like the Russian or French revolutions. These analogies are obviously necessary, if at least we refrain from erecting them as models. They make it possible to place the future of Algeria in world history and in a structured debate around a set of common theoretical, methodological and historical references that the various critics take up, here and elsewhere.

This is what we will revisit in this contribution starting from the reality on the ground.

Rupture, continuity or transition?

The popular movement underway has no a priori ideal to be realized. Like all the movements that have punctuated the modern history of humankind, it seeks first of all to find new political and social relations, in other words to find the best way for cultural, economic and social development. The revolutions of the 20th century, all in societies considered “backward” in terms of economic development (Russia, China, Algeria, Vietnam, Cuba and so on) had the objective of “development of the productive forces”. Are we witnessing today a blockage of the development of these productive forces which would be the prelude to a social revolution? [\[1\]](#)

Anyway, staying with the Algerian case, its evolution since February 22 clarifies these issues for society. If the motivation that prompted the movement was, in its beginnings, on the ground of “rediscovered dignity”, it rose to a crescendo in a critique of what is called the “System”, a critique that however remains essentially moral. This is what the fundamental slogan of the movement “*Klitou l'bled ya serraquin*” (“You stole the country”) expresses. The criticism of the regime is at a moral level with legal implications and avoids a profound critique of the neoliberal economic system. Today, the thieves denounced by the *Hirak* are presented as “*Issaba*” (criminal gang, in Arabic).

This is a hub of the movement. On the ground, criticism develops that Gaid Salah tries to “get closer to the real people who demand action”, and to denounce him would be “an abandonment of the aspirations of the masses to the judgment of rotten and corrupt politicians.” This is what, for example, one of the influential members of the “Panel”, the structure set up by the government to negotiate with the political oppositions for the organisation of elections, journalist A. Belhimer argues; “the army accompanies a peaceful revolution, protects it and refuses to confiscate it, and laboriously but courageously catches its breath after a long period of empty instrumentalization”. [\[2\]](#) This constitutes support, barely critical, for the military institution.

On the other hand, there is the criticism that Gaid Salah is rather “in the phase of intimidation” of the protest movement. If he tries to gain popularity by accusing every social and professional category, from the young man accused of raising the “*Amazigh*” emblem to the businessman or entrepreneur and industrialist, now “oligarchs” accused of embezzlement and corruption, “this may be the prelude to something more serious”, runs this correct

view, which is constructed at the rhythm of the *Hirak*.

Unless you are naive, you must not minimize this risk. The important thing is to warn that the population has the right to know the reasons for incarceration and to require trials in full transparency. This claim is democratic. It is even potentially revolutionary in the context we live in, where any realization of a transitional demand of this kind involves ruptures, especially in justice, since it is at this level that the key issue is located.

This translates politically into two competing positions. The first advocates the passage through a presidential election that restores as soon as possible the political stability of the regime and the system. The second calls for a rupture with the current state of affairs, and therefore a period of transition to a new situation in tune with the aspirations of the people in motion, with a sovereign constituent assembly as a focus.

However, the prospects for a fair and democratic outcome for this phase of struggle are receding. But the movement did not fail, even if we did not take the “Casa d’Elmouradia” on the model of the “taking of the Winter Palace”, or that “of the palace of Carthage” (in the Tunisian case). The nature and scale of the movement requires a dynamic of rupture and transition. The term “transition” emerges as the best able to translate actions to consider in the short or medium term but then immediately poses the question: how to lead this transition and towards which objective?

The form this transition will take depends, in the last instance, on the balance of power that is built up according to the rhythm of the struggles and the confrontation of projects. The idea of the Constituent Assembly, for example, was very much in the minority in the aftermath of 22 February. It was not about waiting for a relationship of forces favouring the poor to be established to demand this assembly, but rather forcing back the regime to prevent a consensus and compromise between it and factions of the oligarchy. Its function is to arm the people in struggle with a political slogan to concretize the “departure of the system”. That’s what happened in part. Today, the idea of the constituent process has won over a part of civil and political society. Whatever the outcome of this phase of struggle, whether presidential election or constituent assembly, the challenge is for us to deepen the process leading to social and political emancipation.

To consider that the movement is not finished must not, however, prevent us from underlining its contradictions, or the stalemate in which it finds itself today.

The “Gramscian” paradigm

The fundamental contradiction in today’s *Hirak* reminds us of the historical dilemma diagnosed by the Italian Communist leader Antonio Gramsci during the Italian crisis of the 1920s. A dilemma that holds true at every revolutionary stalemate.

It was during the crisis of world capitalism of 1929 that Gramsci spoke of the “crisis of authority” or “crisis of hegemony” of European capitalism, writing that: “If the ruling class has lost consensus, that is, if it no longer ‘leads’ but only ‘rules’ – it possesses sheer coercive power – this actually means that the great masses have become detached from traditional ideologies.” [3]

This means that the political conditions for a revolutionary denouement are not yet met. This type of historical situation is characterized in the oft-quoted phrase: “the crisis consists in the fact that the old is dying and the new is not yet born”..

It is in this impasse between a discredited regime, incapable of governing, and a popular movement that is not yet capable of building a new power, that Bonapartism can emerge, notes Gilbert Achcar (see *The People Want*, University of California Press, 2013). This was the case, with all due proportion, of Boumediene in 1965. It was also the same type of contradiction that generated an Islamist fascistic dynamic in Algeria in 1991. Today, the alarmism of some circles, including neoliberals, who seek a quick solution through a presidential election, acts in this direction, the objective being to find a “Bonaparte” and thus avoid an intervention of the masses organized for a broad democratic solution.

However, our present situation is undoubtedly different from that of 1965 or January 1991 and is still further from Gramsci’s Italy. The crisis is not as acute, either economically or, to a lesser degree, politically.

It is a crisis that occurred, however, after decades of dismantling the “social contract” on which the hegemony of state capitalism, built in 1965 by Boumediene, was based. Since the 1980s and the initial economic opening known as “infatih”, neoliberal destabilization and precarisation of socio-economic conditions have slowly but surely fuelled a general retreat on identity markers (religion, ethnicity, culture, nation) as well as a drift towards neoliberal ideology.

This raises the question of whether this situation is a consequence of the global crisis of capitalism that the world is experiencing, or rather the product of a specific crisis in the state, rentier and patrimonial system that characterizes this part of the world. as Achcar points out in his study of the Arab world. This question remains open and cannot be dealt with within the limits of this contribution.

Be that as it may, short-term action suggests an unrestrained democratic demand.

Class democracy or class critique of democracy?

By democracy, we must understand the conquest by the people of political power. “The presupposition of democracy is politics” said the French activist and philosopher Daniel Bensaïd. [4] This is the starting condition for all economic development and social emancipation. This is where the immediate challenge of any revolution lies

This issue is well highlighted by the Algerian *Hirak*. The debate on constitution or presidential election that we raised above expresses this economic issue. To proceed by a platform of cultural, social and economic demands addressed to the regime is a form of recognition of the legitimacy of this regime. However, in a historic moment when millions of people on the street claim the departure of this regime, this posture is akin to a support of the “regime” and the “system” in place!

“Democracy is the resolved mystery of all constitutions. Here the constitution not only in itself, according to essence, but according to existence and actuality is returned to its real ground, actual man, the actual people, and established as its own work. The constitution appears as what it is, the free product of men...”, Marx emphasized in his “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right”. [5] And he added in the continuation of his argument that “democracy is the essence of every political constitution, socialised man under the form of a particular constitution of the state... stands related to other constitutions as the genus to its species; only here the genus itself appears as an existent, and therefore opposed as a particular species to those existents which do not conform to the essence. Democracy relates to all other forms of the state as their Old Testament. Man does not exist because of the law but rather the law exists for the good of man. Democracy is human existence, while in the other political forms man has only legal existence. That is the fundamental difference of democracy.” [6]

It is not therefore a question of starting from a metaphysical vision of democracy. It is a question of starting from reality, and this is ultimately a social reality. Every man, woman, group, association or political party, according to the position of each on the social chessboard which is structured according to the layers and social classes, develops a critique of democracy. So, there is a class critique of democracy and not a class democracy, just as for Marx, methodologically, "there is not a class political economy, but a class critique of political economy." [7]

From this point of view, the most democratic attitude is to organize a sovereign constituent assembly that will see the mobilized people build a new beginning from a new social and political power struggle. And it is according to this new balance of power that a new dynamic can be envisaged. This new reality will obviously not be the end of history but will allow us to initiate or continue the same democratic and social struggle on new bases and from new rules. To paraphrase Daniel Bensaïd, it is always to go further, to transgress permanently its instituted forms so as to extend permanently and in all fields access to equality and citizenship.

The second attitude that favours the passage via a presidential election is rather trying to curb this momentum. It protects the interests of the oligarchy in power. This gang of criminals, *Aissaba* in Arabic, is not a simple malformation of the regime that ruled the country under the reign of Bouteflika. It is the tip of the iceberg of the neoliberal economic system, which constitutes the dominant ideological matrix of the system and is broader than the sphere of the regime. The hidden part of this iceberg, which has not reached this level of malfeasance, has not totally lost the battle.

However, the form of organization and protest, the very nature of the movement, the lack of organization of the movement from workplaces and sites of life, urban neighbourhoods and villages, keeps that movement in a state of fragility and a defensive attitude of denunciation, unable to take offensive initiatives in the direction of the conquest of power. The call for forms of self-organization by the forces of the "democratic alternative", however late, is just and necessary for a more enterprising future. But its realization is far from being achieved. And even if it were effective, its democratic and subversive reach in the service of the majority and the poor depends ultimately on its component and content. It would constitute another space of political and ideological struggle, in other words the site of a permanent struggle.

The mere existence of self-organization is never the absolute guarantee of a truly democratic solution. Criticism in the service of the underprivileged and underprivileged classes must remember the example of the *Aïffrouch*, the self-organizing structure that emerged during the 2001 revolt that affected part of Algeria, Kabylie, as it must also remember the Iranian example of 1979.

This autumn, Gaid Salah is reviving his presidential political project after having, apparently, consolidated his bases within the military and security institution. At the same time, he anticipates the upcoming economic reform, inspired by neoliberalism, which aims to revise the rule 49/51 governed foreign investment in Algeria. This project, however, stumbles on the lack of credible political personnel to undertake it calmly. For its part, the popular movement is content with its "war of position" and rejection. It would benefit from redeploying to workplaces and daily living spaces for more active, organized and offensive action.

But in any case, the outcome of this contradiction will pave the way for a transition to new, more promising horizons, given the open breach in the system. Revolutionary political commitment is not based on any progressive scientific certainty but on a reasoned bet on the future. At first there was the indignation, the indignation of prostrating oneself before a person more dead than alive. Now, as indicated by Bensaïd, "indignation is a beginning. A way to get up and get going. We are indignant, we rebel, and then we see". It is now a question of seeing, collectively, how to move beyond indignation.

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[1] The same type of question was posed by Gilbert Achcar concerning the movements of revolt across a number of Arab countries in 2011-2012.

[2] DZ Video, 1 September 2019 [“Lahouari Addi : À « Dire que l’armée accompagne le hirak est faux, Belhimer À »

https://www.dzvid.com/2019/09/01/lahouari-addi-dire-que-larmee-accompagne-le-hirak-est-faux-belhimer/?fbclid=IwAR2rsUVLLLO3iqBvVh0R2Ow2L49jyC6MEyLVf8PAoRwnLczE8rtZXQmJ_qA].

[3] Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks*: New York, Columbia Press, 1996 p. 32.

[4] See his essay in *Democracy in What State?*, Columbia University Press, 2012.

[5] See [“A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right”](#).

[6] *ibid.*

[7] M. Tafuri, *Projet et Utopie*: Paris, Dunod, 1979, p. 153.