Fires of resistance in Algerian discourse: A genealogy of a trope

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Abstract
This article takes as its starting point the use of fire as a political metaphor by Algerians who participated in the Screening Violence research project; it emerged in these discussions as a trope of struggle and conflict in Algeria. In part, this political imaginary has been influenced by France, where fire has historically represented freedom and resistance to unjust powers. However, this inheritance has not been received passively in Algeria, and its irony in a colonial context contributes to a complex relationship with tropes of resistance in Algerian cultural and social discourse. We therefore trace a genealogy of the trope of fire which acknowledges the inevitable and significant contribution of the French political imaginary to the Algerian, but which also recognises the distinct cultural modes of resistance taken up by Algerian artists and political activists themselves, from the Algerian Revolution of 1954 to the Hirak protests of 2019.

Keywords
Algeria, France, tropes, fire, flame, burn, torch, imaginary

Introduction: Tropes, imaginaries, repertoires of contestation
This article seeks to trace a genealogy of the trope of fire in Algerian discourses of conflict, encompassing connections between Algerian and French iterations of fire as resistance, following its emergence in our recent fieldwork for a research project called Screening Violence.1 Since violence is ‘a total social fact’, it is informed not only by ‘practice’ but also by the ‘imaginary’ (Schröder and Schmidt (2001: 3)). Local imaginaries of conflict in five countries with experience of civil war, including Algeria, are the focus of the Screening Violence fieldwork; since these imaginaries are produced and reproduced in discourse, we have focused on the vocabularies of violence, including the metaphors and tropes of conflict, used by our participants. Our methodology has involved screening films about civil conflict to focus groups in our target countries as a stimulus to discussion, then video-recording those discussions and analysing the expressions and perceptions of conflict that emerge. Our conception of the imaginary follows Taylor’s influential definition (2004), in
which he points out that social imaginaries are expressed by means of ‘images’ and ‘stories’. In addition, more recent work (Davoudi and Brooks, 2021) has emphasised the performative nature of imaginaries.

We find that it is particularly useful to consider imaginaries as performative when analysing discourses of contestation and resistance. According to Davoudi and Brooks (2021: 54), the imaginary is ‘a performative act through which socio-spatial relations’ (including relations of power) ‘are reproduced and contested’. They add that ‘performativity foregrounds relations of power in which contestation and resistance are ever present’. The iteration and reiteration of imaginaries of power and resistance pertaining to Algeria, this article will argue, includes repeated performance of the trope of fire as resistance. We will map out a genealogy that first considers theorisations of fire as a cultural trope, finding that it is often paradoxical as well as performative in nature. We then consider its role as a figure of martyrdom in Algerian discourse, its history in French culture as a tool and a symbol of revolution and resistance, and its recurrent appearances in confrontations and violent exchanges between Algeria and France. First, however, we will examine the trope of fire as it was disclosed during our Algerian fieldwork.

The Algerians interviewed for Screening Violence repeatedly drew upon fire as a metaphor in their descriptions and explanations of civil conflict. The trope of fire in their testimony is to some extent predictable and relatively unremarkable; it expresses a conflagration, an outbreak of violence. For instance, a former Islamist political candidate who stood in the elections of late 1991 which were shut down by the state, contributing to the slide into civil war, describes the mass protests of October 1988 (known in Algeria as Black October) as ‘un embrasement’; a photographer who worked in Algiers in the early years of the nineties (known as the black decade), before fleeing to France to escape the violence, declares that ‘ça commençait à s’enflammer’; and a Berber activist reflecting on the so-called Black Spring of 2001 (social unrest and its violent suppression in Kabylia) states that ‘toute la Kabylie s’est embrasée’. But looking further into the trope reveals more particular and unexpected elements, suggesting that fire has, for some Algerians, a distinctive metaphorical value in their imaginary of political conflict.

At first, one might note the combination of light and darkness expressed here (fires of conflict are ironically associated with Black October, la décennie noire, and the Black Spring). But what is more remarkable is that fire functions predominantly among our participants as a trope of resistance, and one which extends (burns) through time. Moreover, the fire trope does not play such a role in evocations of conflict in the other countries our research team have investigated (Argentina, Colombia, Indonesia, and Northern Ireland). In Argentina, for instance, violence is monstrous and inhuman: our participants there spoke of ‘beasts’, ‘monstrous humans’, and ‘inhuman’ perpetrators, while the phrase dos demonios is a well-known Argentinian evocation of civil conflict, characterising political violence as shared by two equally demonic agents. Looking beyond our own research project, in Albania imaginaries of violence crystallise around the trope of blood—tribalism, honour codes, blood feuds, ‘blood for blood’ and so on (Schwandner-Sievers, 2001). Hence the question arises: why is fire mobilised in Algerian discourses of violence, and in particular as a trope of resistance to power?

The Algerian interviews for Screening Violence took place in 2019 – the year of the Hirak, the peaceful protest movement against President Bouteflika’s candidature for a fifth term (and more generally against the autocratic Algerian regime). It was therefore unsurprising that evocations of struggle against state power were frequent in our participants’ accounts of conflict. More surprising was the finding that fire was the principal trope through which these struggles were articulated. Addressing the civil war of the 1990s, the Algiers photographer connects the insurrections of that conflict to the moment of 2019 by employing the trope of burning embers: ‘Il y a des braises, elles sont toujours allumées’. Thus, the resistance of the populace against the regime is still present,
even if at times the burning of the embers is not always apparent. Of course, fire is also a power wielded by the state. The former Islamist candidate describes how in the nineties the Algerian regime ‘a mis le pays à sac et à feu’. But much more often it is resistance against the state that is mobilised by this trope. The action of fighting fire with fire is implicit in an account of the Black Spring by a Berber participant: ‘Lorsque vous allumez un feu, il devient incontrôlable’. He also uses the phrase faire embraser tout le pays and the metaphor of a volcano to represent Kabyle unrest of a greater intensity than the state authorities had anticipated (they lit a fire and then faced a volcano). He does not simply associate both sides of the conflict with fire but suggests that the fighting was spread and propagated from one side to the other through provocation.

More evocative still, and more frequent, is the image of the torch of resistance passed on down the generations. When compared to the metaphor of burning embers, the torch passed on also persists through time, but is more visible, more public, and more demonstrative, thus functioning as a call to arms. The temporal element of this image establishes a sense of continuity, a link from one uprising to the next; again, the target for these struggles is often le pouvoir – the Algerian state. The first person to speak in a debate our team organised on memories of the 2001 Black Spring addressed state violence aimed at Kabyle youth with the words ‘Il fallait faire quelque chose; il fallait protéger ces garçons-là, tout en essayant de prendre le flambeau à leur place’. The trope of the torch passed on again expresses continuity when a younger Kabyle participant, reacting to a documentary about the murder of a feminist activist by Islamists in the nineties, states: ‘C’est à nous de reprendre le flambeau maintenant’. At the same time, the image of an inherited torch implies that generations to come must continually protect and renew the flame: that is, fight to keep it burning.

It is not only our participants who use the torch metaphor to evoke a trans-generational continuity of resistance. In an intervention which emphasises a common purpose shared by the Hirak and the Algerian Revolution itself, anti-colonial veteran Djamila Bouhired wrote in a letter to the 2019 protestors: ‘vous avez repris le flambeau qui va éclairer le chemin de notre beau pays’ (cited in Fabbiano, 2019: 125). The torch of resistance against power (be that colonial power or the post-colonial pouvoir) is here implied to emit light as well as heat, consuming time and illuminating the future while also targeting present injustice and perpetuating the values of past struggles.

Tropes of fire can be seen to manifest in the discourse of the 2019 and 2001 protests, the civil conflict of the nineties, and the anti-colonial uprising of 1954. These historical moments thus appear to share an imaginary that mobilises the flame of resistance; one might say that they share a repertoire of contestation. Repertoires of contestation are defined by Tilly as behaviours that emerge within a distinct political group in a specific situation:

people in a given place and time learn to carry out a limited number of alternative collective action routines, adapting each one to the immediate circumstances and to the reactions of antagonists, authorities, allies, observers, objects of their action, and other persons […] involved in the struggle. (1991: 2)

Such repertoires have been glossed as ‘not only what people do when they are engaged in conflictual relations with others; it is what they know how to do and what others expect them to do’ (Tarrow, 1993: 70, italics in original). The sense of expectation here is crucial; it is inherent in any social imaginary, since it entails a shared, normative understanding of what is said and done in certain circumstances. Taylor defines the social imaginary as ‘the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, […] the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations’ (2004: 23). We reiterate here Taylor’s emphasis on imagery. Images, symbols and tropes are all essential means of constructing and reproducing social imaginaries; we can say that the trope of fire as
resistance is part of a conflict imaginary in Algeria which functions both to transmit and to transform, and whose lineage, as we will see, actually includes French revolutionary and resistance discourse.

These political imaginaries and repertoires, furthermore, do not emerge only within particular spaces and events, but also extend and persist through time. Tarrow (1993: 82) notes the development of ‘cycles of protest’ which use the same repertoire to reproduce themselves, with ‘learnable’ actions generating a ‘rolling’ form of protest rather than brief, ‘cathartic’ episodes. While Tarrow does not delve into tropes and language, this aspect of transmission has an important part to play in what he calls the ‘diffusion’ of a learned repertoire of protest. Gattinara and Froio (2014: 155) add that ‘Generation by generation, these repertoires crystallize within political cultures […]. In the same fashion, discursive and narrative characteristics may be transmitted over time’. In an earlier study, Sewell (1990) points to the importance of the historical event as a moment of rupture, informing how repertoires may be changed and re-learned. His key example is the French Revolution, a watershed moment in developing influential new repertoires of contestation. Crucially for the trajectory of the fire trope we are tracing here, the transmission of a certain imaginary from Republican France to Algeria is identified in the recent Stora report on Franco-Algerian relations. In his discussion of nationalist Algerian leaders such as Messali Hadj and Ferhat Abbas, Stora notes not just the moving back and forth of a particular repertoire (from France to Algeria and back again) but its transition from one revolution to another (French to Algerian):

La longue présence coloniale française […] a fabriqué l’émergence d’une élite d’Algériens musulmans qui […] s’est imprégnée des valeurs républicaines portées notamment par la révolution française … pour les retourner contre la France coloniale (Stora, 2021: 26).

It is within this revolutionary flow that we place the iterations of the fire trope we are tracing. Before we pursue this further, we turn briefly now to a wider theorisation of fire as a trope of violence and of transmission.

Theorising fire

Hart (2018: 279) considers metaphor ‘a key index of ideology and an important device in the legitimisation of social action’. Fire metaphors are often linked to discourses of social unrest and to the construction ‘CIVIL DISORDER IS FIRE’ (Hart, 2018: 283). Hart adds that the ‘core elements’ in the frame of discourse around fire metaphors include cause, endurance, transmission, sustenance, and cessation (2018: 283). Similarly, Charteris-Black identifies ‘spread’ or ‘transmission’ as a metaphor drawn from fire and applied to disease, to language, and to authority (2017: 22). The torch metaphor is frequently drawn upon to embody the circulation (temporal and spatial) of ideas between nations and political organisations. But the torch is not always passed from one group to another by choice or design; to take examples from just one French source, recent articles in Le Monde diplomatique observe that the CGT has had ‘le flambeau de la contestation sociale’ stolen from it by the ‘gilets jaunes’ (Dumay, 2019: 4) and, even more pertinently, that Algeria may be taking up ‘le flambeau du “printemps arabe”’ (Achcar, 2019: 6). The emphasis in both examples here on the torch as a trope of contestation clearly chimes with the imaginaries of resistance that we are exploring.

Salient among Francophone accounts of fire imagery is the work of Bachelard. He splits fire into two functions: following Prometheus (fire as a tool, a weapon) or following Empedocles (fire as self-destruction without a trace): ‘Prendre le feu ou se donner au feu, anéantir ou s’anéantir, suivre le complexe de Prométhée ou le complexe d’Empédocle, tel est le virement psychologique
qui convertit toutes les valeurs’ (2002: 189). A Promethean perspective might lead us to interpret our participants’ fire tropes as metaphorical weapons of resistance: ‘Prométhée est le symbole de la désobéissance constructrice’ (Bachelard, 1988: 125). The ‘fire’ in their discourse could then be understood as part of an ongoing struggle to renew Algeria, where fire represents constructive disobedience. Or, following Empedocles’ suicide, fire could represent a form of escape that leaves nothing behind; ‘la mort totale et sans trace’ (Bachelard, 2002: 41). This suicidal fire metaphor anticipates the harragas, migrants from North Africa to Europe who burn their identity papers (in a symbolic suicide) to avoid detection by the authorities. The term is an Algerian neologism, from the Arabic word hrarg (burn). But Souiah et al. (2017: 198) point out that this ‘burn’ does not refer only to the papers; ‘in the Magrebi dialects, those who leave without documentation are called harragas, literally “those who burn” the borders.’ They add that ‘the verb “to burn” in Arabic can mean “to free ride,” “to jump a queue” or “to run a light”’ (Souiah et al., 2017: 198 n.). The harragas’ desperate form of migration is known generally as harga (‘the burn’). Here, fire is a method that destroys borders and barriers; the migrants ‘burn’ their way across land and sea to their destinations. This burning can be seen as Empedoclean (a destructive self-immolation), and yet as potentially Prometheus (a tool for creating a new identity and a new fate). Moreover, as harga it signifies the act of travel itself, becoming a mode of transmission or movement for the body across borders and across water.

Bal (2013) characterises the cultural history of fire as, following J. L. Austin, ‘hover[ing] between thing and event’ (p. 175). This liminal status has made fire, she suggests, a useful figure for the performative speech act:

Like fire, something that is being said, in the everyday circulation of words among people, not only means something but does something: it brings about a consequence […] potentially huge. Fire can destroy, purify, […] warm us, and even kill us. (2013: 175-6)

This distinct status of fire – what Bal calls its ‘semi-eventness’ (p. 175) – has given it a unique function as a trope; it is simultaneously a transmitted trope and a trope of the concept of transmission. It has been used to represent contrasting, even conflicting ideas; it can itself figure conflict, struggle, and movement; it has even been taken as a figure for paradox itself. Hence, in Feu la cendre (1987) Derrida considers the recurrence of cinders throughout his writing. For Derrida, cendres are ‘le meilleur paradigme de la trace […] ce qui reste sans rester de l’holocauste, du brûle-tout, de l’incendie l’encens’ (p. 27). The trace is the past and the future of the event, which are non-present yet still impact upon the present. There is, then, a paradoxical aspect to the nature of cinders. They are fragile and stand as evidence of previous destruction; but they are also resistant, as they continue to burn after an initial blaze has died down. This renders them an evocative metaphor for the apparent destruction (i.e. failure prior to 1954) and yet continuation of the Algerian independence struggle – as represented in, for instance, the epic film Chronique des années de braise (Lakhdar-Hamina, 1975).

Derrida argues that cinders indicate not the fire, nor the place, but that a fire has taken place and has incinerated a place: ‘Pur est le mot. Il appelle un feu. Il y a là cendre, voilà qui prend place en laissant place, pour donner à entendre: rien n’aura eu lieu que le lieu. Il y a là cendre: il y a lieu’ (Derrida: 21). Here, he repurposes a common fire trope: instead of standing for purity, the fire represents the impossibility of purity in recalling what was incinerated. Derrida finds this paradox enclosed again in the form of the cinder: ‘Si un lieu même s’encercle de feu (tombe en cendre finalement, tombe en tant que nom), il n’est plus. Reste la cendre. Il y a là cendre, traduis, la cendre n’est pas, elle n’est pas ce qui est’ (p. 23). The cinders both are the place (as it is now) and were the place (before it was consumed in the fire). Yet, as they visually attest to the place no
longer existing, they are also self-evidently not the place. And the cinders also attest to the existence of the fire itself, not just the place it burned. Though the flames might be gone, the remains of the fire can still be seen glowing within the cinders.

It is worth noting that, despite the Franco-Algerian connections that this article focuses on, fire metaphors were part of Algerian imaginaries long before the French occupation of 1830. The two most well-established cultural traditions of pre-colonial Algeria – the first of which especially has continued to inform Algerian discourse to this day – were provided by the Quran and by Berber (Kabyle) cosmology. Described as competing and yet also accommodating each other (Mammeri and Bourdieu, 1978), ancient Kabyle culture and the Islamic culture brought to Algeria by the Arabs both mobilised the trope of fire. Fire in the Quran is often found in the form of hellfire and linked to anger and punishment. These tropes are not unique to Islam (for the common linkage of fire to anger in other cultures, see Hart, 2018: 284-5), but they are sustained throughout the text as references to hell and damnation. Jahannam, the Islamic place of punishment in the after-life, is referred to metonymically as al-nar (the fire), sa’eer (the blaze), and jaheem (blazing fire). The punishment for greed is ‘the Fire of the Wrath of Allah kindled to a blaze’ (ch.104, v.6), and ‘those who swerve, they are (but) fuel for Hell-fire’ (ch.72, v.15).

But as well as a form of punishment, fire emerges as a creative figure, whose constituent parts have very different consequences: Nasr draws from Qaswini’s cosmology The Wonders of Creatures and the Marvels of Creation to describe how ‘God created angels from the light of fire, jinn from its blaze and devils from its smoke’ (1981: 135). As creatures of flame or air, jinn are considered the spirits of a place; in pre- and post-Islamic Arabic traditions, they can possess people and things for evil or for good. Meanwhile, according to Bourdieu’s mapping of Kabylia’s traditional ‘système mythico-rituel’, for Kabyle Berbers fire was associated with the ‘masculine’ half of the cosmic/everyday universe, alongside entities such as light, gold, the sun, and the sky (Bourdieu, 1990: 6). Fire was also the means by which tools and weapons were forged for quintessentially masculine actions such as harvesting, killing beasts, and warfare (Bourdieu, 1990: 8). The trope of flaming resistance, or of torches passed on down the generations, does not however feature in Bourdieu’s account of Berber customs. When the Kabyle writer Mouloud Mammeri expounds for the French sociologist the sense of illumination and mobilisation that emerges as one Berber poet transmits his expertise to the next, the torch trope which might be expected to fit well here is notably absent: ‘Le rôle de l’amusnaw est de […] faire passer la tradition dans la praxis du groupe’ (Mammeri and Bourdieu, 1978: 64). The function of lighting the way is achieved by the poet alone rather than by the torch or flame of knowledge: ‘Le poète est celui qui mobilise le people; il est celui qui l’éclaire’ (Mammeri and Bourdieu, 1978: 66).

The period of French colonisation (1830–1962) is known in contemporary Algeria as ‘la nuit coloniale’. Sharpe points out that ‘the iconography of the sun was frequently used by a range of metropolitan and settler artists during decolonization, to allegorically allude to the rise and demise of colonial rule’ (2021: 7). But in the form of ‘la nuit coloniale’, darkness envelops Algeria’s history for over a century (only to be expelled, it is implied, by the ‘daylight’ of resistance or revolution). We might detect here a political permutation of the Derridean concept of cinders: the phrase implies that Algeria was obscured or extinguished by the colonial night, but the temporality implied in ‘night’ also allows the national ‘place’ to re-emerge from that darkness, into a new dawn of independence.

Algeria: Fires of martyrdom

The perception of Algeria as a nation forged in the fires of anti-colonial struggle is powerful and enduring. It particularly informs state-sponsored rhetoric and cultural forms such as the numerous public symbols, monuments, films, and official histories generated after independence in 1962. The
nationalised cinema of the 60s and 70s includes classics that celebrate the fires of revolution and martyrdom: in the climax of *La Bataille d’Alger* (Pontecorvo, 1966), resistance fighter Ali La Pointe is blown up by French paratroopers, martyred in a glow of sacred fire. A decade later the historical epic *Chronique des années de braise* (Lakhdar-Hamina, 1975) employed a running metaphor of the embers of long-standing resistance against the French finally blazing into the insurrection of 1954. The fire trope is also found in militant Algerian cinema made during the Algerian Revolution itself, thus in effect contributing to the struggle for independence – as in the documentary *L’Algérie en flammes* (Vautier, 1958). Here, there is less of a sense of transmission (there is as yet no victory to celebrate) but the war is characterised by the narrator as itself a fire: ‘la flamme de la guerre d’Algérie’. This metaphor is literalised with images of terrain devastated by French fire (napalm) leaving only what the voice-over describes as a ‘terre brûlée, forêt ravagé’ and ‘ruines sous le soleil brûlant’. Mid-conflict, fighting fire with fire, there seems as yet nothing heroic or legitimating about the fires of Algerian military struggle. Even at the moment of independence, in Choukri Mesli’s red and orange abstract painting, also called *L’Algérie en flammes*, the destructive rage of fire dominates, creating a sense of ‘l’embrasement général, physique et métaphorique’ (Bouayed, 2007: 129). But as the FLN sought to establish and maintain its legitimacy in the years after 1962, the transmission of its message of national unity and heroism became increasingly hegemonic.

We have already noted the presence of the torch metaphor in French journalistic discourse and in the imagery employed by our Algerian participants. The persistence of *martyrdom* as a legacy of the Algerian Revolution is often represented via the very same trope – the burning torch passed on down the generations. Branche (2011: 433) comments on the ‘martyr’s torch’ as a vector of official memory and power, an image apparent in the iconography of the ONEM (National Organisation for the Children of the Mudjahideen) and in President Chadli Benjedid’s declaration in the eighties that the ONM (National Organisation of Mudjahideen) had the task of ‘transmitting the Revolution’s message to the rising generations’. Branche does not comment on the content of the trope (fire as transmission of resistance), focusing instead on the function of martyrology as part of the Algerian state’s self-legitimating discourse. A vast symbol of this discourse, dominating the city of Algiers, is the Maquam E’-chahid or Martyrs’ Monument, built in 1982 to mark 20 years of independence, and shaped like three leaves (or tongues of fire) meeting. It is guarded by statues of three Algerian soldiers, and hosts an ‘eternal flame’ (Branche, 2011: 436). Critiquing its explicit message (heroism, memory, the FLN’s legitimacy through armed struggle), Khanna has re-interpreted the Martyrs’ Monument not as a ‘massive flame burning in respect’ for fallen fighters, but as ‘a chimney’ in which burn the anonymous and disposable bodies of the Algerian populace, a disempowered people consumed by the Algerian military and political elite (2006: 27).

In effect Khanna reads the monument not as a Promethean fire – the Algerian struggle for independence as a form of disobedience which constructed a nation – but as an Empedoclean fire (which threatens to remove all trace of the Algerian population). For Khanna, the FLN’s autocratic regime destroys rather than empowers its citizens. A more explicit example of fire ensuring ‘la mort totale’ (Bachelard, 2002: 41) in the manner of Empedocles’ suicide is the act of self-immolation that ‘literally “ignited”’ the so-called Arab Spring when ‘a young street vendor in Tunisia […] set his body on fire’ to protest police harassment (Afsaruddin, 2015: 78). Similar actions have emerged in Algeria, as shown in the powerful recent documentary *Nar* (Achour-Bouakkaz, 2019), performed by young men desperate to escape a life of despair and the *hogra* (contempt) they feel emanating from the state. Unlike Bachelard’s view that Empedoclean fire leaves no trace, however, these acts of self-immolation do indeed leave a potential trace – that of protest – even if, according to one of the witnesses interviewed in *Nar*, the Algerian media often dismiss these acts as ‘accidents’ or *faits-divers* rather than protests. The sudden events of these suicidal fires suggest an ordinary point for a
radical manifestation of political resistance; again, these actions can be understood as attempts to capture the Derridean trace in an image, to embody total erasure while simultaneously seeking to prove the need for political change and a renewed national future.

**French fires as tropes of revolution and resistance**

The significance of fire in French imaginaries of conflict has transmuted over time but, as in the Algerian instances just analysed, it centres around forms of struggle and resistance. During the Middle Ages, the *Oriflamme* – a red banner with sharply pointed ends, embroidered with gold flames – was the battle standard of the French King. Attached to a gilded lance and carried by an official *porte-oriflamme*, it was a conspicuous symbol on the battlefield. Its redness signified blood as well as fire: to French forces, it was a rallying point; to the enemy, it indicated that no quarter would be given to captives. Tuchman (1978: 148) attributes its medieval military use to a legend which attached it to Charlemagne, and the prophecy of a Christian victory over Saracen enemies. The ‘oriflamme’ persists in the modern era as a political concept, ‘an object, principle, or ideal that serves as a rallying point in a struggle’, and more generally as ‘a bright, conspicuous object’ (*OED*). One manifestation of such an oriflamme in modern French history is the storming of the Bastille, which still stands as a national symbol of political resistance. A contemporary water-colour by Jean-Pierre Houël, *Prise de la Bastille*, features the fortress overwhelmed by smoke with flames licking towards it. In the foreground, cannon and gunfire surround its governor as he is seized by the crowd. As the British Library notes in its description of the painting and the event it depicts, ‘the fall of the Bastille was used thereafter as a symbol of the potency of the French revolutionary movement, which spread like wild fire throughout the rest of the country’ (Anon, 2021).

A related trope is that of the volcano – natural fire at its most explosive. Recall that a Kabyle participant in our research described the unexpected intensity of the 2001 Black Spring protests as ‘un volcan’. Miller (2009: 559) traces the use of the volcano as a symbol in revolutionary France and notes that its significatory power shifted as the movement progressed: ‘during the early years of the Revolution, it symbolized the potential for unbridled force and destruction’, but by the Reign of Terror, the volcano ‘became a positive symbol of revolutionary transformation, emblematic of patriotic passion and republican virtue’. (We might add that ‘patriotic passion’ certainly expresses the emotional stimulus behind the Kabyle protests.) Reflecting on the French Revolution in 1837, Thomas Carlyle described it as a ‘volcanic lava-flood’, (1902: 132) and saw France as a ‘Fireship’ (p. 138) whose course could not be predicted. In the French imaginary, however, the fires of revolution were the crucible of the republic and have remained a rich source of rhetorical inspiration. As Burns notes, ‘the French Revolution […] remains at the core of French identity and a touchstone of its politics’ (2014: 5).

In France, the trope of fire as resistance against an illegitimate authority has endured. The need to both assert control over it and to insist that it continues to dominate is evident in the national rhetoric of wartime opposition to the Nazis. In his role as *l’homme qui a dit non*, de Gaulle presented resistance against the occupation of France as immutable, and time as an eternal cycle of resistance to (national) enemies, where defeat only ever leads to future victory: a ‘cyclical nexus of defeat and ultimate triumph’ (Kritzman, 2007: 162). His defining speech of 18 June 1940 declared that ‘Quoi qu’il arrive, la flamme de la résistance française ne doit pas s’éteindre et ne s’éteindra jamais’. Here, the fire trope is precisely the expression of insurrection against an unjust order: ‘If for Vichy honor [sic] implies the act of obeying, for de Gaulle it represents the diametrical opposite’ (Kritzman, 2007: 164). Yet the post-liberation Gaullist myth of resistance, characterised by Rousso (1990) as *Résistancialisme*, rapidly ossified into an official screen memory obscuring Vichy France and collaboration. Bracke (2011: 6) points out that this collective memory had to be buttressed
further by 1954: ‘At the outbreak of the Algerian War, de Gaulle and the conservative elites were forced to reinforce the myth of Résistancialisme, turning it into a something that resembled a caricature’. She suggests that the Algerian War interfered with established narratives by bringing into question the use of torture as a weapon, and by forcing a confrontation with the *devoir d’obéissance/devoir de résistance* (Bracke, 2011). For de Gaulle, the historical ‘flame of resistance’ had to be seen to be burning constantly in France. An admission that France submitted in any way – that the flame went out – might lead to a crisis in France’s cultural identity, and thus to the need for a reckoning and even an admission of guilt. The figural flame became, then, a means of resisting the past itself. In an Algerian context, as we have seen, the *fires of resistance* represent not a refusal of the past but continuity. In Gaullist discourse, the trope is paradoxical: the fire represents an ‘eternal’ France, which exists outside the time of the Occupation and Vichy, but which also serves to consume and to renew the historical period of collaboration in France. Yet again, a politically expedient form of Derridean *cinders* might be observed in this simultaneous destruction of and re-presentation of the historical place of Vichy France.

The flame also emerges as an image of resistance in at least one French memorial to the victims of the Second World War. Shelomo Selinger’s sculpture ‘The Gates of Hell’ (1973) stands in Drancy, the site of a transit camp for the internment of Jews during the Occupation. The sculpture includes three granite columns; like the Martyr’s Monument, it is tripartite, but while the flames of the Algerian monument reach towards the sky triumphantly, the sections of Selinger’s sculpture are positioned open and apart like gates. Hedges (2015: 27) points out that the columns represent the multiple meanings of the Hebrew letter *shin* (tooth), which has three flame-like prongs: ‘it can stand for the name of God, “shaddai,” and for the flame of divine revelation; it is the symbol used in the mezuzah that is affixed next to the doors of Jewish homes’. The ‘flame of divine revelation’ is appropriated in the sculpture to become a memorial for the Holocaust, as well as a symbol of Jewish resistance to extermination. Hedges also quotes Maurice Rajsfus, who visited Drancy in 1995 to interview its inhabitants: he found that Drancy’s status in the Occupation was not well remembered there and concluded that the traces of memory remaining must not be extinguished: ‘This small and fragile flame must not go out, because it constitutes a certain guarantee, if not against the return of barbarism, then at least against the silence that covered the abjection that took place at Drancy’ (cited in Hedges, 2015: 28). Rajsfus’s own rhetorical use of the trope of fire is resistant to Résistancialisme, and instead positions the flame of resistance as a continuous struggle against forgetting past events.

**Butins de guerre:** Trophies of war in French/Algerian exchanges

In twentieth-century France the Algerian independence movement, and the abuses committed by France, were sometimes euphemistically referred to as *événements d’Algérie*. It is an instrumentally vague phrase, which does not assign blame, and which might be taken to imply an inevitability or tragic randomness to France’s role in Algeria. By glossing over the events, the phrase downplays their significance and prevents their full emergence and transmission as events in France. But the trope of *fire as resistance* in Algeria can be understood as itself specific and ‘evental’, forcing the struggle to re-emerge in the imaginary. A historical ‘event’ can be understood not only as a rupture, but as an occurrence which implicates the beholder into it (Badiou and Tarby, 2017: 143). The complex nature of fire makes it a powerful trope for assembling and mobilising others to the cause of political resistance, even overcoming their own resistance by incorporating them into the struggle in a distinctly event-al way. The Algerian Berber writer Kateb Yacine characterised the French language not as a remnant of French colonial authority, but as an Algerian war trophy: ‘Le français est à nous, c’est un butin de guerre’ (cited in Sansal, 2006: 38-9). The trope
of fire as resistance informing Algerian imaginaries might also be understood in this light: as a figure that was transmitted and transformed, and thus ‘won’, in its passage through political conflicts and struggles. If a language – and indeed the tropes which are part of that language – can be ‘won’ in this way, it seems that transmission and exchange often relies on the politics and the events of warfare to cross boundaries.

Some of the material spoils of war taken during colonisation were given forceful metaphorical meanings; the trope of fire has been lost by Algeria as well as won. One early example is La Consulaire/Baba Merzoug, a 7-metres long, muzzle-loading bronze Barbary cannon stolen from Algiers during the 1830 invasion. Commissioned by Barbarossa’s son and cast in Algiers in 1542, it was vital to Algiers’s fortifications, and was once the most powerful cannon in the Mediterranean. Seized as a trophy by Admiral Guy Duperré, it was taken to France and positioned upright into a column; a Gallic Cockerel with a globe under its claw was placed on its mouth.9 In Algeria, the cannon is known as Baba Merzoug, ‘Blessed/Lucky Father’, for its role in fortifying Algiers. But in France, it is La Consulaire:

Indeed in 1683 the French consul at the time – Jean le Vacher – was shoved into the cannon and blasted from it during a failed attempt by the French navy to take the city. To this day French military officers call the weapon ‘La Consulaire’ after that ignominious incident. (Rouaba, 2020)

The cannon (in its life as La Consulaire) has had another metaphorical value attached to it: a series of bronze panels were subsequently added to the base of the pedestal, one of which is titled L’Afrique délivrée, vivifiée, éclairée par les bienfaits la France et de la civilisation. It depicts the imperial figure of France extending its hand down to a naked Africa, the latter thus illuminated by rays from the sun of knowledge. The Orientalist symbolism (of France as a civilising force, of Africa as needing to be enlightened) is obvious; but it is worth noting that the rays of light are given a dual role as a sterilising force. They represent Africans as illuminated and ‘clarified’ by France’s mission civilisatrice, and they ‘purify’ the violence of colonialism by suggesting that the knowledge of the Enlightenment was bestowed generously and gently by France. In this way, the panel seeks to transform France’s history in Africa into something both civilising and civilised. It is possible to see in the history of La Consulaire how the literal and the figurative significance of fire (particularly as firepower – that is, as a weapon) are interlinked through time and embedded onto each other in spaces. The trope of fire emerges as a mode of hostile exchange between French and Algeria, which (in the public killing of Jean le Vacher and in the sealing of the mouth of the cannon) is used to express dominance and to send aggressive ‘diplomatic’ messages about the mastery of France over Algeria/Algeria over France.

**Conclusion**

In this article, we have seen how political metaphors of fire can be picked up, moved around, and given new meanings; how tropes and imagery can express ‘the remarkable staging power of imaginaries’, as Davoudi and Brooks have put it, with ‘their blurring of perceived facts and fictions’ (2021: 54); and furthermore, how fire itself is seen as a force of transformation and of transmission. The evental (or semi-evental) nature of fire might be what encourages its transformation as a political trope – new concepts can adhere to it, are symbolised by it, and then transform it in turn. The flame is itself ‘resistant’ to a single ongoing meaning. While the elements of air, water, and earth can also be made to hold a plurality of metaphorical meanings (each can be considered life-giving but also deadly or associated with death), they do not tend to be considered ‘evental’ in the same way.
The distinctiveness of the flame as a trope seems to lie in its availability to the eye (unlike air), its resistance to touch (unlike water or earth) and its ‘performance’ or continuous visual change: it glows, flickers, illuminates and emits smoke. While humans can tame it, gather around it, and use it (as a literal and as a metaphorical tool), it is never still and thus cannot be understood as latent or passive. Except, perhaps, when it presents as a dormant volcano, or when it presents within cinders, as Derrida suggested – but in these instances its paradoxical aspect, as an indication of something extinguished and something persistent, becomes clear. The dormant volcano of the Reign of Terror, meanwhile, still holds the threat of violent eruption within it. Of course, much of the power of the trope of fire comes from the element’s capabilities not only as a tool, but as a weapon. In political conflicts with violent eruptions of firepower, the metaphorical values of fire can also be seized, harnessed, and wielded in expressions of dominance and authority over an adversary. Its use can bring about a sense of obligation in others to carry it forward and to keep its cause alive (as one of our participants said, ‘C’est à nous de reprendre le flambeau maintenant’).

Fire is a trope which changes over time and across borders; it can represent the possibility of (or threat of) a new political event, or the continuation of an old one. It can be considered paradoxical and multivalent, as it is able to encapsulate destruction and creation within the same figure (as a possibility, an act, a threat, or as remains). It is not only used to stand as a symbol of resistance and of revolution but is unleashed to provoke and to fuel acts of transmission and transformation. Fire can be taken, then, as an evental trope – that is, as a force which provokes the creation of new meanings in a political imaginary – such as the Algerian imaginary of struggle and resistance which we have examined here. As Bachelard put it, ‘La flamme nous force à imaginer’ (1961: 11).

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**Notes**

1. Screening Violence: A Transnational Study of Post-Conflict Imaginaries is funded by the AHRC. The project concerns imaginaries of conflict and the transition towards peace in five countries that have suffered civil conflict: Algeria, Argentina, Colombia, Indonesia, and Northern Ireland. The research team consists of Guy Austin (Principal Investigator), Research Associate Gemma McKinnie, and Co-Investigators Nick Morgan, Philippa Page, Simon Philpott (all Newcastle University), plus Roddy Brett (Bristol University) and Brandon Hamber (Ulster University). We are supported by academic partners and filmmakers in each country. For Algeria, our partners are Habiba Djahnine, Giulia Fabbiano and Yacine Helali.

2. For an important iteration of the term ‘braises’ (embers), see the seminal Algerian film *Chronique des années de braise* (Lakhdar-Hamina, 1975), discussed in this article.

3. The film is *Lettre à ma soeur* (Habiba Djahnine, 2006). The activist is Nabila Djahnine, killed by the GIA (Groupe Islamique Armé) in Tizi-Ouzou in 1995. The torch here is a metaphor for the ongoing campaign for women’s rights, and does not confront an explicit adversary so much as general patriarchal elements – which might include state and Islamist groupings.

4. Another key trope shared by the Algerian Revolution and the Hirak is ‘the people’. See for example the revival and re-appropriation of FLN slogans such as ‘Un seul héros: le peuple’ (Fabbiano, 2019). We found ‘the people’ often evoked as innocent victims of the black decade in our participants’ accounts of that conflict.

5. Tropes of construction employed by Algerian participants in Screening Violence include the following: to build a future, build society, build your country, rebuild oneself after conflict (*se reconstruire*).

6. Austin was referring to the tendency in philosophy to use ‘doing an action’ as a catch-all phrase with an assumed meaning: ‘We scarcely notice even the most patent exceptions or difficulties (is to think
something, or to say something, or to try to do something, to do an action?), any more than we fret, in the ivresse des grandes profondeurs, as to whether flames are things or events’ (1956: 5).

7. The fires of martyrdom and the militant narrative of La Bataille d’Alger are critiqued in the dissenting film Youcef (Chouikh, 1993) where a screening of the FLN-sponsored classic is organised in a cave in order to demonstrate to an amnesiac fighter that the Algerian Revolution actually happened. This is necessary because all Youcef can see around him in the present are repetitions of the colonial disempowerment of the people (albeit by an Algerian elite); the fire of resistance here becomes, like the fire in Plato’s cave, only an illusory flicker.

8. One can debate whether this film is Algerian or not. Although the director is French, Vautier was embedded with Algerian fighters, and the film is listed under ‘les premières réalisations’ of an independent Algerian cinema in the official compendium published in 1984 to mark 30 years of independence (Aissaoui, 1984: 7).

9. In a BBC article Ahmed Rouaba notes: ‘The symbolism is not lost on Algerians – and they want the weapon returned as part of a symbolic détente in relations between the two countries’ (Rouaba, 2020). It is still on display in Brest, in the military zone of the Arsenal.

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