

The Revolutionary Thought & Praxis of Thomas Sankara

By Amber Murrey

In terms of revolutionary movements in Africa, Thomas Sankara's revolution stands out not only because it occurred well after independence, but also because of the ambition of its vision: Sankara was an economic revolutionary who aimed to achieve social justice at home while recalibrating Burkina Faso's place in the international system. His commitment to women's rights, the importance of environmental sustainability and a strong national pride distinguish his political vision from traditional Marxism-Leninism. His commitment to Burkina incorporated internationalist, Third Worldist, Pan-Africanist, feminist humanism.

In this article, I outline how Sankara set out ambitiously to reorient the Burkinabé state towards the wellbeing of people and how he is distinguished from other leading Pan-African revolutionaries in: (a) His unflinching focus on the power of ordinary citizens to empower themselves to create environments of self-sufficiency and sustainability. (b) His political philosophy grounded in the fight for tangible or concrete material improvements in wellbeing, as demonstrated through a reforestation campaign in the Sahel in which people celebrate and mark occasions through the planting of trees or through his encouragement of production of Faso dan Fani, a local cloth produced by women. (c) His insistence that women held enormous social and economic power and knowledge, including his assertion that women take ownership of the revolution.

I engage a principal paradox of contemporary activism in Sankara's shadow: while Sankara insisted on the centrality to his politics of a feminist emancipatory praxis, media and scholarly studies of Sankarist afterlives have focused almost exclusively on men's activism. I work to excavate and integrate these complicated stories of gender and activism (importantly, I integrate women's and men's activism rather than separating the two—an analytical practice which tends to understand women's activism as a "local" phenomenon while internationalising men's activism).