

Chapter Title: Introduction. Multiplying Revolutions

Book Title: Anthropologies of Revolution

Book Subtitle: Forging Time, People, and Worlds

Book Author(s): Igor Cherstich, Martin Holbraad and Nico Tassi

Published by: University of California Press. (2020)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2rb75ns.4>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Anthropologies of Revolution*

Introduction

Multiplying Revolutions

NOT MISSING THE REVOLUTION

In his provocative 1991 article “Missing the Revolution,” American anthropologist Orin Starn admonishes anthropologists of Peru for having allowed the insurgency of the Shining Path—the Maoist group whose violent revolutionary campaign dominated life in Peru in the 1980s and 1990s—to take them completely by surprise. Hundreds of ethnographers had been conducting research in the Andes throughout the 1970s, often in the very parts of rural Peru where the Shining Path’s uprising made its deepest inroads. Yet in their writings, Starn complains, they remained oblivious not only to the popular ferment that led up to the Shining Path’s campaign from 1980 onward but also to the socioeconomic conditions that contributed to it. Little or no attention was paid to the developing impoverishment of the countryside and the unrest it produced, while the dynamics of internal migration that had created the pool of mobile youths from which the Shining Path drew its cadres also went unnoticed. Rather, anthropologists working there at the time stayed within the narrow confines of what Starn disparagingly calls “Andeanism,” portraying peasant life as somehow immune to the flow of history, and focusing instead on such exotic and apolitical topics as environmental adaptation, ritual, and cosmology (see also Starn 1995).

Starn’s critique is relevant well beyond the case of Peru. To be sure, it would be wrong to contend that anthropologists have in general ignored the revolutionary upheavals in their ethnographic midsts. As we shall explain in more detail

presently, there are plenty of anthropological studies of revolution, including a number of substantial monographs, written by ethnographers who have been caught up in the action of revolutionary uprisings (e.g., Bourgois 1981, 1982; Hegland 2014; Armbrust 2019) or, perhaps more often, have sought to study their aftermath in particular ethnographic settings (e.g., Lan 1985; Donham 1999; Wilson 2016). Nevertheless, Starn's observation is pertinent on a broader level, since this literature is largely fragmentary. While studies of revolution are indeed scattered across anthropology, one is hard-pressed to find a set of debates or approaches to revolution that could be described as distinctively anthropological. There is no such thing as an "anthropology of revolution" (as there are, say, anthropologies of ritual, food, development, postsocialism, capitalism, and even, recently, protest movements)—no clearly discernible genealogy of writings with a sense of scholarly dialogue on the topic.¹ As Bjørn Thomassen puts it in an article that helps to set the agenda for the kind of anthropology of revolutions we seek to develop, anthropologists have been "strikingly silent" on revolutions (2012: 680). Contributors to the debate about revolutions in the broader historical and social sciences "can hardly be blamed" for failing to cite anthropologists at all, "for the neglect comes from within anthropology itself" (680).

This book seeks to remedy such neglect by exploring systematically what anthropological thinking can contribute to the study of revolutions. In a field that seems saturated by the writings of philosophers, social and political theorists, historians, political scientists, and sociologists, not to mention emblematic works by revolutionary actors themselves (from Bakunin and Lenin to Guevara and Mandela), we seek to make space for a distinctively anthropological approach to revolutions. Our tack in this regard, however, is in a sense the opposite of what Starn had recommended. Rather than behaving more like political scientists or sociologists by paying attention to the distribution of resources, social and economic inequality, migratory pressures, and other structural conditions of local and global political economies, our intent is to take the study of revolutions deeper still into a distinctively anthropological terrain. A focus on quintessentially anthropological themes such as ritual, cosmology, and personhood, we propose, can help to deepen as well as refigure the study of revolutionary politics, unpacking the very notion of revolution in new ways, and taking the way we imagine it and study it in new directions.

At the heart of the book is an ethnographically driven experiment: What happens when we look at revolutions through the prism of the local social and

1. It is telling, for example, that contributors to two prominent online forums presenting quick-fire anthropological responses to the revolution of 2011 in Egypt, in the aftermath of the so-called Arab Spring, appeared to have had few anthropological theorizations of revolution upon which to draw (Elyachar and Winegar 2012; Abu-Lughod et al. 2012). Alongside the regional scholarship, in these essays one finds an array of references to philosophical, historical, and political scientific works on revolution, but hardly any to such works by anthropologists.

cultural frameworks in which they are enacted? How might our understanding of revolutions be challenged, shifted, and augmented by looking at revolutionary phenomena in different ethnographic settings, in relation to varying social forms, notions of time, space, power, and personhood, religious cosmologies, indigenous mythologies, and ritual practices—contexts, that is, that are often quite different from standard understandings of revolution as a predominantly “modern” political phenomenon (e.g., Brinton [1938] 1965; cf. Scott 2004; Buck-Morss 2009)? What happens to revolution, for example, when it is enacted through idioms of tribal affiliation in Libya, ancestral spirit-mediumship in Zimbabwe, Shi’a martyrdom in Iran, Buddhist ethics in Mongolia, West African-derived animal sacrifice in Cuba, or Aymara cosmology in Bolivia? By experimenting with these conceptions and experiences of revolution that are often quite distant from what the script of influential political theorists predicted, we show the limits of often normative outlooks and add a new voice to the broader debate about revolution. In other words, we use the power of anthropological analysis to break out of standard assumptions and open up new ways of thinking about what revolutions are, how they operate, and why they matter to people.

To map out the scope of such an endeavor, in this book we ask questions such as the following. What might we learn about revolutions if we think of them in relation to anthropological debates about the dynamics of ritual transformation (chapter 1)? How might anthropologists’ long-standing concern with kinship, clanship, and other localized forms of social organization inform the way we understand the role of the state, the party, and the vanguard in revolutionary projects (chapter 2)? How do varying conceptions of personhood in different ethnographic settings inflect the way revolutionary subjects are constituted (chapter 3), and what bearing do they have on how we understand the power and charisma of revolutionary leaders (chapter 4)? How could debates about the role of ideology in revolutionary action be reoriented by taking into account the varying ways in which people imagine the relationship between reality and illusion in more localized revolutionary contexts (chapter 5)? How, more broadly, do differing cosmological frameworks in different social and cultural settings change the very horizons of revolutionary politics—how is revolutionary time, including its origins and ends, imagined and experienced; how are revolutionary projects spatialized; and how do revolutionary projects sit alongside other forces, relations, and entities that compose people’s worlds (chapter 6)? Could revolutionary politics, ultimately, be understood as cosmogonic projects in their own right (Conclusion)? That is to say, how do we take seriously as anthropologists the notion, so often propounded by revolutionary protagonists, that what is most deeply at stake in revolutions is not just a desire to modify the conditions of people’s lives, but the more radical aspiration of reconfiguring the very worlds in which lives unfold?

This book’s central contention is that, when viewed anthropologically in this way, revolutions emerge as concerted attempts to radically reconstitute the

worlds people inhabit. Unlike more gradual and piecemeal forms of political change, revolutions set themselves up as projects of total and radical transformation, expressed characteristically as a desire to bring about a “different world”—sometimes an altogether “new” one. This all-embracing quality makes revolutions more than simply acts of violent political rupture—a feature on which political theories of revolution have tended to focus (e.g., Arendt [1965] 2006; Dunn 1972; Badiou 2009). From the holistic, ethnographically informed perspective of anthropology, revolutions emerge as processes of wholesale societal transformation that penetrate deeply into the fabric of people’s lives, albeit in complex, often uneven, and invariably contested ways. They interact with localized social forms and structures, which they often seek to reconstitute. They make demands in people’s most intimate spheres, promoting new forms of personal comportment, sometimes related to religious or quasi-religious ideals such as Islamic piety or the “New Man.” They seek to refigure the relationship between past, present, and future, often through ritual practices and mythical narratives. All in all, we suggest, revolutions have a deeply *cosmogonic* character, in the classic sense of “cosmogony,” understood as an act that brings about or otherwise reconstitutes a whole world. They unfold and refold in different ways the coordinates of human existence, recasting people, their relationships to each other and to the world at large, giving new roles not just to State, Leader, or Party, but also, for example, to divinities, ancestors, and spouses.

The notion of revolution as bringing about new worlds resonates with a modern and conventional political idea of radical transformation according to which human action can deliberately change the course of history, erasing the past in the name of a better future (Koselleck 1985; Scott 2004; Malia 2006). To paraphrase Claude Lévi-Strauss’s anthropological comment on the French Revolution in particular, revolution is the “myth” of modernity. It provides “a coherent image on which our action can be modelled” (1966: 254), and indeed, deeper still, it provides a model for the very idea of what might count as an “action” at all, at least as far as the political arena of history, as we might imagine it, is concerned. If it is to paint revolution on a canvas larger than just “Western modernity,” therefore, our anthropological approach must handle with care the idea that revolutions aim to bring about new worlds. In particular, encompassing the full diversity of revolutionary situations in different parts of the world, drawing into the fray ideas and practices that diverge from “modern” images of revolution, must involve critically interrogating assumptions about newness, historical rupture, progress, and indeed the very idea of a “world” as an object of human influence or control (Abramson and Holbraad 2014). To be sure, some form of rupture or upheaval is common to all of the situations we shall be treating as revolutionary (and we return to questions of definition presently). Part of our aim, however, is to allow the content we give to these notions—“rupture,” “upheaval,” indeed, “revolution”—to vary from one ethnographic

situation to another (see also Holbraad et al. 2019). What the shape of any given revolutionary upheaval might be, how it may be understood and valued by the people involved in it, and how far it might converge or diverge from emblematically European ideas about revolution as a historical rupture are all questions we leave deliberately open to ethnographic scrutiny. So, yes: revolution as a cosmogonic process that seeks to bring about a different world. But only if what counts as a “world,” what makes it qualify as “different” or even “new,” and what the conditions and manners of “bringing it about” might be, are all treated as open anthropological questions.

Qualifying and presenting alternatives to the images of revolution that tend to dominate both public and scholarly commentary is one of our prime aims in developing a distinctively anthropological approach to the topic. Throughout this book we shall have occasion to enter into critical dialogue with historians, philosophers, social and political theorists, as well as revolutionary protagonists themselves, whose writings articulate, or at times simply take for granted, the central ideas that the “myth” of revolution as the modern form of politics par excellence has mobilized. To give a sense of where the fault lines of such a critical engagement lie, it is useful to consider as an example the ways in which revolution has been debated by political scientists in particular. After all, the frameworks that political scientists develop, and the questions they ask, tend to have a strong influence in wider public commentaries on revolutionary events and processes, by regional experts, journalists, and other pundits who comment on such developments in the media.

QUESTIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS IN THE POLITICAL SCIENCE OF REVOLUTION

A well-rounded, let alone exhaustive, account of the political scientific literature on revolution—a literature that is voluminous and in any case well reviewed (e.g., Kimmel 1990; Bauman 1994; Goldstone 2001; Meeks 2002)—is beyond the scope of our argument here. Our aim is only to illustrate how political scientific debates and approaches tend to ratify certain basic assumptions about revolutions, and then to show how an ethnographically driven anthropological engagement can serve to open these assumptions up, exploring ways in which they could be diversified and recast. In this connection, we should note that the literature on revolutions in political science tends to circle around two main questions: first, how revolutions ought to be defined and, second, what their causes and consequences are. These two questions are of course related, since the definitions of revolution that are proffered in these debates tend to be cast in terms of causes and, to a lesser extent, consequences. For example, are revolutions to be understood as outcomes of class conflict (e.g., Marx [1852] 2008), as examples of collective action borne of a competition for economic resources and political sovereignty

(Tilly 1978), as responses to modernization (e.g., Huntington 1968), or as a function of weakened state structures (Skocpol 1979)? Should they be understood as singular events or as more drawn-out processes (Brinton [1938] 1965; Hobsbawm 1986; Stinchcombe 1999)? Is the emphasis on structural considerations enough to explain them (Goldstone 2001)? Should one not also take into account the agency of collectives (e.g., “the people,” or particular classes or interest groups) as well as individual protagonists (Kimmel 1990; Foran 1997)? And what about all the other factors that contribute to revolutions, such as civil society (Dahrendorf 1997), gender (Olcott et al. 2006; Malmström 2012), domestic life (Johnson 1985), or, indeed, religious worship (Billington 1980)?

Reading the best that this well-developed body of work has to offer, it is hard not to be impressed by its attention to precision and the insight to which it can lead—although, admittedly, its self-consciously “scientific” tenor and tone can make one rather crave for more of the sentiment famously expressed by American journalist H.L. Mencken, that “revolution is the sex of politics” (cited in Selbin 1999: 1). Here, however, we want only to draw attention to two related characteristics that one can discern in the political scientific literature taken as a whole, which serve, by way of contrast, to pinpoint the kind of departure that an anthropological approach can offer. These have to do, first, with certain basic assumptions about revolution that underlie these accounts; and second, with the role accorded to definitions in their overall strategy and, particularly, to the normativity to which this strategy gives rise. Let us take the two points in turn.

Regarding the basic assumptions that undergird the political science of revolution, we note first that the idea that revolutions are essentially a modern phenomenon is prominent here, too. Many of the most central questions that political scientists debate in this context revolve around how best to articulate and specify ways of thinking about revolution that have become intuitive in Europe since the Enlightenment. The question of whether revolution is better considered an event or a process, for example, takes for granted a linear conception of history, consisting of a series of occurrences that can sometimes generate moments of historical rupture (cf. Palmié and Stewart 2016). So too does the very idea that revolutions can be understood in relation to the complex sequences of historical causation in which they are embedded, and from which explanatory frameworks can be abstracted to furnish more “generalizing” definitions and explanations. As we shall see in more detail in the next chapter, conceptual historian Reinhart Koselleck (1985) has argued that such a conception of history, and of time itself, is intimately bound up with changing notions of revolution in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe.

These essentially cosmological assumptions about time as historical development are married in political science approaches to revolution with assumptions of a more sociological nature—in particular, a view of what kinds of entities and

relationships compose the social and political world (i.e., a particular sociopolitical cosmology—cf. Collier 2011). The most overt of these are the mainstay categories of political scientific analysis, which tellingly coincide with the conduct of modern politics. Revolution is seen as a function of the interaction among “states,” “institutions,” “classes,” “interest groups,” and, indeed, that most marked category of revolutionary ferment, “the people” (see also Humphrey 2019). The historical contingency of these basic categories of contemporary political thought—the peculiarly European story of their emergence and the complex trajectory of their now global hegemony—is of course a topic for historians and theorists of political thought (e.g., Skinner and Stråth 2003, Thompson 1991; Arendt [1965] 2006). Deeper still, as we know from some of the most radical anthropological critiques of sociological thinking (e.g., Dumont 1981; Strathern 1988; cf. Hage 2012), the underlying, less marked, and therefore more thoroughly taken for granted distinction between, on the one hand, something imagined as “society” and, on the other, the “individuals” who supposedly compose it, is just as contingent. For example, in a remarkable feat of anthropological deconstruction, Marshall Sahlins (1996) has tracked the specifically Judeo-Christian trajectory of the image, so commonplace among economists as well as political scientists, of individuals self-interestedly competing over scarce resources. An anthropological approach to revolution, keen to explore conceptions and practices of revolution that go beyond what we (think we) already know about the topic, must involve a thoroughly reflexive interrogation of these assumptions with reference to ethnographic alternatives. In chapter 2, for example, we shall see how a rich array of other social entities and relations—dealing with kinship, clanship, and tribal organization—come to play a constitutive role in varying social settings in which revolutionary politics is played out.

Such examples, of which we shall see many throughout this book, speak to a broader point about our anthropological positioning in relation not only to political science but to all approaches that build their studies of revolution on categories they deem as “basic”—be they sociological ones (e.g., about class) or, more recently, to do with gender, ethnicity, or sexuality. To be sure, revolutions themselves most typically cast their central aims as extinguishing forms of inequality in those very terms: class, ethnicity, and, sometimes, gender and sexuality. We take it as read that studies that analyze revolutions in these terms have produced important insights into the dynamics of revolution. For example, studies adopting a feminist approach have sought to overcome the standard assumption that revolution is an affair primarily of men (staged as a matter of bold political action in the public sphere, involving technological know-how and of course violence), foregrounding the role of feminist movements in revolutionary struggles and countering the depoliticization of women’s reproductive work (e.g., Federici 2012). Similarly, an approach to revolution that precluded an understanding of the racial and ethnic dynamics even of revolutions that do not—as so many have

done—frame themselves primarily in those terms would be deeply questionable (cf. Moore 1989). Still, we contend that an anthropology of revolution can help us to bring forth categories and indeed forms of subjectivity that stand in a complex relationship to assumptions about class, gender, and ethnicity that are already—and rightly—prevalent in the literature, and which have often been excluded from well-known modern revolutionary narratives.

This brings us to our second point, regarding the normative role that definitions tend to play in the political science of revolution. While the strategies adopted on this score are of course varied and subject to debate in themselves (e.g., Abrams and Dunn 2017), the overall direction of travel is revealing, since it marks a fundamental point of contrast with the anthropological approach we develop in this book. As with other concepts on which they focus, political scientists make it one of their prime tasks to define revolution as an abstract category, be it in order to establish a rigorous (presumably historically and culturally “neutral”?) conception to add to the analytical armory of a science of politics (e.g., Goldstone 2001: 140–42), or, more flexibly, in order to “advance one’s understanding of the term” (Selbin 1999: 4). Debates, then, often focus on whether a particular definition is sophisticated enough to shed light upon particular empirical cases, which in turn can serve as a pivot for a revision of the definition itself (e.g., Paige 2003). Definitions, in this way, come to act as a conceptual benchmark for understanding empirical cases, while empirical cases can also act reciprocally as benchmarks for assessing the merits of competing definitions. This is very much the stuff of social science debates on revolution.

Crucially, however, this kind of benchmarking lends a strongly normative quality to political scientists’ competing definitions of revolution. Definitions are important because they are meant to specify what “counts” as a revolution in the first place, when a particular revolution might be said to have failed or succeeded, and how revolutions are to be distinguished from, say, revolts, protests, civil wars, or coup d’états (e.g., Dunn 1972: 13–16). Indeed, these questions can gain a great deal of traction in broader political commentary. Note, for example, the prominence of political scientists in the heated debates about the so-called Arab Spring and its aftermath, with pundits and commentators of various kinds appealing for their expertise on whether the events are to be considered as revolutions at all, not least in view of the course they have taken since (e.g., Bellin 2012; see also Noueihed and Warren 2013). The inherently normative character of political scientists’ concern with definition—their disciplinary orientation toward sorting the wheat from the chaff when it comes to the central categories of political thought and action—can in fact be seen as an extension of the normative stakes of the very political practices on which they seek to comment.

By contrast, our concern with “opening up” the notion of revolution to critical ethnographic scrutiny, as already stated, leads us to put questions of definition firmly within brackets. To be sure, general definitions of revolution can help with

identifying particular historical or ethnographic situations as revolutionary. For these purposes, however, we are happy to operate with a broad, loose, and intuitive understanding of revolution—for example, revolutions understood as large-scale upheavals, aimed at wholesale change of the political order, often involving violent conflict, in which, as we are keen to emphasize, the very constitution of the world is at stake. Other than for such “heuristic” purposes (Henare et al. 2007), however, our interest in revolution throughout this book is above all, and deliberately, *ethnographic*. This, we suggest, includes the question of definition itself: rather than proffering a definition of our own, we are interested in how revolutions are defined by the people who are involved in them. “Revolution,” in other words, is interesting to us strictly as a local category, which is therefore inherently variable. How people’s understandings of revolution may change from one empirical situation to another, and how this may serve to pluralize the ways in which revolution can be conceptualized analytically, are our abidingly anthropological questions.

Of course, this is in many ways standard anthropological fare. Anthropologists par excellence are those who like to take concepts that other disciplines may seek to render uniform, or even universal, in an abstract and generalized way, and try instead to open them up critically by showing the different ways in which they may be imagined and constituted in different ethnographic circumstances. In the case of a concept such as revolution, which as we have noted has such an emblematically modern European provenance, this tack involves two related sets of questions. On the one hand, the first anthropological reflex is to ask how revolutions might be understood in contexts other than the “modern” or the “European,” whatever one might actually take these tags to mean (for these too are of course variable concepts—e.g., see Chua and Mathur 2018). If revolution as a political form is at least in part tangled up with the contingencies of its modern European roots, then in what sense can we speak of revolution in social and cultural circumstances that may be very different, and what insights might doing so yield for a broader, more pluralized understanding of revolution?

On the other hand, this forces us to confront immediately another set of questions, which are also explored by anthropologists addressing other phenomena that can be understood as having radiated globally out of Europe and its vicinities, such as Christianity, capitalism, and democracy (e.g., Cannell 2006; Miller 1997; Cook et al. 2016). Namely, how far can the varied manifestations of revolutionary politics we encounter around the globe be understood in relation to the modern European origins of the very concept? This is a question explored in great detail by one of the prime forerunners of our attempt to develop an anthropology of revolutions—Donald Donham’s seminal historical ethnography (1999) of the interaction between “Marxist modern” conceptions and practices of revolution with local forms of traditionalism as well as Evangelical Christianity in Maale, Ethiopia, in the 1970s and 1980s. Following Donham, and painting this central question on a comparatively larger canvas, we suggest that answering it cannot

come down to setting up a spurious (at least in this context) distinction between “modern” and “nonmodern” versions of revolution. Rather, the question is how a distinctively modern political form such as revolution is able to take hold in such diverse social and cultural contexts, and what local concepts and practices might be configured as part of its putative traction (see also Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997; Tsing 2004, 2015; Englund and Leach 2000).

Once again, however, it is crucial to emphasize that these matters are interesting to us, analytically, above all because they are so alive for the people who participate in revolutionary processes. Our attempt to broach the question of revolution anthropologically does not primarily involve an attempt to chart the spread of ideas of revolution across the globe, although occasionally we shall be brushing against such questions of “diffusion” in a more incidental way. Rather, throughout the book we shall encounter varied localized interpretations, critiques, refractions, and contestations of the modern conception of revolution—for example, through the global projection of Marxist-Leninist texts and politics—and look at how these have fueled variable manifestations of revolutionary processes in different ways. The modernity of revolution, in short, is itself an issue for those involved in its action, and paying attention to this is part of the scope of our argument. Indeed, this reflexive quality of revolution as a political form—the fact that what a revolution is, and how it ought to be imagined and enacted, is a question that revolutions, and the people they involve, ask of themselves—is at the heart of what makes revolution so inherently variable, and therefore also so compelling from an anthropological point of view (see also Graeber 2009: 527–28).

To sum up, then, our categorically anti-normative stance on the question of definition marks a stark contrast between our approach and that of political science. We refuse to provide a definition of revolution, as already stated, because we are interested in all of the different ways in which people can come to understand it in different settings. This implies that, as anthropologists, we are happy to treat as a “revolution” any instance local actors conceive of as such—any political upheaval, that is, which, for variable reasons and in varied ways, participants brand as a “revolution” in their own terms. What they might mean by that, and how they might (or might not) relate it to what revolution might be taken to be in other settings, including in traditions of revolutionary politics emanating from Europe, are the questions motivating us. To a political scientist, such an approach may appear unprincipled or even chaotic, since it dissolves any hope of articulating analytically any kind of “essential” understanding of revolution, or even of identifying some kind of common denominator that might help to isolate it for cross-cultural comparison and analysis. From our point of view as anthropologists, however, that is precisely its virtue. We do not seek to “purify” revolution into some core concept, but rather critically to upend all such efforts, pluralizing and diversifying the very notion of revolution according to its contingent ethnographic instantiations at

different times and in different parts of the world. In short, what excites us is not the possibility of finding out—once and for all perhaps—what revolutions really are and how they operate. Instead, we are bent on exploring analytically the different things revolutions *can* be—indeed, even, what they *could* be (see also Holbraad et al. 2014). As we shall discuss at length in the Conclusion, this does not constitute an effort to foreclose a universal notion of revolution but rather to open up more possibilities as to how revolutions’ claims to universal aspirations—indeed their very claims to universality—may be understood.

AN OVERVIEW OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL WORKS ON POLITICAL UPRISINGS

Given the sudden and unpredictable nature of revolutions, it has been historically difficult to plan and execute thorough ethnographic studies of them. To be sure, the often all-embracing social and political effervescence that follows revolutions is by definition volatile and can present security risks for research, while revolutionary states such as the Soviet Union, Cuba, and Iran can be unwelcoming to foreign researchers.² These constraints have tended to impede the ethnographic study of revolution and induced scholars to treat revolutionary phenomena more or less incidentally. They have also obstructed the consolidation of a body of anthropological knowledge on the subject, leading to the production of a set of scattered works that tend to tackle the question of political uprising and transformation from multiple and heterogeneous angles (cf. Worsley 1991).

To make things even more complex, in terms of heterogeneity, revolutionary processes are internally strongly differentiated, with a high degree of variation depending on the phase of the trajectory of revolution over time. The initial period of effervescence and social upheaval, for example, can be strategic in foregrounding insights on violence and imaginings of past and future (Schielke 2015; Mittermeyer 2014; Abu-Lughod 2012; Ghannam 2012). However, a focus on revolutionary statecraft, or the institutionalization of a society transformed by revolution, has constituted privileged terrain on which to visualize and understand how political ideas have been operationalized through sociopolitical structures and institutions, but also to comprehend the specific dynamics in the making of the revolutionary subject (Humphrey 1999; Verdery 1996; Wedeen 1999; Varzi 2006; Yurchak 2006; Holbraad 2017b). Finally, particularly in the case of the Soviet Union and former state-socialist countries, more recent ethnographic

2. Examples of vivid and, at times, harrowing accounts of the difficulties involved include Ruth Lewis’s account of her and her husband Oscar Lewis’s expulsion from revolutionary Cuba in 1970, accused of being CIA agents (Lewis 1977; see also Rigdon 1983), and Katherine Verdery’s narration of her surveillance while conducting ethnographic research in socialist Romania, based on her subsequent review of her own Securitate files (Verdery 2018).

studies have focused on what could be termed the “afterlife” of revolutions, exploring how subjects and societies instituted under a revolutionary framework respond to new circumstances in a postrevolutionary era, and how the ideas and practices of revolution have transmuted into newer forms (Steinmüller 2013; Ssorin Chaikov 2003, 2017; Pedersen 2011; Hann 2002).

In addition to broaching different phases of revolutionary processes, then, the heterogeneity of an anthropological approach to revolutions is exemplified by the different angles and topics through which radical sociopolitical transformations have been studied and conceptualized. To be sure, these thematic choices—from ritual to political forms, from religion to modernity—illustrate what a distinctively anthropological contribution to the study of revolution might involve. Nevertheless, when viewed collectively as a body of literature, these heterogeneous works do not coalesce into a coherent frame that systematically critiques, complements, or problematizes the set of definitions, assumptions, and norms about revolution we still often take for granted.

In what follows we provide an overview of these texts with two aims in mind. The first objective is to begin to systematize the existing literature by harnessing a number of different elements, ethnographic ideas, and practices that provide a sense of the many ways in which ethnography can refigure the concept of revolution, exemplifying what a specifically anthropological gaze has to offer. The second objective is to show certain shortcomings in these works in order to problematize certain habits and assumptions in the study of revolution and allow ethnographic materials to open up the way we think of revolutions. Most of these works will be further analyzed and discussed in the main body of the book, although, despite our outlining a multiplicity of anthropological works on revolution, the book is not to be understood as a compendium.

Pioneering works such as Evans-Pritchard’s *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (1949) and Gluckmann’s “Rituals of Rebellion in South-East Africa” (1963) have been held up as referents and ancestors of an anthropology of revolution (Worsley 1991). Evans-Pritchard’s book describes the coalition between the Libyan tribes of Cyrenaica and the Sanusiya Islamic brotherhood in the battle for the liberation of Libya from Italian colonial invasion and occupation. Although Evans-Pritchard’s work does not directly address the question of revolution, it demonstrates the relevance of social forms of tribalism, its alliances and control of territory, in Libya’s liberation from colonial powers. Through their networks and alliances (*saff*), the tribes were able to crystallize forms of control of vast territories and/or the caravanserai in the proximity of the borders. Despite emphasizing the struggle of the tribes against foreign invaders, the book offers a series of reflections on the transition from the segmentary structure of the tribes to the modern and centralized form of the brotherhood that was able to do away with colonial powers and shape a cohesive political system. In fact, Evans-Pritchard tends to

present the cultured Sanusiya brotherhood as a state-like organization capable of articulating, controlling, and educating the illiterate tribes through local tribunals and mechanisms of conflict resolution, thus reproducing political science's linear notion of political transition toward modern institutions and the inability of the traditional social forms to produce thorough transformations.

We encounter a similar bias toward modern forms and practices of political organization in the mentioned work of Max Gluckmann, described in detail in chapter 1. Gluckmann tackles a series of ritual forms that explicitly transgress ordinary social practices and political structures by visualizing and exacerbating the conflicts and sociopolitical hierarchies among different members. In line with an established tradition of thought in the anthropological study of ritual, however, Gluckmann observes that such ritual performances are unable to activate a radical transformation of the political order—such as in a proper revolution—but, rather, generate minor alterations necessary to reaffirm the legitimacy of the whole political system. In this sense, Gluckmann echoes the existing debate in political science at the time about the difference between “primitive rebels” (Hobsbawm 1959), fundamentally unable to shape a thoroughly new political order, and modern revolutionaries (see Wolf 1969). Although this conceptualization of ritual and “traditional” segmentary forms of political organization—of being able to activate transformations (Gluckmann 1963; Bloch 1992) that are yet sufficiently circumscribed as not to challenge the existing sociopolitical order—remains central to most ethnographic analyses, a number of works (Gibson 1994; Turner 1975) have plotted a series of correspondences between ritual and revolution or between revolution and segmentary forms of organization (Davis 1986; Hegland 2014). What we tackle in this book (see chapter 1) is the possibility of identifying “rituals of revolution” wherein ritual practices may become instrumental in the definition of specific forms and practices of revolutionary politics. We show that, rather than constituting forces obstructing processes of thorough political liberation, practices and forms ranging from spirit possession to kinship and segmentary organization may become strategic in the definition of the rhythms, strategies, and legitimacy of insurrectionary events (Lan 1985).

Although not always tackling the notion of revolution head-on, a series of anthropological works have been instrumental in foregrounding tribal ethos, kinship, ritual, and religion as strategic domains for the study and understanding of radical political transformations. In principle considered incompatible with revolution by political theorists, domains such as religion have been reintroduced and become instrumental in a number of anthropological analyses. In the case of the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela, Michelutti (2017) points out that the late revolutionary leader Hugo Chávez is being turned into the figure of a spirit, a saint, a reincarnation of independence fighter Simón Bolívar (cf. Taussig 1997); thus, Chávez continues to shape Venezuelans' revolutionary selves by

becoming an integral part of everyday social life. Moreover, these dynamics amplify the religious undertone of the revolution by creating a revolutionary system of divine kinship through networks of local politicians—each referred to as a “little Chávez”—whereby the legacy, charisma, and spiritual force of revolution are reproduced.

Martin Holbraad (2014) elaborates in his work on the notion of self-sacrifice as a constitutive dynamic of the Cuban Revolution, one clearly reminiscent of the Christian notion of renunciation of the self for the sake of a greater power and project. This downplays the role of political ideology as the main framework through which to interpret revolutionary phenomena and the ultimate aspirations of the Cuban people, presenting a notion of revolution as an all-encompassing entity capable of permeating all aspects of social life, thereby conflating the intimate (private) and the political. Alpa Shah (2014) similarly describes the role of the dedicated revolutionary cadres in the Maoist guerrilla movement in India as shaped and (re)interpreted on the basis of the religious principles and practices of the Hindu renouncer. While the renouncer seeks to end the eternal cycle of reincarnations, transcending cast and taboos in order to shape a parallel social path founded on radical equality, the ideology of the Maoist guerrilla fighter appears to be shaped by a similar aspiration to transcend binding social rules and impediments in the building of a liberated world.

All of these works present an argument which is highly relevant here, namely, that political projects and upheavals are often embedded in religious frameworks which, instead of jeopardizing the full realization of revolutionary change, become instrumental in defining the shape, the practice, and the horizon of political transformation (see also Humphrey 2003; West 2005; Varzi 2006; cf. Badiou 2003; Sewell Jr. 1996). Throughout the book we build on this type of scholarship and argument to question and reconfigure the conceptualization of revolution as a universal mold applicable to different sociocultural contexts.

Particularly the existing anthropological scholarship on the Arab Spring has revealed unexpected spaces and domains of operation of revolutionary forces and practices. In tension with Starn’s article “Missing the Revolution” (see above), a series of emblematic ethnographic works have begun defying the conventional loci of study from which to examine and comprehend revolution. In the case of the Egyptian revolution of 2011, a set of mostly female anthropologists (Abu-Lughod et al. 2012; Mittermaier 2014) accentuated and analyzed a series of strategic spaces traditionally overshadowed by the conventional focus on the political, providing crucial insights into the workings of revolution. While the stereotypical representation of revolution often emphasizes effervescence, action, violence, and the convergence of a mass of fighting protesters, mostly men, in the central space of a large city, these authors began to signal a series of unexpected dynamics and places—from the intimacy of a home in the outskirts

(Abu-Lughod et al. 2012) to the Islamic significance of food (Mittermaier 2014)—traditionally overshadowed in mainstream accounts focusing on Tahrir Square. These authors begin to challenge the association of revolution with the classic loci and forms of political action, demonstrating that what is at stake in a revolution may not be fully visible in the emblematic uprising that signals its beginning, or in its explicit, public, and political dimension. This calls for broadening the focus and taking into account a set of often-overshadowed elements, from space and time to gender and religious notions, that remain crucial to understanding how revolutionary transformations are enacted and experienced, as well as sometimes impeded. Throughout the book we deploy this inherent tendency of anthropology to retrieve unexpected notions and ideas from neglected spaces and domains, but also its capacity to operate simultaneously on different scales in the examination of social phenomena: from the private and intimate dimension of a home away from the uprising to the political ideology and messianic aspirations of the fighter at the center of Tahrir Square (see also Loris-Rodionoff 2019; Malmström 2015, 2019; Elliot 2017, 2020).

Finally, one of the most interesting anthropological contributions on revolution results from the critical stance of some of these works toward the range of naturalized ideologies that come with the concept of questioning taken-for-granted narratives of change and modalities of transformation. Judith Scheele (2007), in analyzing the political practices and discourses of the Algerian people of Kabylia together with international rhetoric on revolution, singles out the need to look critically at the notion of revolution and its concurrent concepts of change, creativity, and newness. If anthropology has been instrumental in warning about the dangers of reifying tradition, Scheele concludes that an anthropology of revolution should be equally aware and critical of the intrinsic danger of treating revolution, newness, and change as universals and/or objective descriptions of societal transformations. In a time where newness and change have become social imperatives of our reality, revolution runs the risk of turning into a convention rather than a unique event irremediably breaking with the past and previous political forms.

Samuli Schielke (2015) describes the Egyptian uprisings of 2011 as spontaneous, emotional occurrences; yet these events have been reframed by intellectuals and political activists as oriented toward a future horizon of transformation along a defined trajectory of change, making this the official narrative of the Arab Spring. In Schielke's view, such a recasting of a spontaneous event into an aspirational trajectory of transformation is part of a process of co-option of an impulsive uprising into the conventional categories and frameworks of capitalism and, for that matter, Islamism. For Schielke, the formal religious and economic frameworks are both excessively concerned with newness and with the notion of the future as a horizon one always fails to reach. He points out that canonical conceptualizations of revolution may conceal the true nature of revolutionary events, while a

supposedly new and transgressive political event may be reformulated according to the interests of capitalism.

These sometimes scattered works crystallize a specifically anthropological way of employing the concept of revolution from which we draw inspiration throughout this book. They generate resources for our project that range from a critique of naturalized ideologies—such as newness and linearity—in the conceptualization of political transformations, to ideas of the scale and shapes of revolutionary phenomena, thereby presenting a set of unexpected spaces and domains in which to examine the subject. This book constitutes an attempt to explore the consequences of addressing the process of revolution ethnographically and rejecting a priori definitions, norms, and recipes. In the following chapters we challenge established narratives and features of revolutionary processes by thinking them through indigenously cosmological categories, exploring the scope and limitations of reconfigurations of social, political, and cosmological coordinates according to local views in order to bring to light and comprehend emergent revolutionary forms. Bartering conventional notions and expectations for an explicit project of indigenization of revolution, we lay the foundations for an anthropology of revolution around which to rearrange coherently the set of scattered works outlined above.

ANTHROPOLOGY OF REVOLUTION AND ITS POLITICAL ENGAGEMENTS

Having presented our proposal for a nondefinitional approach to the study of revolutions, an important clarification is in order—one that the reader should bear in mind throughout the book. Our call for an open framework does not negate the possibility of political engagement. In saying that revolutions can be radically different, and that one has to take each in its own right rather than measuring it against a normative definition or model, we do not mean to say that all revolutionary projects are equally desirable from a political point of view. Our intent here is not to advocate suspension of judgment, nor do we want to convey the message that there is no truth in the assumptions that characterize the current discussion on revolution. To be even clearer, we are not arguing that European revolutionary theorists and traditions should be discarded in favor of non-European versions. Ours is not a desire to do away with “linear upheavals”; if it were, we would still be proposing a “model for all.” Nor do we wish to “open up” the concept of revolution by force. Rather, we want to problematize formulaic conceptualizations while knowing full well that we all have political opinions and stances. Ultimately, we wish to shed light on an inherent openness—a tendency to produce different versions of itself—that is already at the heart of revolutionary logic.

Revolutionary practitioners themselves also ask the question, “What is a revolution?” They continuously revise and adjust, either to ensure that they

stay faithful to the original aim of their endeavors or to deal with unforeseen circumstances that demand fine-tuning, amendment, and even drastic rethinking. The depiction of the revolutionary leader or group gathering a committee to discuss the revolution—even years after it has succeeded in establishing itself—is not an exception in the revolutionary landscape. It speaks of a need to constantly redefine: a need for revolutions to preserve some recognizable traits while, at the same time, staying open, at least to some degree. It is a way for revolutions not to reify themselves—not to be obsessively attached to their own images of themselves, as they so often have been—to forestall their transforming into reactionary projects. Determining whether revolutionary movements actually manage to do so—that is, whether they are truly willing to cultivate openness—is beyond the scope of this work, however. What is important is to stress that the questions we ask are emic, not etic; they stem from established practice: from an openness that characterizes many of those who invest their lives in revolutionary activities. It is perhaps in this sense that, in the words of Thomassen (2012: 680), “anthropology has an unarticulated affinity with political revolutions,” not only because, as he explains, anthropologists have often been ready to sympathize with revolutionary endeavors in the fight against colonial repression, but also—we feel—because both anthropology and revolution are open. They share a distrust for what has been statically predefined.

It is in this spirit that, throughout the chapters, we engage not only with less-documented revolutionary phenomena—hopefully in itself one of the virtues of this book—but also with a series of well-known thinkers who see, or have seen, revolution not simply as an object of intellectual inquiry but as a matter of personal, philosophical, and political involvement, from Karl Marx to Mikhail Bakunin, and Walter Benjamin to Slavoj Žižek.³ Although these renowned intellectuals have become part of the “revolutionary canon” we seek to problematize—and in that sense are often compared and contrasted with other forms of revolutionary thought and action in the pages that follow—we also capitalize, as much as possible, on their capacity for openness. In this sense, as will become clear particularly in the conclusion of the book, our project of “multiplying” notions of revolution is conducted in dialogue with the attempts made, at least by some of these thinkers, to open up the idea of what revolution is and what it could be.

3. We are aware that most of the references and descriptions of revolution by political theorists and philosophers we use throughout the text draw from the Marxist tradition of revolution. As an established, systematic, but highly diversified body of literature, Marxist debates are useful in exploring both discrepancies from and continuities with the anthropological approach we want to develop, thus allowing us to clarify the scope of our project. In the chapters we also touch upon various aspects and incarnations of the Anarchist episteme. As for other discourses, be it classical European liberal nationalism (Mazzini 1862), capitalism (Berger 1986; de Althaus 2007), National Socialism (Hitler 1925), or Fascism (Mosse 1999), we leave for future research a critical engagement with their claims to revolution.