

Conclusion

Worlds in Revolution

Throughout this book we have addressed different formations of revolution—what we may call “shapes of revolution”—from the most established examples of modern secular revolution to less well-documented, though no less powerful, forms of upheaval. In particular, in the previous chapter we have seen how these different revolutionary endeavors are informed by distinct understandings of the way the universe operates, lending revolutions different cosmological coordinates in each case. At times such understandings are articulated *locally*, that is, by relying on indigenous cosmological assumptions, while at others, as we have also seen, revolution is perceived as a language of liberation coming from outside: an *external* impulse. Often related to European revolutionary traditions, it is, nevertheless, contextually reinterpreted, and therefore involves a complex dialogue between different cosmological frameworks and concerns. Either way, our central contention thus far has been that attempts by revolutions to transform the socio-political conditions of human beings must be understood in light of the varying assumptions, discourses, and practices concerning the nature of the world, its capacities for change, and the role of people in bringing it about. The politics of revolution, we might say, must be understood with reference to the cosmological terrain in which it is enacted.

In this concluding chapter, however, we add a further twist to this thought, namely, that revolutions can be understood not only with reference to the cosmological coordinates that “frame” them (cf. Abramson and Holbraad 2014) but also, and perhaps most crucially, as cosmological projects in their own right. Revolutions, we suggest, are projects that set out to alter in unanticipated ways the manner in which people experience and conceptualize the universe and their place within it. In that sense revolutions have an inherently *cosmogonic* dimension: they are *events that seek to generate and regenerate worlds*—changing their coordinates, altering their spatiotemporal foundations, reconfiguring the position of human beings within them, reconstituting the very conditions of their existence. To be sure, when viewed from an anthropological standpoint, most political forms can be said to have cosmological and even cosmogonic dimensions of this kind. We know this from classic studies not only of putatively “nonmodern” political

contexts—from the studies of African kingship we have already reviewed, to famous analyses of the cosmogonic character of the “theatre state” in Bali (Geertz 1980) or the Mandala-like “galactic polities” of Southeast Asia (Tambiah 1977)—but also of emblematically “modern” political formations, such as nationalism (Anderson 2006), state socialism (Collier 2011), and colonialism (Taussig 1986; Mitchell 1991). Still, while we do not claim that revolutions are exceptional in this respect, we do suggest that they are distinctive, if only in degree, and in three main ways.

First, as have seen throughout the book (and the point is so obvious that to some it has appeared as essential to the very definition of revolutions—e.g., Brinton [1938] 1965), revolutions are characteristically invested in the question of *change*, though admittedly in widely varying ways. That is to say, unlike many other political forms in which cosmological dynamics may be at stake, in revolutionary projects the act of bringing about or otherwise radically reconfiguring worlds takes the form of a cosmological transformation. It is for this reason that we are tempted to conceptualize revolutions as “cosmogonic” ventures: bringing about or otherwise radically reconfiguring worlds is one of their deepest stakes. Secondly, and again unlike other political ventures in which cosmological reconfigurations of various kinds might come about as largely unintended consequences, in revolutions such transformations are pursued *explicitly* and *deliberately*.¹ Revolutions do not just change the world; their *point* is to do so. Cosmogony is not so much their consequence as their reason. Indeed, thirdly, the temptation to consider such changes in “cosmic” terms is owed partly to their deliberately *wholesale*, as well as radical, character. Where tamer programs for political transformation may involve piecemeal reforms limited to specific aspects of life (e.g., a reform in the scope of suffrage, which then altered conceptions of “the people” as political actors), revolutions characteristically take on an all-embracing quality. To recall Marcel Mauss’s term (1990), revolutions typically set themselves up as “total” social phenomena: political change is realized in and through projects of radical social transformation that go deep into local social forms, as well as the very constitutions of persons, space, time, power, and divinity, as we have seen in detail in previous chapters.²

1. One example of unintended consequences would be Benedict Anderson’s argument that nationalism emerged in late eighteenth-century Europe as a “spontaneous distillation of a complex ‘crossing’ of discrete historical forces” (2006: 4).

2. Such totality should be understood in light of our argument that revolutions explicitly set out to change the world. Unlike revolutions, other holistic sociopolitical projects might not overtly acknowledge their own capacity to affect all facets of life. Consider, for instance, forms of global capitalism and neoliberalism that—despite presenting themselves as ventures aimed at freeing the subject, thus furnishing human beings with an agency and a degree of independence that were denied by the totalitarian experiments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—impose, in the end, a total reorganization of the world and of those who inhabit it.

It is precisely this concerted holistic quality of revolutions, as we have suggested throughout this book, that makes anthropology—the holistic science par excellence (Malinowski 1922; Otto and Bubandt 2010)—a royal road toward gaining a proper handle on them. This, after all, is our main complaint about the way revolutions tend to be treated by other disciplines: by focusing exclusively on political dynamics over everything else, they have missed the inherently holistic character of revolutions. Treating revolutions as events of cosmogonic proportions, by contrast, makes a virtue of their “total” quality, and places their political significance in relation to all of the topics we have opened up for anthropological scrutiny in the preceding chapters.

To be sure, the notion that revolutions are cosmogonic acts is not, strictly speaking, an anthropological discovery of our own. Descriptions of revolutions as Big Bang–like events that spawn new worlds have been recurrent since the French Revolution. The rage of the underprivileged, for example, has been described as a subterranean force breaking the earth’s crust and irremediably changing the features of the cosmos. Revolutions, like volcanoes, spread a purifying fire over nations, burning to ashes the old world while simultaneously fertilizing the soil they are meant to destroy, thus creating the conditions for a new, generative rebirth (Ashburn Miller 2011: 154–55). Writing about the European uprisings of the early nineteenth century, for instance, Karl Marx describes these insurrections as phenomena akin to oceans of lava ready to blast away the surface of rock, and in envisioning his own revolutionary project, he often claimed to hear the continent shake and the crater of revolution rumble, voicing his hope for an eruption in his epistolary exchanges with Engels (Gandy 1979). Similarly, as explained in chapter 2, in more recent years Marxist Latin-American intellectual Álvaro García Linera has described revolution as a volcanic magma that violently erupts, and then slowly cools, solidifying into new political institutions that remain meaningful until the next eruption occurs, when, now old, they are burned to ashes, giving way to more just replacements (García Linera 2017). Revolutions thus feature in these accounts as truly cosmogonic events: outbreaks that destroy old worlds and generate new ones, inaugurating a novel era—a new time and space—and carrying human beings along a linear route of progress and refinement. Indeed, this is so prevalent that the point made in previous chapters regarding the linear understanding of the cosmos as found both in many modern revolutionary discourses and in monotheistic traditions could be reiterated here.

The notion that the muck of the ages is overcome in order to bring a better world into existence recapitulates two central ideas of the Abrahamic faiths: first, as Arendt points out ([1965] 2006: 16–18), the notion of a singular event—be it the storming of the Bastille or the advent of Christ—precipitating a qualitatively New Time, a gearshift of the rectilinear cosmology of history and, by that token, a cosmogonic moment; and, second, the idea—implicit in the association between

revolutions and eruptions—that the past is nullified and erased by the advent of radical newness. The latter is a concept that has a diffuse resonance with the idea of Creation as an act of Will (divine in monotheistic accounts, human in familiar modern takes on revolution), bringing about something out of nothing, as in the creation of the world *ex nihilo* recounted in the book of Genesis (cf. Rubenstein 2012).

Below we expand on the apparent similarity between modern articulations of revolution and Abrahamic cosmology. However, for now it is important to clarify that, as much as it might be relevant to the understanding of revolutionary projects, a view of cosmogony as a process that necessarily unfolds in a linear manner does not fully help us to grasp some of the phenomena we have unpacked in the book. As we have shown throughout the chapters, the cosmological coordinates of revolution can be multiplied and diversified in different ethnographic contexts, and the same can be said of its cosmogonic narratives. Upheavals come in different shapes and sizes and so do the worlds they aim to create. As we have seen, for example, in some cases the change brought about by revolutions is not understood as the establishment of a completely new order of things that nullifies the past but rather as a new rediscovery of an old one. Besides, cosmogonies can fail, or alter their course. Often they are not articulated as the outcome of a trajectory that follows a linear development and eventually comes to realization. Rather, they might involve a continuous and endless process of adjustment, a cosmology constantly in the making (cf. Barth 1990). When we speak of revolution as a cosmogonic project, then, we mean it in a capacious sense: in revolutions the generation of the world is always and deeply at issue, but what “generation” and indeed “world” might *mean* are questions that we must leave resolutely open to interrogation in each case.

Naturally, this approach can hardly dismiss revolutionary projects that appear to rely on linear cosmogony, not least the long tradition of writings (and doings) inspired by Marx. Throughout this book we have sought to establish a dialogue between such powerful, enduringly relevant—and, as we have also seen, globally influential—epistemes and alternative conceptions that ethnographies of revolution in different parts of the world can help to articulate. Our intention in setting up this dialogue has been neither to dismiss the European traditions of debate nor forcibly exoticize the concept of revolution. Rather, by adopting the broader vantage of anthropological comparison, we have sought to uncover the deeper stakes of revolutions as “total” phenomena, encompassing more than just the standard narratives about radical political upheaval. Having made this case, however, we are now in a position to track two reciprocal moves in our dialogue with more established theories of revolution. First, we want to show how certain strands of Marxist writings have dealt with themes that are pertinent to our argument that revolutionary cosmogony does not necessarily imply linearity and creation out of

nothing. Secondly, we want tackle a question that has informed theoretical writing on revolution, particularly, as we saw in our discussion of the role of ideology in chapter 5, those pertaining to Marxist philosophy, namely the question of universality. If revolutions characteristically set themselves up as total, and therefore, in a sense, universalizing projects—consider such emblematic revolutionary pronouncements as “declaration of the rights of man,” “workers of the world unite,” “bread, justice, and freedom”—then how might this tally with our proposal to consider them acts of cosmogony? Where, we may ask, does the variability that the notion of cosmogony introduces leave the idea that revolutions aim to transcend the particular in favor of the universal?

BEYOND THE LINEAR: BENJAMIN AND BADIOU

Marxist philosophers themselves have at times attempted to go beyond established understandings of revolution, thus hinting at the existence of nonlinear revolutionary cosmogonies. In his famous “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (2007: 253–64), for instance, the legendary and often cryptic Marxist thinker Walter Benjamin takes us through the potentials of revolutionary transformation in relation to the constitution of time, thus framing the question of revolution in explicitly cosmogonic terms. In particular, drawing inspiration from Jewish traditions of esoteric thought—a topic that intrigued Benjamin throughout his career—the thinker attempted to connect the Marxian concern with revolutionary transformation to mystical interpretations of the idea that the Messiah promised by the scriptures will return to establish a new world and a new sense of time. Interestingly, as we shall see, the upshot is a nonlinear account of revolutionary temporality, one that, although faithful to Marxist premises, is quite different from Marx’s own.

Benjamin’s analysis proceeds from the Jewish mystical idea that the Messiah’s arrival can occur at any time, and the faithful must be constantly alert and ready for it. From this perspective, time is always marked by a sense of expectation, and, consequently, the present is never experienced merely as a “now.” Rather, in a sense, the present is always already projected toward—and, therefore, pervaded by—the future, so the two cannot be distinguished in a clear way (2007: 263–64). This continuity between present and future sheds light on the true significance of the coming of the Messiah. In the words of Jewish theologian Gershom Scholem, one of Benjamin’s prime interlocutors, such coming involves “transcendence breaking in upon history, an intrusion in which history itself perishes” (1971: 10). The Messiah, in other words, will bring about a form of newness so radical that, rather than simply abolishing the old world and generating a new one in a linear cosmogony of sorts, it will operate beyond the categories of “old” and “new” as they are conventionally understood. The power of the Messiah, therefore, will be

so great as to be unrestricted by such categories, and indeed by time itself. Crucially, in this way he will be able to redeem, simultaneously, all the wrongs of the past, as well as those of the present and the future.

Benjamin saw a similar, though unexpressed, redeeming capacity in Marxist thought (Derrida 2012: 211), and by emphasizing this potential he devised a messianic formulation of the cosmogonic powers of revolution. His account was founded on a core intuition: the idea that a redemption beyond time as found in Jewish mysticism was compatible with the Marxist critique of capitalism. Further, it could prove more effective in the fight against capitalism than the usual tendency of Marxists to see revolution as the coming of a better world as, after all, capitalism also claims to carry humanity along a route of advancement (Benjamin 2007: 257–58; see also Berman 2010). To elucidate his point, Benjamin argued that a true revolution is such only if it is able to make sense of the fact that in the past many have tried to rise against the wrongs of the world, even though they may have failed. Marx's position toward these failures was essentially to learn from them, incorporating them into his dialectical model of history in order to set the conditions for revolutionary success in the future (Marx [1852] 2008: 15). Benjamin, on the other hand, thought that a successful revolution ought to connect with these aborted attempts at a deeper level, that it could succeed in their name, thus operating a retroactive redemption, a fulfillment in the present of all the unrealized potentialities of the past (2007: 260). Benjamin's conception of revolution was cosmogonic, then, insofar as he thought of revolution as an event that has the potential to precipitate a new *kind* of world or "era," one in which all wrongs could be redeemed. In his account, however, such a cosmogonic dimension is not articulated with a stress on the need to nullify the past or to leave it behind, as in standard Marxian conceptions, but rather, as with the Messiah, through a redemptive and in that sense affirmative relation with it.

Benjamin, we might say, wanted to free Marxism from a view of history as a trajectory of progress that, in his view, limited its liberating potential (Eagleton 1981: 78, 2010: 38). His attempt to do so, to be sure, has exerted a strong influence on subsequent attempts to modify and renew conceptions of revolutionary change by an array of neo- or indeed post-Marxist thinkers (e.g., Žižek 2008: 59), and not least with the renewed interest in "messianic time" in European political philosophy (e.g., Agamben 2005b). Bypassing, qualifying, or otherwise rethinking linear conceptions of time and history has been a central concern of these writings, particularly in the work of Alain Badiou, which has featured so prominently in recent debates. Indeed, Badiou's work is relevant to our purposes here, and deserves to be explored in some detail since cosmogonic concerns, which are in many ways analogous to Benjamin's, lie very much at its surface. Though an atheist himself, Badiou too, like Benjamin, draws inspiration from a spiritual tradition, namely, in his case, the letters of Saint Paul. While it is true that Badiou is

one of many leftist thinkers to take an interest in Paul (Lyotard and Gruber 1999: 15; Žižek 2003; Preve 2006; Caputo and Alcott 2009; Milbank et al. 2010; Baker 2013; Pasolini 2014), his treatment is distinguished by its markedly cosmogonic tenor, particularly in the parallel he draws between revolution and the resurrection of Christ: a parallel that pushes him to define a revolutionary cosmogony that, as with Benjamin, is not fully linear, at least when compared with more canonic Marxist articulations.

When Paul describes the resurrection, according to Badiou, he portrays it as a breaking point. The resurrection is such a constitutively “new” event that it cannot be apprehended from within the scope of categories of thought that were in use before its advent, such as Greek philosophy and Jewish law: the two main sets of discourses in Paul’s time (2003: 42). The resurrection thus reveals the limitations of these prior ways of looking at the world. To illustrate this point, Badiou draws attention to the fact that both Greek philosophy and Jewish law put the stress on their mutual differences, as seen, for example, in the Jewish commitment to circumcision and the Greek rejection of it. This is in stark contrast with the idea of a risen Christ who saves all humans regardless of their background because in the eyes of God there is “neither Jew nor Greek,” as Paul says (42). The event of the resurrection, then, brings forth an altogether new situation, in which the basic constituents of the world as people experienced it at the time (e.g., the distinction between Jews and Greeks) are superseded by new ones (e.g., humanity taken as a whole).

Badiou’s Pauline analysis does have a strong emphasis on newness as the overcoming of an old order, and it would not be incorrect to say that for him events such as the resurrection effectively act to reorder the very constituents of reality. However, it is important to be quite precise about this point, since it goes to the heart of the difference between Badiou and Marx on the one hand, and the affinity between Badiou and Benjamin on the other. The novel situation in which all humans are united into a whole, according to Badiou, does not feature in Paul’s writings as something that emerges as an altogether “new reality” or “world” out of the event of resurrection. Rather, it is something that was real even before Christ’s rising, with the difference that at that time it could not be *articulated*, since the discourses that were then available were so focused on distinguishing Jews from Greeks that they precluded a more unified sense of humanity. So here cosmogony must be understood not as a matter of creating worlds out of nothing but rather as one of revealing realities that were already present in the past, although neither seen nor computed.

In a sense, then, Badiou’s views resemble classical Marxist positions more than Benjamin’s, particularly in the idea, encountered in chapter 5, that revolution makes reality visible by helping subjects to abandon the ideology that once hid it from view. Badiou, however, proposes an understanding of this process that is

significantly different from that of more orthodox forms of Marxism. In particular, he argues that in Paul's account the disclosure of reality that the resurrection brings about does not require Greeks and Jews to abandon their traditions, and, in that sense, to annihilate the past. Rather, it asks them to become witnesses to an event that cannot be understood through such traditions, so that, although rooted in their customary commitments, Greeks and Jews can nevertheless become open to new aspects of the world (Badiou 2003: 43). While Paul confines this dynamic to the spiritual realm—particularly to the possibility of a “spiritual revolution” (Ephesians 4:23), Badiou extends it to any revolutionary event. Hence, in Badiou's view, revolution adds new dimensions to the world not by seeking to abolish pre-revolutionary discourses—as with classical Marxism—but by relying on the way in which subjects, who are positioned within different and otherwise localized traditions, respond to the novelty of the event of revolution as that which *exceeds* those traditions without necessarily obliterating them.

In light of these considerations, both Badiou and Benjamin stand out as important predecessors in our anthropological approach to revolutionary cosmogonies. Furthermore, their analyses allow us to clarify that even though, as we have often said in the book, the Judeo-Christian tradition is in important ways characterized by a linear view of time, linearity is far from being its only component. This is as true for the Jewish messianic themes that inspired Benjamin as it is for Pauline Christianity, whose cosmology does not rely only on a temporality that points toward the future (the second coming of Christ) but also on the idea that Christ has *already* come, so that humanity does not simply proceed linearly toward the “end of time” but rather lives in the “time of the end”—a special time, carved within linear time, where it is imperative spiritually to meet Christ in the present (Agamben 2005b: 67–69, see also Lancaster 1988: xviii). The work of Benjamin and Badiou, then, shows that ultimately the idea of a purely linear cosmogony belongs more to classical Marxism and other attempts to secularize the Judeo-Christian paradigm of salvation than to this paradigm itself (Scholem 1971: 10).

Yet it is also important to stress that, ultimately, neither Badiou's nor Benjamin's approach fully coincides with ours, at least when it comes to documenting the ways in which revolutions are understood in different contexts. Although both these thinkers challenge standard cosmogonic assumptions, they nevertheless base their analyses on what is essentially a modern and secular view of the cosmos: one where the reconfiguration of the world operated by revolution is carried out by human beings as the sole actors of history. Admittedly, scholars have long debated whether Benjamin's approach is better understood as secular or theological (Dickinson and Symons 2016), whereas Badiou's approach is explicitly rooted in a humanist stance (Badiou 2003: 1–3). Regardless of their differences, however, these philosophers stand out as distinctively secular when one compares their work with the much more radically varied revolutionary epistemes we have encountered in previous chapters. For instance, while Benjamin believed that the

notion of the messianic was particularly suited to describe revolution, he very much excluded the possibility of the Messiah truly manifesting himself (Rabinbach 1992: xviii). By contrast, as we have seen, the Iranian Revolution has relied heavily on the idea that the messianic figure of the Hidden Imam will return to establish justice on earth. Similarly, if Badiou saw in the resurrection a powerful paradigm of the revolutionary event, in the Liberation Theology movements underpinning revolutionary action in parts of Latin America and elsewhere, the prospect of revolution is based on the unabashedly nonsecular principle that Christ's resurrection is not merely a theoretical model for other events but a real event in its own right.

When juxtaposed with these discourses, Benjamin's and Badiou's writings come across, as they readily acknowledge themselves, not as alternative Christian or Jewish revolutionary cosmogonies but rather as Marxist articulations of Judeo-Christian themes: a feature that, as we have seen, characterizes even more orthodox Marxist analyses, although not with the same degree of experimentation. Even though both intellectuals show an awareness of the risks one encounters when assessing a religious cosmology through the lens of a secular one (Badiou 2001: 24; Benjamin 2007: 25), their approaches do not help us fully to make sense of the role played by gods, spirits, and other nonhuman agents in local revolutionary cosmogonies. While Benjamin and Badiou certainly enact the possibility of putting canonical revolutionary epistemes in dialogue with other traditions, as we have attempted to do in the book, their formulations remain an attempt to provide a general framework of revolutionary cosmogony within which indigenous ideas of revolution can only (and at best) be subsumed. Although this might be considered a legitimate move, should one be inclined to embrace the tenets of secular revolutionary projects, we are interested in the conceptual possibility of reversing such an approach, documenting the ways in which indigenous notions of world-making generate their own, specific, and in their own ways all-encompassing paradigms of politics and cosmogony. Ours is an effort to multiply the possibilities of revolution conceptually. In so doing, we do not aim to show that such possibilities are all equally desirable from a political point of view—a stance that, incidentally, would contrast with the demand, made by many revolutionary projects of their practitioners, to embrace one specific political and cosmological stance. Rather, we seek to show that, in setting out to reconstitute the world, each *particular* revolutionary project articulates its own understanding of the *universal* potential of this process.

REVOLUTIONARY UNIVERSALISM MULTIPLIED

We saw in earlier chapters how Koselleck's contention that revolution is the modern political form par excellence is borne out by the central role revolutions so often accord to universal goals and ideals—universalism itself being a

prime avatar of Enlightenment thought. The very image, after all, of historical development as a march away from the particular and toward the universal, precipitated by increasingly radical revolutionary upheavals, has deep roots in the Enlightenment—it is as much an emblem of modern political thinking as revolutions are themselves. As Luis Dumont (1994) argued so forcefully in his masterful comparison between French and German images of individualism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the most central contention of the French Revolution itself was the idea that its aims were universal. Liberty, equality, and fraternity, alongside such cardinal values as laicism or the right to private property, are to be furthered as goals worthy of humanity as a whole, of which the project of “civilization” that the French Revolution embodies is merely an expression. That the revolution should be “French,” in that sense, is only an historical accident.³ The revolution abolishes culture, as it were, such that French culture is really just *universal culture*. Dumont sums the idea up with reference to an imaginary figure conjured by his comparative argument:

[F]or the Frenchman, the existence of boundaries, of different languages, of conflicts of interest between nations, is negligible in relation to man’s essence as expressed in his watchword: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. The basic or global French ideology is as powerful as it is simple, and devoid of concrete elements. At bottom, it consists of a single principle: the human subject as universal. The creed has come down to us from the Enlightenment, of course, through the dispensation of the great Revolution that fondly marks the beginning of the establishment of truth on earth. (1994: 201)

For Dumont himself, however, such a claim to universality can only ever be understood as a *particular* system of value, to be compared anthropologically with alternatives that can be found elsewhere—for example, that of the Vedic caste system in India, in which the individual, far from universal, is subordinated hierarchically to the values of the system taken as a whole (1981), or the case of post-Reformation Germany, in which the individual is valued not as a social unit alongside others but rather in their deeply personal relationship to God (1994; see also Pedersen

3. Indeed, for Dumont, the “artificialism” of such a conception of human emancipation—the fact that it posits itself as an expression of universal humanity, transcending its contingently local realizations—can also be detected in Lenin’s leadership of the Bolshevik Revolution. That Lenin should imagine, contrary to prevalent Marxist conceptions at the time (not least in Russia), that his country could skip directly from czarism to proletarian socialism in one fell revolutionary swoop, is, to be sure, partly an expression of the deeply Russian character of his understanding of the power of the Russian people, asserted as *against* “Western” principles of universal individualism. At the same time, the conviction that this autochthonous power could be deployed artificially to overcome *itself*—that it to say, to overcome its own contingency in favor of a universal revolutionary principles—is profoundly “modern.” This ability of modern universalism to be “acculturated” in varying circumstances and mixed with elements that are quite contrary to it explains, for Dumont, why “Lenin’s artificialism [could be] adopted later on by communist parties the world over” (1994: 12).

2019). Treating universalism as an ethnographic variable in this way is certainly confluent with Benjamin's and Badiou's philosophical attempts to root the universalistic tenor of revolutions in particular spiritual traditions. As we saw, they allow Jewish messianism and Pauline Christianity, respectively, to alter the Marxist formulation of universalism. It is by carrying this maneuver that they manage to offer alternative notions of universality: one where novelty surpasses all localities without destroying them (as with Badiou) or where the redemption operated by revolution extends to the whole of human history (as per Benjamin).

However, Dumont's move to "demote" the French Revolution's claim to universality, as it were, also illustrates how anthropological comparison can amplify the critical potential of such an approach. Both Benjamin's and Badiou's temperings of universalism are attempts to recuperate the temporal complexity of the Judeo-Christian traditions from which, as we have seen, modern ideas about revolution have emerged, in order to reinfuse them into contemporary proposals for revolution. Although an anthropological analysis of these projects should take their claims seriously, including claims of universality, we also suggest here the possibility to go beyond these trajectories in order to ethnographically document other prospects for revolutionary universality. By way of closing, then, let us illustrate this with reference to the ethnographic torsions of the idea of the universal in our own respective field sites, namely Libya, Bolivia, and Cuba.

Taking the case of Libya first, we may note that, as we have explained, Colonel Gaddafi's revolutionary project aimed at abolishing the nation-state, which Gaddafi considered an artificial colonial construction, as opposed to more natural forms of organization found in Libya, including kinship-based tribal groups. In particular, as we also saw, Gaddafi maintained that the structures of the state against which his revolution was pitted should be replaced by the "State of the Masses": a system in which citizens gather in popular assemblies and address political issues among themselves without the mediation of state bodies. Importantly, Gaddafi presented this formula as a *universal* model that could be applied outside of Libya, and indeed, during the early phases of his leadership, he put considerable effort into trying to export his political model to other countries. In fashioning his universal theory, however, Gaddafi adopted a distinctive Libyan perspective. Gaddafi thought that, once the artifice of the state was removed, society would be kept together by more authentic forms of solidarity: those founded on religion and on kinship. In Libyan tribal discourses these are meant to tie individuals together through blood relationships and religious obligations, allowing them to solve potential conflicts without the help of the state (Davis 1986: 49, 212). Similarly to the case of the French Revolution unpacked by Dumont, therefore, Gaddafi's universalism relied on the assumption that, in this case, Libyan culture was, in a sense, universal. Unlike the French case, however, Gaddafi articulated this assumption in an historical perspective as he believed that forms of

universalism such as those produced by the West—forms that relied on secularism and the inevitability of the nation-state—had run their course and proved ineffective. Based on these premises, Gaddafi argued that his revolutionary venture had precipitated a new historical phase of human history, one that could finally allow Libyans, as well as other neglected localities of the world—which he often described with the collective term “black man” (Gaddafi [1975–81] 2005: 97)—to propose and establish their own, not necessarily secular or state-based, understandings of universalism.⁴

Rather than simply assuming that Libyan idiosyncrasies had a universal vocation, Gaddafi thus argued that such idiosyncrasies encapsulated those of all other neglected particularities, and that, in turn, such particularities could offer a new, refreshing perspective to the rest of the world. In a sense, Gaddafi’s take on universalism resembles that of Marx, as the Marxist project stemmed from a similar, compelling premise: the notion that, throughout history, the universal tenets expressed by the French Revolution had ultimately benefited only a specific particularity—bourgeois particularity—so that a new understanding of the universal was needed, one that had to be formulated from the specific point of view of the exploited (Marx [1852] 2008). It is important to stress, however, that whereas Gaddafi, or Marx, saw the emancipation of one particularity as the necessary condition for universal emancipation, other discourses we have encountered in the book feature a radically different view of the universal dynamics of revolution.

The context of the Bolivian *proceso de cambio* is a case in point, as it sheds light on an understanding of universalism that differs from Gaddafi’s in that, rather than presupposing the necessary primacy of a particularity, it fosters the coexistence of different specificities. In particular—as we have seen in chapter 2—in the Bolivian context, and more specifically among the Aymara, we find the idea that the reproduction of the cosmos relies on a fertile connection carried out by diverse and often antagonistic groups, cosmological forces, and territories: for example, mountainous/masculine highland and humid/feminine lowland. This cosmological outlook is reflected in practices aimed at activating processes of economic, political, and religious articulation across different and autonomous groups and territories, all of which are seen as necessary to sustain the universe. Such practices—which resonate with ancient forms of political administration of multiple groups and territories as found in the Inca Empire (Harris et al. 1987)—shed light on a distinct Andean articulation of universalism, one which is founded on the idea that different entities can be connected with each other through generative networks, meanwhile maintaining their own particular traits.

4. Notice, however, that Gaddafi also stated that his model was inspired by ancient Greek notions of democracy (Davis 1986: 50), thus showing how local forms of universalism often entail complex combinations of various cultural repertoires.

Incidentally, appreciating such a distinctively Andean articulation of universality helps us to problematize the notion—implicit in any attempt to forcefully incorporate different localities into Western universal forms, whether revolutionary or otherwise—that indigenous groups are ill equipped to produce a view of the universe and of revolution that goes beyond their circumscribed particularity: a notion that has left its unfortunate mark on Bolivian politics. So Bolivian progressive intellectuals have taken on the task of projecting to the universal level a series of local particularities. By drawing on local indigenous structures such as the community (or the *ayllu*, an Andean administrative unit), such intellectuals have reframed the *ayllu* as the basis of the collective production and appropriation that constitutes socialism. In other words, the “universal *ayllu*,” once bridged by socialism instituting a transitional epoch of increasing socialization of decision-making promoted by a centralized state, will activate a gradual replacement of the capitalist civilization (García Linera 2015). Much as we have seen with Benjamin and Badiou, Bolivian intellectuals thus incorporated specific localities into a more canonical revolutionary narrative: a move that, in this particular case, was aimed at presenting the *proceso* as a recognizable revolutionary project in the eyes of potential external allies of the Bolivian revolution. This move, which demonstrates that, ultimately, Bolivian intellectuals have persisted in seeing indigenous people as incapable of universalism, irremediably reconfigured the *proceso*. The Aymara notion of a rather decentralized political body articulated by generative arteries dispersed across multiple territories was replaced by the canonical idea of a centralized state where, supposedly, the different groups were represented (Postero 2017; García Linera 2015).

As a final example, we can mention the case of Cuba where, unlike Bolivia, we do not have two different understandings of universalism that eventually clash with each other, but rather an official, state-sponsored version of it that coexists with other, more grassroots conceptions that do not necessarily contradict each other. As we saw in chapter 4, notwithstanding years of persecution, practitioners of Afro-Cuban religious traditions are able to conceive of themselves as participants in Cuba’s revolutionary project by refracting it through the terms of Afro-Cuban cosmology. While in chapter 4 we referred to these conceptions in relation to revolutionary personhood, here we may note their cosmogonic, as well as universal, character, paying particular attention to the idea, found among practitioners of Afro-Cuban religion, that the Cuban Revolution has been able to sustain itself, against all odds, because of the life force (*aché*) with which continual animal sacrifices infuse it. This is, above all, a statement about cosmic production and reproduction. Much like *mana*, the famed Oceanian concept-cum-substance (Holbraad 2007), *aché* is conceived as a “power” or “capacity” that permeates everything that exists since the time of its very “birth,” that is, the times of origin to which much of Afro-Cuban mythology is devoted. Everything has *aché* to some

degree—divinities, animals, plants, objects, people, words, situations—and each thing can gain it or lose it depending on circumstances, animal sacrifice being a prime means for “charging” (*cargar*) particular entities with its force. *Aché*, then, is universal in the sense that it is all-encompassing, though manifest in different degrees, depending both on the will of divinities, who wield it, and on the actions of people who, by virtue of their own *aché*-charged initiation, can invoke their powers.

Crucially, the official revolutionary discourse in Cuba, for its part, also sets itself up as a universalizing project, though in a more “modern” sense. Notwithstanding its more particular concerns with “Cubanness” (Ayorinde 2004), the vocabulary of universal emancipation, cast in terms of social justice and equality, has been at the heart of the Cuban revolutionary project from its very beginning. We may seem, therefore, to be confronting here a conflict of universals: an Afro-American cosmogony of life forces, divinities, and sacrificial rituals pitted against a collective state-socialist—indeed, internationalist—endeavor promoting universal human emancipation. However, this is not necessarily how practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions see the matter themselves. To the extent that everything that exists manifests *aché* in one way or other, and things that are felt to be powerful reveal their particular charge of *aché*, the endurance of the revolution in Cuba is yet another proof of its confluence with the cosmogonic principles of Afro-Cuban ritual practices. What we have here, then, are two encompassing forms of universalism. On the one hand, the Cuban Revolution “contains” within its all-embracing reach the practitioners of Afro-Cuban religion who, from its point of view, are citizens with rights to practice their rituals and religion—one that has become increasingly prominent under the auspices of state-sponsored institutions that support it as part of the national culture. On the other hand, we have the cosmogonic logic of Afro-Cuban spirituality, according to which the revolution, with all its claim to be creating a new world, is itself an entity that manifests the power of the all-embracing cosmogonic principle of *aché*. Each side, then, sees the other as a “particular” instance of a universal principle—be that revolutionary emancipation and respect for religious freedom or the power of *aché* as an all-encompassing living force. Thus, these two claims to universality do not vie for position in some all-or-nothing contest of mutual antipathy but rather fold into each other, as each renders its counterpart a manifestation of its own cosmogonic powers.

This brief presentation of alternative, not necessarily modern understandings of universality—Gaddafi’s idea that Libyan culture had the potential to reflect the universal aspirations of the neglected; the Aymara notion of a generative coexistence between distinct particularities; and the different mutually encompassing forms of universalism found in Cuba—serves to spell out the consequences of our argument about the cosmogonic stakes of revolution for the question of its claims to universality. Approaching these different “particular universalities”

as cosmogonic processes, one might consider the etymology of the two words—“universality” and “cosmogony.” Universe and cosmos are of course synonyms. Notice, however, that there is also a difference. At its root, “*universe*” builds a notion of singularity into the conception of the world. By contrast, “cosmogony” (as well as “cosmology”) has no such connotations. Quite the opposite: studying cosmogonies has a distinct methodological advantage, as it allows us to unpack the different ways in which a cosmos might be generated, reproduced, and transformed, grasping the entities, relations, and dynamics it might involve, and how, crucially, it might align itself in relation to other cosmoi. Placing revolutions’ claims to universality within, rather than beyond, the scope of such contingent variations allows us not only to further problematize the more chauvinistic versions of modern Western thought—as discussed amply, for example, by postcolonial critiques at large (Latour 1993; Chakrabarty 2000; Viveiros de Castro 2014)—but also, more specifically, to grasp the different political prospects enacted by revolutionary endeavors.

Our argument in this regard, we may note, brings us into close proximity with recent calls to rescind cardinal modern distinctions between *cosmos* and *polis*, nature and culture, fact and value, science and politics, in order to embrace instead a “cosmopolitical” stance that treats these putative dualities symmetrically, exploring the many ways in which the political and the cosmological come together in all sorts of partial and contingent configurations (e.g., Stengers 2010; Latour 2002). Indeed, as we have sought to show, revolutions are cosmopolitical by their very nature. Such a realization, we believe, allows us not only to address a wider and more varied array of revolutionary configurations as *revolutions per se*, each with its own understanding of the way the cosmos comes about—thus avoiding the temptation to measure them against an external framework—but also to multiply the possibilities of and for political commitment. If anthropology is “revolutionary” in that it shares with revolution an impulse to shake up certainties and explore alternatives, then perhaps it can also furnish a certain bridge from thought to action. By its very nature, the anthropology of revolution can act as a boost to, as well as a critical check on, projects of revolutionary transformation, opening them up to the influence of as yet unthought-of possibilities deriving from sundry “elsewheres” that could, perhaps, inspire radical visions of lives and worlds “otherwise” (Povinelli 2012), and even, maybe, mark out paths toward them.