

# Revolution as Event

## *Ritual, Violence, and Transformation*

*The relevance of the problem of beginning to the phenomenon of revolution is obvious. That such a beginning must be intimately connected with violence seems to be vouched for by the legendary beginnings of our history as both biblical and classical antiquity report it: Cain slew Abel and Romulus slew Remus.*

—HANNAH ARENDT

It would seem uncontroversial to say that a revolution is, if nothing else, an event. A momentous event, a rupture in history, in time itself. We say “revolution” and we think of the storming of the Bastille or the Winter Palace, the occupation of Tahrir Square. And we put dates on revolutions: 1789, 1917, 2011 . . . Emblematic moments in time, violent upheavals that bring about wholesale change in the prevailing political and social order, or at least seek to do so. And then we ask questions about their causes and effects: What brought such-and-such a revolution about? How far back can we trace its origins? How long can it be said to have lasted? Did it develop in one fell swoop or were there different phases to it? And what were its consequences? Did the revolution change things as much as its protagonists had hoped? How long did the changes last? The notorious, if somewhat apocryphal and probably misinterpreted (e.g., see Plattner 2011: 12) dialogue between US president Richard Nixon and Chinese premier Zhou Enlai during Nixon’s visit to China in 1972 captures this way of thinking. Prepped by Henry Kissinger about the Chinese leader’s interest in French history, so the story goes, Nixon seeks to break the ice by asking Zhou Enlai what he thought the impact of the French Revolution had been on Western civilization. “It’s too early to tell,” goes the legendary response. If the story is meant to typify a sage-like Chinese proclivity to take the long view of things, in its irony it also exemplifies the underlying idea that revolutions echo through history as singular ruptures in time.

The German conceptual historian Reinhart Koselleck offers a meticulous account (1985) of how this idea of revolutions as singular historical events has come to occupy such a central place in modern understandings of history itself as a forward-moving process. As do a number of other influential analysts of revolution and modernity (e.g., Arendt [1965] 2006; Berman 2010), he casts the emergence of revolution as a peculiarly modern concept at the time of the Enlightenment in contrast to earlier conceptions that identified revolution with the cyclical motion of heavenly bodies, to which the cycles of political change were also associated. If the French Revolution is sometimes deemed as the inaugural event of the modern era, according to Koselleck, that is also because the very notion of revolution that it transfigures is itself so modern, with two distinguishing features. First, instead of connoting a circle, revolution now begins to be understood as a singular break, making a rupture with the past for the sake of a future that is yet to be realized, and is in that sense open. Since the Enlightenment, Koselleck writes (1985: 46), “revolution obviously no longer returned to given conditions or possibilities, but has, since 1789, led forward into an unknown future.” Secondly, by unmooring itself from its natural reference in older usages, the concept of revolution is elevated to what Koselleck calls a “metahistorical” status (47). Rather than referring just to events *within* time (e.g., the French Revolution happened in 1789), revolution also refers to the form of time *itself*—an inherently asymmetrical line of development, in which the present stands at the cusp of a past that is forever gone and a future that is as yet unknown. Revolution, then, “assumes a transcendental significance; it becomes a regulative principle of knowledge, as well as of the actions of all those drawn into revolution” (46–47).

Somewhat surprisingly, Koselleck’s conceptual history does not incorporate much discussion of the work of Karl Marx and its legacy in this connection. Given the enormous projection and influence that Marxist conceptions have had on revolutionary processes across the globe, however, it is important to note here that Marx’s conception of revolution as a rupture in and with time is emblematic of the order Koselleck poses as the quintessence of modern ideas about the asymmetry of time. One of the most cited parts of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, which is devoted partly to disparaging the “farcical” character of the 1848 revolutions when compared with the “tragic” quality of the French Revolution—“all great world-historic facts and personages appear . . . [twice]: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce” (Marx [1852] 2008: 5)—illustrates how for Marx the power of revolution turns crucially on the degree to which it is able truly to break with the past. Marx’s writing is so vivid on this point that the famous passage deserves a fuller quotation than it is usually given:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already,

given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language. Thus Luther put on the mask of the Apostle Paul, the Revolution of 1789–1814 draped itself alternately in the guise of the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, and the Revolution of 1848 knew nothing better to do than to parody, now 1789, now the revolutionary tradition of 1793–95. In like manner, the beginner who has learned a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he assimilates the spirit of the new language and expresses himself freely in it only when he moves in it without recalling the old and when he forgets his native tongue. ([1852] 2008: 5)

This tension—between a desire for a clean break with the past, on the one hand, and, on the other, the past’s ability nevertheless to “haunt” the present and thus restrict the scope and character of revolutionary transformation—is one that persists in writings on revolution, not least in the Marxist tradition. For example, in recent years the French philosopher Alain Badiou (2009) has put forward an intricate metaphysics of “the event,” seen as a rupture that creates basic incommensurabilities between the past and the future. As an active Maoist himself (Badiou 2006; cf. Bosteels 2005; Laruelle 2017), Badiou is particularly interested in the political potentials of such a conception of the event, which he associates with iconic moments of revolution in Europe (e.g., Badiou 2007: 180–83; see also Hallward 1998).<sup>1</sup> However, as we shall see in later chapters when discussing the parallel Badiou draws between revolution and Christian conversion, even this arch theorist of rupture finds continuities that connect the new order brought about by revolutionary ruptures to the times

1. Marxist thinkers have developed different understandings on how the revolutionary event unfolds. Some have favored the notion of a speedy and tempestuous rupture, as in the case of Polish Marxist thinker Rosa Luxemburg (2006: 191): “either the revolution must advance at a rapid, stormy and resolute tempo, break down all barriers with an iron hand and place its goals ever farther ahead, or it is quite soon thrown backward behind its feeble point of departure and suppressed by counter-revolution.” Others have conceptualized revolution as a slower, subtler process, as with Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, whose theories will be analyzed in chapter 5. In particular, borrowing from military jargon, Gramsci traces a difference between “war of movement” and “war of position.” The former refers to rapid revolutionary events aimed at immediately destroying old structures. The latter indicates gradual, seemingly uneventful processes in which revolutionary forces slowly erode old structures by strategically influencing public discourses and by creating tactical alliances (Gramsci 1992a: 216–19). Even though Gramsci did not completely dismiss the revolutionary benefits of the war of movement (Gramsci 1994), he saw the war of position as a more efficient strategy for revolution in modern Western societies (Hall 2018: 38).

that came before them. In particular, as we shall see, the analogy Badiou makes between revolution and Paul's conversion to Christianity—politically motivated and, in that sense, normative as it is—invests the concept of revolution with distinctly Christian sonorities. In later chapters we shall be developing a broader argument about what we call the “cosmological” character of revolutionary transformations.

For now, however, we seek to set an argument in motion by focusing on the more narrow, though absolutely central, idea that revolutions are to be conceived, if nothing else, as events—violent ruptures that are meant to inaugurate a new order of things. As we shall see, the notion of event that Koselleck (descriptively) and Badiou (prescriptively) find at the heart of revolution as a modern political form never ceases to be relevant in the diverse ethnographic settings that we shall be exploring. By the end of this chapter, however, it should be clear that standard conceptions of revolution as a singular event that arrests and changes the otherwise ineluctable course of history cannot on their own do justice to the sheer diversity of temporal assumptions, concepts, and practices that different revolutionary projects have relied upon across the world. Indeed, our aim here is not only to make an inductive argument about the temporal diversity of revolutions—this being exactly what one would expect anthropologists to say about most things. More ambitiously, we also present a more “deductive” argument about the purchase that anthropological thinking can have on the analysis of revolutions and their temporal “shape” as events—an argument from first anthropological principles, as it were, bringing some of the most basic anthropological tools to bear on the question.

In particular, what we have in mind here is the study of ritual—an all-time anthropological classic that has furnished some of the most sophisticated analytical frameworks the discipline has to offer. Ritual theory is the obvious anthropological starting point for thinking about revolutions as events, since so many of our standard assumptions about how revolutions occur in time are central also to what anthropologists have had to say about ritual action. Rituals too, after all, are treated as events (unlike myths, say, which are more like abstract narratives); they are deemed to be transformative, having lasting effects on the people who participate in them (think of initiation rituals, for example); and often, as with revolutions, rituals involve significant doses of violence (the classic instance here would be the various hazing-type “ordeals” that initiations so often involve). As we shall see, however, this obvious affinity between revolution and ritual also serves a critical purpose. If key insights from the study of ritual can shed light on the understanding of revolution, then, by the same token, some of the critical perspectives that can be taken on ritual theory can stimulate alternative ways of thinking about revolutions, and not least ways of thinking of it as something other than an event.

## REVOLUTION AS RITUAL: A TRAJECTORY IN BRITISH SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

### *Gluckman on Ritual Rebellion versus Revolution*

The suggestion that the study of ritual might provide the tools for developing an anthropology of revolution has a history—one that is bound up most particularly with the development of British social anthropology in its heyday, and its central concern with social order. The link with ritual is tellingly captured in the title of what, as we mentioned in the introduction, is anthropology's most celebrated early engagement with the topic of revolution, namely Max Gluckman's famous essay, "Rituals of Rebellion in South-East Africa" (1963), delivered as a Frazer Lecture in Glasgow in 1953. Admittedly, the thrust of Gluckman's argument is to *distinguish* from revolutions proper the kinds of "rituals of rebellion" he surveys in his essay—including Zulu agricultural first-fruit rites for the goddess *Nomkubulwana*, for example, in which women transgress their ordinary social roles and temporarily affront the males, or the Zwasi *incwala* ceremony, in which the king is for a period subjected to the disdain of his subjects, before he reemerges triumphantly as master of the forces of cosmic and social renewal.

As Gluckman writes:

[T]hese ritual rebellions proceed within an established and sacred traditional system, in which there is dispute about particular distributions of power, and not about the structure of the system itself. This allows for instituted protest, and in complex ways renews the unity of the system. (1963: 112)

Gluckman's distinction rests on an argument about time and its structure. Qua rituals, the rebellious performances he reviews are quite different from revolutions, which "question the system of institutions . . . [and aim] at altering the existing social and political order" (127), because they are "repetitive":

Every social system is a field of tension, full of ambivalence, of co-operation and contrasting struggle. This is true of relatively stationary—what I like to call *repetitive*—social systems as well as of systems which are changing and developing. In a repetitive system particular conflicts are settled not by alterations in the order of offices, but by changes in the persons occupying those offices. . . . [The] ceremonial enactment of this order states the nature of the order in all its rightness. The ceremony states that in virtue of their social position princes and people hate the king, but nevertheless they support him. . . . [I]n their prescribed, compelled, ritual behaviour they exhibit opposition to as well as support for the king, but mainly support for the kingship. This is the social setting for rituals of rebellion. (127–28, footnotes omitted)

So, for Gluckman, rituals (including rituals of rebellion par excellence, despite the apparent paradox) and revolutions are strictly speaking antithetical to each other (see also Gibson 1994). Taken as one-off historical events that take place in

societies oriented toward change and development, revolutions can only happen if the constraints of ritual cyclicity are broken—this, for Gluckman, being yet another mark of the fabled transition from tradition to modernity. Indeed, Gluckman's example of a modern noncyclical counterpart to traditional cyclical rituals of rebellion vividly pinpoints the antithesis:

In Europe we can no longer ritually reject the king alone . . . it is the Crown itself, and not its incumbent, which is resented. Some South Africans desire independence from the Crown: throughout the Commonwealth there are revolutionaries who wish for republics organized in quite different orders. On the whole no one struggles against a particular sovereign. (129)

In some basic ways, Gluckman's analysis of ritual rebellion, and the contrast he draws between it and revolutions proper, is exemplary of the focus on social order that was prevalent in British social anthropology at the time, as well as the role given to ritual as one of its prime expressions. Following Durkheim's basic idea that ritual is a prime arena in which society is constituted, both "functionalist" approaches associated with Malinowski and "structural-functionalist" ones developed by Radcliffe-Brown and his students at Oxford saw ritual as a mechanism for strengthening and integrating social bonds. At regular periods, social groups come together to perform rituals that reflect the shape of their organization and invest it with sacred legitimacy (e.g., Fortes 1945).

What Gluckman added to this, and substantially developed with his students in Manchester as one of the signatures of what came to be known in the discipline as the "Manchester School" of anthropology, was the focus on conflict (see Evens and Handelman 2006). Indeed, if Gluckman's argument about ritual rebellions has become such a standard reference, that may be because it encapsulates the central tenet of the Manchester School approach; namely, that the integrative role of ritual is achieved not by denying social tensions and conflict but rather by dramatizing them and staging their resolution. Notwithstanding Gluckman's emphasis on the question of order and its reproduction, his depiction of ritual as a conduit for (rather than just a shield against) social tensions and conflicts opened the door for subsequent anthropologists to explore the socially transformative dynamics inherent within ritual. By tracing this particular line of thinking within British social anthropology, we suggest, we can arrive at a position that in some ways is profoundly un-Gluckman-like; namely, seeing ritual not as the opposite of revolution, as he did, but as its avatar.

### *Turner on Revolution and Liminality*

The towering figure in this trajectory is Victor Turner—the most influential among Gluckman's students in Manchester to explore the dynamics of conflict and its resolution within ritual. To be sure, Turner's earliest studies of the relationship between ritual and social change, conducted on the basis of his fieldwork among the Ndembu of then Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), were very much in the

mold of Gluckman's approach, emphasizing the homeostatic effects of ritualized "social dramas," as Turner called them (e.g., 1957). However, as his studies of the inner dynamics of rituals developed, delving also deeper into the symbolic characteristics of ritual action, Turner became increasingly interested in the subversive elements lying at the heart of ritual. Indeed, the three concepts most associated with Turner's analysis of ritual—liminality, *communitas*, and *antistructure*—all speak to Turner's conception of the inner dynamism of "the ritual process," as he called it, and its socially transformative potentials (Turner 1969). Building on Dutch-French folklorist Arnold van Gennep's (1960) famous three-phase model of rites of passage (according to which neophytes are first separated from ordinary social structures, then enter a liminal state characterized by social ambiguity, and are finally aggregated back into society with a new social status), Turner homes in on the dialectical relationship between the ambiguity of the liminal and the social and symbolic structures it temporarily suspends:

It is as though there were two major "models" for human interrelatedness, juxtaposed and alternating. The first is of a society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of "more" or "less." The second, which emerges recognisably in the liminal period, is of a society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the elders. . . . [This gives] recognition to an essential and generic human bond, without which there would be no society. Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low. . . . From all this I infer that, for individuals and groups, social life is a type of dialectical process that involves successive experience of high and low, *communitas* and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality. (Turner 1969: 96–97, emphasis omitted)

Turner's analysis is consistent with Gluckman's basic structural-functionalist idea that the apparently "revolutionary" characteristics of many rituals, which Turner calls "anti-structural," ultimately bolster existing social structures: what liminality reveals, "however fleetingly," is *communitas* as the "generalised bond" upon which the heterogeneous structures of ordinary social life are based (96). Nevertheless, Turner's analysis goes considerably deeper than Gluckman's. Beyond the specific characteristics of rites of rebellion, discussed by Gluckman as a particular class of rituals, Turner's model of ritual articulates nothing less than the inner structure of the constitution of all society. Accordingly, if liminality is "revolutionary" in its tendency, albeit temporarily, to undo existing social structures (and therefore also the reigning political order), this is a potential that is built into the constitution of society itself. The notion that the (social, political) world could be otherwise, which is at the heart of that political impulse one is tempted to call

revolutionary, from Turner's perspective emerges as a horizon that is always implicit in social phenomena, and is made regularly apparent as a referent for social actors in periods of liminality.

In his later writings, Turner often alludes to the possibility that the antistructural potentials of liminality may contain the seeds for more permanent social transformations, passing from the "subjunctive" mood of the liminal, as he calls it (1990: 11), to more declarative programs for more lasting social transformation. Rather than just a horizon undergirding the existing social and political structures, then, liminal process can also be the source of new ones. Millenarian or other social movements oriented toward utopian goals are for Turner a prime example, since they turn the existential condition of *communitas* into an ideology, and seek to institutionalize it as a normative order in its own right—an argument that in some ways runs parallel to Eric Hobsbawm's famous analysis of millenarians as "primitive rebels" (1959).

Indeed, for Turner, political revolutions more broadly can also be understood in this way, expressing the transformative dynamics of liminality "in times of radical social transition, when society itself seems to be moving from one fixed state to another" (1969: 133), as he writes in a different context. The most detailed example of this is Turner's sustained historiographic study of the Hidalgo insurrection of 1810–11, which initiated the Mexican revolution of independence against Spain, acting as "the limen between the colonial period of Mexican history, . . . [and the] period when Mexico became, in the blood and turmoil of colonial and civil wars and revolution, a nation" (1975: 98–99). To be sure, much of Turner's analysis is sociological, looking at key events and protagonists in terms of the unfolding "social drama" of conflict between different constituents of Mexican society at the time—representatives of the Spanish Crown, local *criollo* elites, ordinary mestizos, and the indigenous populations from whose ranks the uprising drew much of its force. When it comes to analyzing the deeper sources of this force, however, Turner draws on the concepts he developed in his analyses of ritual liminality. Combining this with Freudian studies of revolutions as "moments of madness" (Zolberg 1972), he brands as "primary process" the violence that swept up indigenous as well as mestizo participants in the insurrection, under the leadership of Miguel Hidalgo, the local priest who initially uttered the "cry" (*grito*) of revolution in his local parish, Dolores, on 16 September 1810, during the course of festivities in honor of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Turner writes:

[Primary process] arises from deep human needs for more direct and egalitarian ways of knowing and experiencing relationships, needs which have been frustrated or perverted by those secondary processes which constitute the homeostatic functioning of institutionalized social structure. . . . Men caught up in a primary process are mad to establish the kingdom (or republic) of heaven on earth, and they proceed compulsively to eliminate whatever they feel to represent obstacles to this . . . desire for *communitas*. (1975: 111)



The role of the Virgin of Guadalupe as figurehead for the insurrection was catalytic, according to Turner. On the one hand, the liminal dynamics of the ritual festivities provided propitious conditions for the equally liminal impulse of popular insurrection. On the other, the ecumenical character of the "Brown Virgin" herself, as a Catholic figure with indigenous characteristics, cut across the ordinary structural divisions between the indigenous population and mestizos as well as white "criollos," providing a poignant symbolic expression of an underlying *communitas* among them. The confusion in the historical record as to whether Hidalgo's initiating Cry was in her name ("Long live, then, the Virgin of Guadalupe! Long live America for which we are going to fight!") or in that of the nascent nation of Mexico ("Mexicanos, viva México!" as presidents of the republic have proclaimed in the annual commemorations of the event ever since) is indicative for Turner of the confluence of religious and political liminality in this context (1975: 99–101).

Beyond the initial Cry of Hidalgo, however, for Turner the Virgin of Guadalupe's role as liminal symbol of national *communitas* freed of the structures of Spanish colonialism speaks to a deeper sociopolitical dialectic between structure and antistructure. Following the Cry, he explains, the "roused and militant *communitas*" (112) of the insurgents swept away the more tempered military plans drawn up by Hidalgo's criollo allies, and the mass of rebels turned increasingly violent and reckless in a series of battles that have themselves, subsequently, become potent symbols of the force of Mexicans as a "people." By the same token, however, when Hidalgo's undisciplined campaign began to dissipate in the face of the Crown's more organized army, and Hidalgo himself was forced to flee and removed from military command, "the insurgence lost its mythic, primary processual character and faded into the light of a common day in which it had little hope" (122). With Hidalgo's trial and execution a few months later, the structural hierarchies of the colonial government were reasserted, and only ten years later was independence from Spain negotiated. Nevertheless, Turner suggests, "in taking up the banner of the Brown Virgin of the oppressed many-centuries-dominated Indians, [Hidalgo] was seizing a sign of wholeness and prophetic pan-Mexicanness that his opponents could not really counter" (152). While the Hidalgo insurrection itself was abortive, then, the liminal *communitas* that it projected symbolically onto the Virgin of Guadalupe left a "symbolic deposit in actual historical time [with] potent effects on subsequent dramas and revolutionary process" (102). Throughout Mexico's subsequent history and still today, "[o]ur Lady of Guadalupe *lives* in scenes of action . . . as a multivocal symbol of popular powers in times of major social crisis" (153–54).

Nevertheless, there is something tragic about Turner's account of liminality in general, as well as the particular image of its revolutionary potential he presents in a political key. For while his model may be presented as a dialectic, it behaves more as a kind of oscillation. Reigning structures are lifted temporarily, whether in ritual or

at times of broader social transition, such as revolutions, but only to give way to the mold of structure once more as the antistructural power of liminality fades. Turner himself admits as much when he observes that attempts to turn spontaneous *communitas* into an ideology, or to institutionalize it normatively, are themselves “already within the domain of structure, and it is the fate of all spontaneous *communitas* in history to undergo what most people see as a ‘decline and fall’ into structure and law” (1969: 132). As we shall see in subsequent chapters, this is certainly a problem that revolutions run into time and again. However, as far as Turner’s theory is concerned, we may note that this problem of “tragic oscillation,” if we may call it that, is as much as anything a problem with his model of liminality. If the power of the liminal is inherently and in principle antistructural, after all, it is hard to see how it could translate itself into lasting structural transformations. At most, liminal periods can leave enduring “symbolic deposits” that can act as a spur for further antistructural moments, as in Turner’s analysis of Mexico. To the extent that liminality and structure are mutually exclusive in his model, however, to think of liminality as an ingredient, rather than just a spur, of structural change is a contradiction in terms.

### *Bloch on Rebounding Violence*

This is a problem that Maurice Bloch is able to address in his own model of ritual transformation, elaborated in the decades following the publication of Turner’s classic studies (Bloch 1992; see also 1974, 1986). Bloch’s model deploys Turner’s Van Gennepian three-phase structure, involving a contrast between, on the one hand, the world of everyday experience and, on the other, an extraordinary world into which rituals propel their participants, much as with Turner’s notion of the liminal phase. Unlike Turner, however, Bloch does not see the central phase of ritual as rescinding ordinary social structures to reveal an underlying social continuity. Quite the opposite. For Bloch, the everyday world or ordinary experience refers to what all human beings most basically have in common, namely “natural transformative process[es] of birth, growth, reproduction, ageing and death” (1992: 3)—a kind of natural *communitas*, if you like, owed to “universal human constraints” (4). The phase of ritual Turner would call liminal, by contrast, is geared toward representing an alternative to this natural fluidity, reversing it symbolically to produce an image of transcendent structures that can be imagined as permanent. Far from collapsing social and political structures, for Bloch ritual is all about instituting them. His model, in other words, provides a renewed version of Durkheim’s classic idea that ritual provides a prime mechanism for organizing the messy facts of individual human lives into enduring social and political structures:

The social and political significance of [ritual] is that by entering into a world beyond process, through the passage of reversal, one can then be part of an entity beyond

process, for example, a member of a descent group. Thus, by leaving this life, it is possible to see oneself and others as part of something permanent, therefore life-transcending. (Bloch 1992: 4)

To see how this suggestion bears on the question of revolution, we may note first the central role that Bloch's model gives to *violence* in particular—a matter that remained largely incidental in Gluckman's and Turner's analyses, but which to us is of immediate relevance. For Bloch violence is the prime means through which the two crucial transitions of the ritual sequence are enacted—the passage from ordinary life (in Van Gennep's and Turner's models, the “pre-liminal” phase) to the transcendent realm beyond it (the “liminal”), and then the return from the transcendent realm back to ordinary life (the “post-liminal”). Both passages are marked by violence, for Bloch, because they turn on the conquest or consumption of vitality. That this should be so for the first transition follows directly from Bloch's idea that ritual transcendence reverses the terms of ordinary life processes. For the ritual participants to be propelled into a realm that transcends ordinary life, this life must be symbolically vanquished. Elements and processes associated in any given ethnographic context with people's inherent vitality, to do with birth and growth, are violently negated and substituted with representations of decay and death. Thus the destruction of participants' “inner vitality,” as Bloch calls it, is their passport to the “world beyond,” since such a world is precisely one in which ordinary life processes are suspended.

The violence of the second transition, from transcendence back into ordinary life, also follows logically from that of the first, although the argument here is more complex. If the transcendent condition of the ritual participants takes the form of a symbolic death, then their return to the everyday realm must involve a process of revitalization—a rebirth of sorts. It is in this step of the argument that Bloch provides a solution to the problem of “tragic oscillation” that we saw earlier in relation to Turner's model of liminality. If participants leave ordinary life behind in order to enter a transcendent world of permanent structures, then their subsequent return from this transcended order cannot be conceived merely as a return to life, for then their experience of transcendence would make no lasting difference. The “problem posed by the politico-social requirement of constructing a totality consisting of living beings, which is, unlike its constituent parts, permanent,” Bloch explains, requires a solution “which rejoins the here and now and the transcendent units which the rituals create” (1992: 4–5). Therefore,

[Participants'] return into this world [must be made into] something quite different from their departure from it. In the first part of the ritual the here and now is simply left behind by the move towards the transcendental. This initial movement represents the transcendental as supremely desirable and the here and now as of no value. The return is different. In the return the transcendental is not left behind

but continues to be attached to those who made the initial move in its direction; its value is not negated. . . . The return is therefore a conquest of the kind of thing which had been abandoned but, as if to mark the difference between the going and coming back, the actual identity of the vital here and now is altered. Vitality is regained, but it is not the home-grown native vitality which was discarded in the first part of the rituals that is regained, but, instead, a conquered vitality obtained from *outside* beings, usually animals, but sometimes plants, other peoples or women. In ritual representations, native vitality is replaced by a conquered, external, consumed vitality. It is through this substitution that an image is created in which humans can leave this life and join the transcendental, yet still not be alienated from the here and now. They become part of permanent institutions, and as superior beings they can reincorporate the present life through the idiom of conquest and consumption (5).

The manner in which Bloch's model of "rebounding violence," as he calls it, brings together rituals' capacity to conjure alternatives to ordinary reality (the potential Turner saw as "liminal") with an inherent investment in violence speaks directly to our effort here to use ritual theory as a point of departure for developing an anthropological account of revolutions. Revolutions, after all, also conjure alternative orderings of the world in characteristically violent ways. Indeed, while Bloch's model is primarily aimed at explaining how ritual serves to institute and bolster existing sociopolitical structures, there are inklings that his model of rebounding violence can also allow for more subversive situations, reminiscent of revolutions, in which rituals are pitted against the prevailing order. In line with Turner's earlier suggestion, his prime examples are millenarian movements, which, as he shows with reference to the anticolonial character of the popular performance of royal Merina circumcision rituals in nineteenth-century Madagascar (1992: 85–90), can become the bearers of explicitly political projects of resistance and change. The problem with millenarianism for Bloch, however, is that, as an essentially world-renouncing phenomenon, it cannot fully consummate the alternative orders it envisages. Turning into a kind of virtue the problem of tragic oscillation we encountered earlier, the revolutionary potential of millenarian movements is by their very nature exhausted by the first phase of ritual transformation, namely the negation of life in favor of a realm that transcends it.

In the Madagascan case, for example, Merina commoners frustrated with their king's submission to French and British invaders in 1863, manifest in his decision to suspend performances of the royal ritual of circumcision, began defiantly to abandon their ordinary agricultural tasks and spontaneously to become possessed by ancestral spirits on a mass scale. According to Bloch, this denial of vitality in favor of the world of the dead ancestors was the commoners' way of enacting the first phase of the royal circumcision rituals, which involved "killing" the royal child at the moment of circumcision by ridding him of "wet" and "feminine" elements that constitute his youthful vitality, in order to allow him to be infused by

the “dry” and “masculine” characteristics of the life-transcending order of their agnatic ancestors. In its proper royal performances, however, the circumcision ritual would be consummated by a second round of violence, in which the “external” vitality of plants, animals, and women would be consumed collectively by the participants, sometimes in conjunction with military conquests of neighboring groups. By contrast, participants in the rebellious ancestral possessions of 1863 refrained from completing the sequence of rebounding violence in this way. Their aim, rather, was only to deny the authority of rulers they felt had failed them, and assert instead the prior authority of the ancestors by enacting their timeless world.

Still, it is curious that Bloch refrains from extending the political efficacy of ritual, as he conceives it, to more fully fledged revolutionary movements since, we would argue, his model of rebounding violence lends itself perfectly to the task.<sup>2</sup> For while the Merina mass possessions and other such millenarian phenomena might limit themselves to evoking alternatives to the reigning political order, as far as the model of rebounding violence is concerned there is no principled reason why such alternatives could not be consummated ritually, with a violent transformation of the political order of the here and now. Other than practical circumstances (e.g., their military weakness), for example, what was there to stop the Merina commoners from ending their life-transcending trances with a “rebounding” attack on the British and French colonists and their local collaborators, emulating the military expeditions with which their leaders had culminated the circumcision ceremonies in the past? Albeit rear-guard, in this case (and we shall see later that many revolutions are rear-guard in one sense or other), this would indeed be a way of putting into revolutionary use the violent power of ritual as Bloch conceives it.

An example of just such a case of ritual and fully fledged revolution coming together is provided by David Lan’s marvelous ethnographic account (1985) of how the revolutionary freedom fighters of the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) joined forces with local spirit mediums in the Zimbabwean struggle for independence from British colonial rule in the 1970s. Supervised by Bloch, as it happens, Lan conducted his doctoral fieldwork with Shona-speaking inhabitants of Dande, in the northern part of the country, which was the young rebels’ entry point into then-Rhodesian territory from their military and ideo-

2. Bloch in fact devotes the final chapter of *Prey into Hunter* to exploring “truly radical challenge[s]” (1992: 99) to the kinds of permanent institutions rituals support, ending the book with a reflection on how it might be possible “to analyse and criticize the very basis of our ideologies, to begin to demystify ourselves and to search for fundamentally different solutions” (105). But for him this possibility is to be found in myth, which, following Lévi-Strauss, he sees as a space in which alternatives to existing social orders can be explored imaginatively. It would seem that ritual, for Bloch, is inherently conservative and only myth can be truly subversive.

logical training camps in Mozambique, Tanzania, and elsewhere. Lan's central concern is to explain how, during the course of their guerrilla campaign in Dande, these gun-wielding cadres, who called each other "comrades" and fought in the name of Marxist-inspired revolutionary ideals, were quickly incorporated into local society, gaining local support for and even participation in their campaign. A crucial part of Lan's ethnographically nuanced answer concerns Dande practices of spirit possession and their role in the conferral of ancestral authority.

The political circumstances the ZANLA freedom fighters encountered at Dande were in some ways similar to the situation Bloch described for the Merina in nineteenth-century Madagascar. In precolonial times, Dande society had been organized according to royal lineages whose members derived ritual and political authority as rainmakers and "owners of the land" from their association with local royal ancestors, the *mhondoro*. Crucial to this political configuration was the relationship between chiefs and the spirit mediums through whom the *mhondoro* made themselves manifest, since matters of chiefly succession, and therefore of the chiefs' authority over their territory, were decided by the ancestors themselves through the mediums. During colonial times, however, from the late nineteenth century onward, the chiefs' authority was severely curtailed. Authority over the distribution of the land was taken over by the Rhodesian state (systematically divesting Shona people of their land and turning large numbers of them into wage laborers in the white-owned plantations), and chiefs were slowly turned into state functionaries, collecting taxes from their putative subjects in exchange for a salary and other perks. In the eyes of ordinary people, this drastically reduced the authority of the chiefs and, as Lan describes in detail, for such crucial matters as agricultural fertility rituals, local dispute resolution, and the persecution of dangerous witches, people began to turn to the authority of the ancestors themselves. Similarly to Bloch's Merina case, then, dissatisfaction with their leaders' collusion with white colonists led local people to shift "their political allegiance from the chiefs of the present to the chiefs of the past, the *mhondoro*" (Lan 1985: 140). However, unlike the Merina case, this shift to the ancestors did not take the form of spontaneous, millenarian-style possessions on the part of the commoners themselves, but rather of an increase in the authority of the spirit mediums as present-day mouthpieces of the *mhondoro*, who effectively absorbed many of the political and ritual roles the chiefs had held in the past. In this way, the mediums came to occupy a position in Dande society that was structurally opposed to the colonial authorities—an opposition that was expressed in the aversion of the *mhondoro* to all things white.

This explains why in this case anticolonial sentiment did not limit itself to a millenarian denial of the here and now in favor of ancestral transcendence, spurring instead a military campaign to replace the colonial order with the political alternative the ancestors came to represent and actively promote, namely the

anticolonial emancipation for which ZANLA was fighting. For a start, the rebels' emancipatory goal of taking control of the land back from the colonists and redistributing it to the peasants coincided closely with the *mhondoro's* ancestral authority as "owners of the land," effectively scaling it up from the level of local territories to a Zimbabwe-wide struggle against the white landowners. Indeed, this basic affinity between the rebels' anticolonial ideals and the *mhondoro's* stance against the betrayals of the chiefs was affirmed and consolidated by both sides, so that the rebels soon became associated with the *mhondoro* themselves. Under the spirit mediums' guidance, the rebels took on both ritual and social roles associated with the *mhondoro*. For example, they observed ritual prohibitions that called for sexual abstinence and forbade the killing of both animals and humans, and took on many of the duties with which the chiefs, as the *mhondoro's* descendants, had traditionally been charged but had recently abandoned, such as the persecution of harmful witches. On their part, the spirit mediums used their king-making role as mouthpieces of the *mhondoro* to confer political authority onto the rebels, treating them as the rightful heirs of the *mhondoro*, as they had done with the chiefs in the past. Rapidly, then, the ZANLA fighters were transformed from strangers into autochthons, treated as "sons of the soil," and given full legitimacy by means of the Shona's long-standing structures of political authority to conduct their guerrilla campaign in the name of the ancestors, whose will they were now understood to embody.

The Zimbabwean case illustrates how easily Bloch's model of ritual's rebounding violence can be transposed onto the anthropological study of revolutions. Due to their concerted association with the ancestors via the spirit mediums, the ZANLA rebels were indeed propelled into a transcendent order. This corresponds to the first stage of violence in Bloch's model, with the vanquishing of the "inner vitality" not only of the spirit mediums, through spirit possession as in Bloch's own Merina case, but also of the rebels themselves, through sexual abstinence and other ritual prohibitions that changed ordinary patterns of consumption, including that of food. But, in contrast to the Merina case, this also spurred the rebels into a second phase of violence, in which the "extremal vitality" of enemies (witches and political adversaries alike) is the target of military attack, very much in line with Bloch's model, although in this case pursuing the overthrow of the existing political order rather than its affirmation as in Bloch's examples. Ritual and revolution, then, blend into a single sequence of action, each building on the power of the other, and precipitating, in this case, the defeat of the colonial regime and the institution of ZANU-PF's state-socialist government, notoriously headed by Robert Mugabe for the best part of the next four decades.

It is hard not to appreciate the more general purchase of Bloch's basic model on the anthropological study of revolutions, even in cases in which the link to overtly ritualized actions such as spirit possession is not as pronounced, or even present.



The three central ingredients of the model—violence against internal vitality, the propulsion into an alternative political order, and its assertion over the existing order through violence toward external victims—seem to lend themselves to all manner of transposition on real-life revolutions. For example, the idea that revolutions involve an initial commitment to self-sacrifice (a preparedness to put one's very life on the line in the name of a revolutionary ideal) is so common as to appear banal. "Freedom/emancipation/independence/socialism/(what-have-you) or *death!*" is the standard cry of the revolutionary, and in chapter 3 we shall see how this kind of self-abnegation is often fundamental to the constitution of persons as revolutionaries (Holbraad 2014). Moreover, revolutionary ideals themselves, whatever they might be, are typically similar to Bloch's transcendent orders of a "world beyond" in their lofty and often utopian character. Indeed, we shall see in chapter 5 that the role of ideology, which is so often central to the motivation of revolutionary action, is typically precisely that: to present an alternative to the social realities of the here and now, exactly in line with Bloch's characterization of transcendence. Finally, the second, outward round of violence stipulated by Bloch is nigh on the signature of revolutionary action: the decision to treat the reigning powers as enemies and bring about their downfall through force is often regarded as the very essence of revolution (Humphrey 2019).

By the same token, however, one can query whether the easy fit between Bloch's model and standard ways of thinking about revolutions might, to some extent, be due to certain basic assumptions they both share, not least about the nature of time. It is interesting to note, for example, that even though many of his examples of ritual transformation would conform quite straightforwardly to Gluckman's standard anthropological notion of "cyclical time," Bloch's model has built within it a linear notion of chronological succession—precisely the kind of temporal order Gluckman associated with the modern world, and Koselleck theorized as part of its very constitution. For Bloch, of course, this is quite deliberate. The chronological succession of time moving ineluctably onward—future, present, past—is just a fact of nature, while the role of ritual is to "mystify" this by creating the illusion of an order of permanent structures that appear to transcend ordinary linear time—this being the essentially "ideological" role of ritual as a means of domination (Bloch 1989). The very notion of cyclical time, therefore, is for him just an effect of this kind of mystification, as is any other supposed deviation from the natural fact that time passes, and we are all biological beings who are born, grow, mature, and die. The social order—and the same must be said for the orders revolutions seek to bring into being—may require people to imagine that things could be otherwise, but that does not make it any less illusory. The institution of society is indeed "imaginary," as the Greek-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis (1987) would have it, although here "imagination," for Bloch, is to be taken as a synonym of "illusion."



This raises the question of what might happen if we were to unmoor the anthropological analysis of ritual from the kind of naturalistic conceptions of time in which Bloch founds it. While we shall return to this question of revolutionary time in chapter 6, for purposes of our present argument about revolution and ritual we wish to explore in particular what the alternative temporal conceptions that rituals so often involve might also be able to tell us about alternative ways of thinking about revolutionary time. If, for example, the anthropological study of ritual leads us to contemplate nonlinear ways of conceiving of time itself, then where might this lead us in thinking about the temporality of revolution? Might the standard assumption that revolutions constitute a momentous break with the past for the sake of bringing about a different kind of future also be anthropologically subverted (cf. Bryant and Knight 2019)? Are habitual modern ways of distinguishing past, present, and future, and of imagining the passage of time as a chronological succession, necessarily at the heart of revolutionary action, and is such action always best conceived of as an “event” (see also Lazar 2014)? In the next section we tackle these questions with reference to critical ethnographic examples.

### NONLINEAR REVOLUTIONS

As we shall see in more detail in chapter 6, arguments showing that linear ideas of time are far from universal are legion in the history of anthropology.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the classic idea that “nonmodern” peoples often experience and/or conceptualize time as an ever-returning cycle (e.g., Eliade 2018), as we have seen, proposals for indigenous models and experiences of time that do not conform to the modern conception of chronological succession—past, present, future—are standard fare in the discipline (e.g., Geertz 1973a; Strathern 1990). How such nonlinear temporalities might modify our understanding of revolution is the more general question we deal with in chapter 6, where we examine the relationship between revolution and cosmology more broadly (see also Holbraad and Pedersen 2013; Holbraad et al. 2019). Here we shall limit ourselves to suggesting arguments with specific reference to alternatives to Bloch’s linear model of ritual transformation. Since Bloch’s model is both highly sophisticated in its own right *and* embodies the normative assumptions of linear time, it provides a useful point of dialectical contrast for the kinds of arguments we shall be sketching out here.

Lan’s account of the role of the ancestors in the Zimbabwean anticolonial struggle provides a good first illustration of what an analysis of revolution that relies on the classic anthropological idea of cyclical time might look like. Unlike

3. For a classic review of these debates, including an account of Bloch’s contribution to them, see Gell 1992. For an updated review see Hodges 2008.

Gluckman, as we have seen, Lan's ethnographic analysis is of a phenomenon that can unproblematically be classed as a "revolution"—indeed, one that had many of the trappings of "modern" revolutions and that was partly inspired by Marxism. Yet it incorporates elements that Gluckman would class as "repetitive," associated most crucially with the agricultural rituals of chiefly succession and the role the *mhondoro* play within them. In particular, we have here a situation in which ancestors who are deemed (by definition) to have lived in the past make regular reappearances in the present by possessing the bodies of living spirit mediums and speaking through them.

Lan casts this as a shift that can be understood within the temporal coordinates of linear succession. When the Shona peasants started treating the spirit mediums as their political leaders, rather than their "sellout" chiefs, as far as Lan is concerned they were shifting allegiance from the "chiefs of the present" to those "of the past" (1985: 140). Indeed, to the extent that the ZANLA rebels came to represent the order of the ancestral *mhondoro*, the whole anticolonial revolution could quite naturally be seen as an attempt to return to a past that the colonial regime had sought to obliterate. In that way Lan's study could be interpreted as a confirmation of a point made again and again by political and social theorists and philosophers who write on revolution; namely that, for all their commitment to radical change overthrowing the *ancien régime*, revolutions are often motivated by a desire to *restore* an earlier era. Enlisting writings by Franklin, Tocqueville, Paine, and Burke, for example, Hannah Arendt reminds readers of her classic comparative study of the French and American revolutions, *On Revolution*—in both cases the protagonists, at least initially, saw their aim as revolving "back to an 'early period' when they had been in the possession of rights and liberties of which tyranny and conquest had dispossessed them" (Arendt [1965] 2006: 35). That this somewhat paradoxical notion of a forward-moving return to the past should be prominent in the context of anticolonial struggle is of course hardly surprising.

To treat Lan's example in this way, however, would ignore the whole premise of the Shona's relationship with ancestor spirits, and not least the salience of spirit possession as a way of making them present, treating it all as at most a striking local metaphor for the importance of the past. As Lan's own analysis of the king-making powers of the *mhondoro* shows, by contrast, the ancestors' capacity periodically to return from the past and make their presence felt in the here and now is far from metaphorical: it is precisely because the spirit mediums are able, literally, practically, and demonstrably, to embody the spirits that they are themselves powerful players in the political scene of the present. But if this is so, then we have here precisely the kind of breakdown of standard assumptions about the linear succession of past, present, and future that one would associate with anthropological arguments about cyclical time. If the *mhondoro* are both of the past, qua ancestors who lived in a bygone era, and of the present, in which

they are nevertheless able to manifest themselves, then their peculiar power entails a collapse of that linear temporal distinction. The *mhondoro* literally embody the alternative temporal possibility that that past, qua past, can recur in the present and, conversely, that the present, qua present, can be infused by recurrences of the past. More than representations of a kind of historical heritage, then, the possessing spirits of the *mhondoro* can be conceptualized, quite literally, as time travelers. Their translations from the ancestral era to the here and now embody a nonlinear trajectory of time itself.

Such an interpretation of Lan's ethnography yields a substantial departure from the standard temporal coordinates of revolutions. The constitutive role that the *mhondoro* played in the rebels' struggle against and overthrow of the White government in Rhodesia suggests that this was anything but an attempt to rid Zimbabwe of "the muck of ages and . . . found society anew," to recall the classic adage (Marx and Engels 2001: 94–95). Nor was it merely an example of Arendt's point about the restorative qualities of revolution. Rather, our nonlinear temporal interpretation of Lan's study shows what a nonlinear account of revolution might look like. Revolution, on this account, does not unfold within the linear coordinates of chronological time but rather deliberately interferes with them. With its demotion of chiefs into functionaries, the colonial government sought to dissipate the political power of the ancestors—with power here understood as the manifestation of the past in the present, over which it perforce reigns. The ZANLA forces' revolutionary action, in response, draws precisely that power back into the political field, now via the mediums, with the rebels themselves manifesting the ancestral past in their present as well as future-oriented actions. Revolution, then, as time travel. Not the restoration of the past, but its institution as a constituent of the present: that is what revolution looks like in a situation where ancestral spirits are understood as real political players, as they are for the Shona.

The broader anthropological lesson one can draw from the Shona case is that the varied temporal coordinates that revolutions might involve in any given ethnographic situation have a lot to do with the different cosmological conceptions with which they are so often related. In such a view, the linear conception of revolution Koselleck associates with modernity can itself be seen as having its roots in Judeo-Christian traditions of conceiving of Providential time as a progression from Creation to Judgment Day, punctuated by prophetic moments of rupture—this would chime with our earlier point about the frequent association of revolution with millenarianism (Cohn [1957] 2004). The anticlerical tradition inaugurated by the French Revolution could then be seen as an attempt to empty out that temporal form of its religious content, while keeping its linear character intact, much as natural science was doing around the same time. Perhaps the most vivid evidence of how important the form of time itself was to the advent of revolution as an avatar of modernity was the implementation during the French Revolution of the French Revolutionary Calendar. Inaugurating a New Time in its own

right, the calendar sought to purge the measurement of time of any religious associations, completing the rationalizing anticlerical agenda of decimalization, but crucially keeping the very notion of linear chronological progression at its heart. Revolutionary movements ever since have sought to reinitialize time in similar ways, paradoxically marking a break with tradition by confirming the power of an essentially messianic act.

The suggestion that even the most avowedly secular of modern revolutions can display deeply Judeo-Christian traits has been made often and well (Billington 1980; Arendt [1965] 2006; Badiou 2003)—a point to which we shall be returning in more detail in chapters 5 and 6. Of interest to us here is just the way this renders the temporal horizons of revolution contingent, connecting them also to religious practices that may of course differ from place to place. The complex associations between revolutionary politics and different strands of Islam, which have become so prominent in recent decades across the globe, provide perhaps the most-discussed contemporary example. In the burgeoning anthropological literature from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) on the experience of the so-called Arab Spring and its aftermath, for example, the immanent relationship between revolutionary action and Islamic conceptions and practices of piety has been explored most penetratingly with reference to ideas about predestination. To take just one case, in a monograph tellingly titled *Egypt in the Future Tense*, Samuli Schielke (2015) explores how grassroots as well as theological debates about the idea that the course of history is always already “written” by God lent a complex temporal inflection to people’s involvement in and support for the events of Tahrir Square in January 2011. Future-oriented revolutionary action was cast by some as an exercise of individual freedom underwritten by the will of God. Others, by contrast, deemed it an expression of a divine destiny already decided—an idea, deployed by the Muslim Brotherhood in particular, as a way of casting as the revolution’s inevitable outcome their own fusion of divine providence with mundane government (Schielke 2015: 220–23; see also 23–24; cf. Elliot & Menin 2018). Revolution, then, not as a rupture with the past but as its predetermined realization.

The intricacy and sense of possibility that this kind of temporal diversity introduces into the anthropological study of revolutions is vividly illustrated by another study of the experience of the uprising in Egypt, by Amira Mittermaier (2014; see also 2019). Here the ethnographic focus is not on the events of Tahrir Square but rather on a Sufi *khidma* held just a few kilometers away, in Cairo’s City of the Dead. *Khidma*, literally “service,” are spaces set up by Sufi practitioners to provide refreshment, food, and rest for people who may need or wish it, thus enacting God’s grace (*barakat*) and generosity (*Allah karim*—“God is generous”—as the metal plate at the entrance of the *khidma* of Mittermaier’s study reads). Mittermaier makes virtue of the fact that, during her fieldwork there in 2010–12, daily life in this particular *khidma* was not related in any direct way to the events of Tahrir Square and their political aftermath in Egypt as a whole. The *khidma* had

been run for many years by a lady dedicated to providing food to regular as well as occasional guests, and, while politics in general and the momentous events of the 2011 uprising in particular did naturally feature sometimes in people's conversations, cooking for and generally looking after people was her abiding concern. Nevertheless, Mittermaier suggests, the concerted orientation toward the present that the "ethics of immediacy" of the *khidma* enacts may be instructive in the context of the debates that erupted, both in Egypt and globally, in the aftermath of Tahrir Square, about "other modalities of being—in this case of the political and the social" (Sabea cited in Mittermaier 2014: 69). As participants in the uprising attest, Tahrir Square itself was a space where people could experiment with modes of "togetherness in the present"—"mutual care, sharing, openness, generosity, and an attunedness to Others" (Mittermaier 2014: 68; see also Sabea 2014, and Porter 2017 on Yemen). For Mittermaier, the ways in which similar dispositions play out in a *khidma* down the road in Cairo can instigate a "conversation with Tahrir-as-utopia [that] resonates with a line of exploration pursued by at least some Egyptian activists" (72).

The resonance set up by Mittermaier has the question of time at its center. In particular, the experience of immediate care in the present in the *khidma*, which in some ways parallels the ethos of mutual care that developed in Tahrir Square during the weeks of its occupation, is in contrast to the temporal horizon conjured by the demand for social justice that was so widespread in the revolution. While the power of this demand is partly owing to its vagueness, with an array of different constituents subscribing to it (from trade unionists and NGO activists to international backers and commentators, neoliberal reformers, and leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood), its orientation toward effecting change in the future framed the uprising itself as a means to a deferred goal. Such a temporal framing, we may note, conforms to the standard image of revolution as a rupture with the past (the time of social injustice) for the sake of a better future (an era of social justice). Against such a backdrop, the fact that social justice was in no way achieved, and military control of the government eventually returned in 2013, must count as the revolution's failure.

By contrast, an ethnographic focus on the parallel between the sociality of the *khidma* and of Tahrir Square during the catalytic uprising of January 2011 reveals a revolutionary temporality that is oriented towards the present. In many ways, as Mittermaier notes, this can be understood in the context of the Occupy movement in the United States and Europe, which has placed such emphasis on the experimental spirit of the "prefiguration" of desired futures in the very enactment of one's struggle to bring them about (Juris 2008; Maeckelbergh 2009), or indeed the more immediate and "nonlinear" notion of "figuration" (Krøijer 2015: 27), in which the *point* of political action is to realize itself by enacting *in the present* its (otherwise) future goals. While a number of the activist commentators in the aftermath of Tahrir Square made similar arguments (e.g., Sande 2013;

Risager 2016), however, the implications of Mittermaier's study of the *khidma* take this idea in a different direction. On the one hand, the longevity of the *khidma* counteracts the assumption that such forms of present-orientation can only be exceptional and temporary—even liminal in the Turnerian sense. On the other, that very longevity of the forms of togetherness of the *khidma* is owing most crucially to its sacred status as a space for the realization of God's grace and generosity. To the extent that Sufi conceptions of the divine posit God's grace as both immanent and diffuse in the world (Cherstich, forthcoming), the *khidma* can be seen as a portal of sorts, connecting the "here and now" (to use Bloch's terminology) with the transcendent order of the divine, which could even be imagined as lying beyond time itself (Böwering 1997: 60–61). Inverting Bloch's model point for point, however, this is not a matter of the timeless order of the divine imposing itself on the transience of the here and now. Rather, the very notion of grace here involves asserting the present—the here and now in its most immediate and bodily guise of eating, drinking, and sleeping—at the expense of the kind of linear, future-oriented time Bloch's model is built on (cf. Day et al. 1998), and which standard intuitions about how revolutions work also take for granted.

## CONCLUSION

In relation to our broader attempt in this book to elaborate an anthropological approach to the study of revolutions, one of the collateral benefits of studies such as Mittermaier's lies in the way they broaden ethnographic attention out from the "action" of revolution—the effervescence of uprisings seen as events—and onto spaces and situations that can shed light upon revolution from a different angle. By way of conclusion, then, we may complement our substantive attempt to disrupt the linear narrative of revolutions as rupture-like events with a more methodological point about where the action of revolution is to be found when viewed ethnographically. Once one moves away from the normative expectation that revolutions ought to be understood, by definition, as events of intense and often violent effervescence, one opens oneself up also to the possibility that, seen as ethnographic objects, revolutions might take on quite different kinds of shapes (see also Hirsland 2011; Højer 2018; Krøijer 2019). Of course, being caught up in the action of revolutionary events themselves might provide a crucial vantage on how revolutions operate. But, as Mittermaier's study shows, accounts of situations that are connected to the epicenter of revolutionary events at a remove of one or more steps can also provide valuable insights.

Unhinging the study of revolutions from a narrow focus on events and exploring ethnographically their permutations in different aspects of social life is perhaps a natural consequence of the holistic, all-embracing quality of ethnographic research. This becomes evident, for example, in a collection of short essays that were published hot on the heels of 2011 in Egypt, in which anthropologists

who found themselves in the country at or around that time were invited to present reflections on what the revolution looked like from the angle of their particular field sites. How was the revolution experienced in a village in the countryside (Abu-Lughod 2012)? How do people whose involvement in the revolution was primarily through watching the events of Tahrir Square unfold on their TV screens make sense of the contrasting claims to justice put forth by the different groups involved in the uprisings (Ghannam 2012)? What new forms of solidarity take shape at the periphery of the events in Cairo, for example through residents in neighborhoods organizing their collective protection from looters as well as from the police (Hamdy 2012)? How is revolution experienced by those who do not have the “privilege” of joining in its action, but have to remain in domestic spaces instead—not least women caring for children and grandparents while the young men are out in the streets protesting (Winegar 2012)?

From an ethnographic point of view, far from being peripheral to the understanding of revolution, lateral standpoints such as these are integral to it. This is not just a matter of providing a more complete or complex image of how revolutions affect and are experienced in the different social domains and constituents they involve—although it is that too. It is also a matter of connecting the study of revolutions to the perspective of the people who are involved in them. For the young man protesting in the streets, the thoughts and feelings of his mother, wife, and children who might be waiting and worrying for him back at home is as basic an element of his experience of revolution as is, say, his fear and loathing of the police. For an anthropologist, understanding these relationships, and how they are embedded in local (and variable) social structures and the forms of sentiment that they involve, is a basic way of gauging the ways in which the shape and significance of revolutionary transformations might differ from one context to another. The often subterranean and nuanced ways in which revolution is formed by (and forms in turn) particular kinship practices, conceptions of gender, local social structures and forms of solidarity, and so on, can lend revolutions contrasting social proportions in different ethnographic settings. The next chapter is devoted to exploring these questions.