Revolutionary Cosmologies

Spirits, Myths, Worlds

Since everything is coming to an end like this, you should be living holy and saintly lives while you wait and long for the Day of God to come, when the sky will dissolve in flames and the elements melt in the heat. What we are waiting for is what He promised: the new heavens and new earth, the place where righteousness will be at home.

—2 PETER 3:11–13

As we saw in chapter 3, in 1979 the Iranian Revolution replaced a pro-Western, semi-absolute monarchy with a theocracy based on the concept of the "Guardianship of the Jurist" (*velayat-e faqih*), a Shiʿa notion according to which Islamic Jurists should guide the people during the time of the occultation of the Hidden Iman, and conduct the government according to the law and principles of the Quran. At the end of a decade that in Europe and America had been associated with the political emancipation of the masses, and that had emphasized creativity and agency to counteract the inertia of society and tradition (Scheele 2007), the Iranian Revolution dealt a serious blow to progressive intellectuals. In fact, it crystallized a political movement identifying liberation with Islamic government and with "the mysterious current that flowed between an old man who had been exiled for fifteen years [Ruhollah Khomeini] and his people" (Foucault, in Afary and Anderson 2005: 205). By advancing a narrative of returning to Islam as it was in the time of the Prophet, the Iranian Revolution overturned the comforting storyline of a linear transition toward a future horizon of liberation from power formations and grand narratives.

In a famous article suggestively titled "What Are the Iranians Dreaming About?," Michel Foucault gives the following description of the Iranian revolutionary movement and the aspiration of an Islamic government:

It is first and foremost about a movement that aims to give a permanent role in political life to the traditional structures of Islamic society. An Islamic government is what

will allow the continuing activity of the thousands of political centers that have been spawned in mosques and religious communities in order to resist the Shah's regime. I was given an example. Ten years ago, an earthquake hit Ferdows. The entire city had to be reconstructed, but since the plan that had been selected was not to the satisfaction of most of the peasants and the small artisans, they seceded. Under the guidance of a religious leader, they went on to found their city a little further away. They had collected funds in the entire region. They had collectively chosen places to settle, arranged a water supply, and organized cooperatives. They had called their city Islamiyeh. The earthquake had been an opportunity to use religious structures not only as centers of resistance, but also as sources for political creation. This is what one dreams about [*songe*] when one speaks of Islamic government. (Foucault, in Afary and Anderson 2005: 207)

In Iran, the idea of the mass protests and revolutionary upheavals in which thousands of youngsters expressing a common allegiance to Islam confronted the rifles of the gendarmes was explicitly associated with religious notions of annihilation of the self (*bi-khodi*). This was the same response as produced in the crowd of a pilgrimage and *shahid,* the sacred martyrdom / sacrifice capable of bringing about a world that has been denied (Al E-Ahmad 1985; Shariati 2010). In this sense, a multiplicity of elements—from revolution to pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to the historical reenactment of the martyrdom of Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet and prominent figure of Shiʿa Islam killed in Kerbala, as explained in chapter 3—are bound together in a common fight against racial, colonial policies and the rule of the Shah.

Seen from the point of view of the kind of progressive and emancipatory politics that was dominant in Euro-American life in the 1980s, Khomeini—with his turban, robe, beard, and defiantly theocratic rhetoric—was an expression of the "wrong" kind of change; indeed, he was an uncomfortable expression of a failure to purify the "new dawn" / present of a "dark past" imbued with nonmodern forms and beliefs (Latour 1993; Keane 2007; Maurer 2005). To modern secularist sensibilities, such an overlap between religion and political transformation in modern times seemed to constitute the heart of darkness of our comprehension of time and change, one that still lurks at the center of our interpretations of political events.

During the so-called "Arab Spring" of the early 2010s, scholars and journalists rushed to congratulate the millions of protesters across the Muslim world willing to overthrow some of the authoritarian regimes of the region. Soon enough, however, when it became apparent that the political transformations in question did not reflect the liberal and modern expectations of these illustrious observers, the "failed hopes" of the Arab Spring began to crystallize into what was branded an "Islamist Winter" (Bradley 2012; Israeli 2017). The assumption in this way of framing the events in the Middle East and North Africa was that this could only be a transition toward illiberal and ultimately antidemocratic politics, which came as

a natural consequence of religion overshadowing the true intentions of the Middle Eastern upheavals.

As we have seen in an array of different contexts in previous chapters, among political scientists and philosophers the concept of revolution has been positioned as one of the constitutive ideas of political modernity. This entails the production of a new linear and secular time brought about by the emancipation from, or the destruction of, traditional and illiberal social structures, and the nullification of the validity of particularistic beliefs and truths (Malia 2006; Koselleck 1985). In the socialist tradition in particular, the notion of revolution has been often conceived as a universal, secular model of sociopolitical action and transformation that can be equally applied to a variety of cultural contexts from the Soviet Union to Cuba, from Iran to Mozambique.

In this chapter we explore how conventional conceptions of revolution remain embedded in nonsecular beliefs and religious practices. First, we produce a critical analysis of "standard" European ideas of revolution showing how, despite their association with a universal and secular political framework, they remain firmly and predominantly anchored in Christian notions of time, sacrifice, and salvation. Secondly, we demonstrate that standard ideas of revolution may be appropriated, re-signified by, or framed in terms of local cosmologies, showing how different cosmological contexts have been able to produce specific notions and practices of revolutionary transformation. What can we make of revolution when examined through the prism of indigenous, non-Christian cosmologies? What happens when we place modern ideas of revolution in a temporal and spatial order that in different ways goes beyond the coordinates of modernity? What are the cosmological implications and transformations or forms of being that revolution brings about?

THE NEW TIME OF REVOLUTION

The Iranian Revolution described earlier is in tension with the timeline and horizon of standard European notions of revolution often built on the emancipation from God, tradition, and the models of the past. Throughout this section we explore the effort of revolutionary theorists to secularize and purify revolution from the past, tradition, and spiritual forms. Such a position not only crystallizes a clash with the classic domains of interest of anthropology but also ends up outlining a specific ideological—and one could say, cosmological—notion of time and transformation. As we shall see, this effort of "purification" is paralleled by a recursive resurfacing of the past, tradition, and religion into revolutionary practices and forms outlining a set of specifically Christian cosmological principles onto which the Euro-American notions of revolution remain anchored.

Let us return briefly to the question of time mentioned in chapter 1. Time is a prime aspect, or function, of cosmology and a considerable body of anthropological

literature has addressed how different cultures and groups have developed different horizons, logics, and understandings of time. Likewise, revolutions and revolutionaries have also shown an obsession with time and its alteration, traditionally being concerned with transforming time to signal the sense of epochal transformation brought about by the revolution and the irreversible twist in the direction of an epoch. The new "fascist era," for instance, was instituted with the intention of starting to count time with Roman numerals from the "March on Rome" of 1922 that signaled the inception of the Fascist regime. So, for instance, the year 1925 would be identified as year "III" of the new era. Similarly, in the case of socialist revolutions, we witness practices of reconfiguration of time and space on the basis of the revolutionary mythology, the institutionalization of a Soviet revolutionary calendar, or, in the case of Cuba, a form of counting chronological time from the beginning of the 1959 revolution. Thus, the year 2019 would be identified as year 60 of the glorious revolution in all government publications and media sources (Hirschfeld 2007). It is interesting to observe at this stage that these new revolutionary forms of counting time, despite intentions of signaling an era starting afresh and a rupture with previous ideas, religions, and societies, appear to reproduce the same mechanisms of counting time as the most established of religious traditions, all of which assign the year "0" to that of the birth of the Messiah or the Prophet.

As we have seen in chapter 1, the association of revolutions with attempts to reorient time toward the future, to separate the present from the past and engender new, linear ideas of time, is, however, relatively recent. Among medieval and Renaissance astronomers, for instance, a revolution connoted a circular movement of return to an original point. In her work *On Revolution,* Hannah Arendt framed it as a metaphor of "an eternal, irresistible, ever-recurring motion to the haphazard movements, the ups and downs of human destiny, which have been likened to the rising and setting of sun, moon, and stars" ([1965] 2006: 33), therefore somehow removed from the influence of human power. Such movements did not interrupt the course of history, which was conceived of as recursively falling back into a different stage of its cycle prescribing a course that was preordained.

Medieval historian Jacques Le Goff explains how, during the late medieval period, with the empowerment of guilds and the consequent withdrawal of the Church to an increasingly transcendent, nonmundane function, the clock of the city council (often managed by trade guilds) came to replace the Church clock in defining urban rhythms and dynamics. Le Goff (1980, 1982: 132–33) contrasts the guilds' need to measure time and regulate urban life with the Church's lax attitude in this domain; time had been conceived of as a prerogative of God, as shown by the Church's calendric system based on mobile festivities without fixed references. A process of secularization in the forms of counting and understanding time signaled not only a break with the circular, medieval notion of time but also a shift in the control and definition of time into human hands.

Historians of revolution (Koselleck 1985; Malia 2006; Arendt [1965] 2006) trace how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars reversed the medieval connotation of revolution, beginning to employ the term to refer to processes of human liberation that no longer implied a sense of return but rather an idea of overturn (Arendt [1965] 2006). Revolution began to be defined as a process of emancipation, or a liberating transition to the rule of law and representative government by overthrowing divine monarchy—in any case under pressure due to its inefficiency, criticism of intellectuals, and defection of elites (Malia 2006: 303).

Liberal understandings of revolutionary processes implied a transition toward increasing freedom both from the tyranny of political systems and from tradition (the Church, the lineage, the family) seen as curtailing the liberties and limiting the rights of the individual (Dworetz 1990). The destruction of, or liberation from, traditional institutions demanded forms of education that could teach the layperson to make meaningful, rational, and emancipating choices, and impart skills in the specialist management of power and liberal principles by electorally responsible politicians and legalistically inclined judges. In fact, the institutions (the school, the democratic government) and the interests of the emancipated bourgeoisie were projected as the natural tools and conditions of both liberation from the natural instincts of untaught humanity and the shaping of the modern, individual citizen. Old lifestyles and sociopolitical conditions learned or inherited from the past began to be considered unsuitable to modern circumstances, fueling political action with goals of reorienting and transforming, destroying, and experimenting with new forms of life more appropriate to the new conditions.

Marxist notions of revolution shared with these liberal understandings the sense that medieval circularity and ideas of return had been replaced by a linear and universalizable path propelling humanity from slaveholding to feudal to bourgeois and ultimately to socialist society through ontologically different stages of development (Marx [1852] 2008). Marx, however, not only outlined a common and universalizable path of dialectical development but also placed an emphasis on contradictions and violent ruptures with the old world and society.

"The Spirits of the Past" and "the Poetry from the Future"

It is worth repeating here the beautiful and metaphoric parallel between language and revolution Marx draws in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

> 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: 15–16)

A new stage of politico-economic development and / or a new political language brought about by revolution could only truly come to life through a more or less proactive act of forgetfulness of the ancestral era and severance from the old world.

In the case of the Soviet Union, Alexei Yurchak (2006) provides an insightful analysis of the approaches to revolutionary language in the Soviet Union and particularly to the conception of "unlearning" the old language in order to experiment with new forms of thinking more suitable to the new socialist condition.[1] Lenin, for instance, associated the people's revolution with a moment of popular uprising marked by popular demands and efforts on the part of the people to build a new society in their own way, one opposed to the old society that needed to be destroyed (Lenin [1917] 2014). The new history, the new society, the new thinking that revolution brings about are thought to outline radically different notions of time, thought, and the world, which are incommensurable with the past; in fact, the past with its burden and its models can be an obstacle to the full development of revolution.

Framed this way, revolution implied the founding of society anew and, in trying to create that future in the present, an attempt to eradicate the "muck of ages" or, as Shah (2014) says, the muck of the past. Instead of conjuring up the spirits of the past and drawing "its poetry from the past," Marx conceived of social revolution as drawing its poetry "only from the future" as "[i]t cannot begin with itself until it has stripped itself of all its superstitions concerning the past" (West and Raman 2009: 1; Fanon [1961] 2007).

Certainly Marx was an attentive researcher of past revolutionary endeavors with the intention of both learning from past mistakes and identifying and comprehending the elements, historical circumstances, and strategies that might lead to a successful revolutionary outcome in the future. However, with some noticeable exceptions (Benjamin 2007; Polanyi 1959) and many nuances of course (e.g., Marx [1852] 2008), modern, liberal, and Marxist interpretations of revolutionary processes implied the formation of a new political system and society that were incommensurable with a previous order. Concepts such as "creativity" and "newness" became tools to define a new revolutionary time or horizon, one in radical discontinuity with preexisting moral and social conditions, structures, and ideologies that reoriented expectations toward the future (Donham 1999).

The conception of revolution as a sudden cut with the past, a rupture with the bonds, and the inheritance of the old society, with habitus and repetition, necessarily instigates a tension with religious forms and "phantoms"; these may result in structural obstacles and continued conservative forces both at the outbreak of revolution and in the construction of a revolutionary society. For Marx,

> Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. (Marx 1970: 175)

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1. For an argument on the power of language as a force of revolutionary transformation, based on a study of nationalist revolutions in Indonesia, see Siegel 1997.

Religion is envisioned here as a stupefaction of the working class that distorts the reality of its exploitation, the veil camouflaging the suffering of the oppressed, as something God-given that prevents the subaltern from rebelling against his / her condition.

As we have seen, in the *Wretched of the Earth,* Franz Fanon ([1961] 2007) associates revolution and the struggles for independence of colonized countries with liberation from the "phantoms" of the past:

> And the youth of a colonised country growing up in the atmosphere of shot and fire, may well make a mock of, and does not hesitate to pour scorn upon the zombies of his ancestors, the horses with two heads, the dead who rise again and the djinns who rush into your body while you yawn. The native discovers reality and transforms it into the patterns of his customs, into the practice of violence and into his plan for freedom. (20–21)

The modern concept of revolution is inextricably bound up with the notion that the course of history suddenly begins anew, that an entirely new society, new story, a story never known and told before, is about to unfold, a story that is often a woman- or man-made story, not shaped by Providence. The revolutionary gaze and action is repeatedly formulated in terms of a future horizon. As per Orin Starn's example about Shining Path discussed in the Introduction, the revolutionary theorist seems to say: Do not look back at the past, tradition, and religion if you want to understand—and produce—a truly radical transformation (see also Starn and La Serna 2019). But such an auratic future of salvation, truth, and poetry seems to outline, as we shall see, a distinctively religious, cosmological horizon for standard European notions of revolution. As we show in the next section, despite the secularized and purified-from-the-past script of political theorists, a set of screened-out religious motifs and traditions repeatedly reemerge at the heart of modern revolutionary formations. In fact, leaders, intellectuals, and the "people" often end up drawing from the local religious stock and tradition for the consolidation of revolutionary processes or the configuration of "new" revolutionary orders and models.

THE CHRISTIAN ROOTS OF REVOLUTION

In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, Lenin was adamant that the role of the cult of personality of charismatic leaders was a prejudicial practice, misleading the masses and reproducing forms of power not authorized by the sovereign proletariat. Yet Lenin himself ended up promoting monument-building to revolutionaries of the past and fighters for socialism as a strategy to magnify the heritage and grandeur of the socialist project. Interestingly, Lenin aimed at shaping an international heritage by building monuments to great socialist thinkers and fighters as opposed to the nationalist heritage of nation-states, although, eventually,

even he drew the aura and the "poetry from the past" in the construction of a Soviet revolutionary process and its identity. The consolidation of a revolution driven by a future horizon of transformation and doing away with old models, hierarchies, and traditions was eventually building on the aura of past and eminent revolutionaries and politicians.

As we mentioned in chapter 4, after his death, an intense debate unfolded in the Politburo over what to do with Lenin's body (Yurchak 2015). The decision to preserve it, embalming it and displaying it for posterity, drew on notions of the canonization, cult status, and immortality entrenched in religious practices, in the cults of saint and relics, ultimately clashing with the basic tenets of Marxism-Leninism. In fact, the personality cult of the Soviet leader appeared to be built on conventional religious and spiritual beliefs. The linear and secularized time carefully and meticulously introduced by the Russian Revolution appears to revert with the embalming of Lenin's body, which mummifies the Soviet leader—or Soviet ideology (Yurchak 2015)—thereby breaking with modernity and its time.

Buck-Morss (2000) brilliantly shows how in Russian households the so-called "red corner," traditionally reserved for Orthodox icons, had been transformed into "Lenin's corner" with the image of Lenin replacing the religious paintings. This kind of dynamics, rather than severing the Soviet revolution from the past or destroying the phantoms and spirits of old for the sake of a new society, outlines a notion of revolution as building on those same "spirits." One of the most spectacular projects of Soviet political engineering was to tear down and attempt to replace the Orthodox Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow with the Palace of the Soviets, although construction of the latter was never accomplished due to the Nazi invasion. Something similar had happened during the French Revolution when Notre Dame was transformed into the Temple of Reason, generating a new type of civic religion with a specific rituality and calendric system (Dawson 1972).

The so-called theory of God-building found fertile ground among some Marxists of Bolshevik Russia and the Soviet Union (Boer 2014). Maxim Gorki was probably the most prominent intellectual to adhere to such a movement, often portraying the masses as gods, creators of miracles and immortals during the Russian Revolution. Partially based on the French Revolution's "cult of reason," the theory of God-building proposed a meta-religious context in which religion was viewed primarily in terms of the psychological and social powers of ritual, myth, and symbolism; the goal was to exploit this religious force for revolutionary purposes.

Buck-Morss (2000) observes a similar process among Soviet revolutionary artists who sought to interrupt the continuity of perception and estrange the familiar, severing historical tradition through the force of their fantasy. The idea was to step out of the frame of the existing order either through transcending space and advancing toward the "eternal" (the case of the painter Malevich and his nonobjective, abstract art) or through primitive art, turning to the symbols and myths of deep Russia and de-articulating the present from its necessary future. These

practices not only begin to question the notion of a newness ex nihilo in relation to modern revolutionary processes but also start to unearth a series of cosmological forms and instruments that appear to be playing a strategic role in revolutionary processes.

We have seen how the figure of Che Guevara as a Jesus-like modern savior and ascetic political visionary (Scheele 2007) conceptualized a messianic notion of the New Man, morally improved and spiritually redeemed, fashioned on the model of Saint Paul's "New Man" shaped in the semblances of the resurrected Christ and "which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him" (Colossians 3:10). In the Nicaraguan revolution of 1979 (Montoya 2012), large portions of the Catholic Church supported Sandinista revolutionary operations against the dictator Somoza in clear tension with the Vatican. Drawing on a combination of Christian theology and Marxist socioeconomic analysis, the Nicaraguan Church and Liberation theologians not only took a clear stance that favored the poor and the liberation of the oppressed but also became a strategic source of organization for peasant groups through their grassroots religious activities and associations (see also Cooper 2018).

As we discuss in detail in the Conclusion, Walter Benjamin (2007) outlines a similar idea of revolution as retrieving and redeeming an oppressed past/tradition from the spatialized, neutralized jaws of history and unstitching it from its inevitable homogeneous future. In his essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), Benjamin locates the revolutionary task in the rescuing of "tradition" from a "conformism" that threatens to overwhelm it. The task is to set alight the sparks of hope in the past (Robinson 2013). In contrast with the notion of modernization as progress that reduces revolution to the salvation of future generations, producing a corrosive conformity in the present, Benjamin's revolution avenges past generations and actualizes the drive of a messianic past. Although conventionally identifying revolution with a rupture in the Orthodox time frame and in the continuity of history, for Benjamin the rupture consists of the interruption of the homogeneous "empty time" imposed by capitalism as a disciplining instance, in order to embark on a new messianic time redeemed from the past and entering and imploding the time of capitalism.

In his interpretative study of Benjamin, which focuses on his "revolutionary criticism," Terry Eagleton (1981) beautifully summarizes Benjamin's notion of socialist revolution as a mobilization of past memories, spirits, and ancestors in the attempt to shatter the homogenizing force of modern history:

> If we were able to recollect our ancestors, then in a moment of shock we might trigger the unpalatable memory trace at a ripe time, blast through the continuum of history and create the empty space in which the forces of tradition might congregate to shatter the present. That moment of shock is socialist revolution. (Eagleton 1981: 78)

If socialist revolutions have conventionally been theorized as producing an incommensurability with tradition and religion, in the previous paragraphs we have begun to observe how revolutionary processes attempting to throw religion and tradition out of the window often experienced a return of religion and the past through the back door. In the case of the French and Russian revolutions, as we have seen, religion was instrumentally used by the political avant-garde as a powerful symbolic mechanism that could enable to spread and deepen a new, secular revolutionary ethos. However, a number of socialist political thinkers have even more radically tackled the notion of religion in revolutionary thinking outlining the explicitly religious foundations of the standard European ideas of revolution. Generally, the work of Alain Badiou is a prime point of reference for this kind of endeavor. However, a number of lesser-known predecessors have more or less intentionally addressed the issue.

In his most famous political work, suggestively titled "The Revolutionary Catechism," Russian anarchist Sergei Nechayev ([1869] 2014) outlines the precepts, duties, and attitudes required of the modern revolutionary in the constitution of a new subject and a new world. Nechayev's manifesto opens with this exemplary sentence: "The revolutionary is a doomed man. He has no personal interests, no business affairs, no emotions, no attachments, no property, and no name. Everything in him is wholly absorbed in the single thought and the single passion for revolution" (par. 1). What follows is the recommendation for a series of ascetic practices of renunciation, sacrifice, and immolation explicitly inspired by the tradition of Christianity and designed to allow the revolutionary to overcome attachments to family, love, and friendship and eventually to renounce his / her own life for the sake of a grander political objective.

Partly breaking with previous Marxist tradition, the influential work of Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (2003), has explicitly juxtaposed the event of Christ's resurrection and revolution in direct relation and symmetry. Badiou frames the event of Christ's resurrection in typical revolutionary language and rationale as capable of bringing about a new type of subjectivity and a new political language, but also of bringing to light a series of elements and forces that were hidden or invisible in the previous order of things. In Badiou's work the articulation between revolution and Christianity becomes ever more explicit through the analysis of the figure of Saint Paul. The sinful life of Saint Paul is redefined by the encounter with the resurrected Christ not in the sense of a simple shift in terms of belief and thinking but actually in terms of salvation. Saint Paul's conversion is described by Badiou in terms of a thunderbolt, a caesura from his previous life and from the past that literally instantiates a new man, a new order of things, a new form of living as "the old self has been crucified with God."

Badiou's language and work become particularly useful in identifying correspondences and elective affinities between revolutionary jargon and some of the

TABLE 1. Correspondences between Christianity and Revolution

Christianity	Revolution
New Man redeemed from original sin (Saint Paul)	New Man redeemed from ideology and ethically improved (Trotsky; Che Guevara)
Priestly guidance	Vanguard / Leadership
Lies / Sin	Ideology
Asceticism	Renunciation of the family and cherished familial bonds for the sake of a higher calling (revolutionary action / socialism)
Suffering / Sacrifice	Selfless renunciation of one's well-being or life in the present to achieve heroic status in the future
Salvation	A new transcendent *horizon* in the future giving shape and direction to human action
Eternity	A *timeless world* liberated from subjugation and ideology where everyone is equal

principal Christian concepts (see Table 1; see also Arendt [1965] 2006: 16). In other words, Badiou seems to be asserting that the language of revolution is drawn from a religious Christian framework. So, for instance, the Christian and sinful notion of "lie" appears to be equated in the revolutionary language with that of "ideology" as a dangerous distortion from a "God-given" truth. The notion of priestly guidance of the "flock" resonates with that of the revolutionary vanguard leading the masses toward a horizon of salvation and emancipation.[2] Nechayev's ascetic practices and renunciation of cherished attachments—self, family, tribe—explicitly follow Christian ascetic renunciation of worldly matters for the sake of a higher calling: a type of sacrifice in the present that aspires to the materialization of a better world in the future or even to secure one's eternal salvation or liberation.[3]

Unearthing the resonances between Christianity and the canonical notions of revolution gives rise to a number of questions. What would revolution look like in contexts where the religious and cosmological coordinates are different? What

2. Revolutionary thinkers themselves have noticed this resemblance. For instance, Gramsci criticized vanguardist approaches to revolution as they involve a "priestly type of leadership" (1992b: 56). Incidentally, Gramsci proposed a different revolutionary strategy, one that relies on intellectuals as figures who might influence public discourses and persuade other individuals to join the revolutionary cause. Significantly, Gramsci differentiated between "traditional intellectuals" (literati, clergymen, priests, and artists who see themselves as proponents of eternal truths that apply to all) and "organic intellectuals" (who are organically embedded within one specific social class and work to benefit this class) (King 1978: 25–28). In Gramsci's view, the latter have a role to play in emancipating the subaltern classes. Gramsci is not the only Marxist who distanced himself from the notion of the vanguard. The most vocal and radical critics of the priestly nature of vanguardism, however, have been the anarchist thinkers (Gouldner 1982: 861).

3. Significantly, Bakunin criticized Nechayev's approach to revolution for being too mystical and ascetic, dismissing Nechayev as a "monk of the revolution" and a "fanatic" who is "nearer to the Jesuits than to us" (Confino 1974: 244).

kind of revolution may spring from a set of Islamic principles? Or, in a context such as Islam where there is no notion of original sin and therefore no redemption through a "conscious" guide, what notion of redeemed, revolutionary "new man" can take shape?

With these questions in mind, in the following sections we analyze a range of ethnographic examples to highlight how conventional notions and models of revolution are reinterpreted and re-signified in different and specific cosmological contexts; how localized and particularistic myths and rituals may produce revolutions; and how specific cosmologies generate unique ideas of revolutionary transformation.

RE-SIGNIFYING REVOLUTION TO LOCAL CATEGORIES

In the previous sections we have explored the narratives of secularization and purification of the standard European notions of revolution that make them universalizable and applicable as a universal model to a multiplicity of contexts and realities across the world. Eventually, we ended up addressing its religious undertones and cosmological foundations that are often concealed by most political theorists. In the following paragraphs we focus on what happens when we transpose these standard ideas and notions of revolution to different ethnographic settings with different histories, cosmologies, notions of time, and transformation.

During the rebellions against colonial powers in sub-Saharan Africa, local conceptions and languages of power—from cults of the ancestors to spirit possession, from witchcraft to sorcery—became instrumental political frameworks often interacting with conventional ideas of revolution. Harry West (2005) describes how Mozambique achieved independence from Portugal in 1975 as a result of the armed struggle by FRELIMO (Mozambique Liberation Front). Trained in neighboring Tanzania, FRELIMO fighters' liberation of the country started from the most remote rural areas, following a Maoist guerrilla strategy based on proselytization among the peasantry and hit-and-run ambushes (cf. Degregori 2012). Describing the clash between FRELIMO fighters and the Muedans of the Mozambican plateau, West shows that in order to comprehend the encounter and its reciprocal misunderstandings we must look to Muedans' languages of power as shaped and conceptualized in their religion, sorcery practices, and traditional beliefs. Discussing the religious notions and dynamics of sorcery (*uwawi*) among the Muedans, West outlines the specificities of their ideas and how these interacted with the socialist conceptions and notions of FRELIMO fighters. In *uwawi,* according to the Muedans, power finds its beneficent manifestation in the work of responsible sorcerers who possess the ability to enter into the invisible realm, undoing the work of maleficent sorcerers and elaborating and actualizing transformations in the world.

The Muedans' conception of power is synonymous with these maneuvers of repeated and continuous acts aimed at making and unmaking transformations, referred to as *kupilikula,* in the realm of the invisible. Therefore, from Catholic missionaries to the revolutionary guerrillas of FRELIMO, all these speakers of an unfamiliar language of power have been conceptualized by Muedans on the basis of the *uwawi* power framework as "sorcerers," with access to the invisible realm, attempting to transform the world and proclaiming transformative visions. Thus, ironically, while both the Christian missionaries and the revolutionaries have attempted to prohibit practices of traditional religion and sorcery as inappropriate to modern forms, belief, and politics, the Muedans have repeatedly conceptualized missionaries and revolutionaries in terms of their own language of power as powerful sorcerers attempting to reverse and undo previous transformations while bringing about a new reality and world.

In other words, the attempts by FRELIMO fighters to counteract local forms of sorcery and their vocal assertions of the falseness of Muedans' traditional practices were understood by the Muedans as a kind of revolutionary *uwawi* sorcery aiming to neutralize other forms of power. Although both missionaries and revolutionaries thought of themselves as bringing about an ultimate truth in political terms— a truth nullifying the validity of Muedan beliefs and practices—their discourse continued to be conceptualized by locals according to Muedan cosmology, sorcery, and power: inescapably framed in terms of a fight between competing forces. Ultimately, these modern foreign languages, which often disparaged the backwardness of local religious practices, beliefs, and ideas, reproduce local/ traditional cultural categories that appear more resilient than expected in relation to progressive, advanced, and modern notions of revolution and transformation.

West (2005) emphasizes that the process of revolution, decolonization, and democratization in Africa does not depend on the application of Western models of power to African realities (see Fanon [1961] 2007), but rather on the cultivation of local languages of power present in people's everyday lives that might express an emergent political ethics. For West, the "political" problem is that in Africa both policy makers and revolutionaries have been speaking and imposing foreign political languages and notions of power.

In the case of the Muedans of Mozambique, we witness a process of reinterpretation and re-signification of the standard European ideas of revolution that consistently reframes them in terms of local notions of power rooted in the practices of *uwawi*, highlighting a reciprocal misunderstanding between locals and foreign revolutionary fighters. If we turn to the operation of Maoism in India (Shah 2014; see also Shah and Pettigrew 2018), we observe how the conventional conception of revolution and its revolutionary ethos are being reconfigured and altered by means of Hindu religious and political categories.

Alpa Shah (2014) describes how in the last decade, as part of an international strategy, an underground Maoist guerrilla movement in West Bengal has

revitalized a decade-long struggle to seize power from the Indian state and develop communism. The Maoists consider their movement to be the armed struggled of exploited peasants and workers aiming at the attainment of a fairer, classless society, while, according to Shah, the Indian state envisions them as the main internal security threat. Shah draws a parallel between Maoist cadres committed to radical equality and transformation and the figure of the Hindu renouncer seeking liberation from the endless cycles of suffering and rebirth. Aiming for radical equality beyond caste, challenging taboos and hierarchies, the Hindu renouncer opts out of society and its conventions in order to create a parallel society. Shah draws attention to the ideological significance of the figure of the renouncer in the making of dedicated communist revolutionaries in contemporary India, demonstrating that the underground movement has shown surprising persistence due to its parallelism and subversion of the figure. Differing from the case of Mozambique, where the divergence in understandings of power among revolutionaries and Muedans leads to an ironical and enduring misunderstanding, Shah shows how local religious categories, ascetic practices, and cycles of rebirth become structuring elements in the putatively universal, Indian Maoist definition of revolution.

LOCAL TRADITION AS A REVOLUTIONARY TOOL

In the example of Indian Maoism we have begun to explore how conventional practices of revolution defined by the standard Maoist framework are reframed on the basis of Hindu notions of worldly liberation that become strategic principles in the materialization and definition of a specific revolutionary ethos, practice, and scope. Along these lines, in this section we investigate a set of ethnographic examples where local languages of power and indigenous religious practices are explicitly incorporated into a platform of political liberation. This enables us not only to experiment with other horizons of transformation but also to visualize revolutionary forms and practices that may call into question the universal model described earlier.

David Lan's work on guerrillas and spirit mediums during the struggle for the liberation of Zimbabwe, already discussed in chapter 1 in relation to notions of ritual and time, shows how Dande practices of spirit mediumship, linked to the cult of the ancestors, became part of the structural dynamics of revolutionary activities. Although the ideology of ZANLA guerrilla leaders clashed with these forms of traditional religion and most of them came into Dande with the task of politicizing the peasants, as we saw, it soon became clear that any form of political legitimacy among the Shona would only succeed with the endorsement of a set of cosmological notions and practices concerning the ancestors and the reproduction of the cosmos. During forms of spirit possession, the spirits of past chiefs (*mhondoro*) provided the force and energy of rain-making that enabled the reproduction of kin and families and also reasserted the political power of the lineages

over the land. ZANLA participation in ritual practices was therefore instrumental both in gaining political power from the spirits of the chiefs and in order to claim to be autochthonous "owners of the land" in opposition to white "conquering" Rhodesians.

Instead of a straightforward incorporation into the practices of militarily trained and politically advanced ZANLA fighters, the interactions and practices of the locals provide an insight into the role played by local ritual practices, clans, and lineages in the revolutionary movement. This altered the narrative and discourse of the guerrillas, which needed to integrate references to the ancestors and rely on the spirit mediums as political referents for any political action and decision. In fact, the ancestors provided the revolutionary movement with a new ideological basis and heritage with which to rethink the idea of nation, allowing them to reframe the new Zimbabwe in terms of an ancient polity over which the ancestors had ruled long ago.

Lan presents an interesting dimension of the role of local religious forms in a context of revolutionary war and transformation, pointing out that Shona cosmological ideas and practices enabled the guerrillas to recreate and reproduce the connection with the ancestors. More importantly, those ideas were institutionalized within the guerrilla groups, becoming structuring practices in the lives of combatants who were placed under the protection of the ancestors but also socially normed according to the rules thrust on them by spirit mediums. So, for instance, combatants were prohibited from killing wild animals in the forest, eating certain foods, and having sexual intercourse, as respect for these embargos would allow them to become invisible during warfare and to acquire powers from the ancestors. The local cosmology became an instrumental dimension in the construction of a revolutionary anticolonial platform as well as a modern nation-state.

Another example of a revolutionary movement being born out of cosmological practices is the case of Haiti, the first and uniquely successful slave uprising that produced the independent republic. Trinidadian socialist historian, writer, and intellectual C. L. R. James described the Haitian revolution in his book *Black Jacobins* (1963) and, despite his scant references to voodoo—to be expected of a socialist—the work still manages to convey the strategic role played by religious and spiritual practices in the uprising (see also Geggus 1992; cf. Jean-Marie 2019). Voodoo became the medium of the revolution because the slaves traveled miles to sing and dance and practice their rites, creating the conditions for scattered peasants to generate spaces of congregation and resistance in which to question the rules and forms of slavery. Consequently, voodoo ritual structures became the tools of organization for revolutionary action, and it is not surprising that the first leader of the Haitian revolution, Boukman, was a *papaloi* or high priest.

C. L. R. James describes how revolutionary action was planned in the middle of voodoo rituals and preceded by voodoo incantations and the sucking of the blood

of a stuck pig by groups of the rebel slaves. Papaloi Boukman frames the revolution in a creole-language prayer in terms of revenge of our wrongs, as "ordered by our god," a god that will also "direct our arms" in the revolt against the whites. In preparation for the war against the French army, the slaves carried out preliminary maneuvers in dead silence while the papaloi-priests chanted the spells and the women and children danced to the point of frenzy. When all these activities had reached the necessary height of excitement the fighters attacked.

Local cosmology, religions, and practices of spirit possession provided the foundation not only for rebellion but also for shaping a new political order. In Haiti, voodoo rituals became the terrain where revolution was instantiated while spirits guided the bodies of the rebels during military actions, literally turning revolution into a form of spirit possession. While we have addressed in chapter 1 the revolutionary potential of rituals, in this section we have shown the cosmological properties of revolution and how the notion of revolution springs not only from the social forms of black slaves and indigenous groups but also from specific notions of power and modalities of articulation with spiritual forces.

INDIGENOUS NOTIONS
OF REVOLUTIONARY TRANSFORMATION

As illustrated by the case of Mozambique, from the point of view of peasants and indigenous groups, revolution has traditionally been seen in terms of an external geopolitical event invading or even threatening a locality. However, as in the case of Haiti, indigenous rituals, myths, and organizational forms may become the platforms from which to develop forms and notions of revolution that draw on local concepts and histories. Building on these examples, in this section we explore the scope, meaning, and possibilities of an indigenous conception of revolution.

In the case of the *proceso de cambio* in Bolivia, scholars have repeatedly signaled the resonance between the revolutionary process and the indigenous myth and notion of *Pachakuti* (Hylton and Thompson 2005; Gutiérrez 2014; Arbona et al. 2016), literally "the return of time/space" in Aymara. The myth of *Pachakuti*, which began to take shape across the Andes and among different groups during the colonial era, can be summarized as follows: After the quartering and burying of the limbs of the dismembered body of the Inca emperor (Atahualpa)—or of the Aymara chief Tupak Katari—in different locations across the Andes, it was said that the body of the emperor—or of the Aymara warrior—would grow back together underground, causing another world to develop (Arguedas and Roel Pineda 1973; Castro-Klarén 1993). Through what is called a *Pachakuti*—a reconfiguration of time and space—this underground world would surface, reestablishing the rule of the indigenous world over the current rulers while also giving rise to a time of health and justice where the whites would work like *indios*.

During the colonial war of independence from the Spanish Crown at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Aymara people had already experimented with the instantiation of the myth during indigenous revolts supporting liberation from the colonial yoke. In 1804 the provisional formation of an indigenous republic in the town of Oruro did not lead to the killing or expulsion of whites and mestizos but rather to their being obliged to wear ponchos and sandals (*abarcas*) and chew coca leaves (Thompson 2002), all actions specifically associated with the indigenous peasantry. *Pachakuti* not only changes the rhythms and directions of time—as signaled by the Congress clock running counterclockwise—but also brings about an immanent space or cosmos. In practice, it takes the semblance of a cosmological transformation, an emergence in all its intensity of an indigenous world that has previously been rendered invisible and relegated to the social and political margins. In such a process, indigenous cosmological forces such as the Andean Mother Earth, *Pachamama*—nurturing in her womb the limbs of Atahualpa / Katari—and traditional indigenous textiles, or even the everyday cultural practice of chewing coca leaves, are framed as essential tools to antagonize an external power and also as revolutionary instruments that in their daily and quotidian operation persistently and methodically shape and potentiate an indigenous cosmos that will counteract and possibly reverse white domination.

Throughout the *proceso de cambio* this indigenous concept of renewal has been symbolically mobilized and strategically appropriated by the Morales administration to point at the specificity and indigenous twist of the Bolivian "revolution" and even to masquerade some of its most liberal and less revolutionary politics (see Goodale 2019; Salazar 2015). Beside, the prebendal relations between the apparatuses of the revolutionary state and the indigenous organizations has led scholars to deemphasize the "cosmic" character of the revolution (see Reinaga [1970] 2010) in order to pragmatically foreground convenience and corruption (Zegada and Komadina 2017). We still retain that some of the local categories, political expectations, and notions of transformation of the popular and indigenous sectors remain critical to understand the scope and character of this phenomenon.

Scholars, for instance, have discussed how at the inception of the upheavals of the *proceso de cambio* in the 4,000-meter-high city of El Alto, *alteños* discussed in their assemblies the option of flooding the city with *indios* by having eight to twelve children, like their grandparents, thus causing the gradual disappearance of the whites (Zibechi 2010; Mamani 2010). The language used to describe the insurrectionary movement was dotted with expressions such as "waves," "flooding," "spilling over," and "ant-like" (*como hormigas*) to depict the protesters pouring down from the plateau. Nestled at the bottom of a mountain canyon and encircled by indigenous settlements, the white and mestizo inhabitants of La Paz have historically lived in fear of being besieged by the *indios*. Not only did the local communities and assemblies "flood" the survival capability of the government and

depose a president speaking Spanish with a heavily American accent, they also "spilled over" and "poured down" from the plateau to the steep canyon where La Paz stands, inundating the seat of government. Instead of the conventional idea of revolution as a sudden rupture with the preexisting political order, Aymara sectors resorted to the liquid metaphor and to their own cosmological categories.

The ant, for instance, is the being par excellence that embodies a specific pattern of small repetitions inducing a sense of multiplication and cosmological reproduction. Repeated sequences of ants jammed in honey are used by traders in their offering to cosmological forces to attract customers "like ants" and for their business to reproduce and multiply. In the lavish dance parades for the celebration of local saints, the line of repeated, heavily costumed dancers (like ants) are thought to make the saint "reverberate" (*retumbar*) in every street corner of the city, reproducing and overflowing its reach and power across the landscape (Tassi 2010, 2013). Rather than seeing revolution as transcending the worldly space and aspiring toward a transcendent horizon, Aymara "revolution" is framed through their own cosmological categories of "reproduction," along with their rules, practices, and political forms, flooding and overturning the rest. Instead of a sudden separation of the past from the present and a reorienting of expectations toward the future, it appears as if the barycenter, the axis of the cosmos, has shifted, redefining a set of sociopolitical coordinates: what was submerged and marginalized has now moved toward the surface and the center.

Tassi (forthcoming; cf. Arbona et al. 2016) describes how Martín, one of his informants, founder of the most renown religious brotherhood in La Paz and head of a traditional family of Aymara origin, would often boast that in his family all female members had to wear a *pollera*—the traditional Andean attire of multiple skirts. This implied that some of his daughters-in-law, when joining the family, had to abandon conventional Western clothes (*hacerse de pollera*). Subtly, Martín's boasts did not merely reference the proud "return" of the past encouraged by some indigenous intellectuals (Yampara 1992; Yampara et al. 2007; Untoja 2001), but also a process whereby the *pollera* is taking center stage in urban social dynamics and even in the expression of status. As per the narrative and notion of *Pachakuti,* clothing items such as the *pollera* and the bowler hat have been socially and symbolically reconfigured from marginal and discriminated-against objects and symbols to definitory instances of a "new" social and cosmological reality.

Arbona et al. (2016) mention that, in a neighborhood of El Alto, people voted en masse in the 2011 elections for the Magistrates' Council for a middle-aged woman named Cristina Mamani. Cristina was an *alteño* woman in her forties whom nobody in the neighborhood knew personally; they had merely seen her picture on the ballot paper. Her image—dressed in the bowler hat and the *pollera*—was a convincing element to the locals who disregarded a number of candidates with higher academic qualifications and neater, more modern, more appropriate

appearance for the position. Being a *pollera* woman was taken as the expression of an affinity with the interests and aspirations of the popular sectors but also of an association with self-determination and firsthand knowledge of the practical possibilities and limitations of the country, unlike local intellectual / political circles and even formal institutions.

Eusebio, a young student from El Alto, was encouraged to run as a candidate in an *alteño* constituency because of his Aymara looks and humble physical appearance, his measured but direct way of speaking, and his firsthand and practical—rather than specialist—knowledge of local problems. Paradoxically, instead of a disposition for political leadership or personal management and negotiation skills, Eusebio was nominated for not being a politician, at least not in the conventional sense. What can be observed here is how attire and practices racially associated by the whites with the lumpen proletariat, filth, and amoral sexuality (see Weismantel 2001 regarding the *pollera*) are publicly framed from the Aymara point of view as constitutive components of a world with a certain moral, cultural, and intellectual hegemony over conventional ruling sectors. This is nothing new; although concealed or made invisible, these elements have always been there. However, they are now being amplified, "reverberated" to the point of bringing to the surface dynamics that, despite operating under the radar of mainstream and official institutions, have remained central to structuring local reality. Methodical insistence on culturally specific practices, items of clothing, and beliefs dismissed by both modernity and official institutions have become a strategy of both reproduction and amplification of a marginal world now aspiring to become the hegemonic center of life.

In the case of the Aymara and of urban popular sectors, instead of constituting an incommensurable rupture, "revolution" takes the form of a process of potentiation, surfacing, and overflow of a cosmos that has been growing underground, at the margins of the official political institutions; an intensified expression of the everyday organic life of communities and associations routinely participating in meetings, demonstrations, civic parades, and other collective responsibilities (cf. Albro 2006). Instead of conforming to conventional revolutionary ideals of transformation, such a notion of revolution promotes the possibility of "being who we are" in a context where a set of national and international agents have continually worked toward precluding this possibility.[4]

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4. The economic ascendance of some indigenous and popular sectors in Bolivia in the last decades has brought scholars (Shakow 2014; Pellegrini 2016; CIS 2018) to emphasize dynamics of indigenous participation in the orthodox processes of modernity, from practices of consumption to patterns of social differentiation, from the use of technology to the access to private schools for their offspring. Some scholars have even paralleled these economic transformations with a destructuring of indigenous values and forms of organization (Urioste 2017). It is worth mentioning that the cosmological shift we have been describing that feeds a repositioning of the margins toward the center does not imply an

In this sense, the ethnographic materials described end up emphasizing specifically Aymara notions and "horizons" of radical transformation. Instead of a transcendent horizon of freedom, salvation, and undifferentiated equality, revolution appears to be driven by an immanent cosmological reconfiguration that repositions the social margins of society right at the center. Such a reconfiguration is not created by a sudden rupture with tradition and with religion but rather through a potentiation of a set of objects, practices, and cosmological elements that activate such "revolution." In other words, religion and myth are neither the veils of the oppression nor the opium of the people. On the contrary, religion and myth become the decisive forms, forces, and domains of revolution. Through their potentiation and intensification revolution is ultimately instantiated.

CONCLUSION

In the tradition of political science's—and, to a degree, anthropology's—study of revolution the peasant, the indigenous, and the slave have been conceived as structurally incapable of producing revolutionary transformations (Wolf 1969; Stern 1987). They were the parochial initiators of revolts but eventually the ball had to be handed over to more sophisticated groups: intellectuals and vanguard parties capable of harnessing peasant energies, but for ends never dreamed of by these subaltern groups, thereby transubstantiating unsophisticated effort or brute force into refined revolutionary strategies or political projects with their own teleology. What we have seen throughout this chapter, however, is that rituals, myths, and religious forms may become tools of teleological transformation. The political projects of peasants and indigenous groups, formulated and instantiated by indigenous peasants themselves, may not require sophisticated political elites to translate the dissatisfaction of the people into "genuine" political projects.

This enables us, first, to provincialize European ideas of revolution often used as universal models or forms for revolutionary action throughout the world. To be sure, supposedly universal European notions of revolutionary action (see the discussion of universalism in the Conclusion) continue to be appropriated and employed locally (see Donham 1999). However, if we persist in measuring revolution / political transformation according to standardized horizons, canons of

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indigenous rejection of or contrast with modernity but rather a possibility of being both modern and indigenous. In fact, the notion of "being who we are," as expressed by one of Tassi's informants, also clashes with the two main narratives describing indigenous possibilities of being: either integrating and adjusting indigenous practices to the forms and demeanors of hegemonic modernity, or returning to the community and to marginal, rural ways of living, conserving native traditions and impersonating a timeless alternative to capitalism and modernity. The combination of "being who we are" and their reconfiguration described earlier introduces a new possibility of being indigenous and hegemonic, Aymara and modern, at one and the same time.

sacrifice and consciousness, in terms of lack, divergence, and immaturity in rela-
tion to a universal model, we run the risk of reproducing our own categories
and hierarchies of knowledge while missing practices and concepts of revolution
framed in terms of indigenous principles.

Secondly, this establishes the foundations of an anthropology of revolution, one
able to highlight unexpected interpretations, re-significations, practices, and con-
cepts and break the dichotomic tension between the canon and "alternative" local
conceptions, thereby multiplying the possibilities of what revolution could be by
emphasizing its multiple understandings as social and cultural practice.