

## Notes towards an Anthropology of Political Revolutions

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# Notes towards an Anthropology of Political Revolutions

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## INTRODUCTION: IS THERE AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF POLITICAL REVOLUTIONS?

In 1961, Peter Worsley opened his paper assessing the anthropology of rebellions and revolutions with the following statement: “A survey of the social anthropological literature on rebellions and revolutions is a simple undertaking, for it is the absence of such analysis that is so striking” (1961: 26). Fifty years later, having witnessed several waves of revolutions across the world, as well as radical, abrupt, and irreversible changes in social norms, political systems, and cultural values, surely anthropology by now has an established tradition of studying political revolutions. Or do we? There is certainly an anthropological tradition of studying protest and resistance. The Manchester school in political anthropology developed a focus on conflict and political rebellion, but that did not involve a proper study of political revolutions in modern state societies. In 1963, on his way toward America, Victor Turner had his decisive reading experience of Arnold van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage*, and developed a processual approach to the study of change via liminality (1967; 1969) that I will discuss below. This approach, however, has rarely been systematically applied to political transformation, despite Turner’s own hints in that direction. Our encyclopedias or dictionaries of anthropology have no entries on political revolutions. If the word “revolution” figures in anthropological readers it most often refers to social change within a long-term process, as in “Industrial Revolution” or “Neolithic Revolution.” Alternatively, it refers to paradigmatic changes within anthropological thinking itself, as in “linguistic revolution.” Since the 1960s anthropologists have frequently depicted epistemic changes in thought as “revolutions.” But though we talk about our own revolutions,

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we say much less about those that take place around us and continue to shape the world in which we live.

Half a century after Worsley's call for a social anthropological engagement with political revolutions, research on the subject is thoroughly dominated by political scientists, political sociologists, and historians. Of course, these disciplines are bigger and arguably more powerful than anthropology, and that they dominate a research area so evidently central to their subject matter is by no means strange. In fact, sociology started with Saint-Simon and Comte, and one of their central claims was that, with the revolution, France had arrived at a crucial moment of transition. Their work focused on the historical process leading to this juncture, and on the solution that would end the crisis (Szakolczai 2009: 144). But why are anthropologists so strikingly silent about political revolutions? Political scientists write volumes about them without consulting the anthropological literature. Foran's edited book *Theorizing Revolution* (1997) makes no reference to any work of anthropology, and John Dunn's much-quoted study of political revolutions (1989) does not mention anthropology either. The list could be continued, but these writers can hardly be blamed, for the neglect comes from within anthropology itself.

This neglect is even more surprising given that anthropologists in a very general way tend to side with the "people" over and above institutional power structures. Political revolutions involve, as a minimum, some degree of mobilization of those "ordinary people" that are normally the focus of our ethnographic accounts. Moreover, anthropologists have been very sympathetic toward social and political emancipation, especially in colonial and postcolonial situations. It could even be argued that anthropology has an unarticulated affinity with political revolutions, if perhaps a slightly problematic one. From the 1960s onward, a good portion of anthropologists certainly shared, at the theoretical as well as ideological level, Marxist-inspired appeals to revolution as a way of overcoming social inequality and colonial repression. This was evident, for example, in the French neo-Marxist schools of anthropology built around Godelier and Meillassoux.

In American anthropology, such voices understandably gained force during the Vietnam War. Revolutionary appeals heavily influenced Spanish and Latin American anthropological traditions, where the Mexican Revolution in a general sense came to serve as a reference point much as the English, French, and American revolutions have underpinned political thought in the "West." Moreover, while in the Latin American context the social scientific concern with revolutions was always marked in a general way, it here also involved an intimate relationship with the study of indigenous populations (Korsbaek 2005) and/or peasants. The revolutionary war launched by *Sendero Luminoso* in Peru was but one attempt to mobilize the peasants of the countryside against the state via an appeal to both class and ethnicity (Degregori 1988). In some of Europe's "internal colonies," from Scotland to

Catalunya, anthropologists turned the same hybrid inwards, coupling ethno-nationalism with Marxist theory (Nairn 1977; Llobera 1989).

This linking of class-based mass mobilization and ethnicity or indigenous identity has of course also figured prominently in Asian twentieth-century history. At its extreme, this would inject Marxist revolutionism with notions of ethnic purity or organic community, which in fact had their origin in anthropological thought and discourse (Strauss 2001). Throughout the twentieth century, once it became evident that Western working classes had turned into docile bodies, the search for revolutionary potential was directed toward Russian workers, then Chinese peasants, then Third World movements, then peasants in general, then women, then students, then some of these categories in combination. Anthropologists have been particularly active in repositioning the peasant as a revolutionary subject, against Marx's denigrating view. Ernest Gellner, from some opposite side of the spectrum (but well within a horizon of historical materialism), once remarked, "peasants only grunt." Starting in the 1960s, peasant resistance and revolution came instead to be seen as a Third World answer to capitalism and imperialism, or at least as a potential source of social change. It was in this context that Eric Wolf made his comparative studies of peasant resistance, and James Scott (1976) wrote about the moral economies of Asian peasants—to mention just the most famous cases.<sup>1</sup> Ever since Marx's identification of the proletariat as the decisive social force, modern ideological revolutionaries have been in constant search for human groups who could be championed as authentic carriers of revolutionary potential. And in this constant launching of the marginalized into the vanguard, anthropology has played a role that decades of disciplinary reflexivity has left relatively untouched.

The theme of revolution entered into much anthropological work from the 1990s as a natural consequence of the regime changes that took place around the globe with the end of Cold War and Communism, and soon also Apartheid (as so thoroughly analyzed in the work of Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; 1997). It is far beyond this article's scope to discuss all of this work, and what is said below should not be read as critique of it. I simply note that "revolution" was invoked here, and also in the post-socialist and post-colonial literature, mostly as a background or context: there was a focus on the configurations that led to revolutionary thinking, the cultural and ideological borrowings across traditions, on the formulation of alternative modernities (Thomassen 2012), and on the consequences of revolutionary change for local settings. Anthropologists have, with a very few exceptions (see for example Donham 1999), generally refrained from studying actual political revolutionary *events* as ethnographic

<sup>1</sup> Besides the sustained ethnographic focus on peasant rebellion (still strong in American anthropology), this also led to theoretical debates over the very term "peasant," and how to fine tune the Marxist framework to extra-European situations (see Gledhill 1985, for example).

cases, and consequently they have also left comparison of the processes involved to political scientists. Nugent's excellent historical anthropology, *Spent Cartridges of Revolution* (1993), focuses on the events leading up to the revolution and on life among peasants in the post-revolutionary Mexican setting; the book is explicitly not about the revolution itself.

To the extent that anthropologists have actually focused on real political events, our attention toward "change from below" has more often been formulated via an engagement with "Subaltern Studies," with a more general concern with marginalized people and their means of resistance at the "low level" of political action. Even here, Sherry Ortner (1995) rightly identified a series of "ethnographic refusals" to focus on resistance. If such a refusal can be identified with broad reference to various forms of political activities that seek to question existing patterns of domination, in the case of large-scale political revolutions we seem to be dealing with a genuine blind spot.

There are certainly some good reasons why anthropologists have not engaged extensively with political revolutions, which need to be considered from the outset. First, revolutions take place in "large-scale societies" where there is a larger "system" to overthrow, a certain degree of institutional differentiation, and some notion of political accountability; they do not happen in the Trobriand Islands. While the study of revolutions and crowd violence naturally constituted a core theme from early sociology onwards, the same was not the case for early anthropology. Yet rebellion is indeed a feature even of "tribal society" (Gluckman 1963). And more importantly, anthropologists started to occupy themselves with "complex societies" and "states" in the 1930s, as in the work of Robert Redfield (see Thomassen 2008).

Second, one might well argue that political revolutions are taking place within what international relations scholars and political scientists call "high politics," which is distant from anthropology's focus on the ordinary and everyday forms of political behavior. A study of Lenin's or Khomeini's coming to power or the taking of the Bastille seems to fall quite naturally within the terrain of political scientists and historians. It is emblematic that the most famous anthropological work on political rebellion is "Weapons of the Weak" (1985) by James Scott (a political scientist by training). This remains a significant contribution to theorizing resistance, and certainly the single most quoted anthropological contribution to the study of political change from below. Scott's general argument was that we need to recognize not only "big events" as representing forms of political resistance, but also the many small acts that people (peasants in this case) carry out to improve their situation, acts with which they manage to bring about change. Dominated people, Scott argued, are usually well aware of their situation, and have "hidden scripts" whereby they carry out their acts of political protest, often in "invisible" and non-verbalized manners. Scott's approach stimulated a whole range of studies that focused on ordinary forms of resistance and rebellion. So, one

might argue, it is at this level of analysis that we can contribute toward the analysis of political behavior and change. And that is certainly *also* true. In fact, nothing of what I argue here is meant as a critique of various attempts to theorize resistance (Seymour 2006). My point is that revolutions involve something else.

A third reason why anthropologists have paid little ethnographic attention to political revolutions is practical and methodological: it is difficult and often impossible to plan a field study of revolutionary behavior. Revolutions often happen when nobody expects them. Anthropologists can plan fieldwork on peasant behavior or urban youth mobilization, but not on political revolutions. And when one finds oneself within a revolutionary setting, the main concern may be with surviving and getting out of it as quickly as possible. No responsible teacher would send a Ph.D. student into a war zone.<sup>2</sup> For this reason an anthropology of political revolutions will often have to be historical in nature, but this by no means precludes taking on such a project. In fact, when Marcel Mauss prefaced his book on the Bolsheviks, he called himself a “historian” (Mauss 1992: 165), and he wrote the study four to six years after the events it analyzed. Anthropologists with years of fieldwork experience in a concrete setting can normally also engage the historical record. And if the ethnographic work is carried out within years of the more dramatic revolutionary events, our informants will still be more than willing to talk about their experiences of the revolution. With current technologies of electronic communication, the possibility of studying revolutions from a distance has become spatial as well as temporal. An ethnographic account of political revolutions is well within reach, and so too is an anthropological reflection on the nature and modalities of revolutionary behavior.

#### POLITICAL REVOLUTIONS: INDICATING THE TERMS OF THE DEBATE

Since “revolution” is one of the most polysemic words of contemporary English, let me start by singling out some salient defining features of political revolutions, mostly following standard approaches but adding a purposeful anthropological twist. This definition is not meant to be exhaustive, and merely serves to indicate the terms of the debate. As a rough understanding, when I invoke the term “political revolution” I imply most or all of the following elements:

- It involves a rapid, basic transformation of a society’s political structures.
- It is an effort to transform not just the political institutions but also the justifications for political authority in society, thus reformulating the ideas/values that underpin political legitimacy.

<sup>2</sup> Quite a few anthropologists have, of course, found themselves in the middle of war-like situations, and chose to take up the ethnographic challenge. Charles Hale, for instance, did most of his fieldwork in war zones (1994).

- This effort is accompanied by formal or informal mass mobilization and non-institutionalized actions that undermine authorities.
- Such actions take on highly theatrical forms enacted in public space that is appropriated via “street politics.”
  - Because such mobilizations take place outside and against existing institutional orders, they are experienced by involved subjects as extraordinary, liminal moments.
  - While revolutions involve mass mobilization, they are guided by revolutionary leaders who rise from outside the established power hierarchies and who claim to be, or are perceived as, speaking on behalf of the people.
  - During such extraordinary moments strong affective ties are often established between a new political leadership and the masses, and these ties in some cases endure beyond these moments.
  - Mass mobilization leading to revolutionary change is experienced as a collective effervescence and can lead to deeply-felt *communitas*.
  - Revolutionary leaders, whether individuals or small groups, usually produce texts that articulate the revolutionary program, and such texts directly or indirectly become foundational semantic/legal scripts for the new order that emerges.
  - Violence is often, though not always, an aspect of rapid transformation, and in some cases violence escalates within and beyond the revolutionary period proper.
  - While rapid transformations of the political structure are political in orientation, when successful they are often accompanied by more or less rapid and fundamental transformations of social, economic, and cultural configurations.
  - Political revolutions will *somehow* end as the extraordinary moment is channeled back into an ordered and structured social situation where power can no longer be *fundamentally* questioned. This process can itself take highly theatrical forms and can be accompanied by further violence, either real or symbolic.

In short, political revolutions are real events in history with no uniform structure but with a series of shared characteristics and often shared *forms* that make them worthwhile objects of anthropological and ethnographic investigation. I will return to the various parts of this working definition in the discussion. In what follows I will advance a series of reasons why anthropology can indeed enrich the study of political revolutions. I argue that anthropology can do so via key concepts developed by Victor Turner: “liminality,” “social drama,” “*communitas*,” “frame,” and “play.” Turner’s ritual approach gains further force when linked to other concepts as developed by Marcel Mauss, Gabriel Tarde, Georg Simmel, and Gregory Bateson, such as “imitation,” “trickster,” and “crowd behavior.” My overall point is that modern political revolutions very much resemble rituals and therefore can be profitably studied within a process approach. To study revolutions therefore implies not only a focus on political behavior “from below,” but also recognition of moments at which “high and low” are relativized, made irrelevant, or subverted, and the micro and macro levels fuse in critical conjunctions. Anthropologists might have quite a lot to say about *exactly* those “big events,” those extraordinary moments or situations where existing power configurations crumble and collapse in brief and drastic events.

The argument I put forth does not say that we should disregard the importance of socio-economic factors or other variables singled out in classical



approaches to revolutions, from Skocpol to Barrington Moore. Nor is the argument proposed as a final statement; it should be read as “notes” towards what an anthropology of political revolutions might add to existing research traditions. I write these notes in yet another historical period marked by revolutionary change, this time throughout the “Arab world.” We have not seen the last of political revolutions and there are compelling real-world reasons why we should orient our analytical apparatus and ethnographic efforts toward such events.

#### MARCEL MAUSS ON THE BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION

Marcel Mauss is arguably the only anthropologist of fame who has engaged explicitly and in-depth with the nature of political revolutions. He did so via his work on the Bolshevik revolution. That work needs a brief introduction, especially because Mauss’ political writings are surprisingly little known. His analysis of the Russian revolution is but one of many reasons to consider him a founder of political anthropology (Thomassen 2008: 269–71). Mauss’ work represents elements of a “lost tradition” that can be used as a springboard for further, productive reflection.

Already the first Russian revolution in 1905 had inspired Mauss, but his effort to write about it was blocked by the resistance of Durkheim (Fournier 2005: 130). Having himself visited Russia in 1905–1906, written articles on Russian co-operatives, and made contact with the “Bolsheviks of Parc Montsouris,” Mauss obviously followed the events in Russia closely. By 1923–1924, he felt the time was ripe for reflecting on the events of 1917, which happened to be the year Durkheim died—a coincidence of some significance. Mauss’ reflections were written in the same period as he was writing his book on gift relations, and the two works must be read together.<sup>3</sup> Recognizing his linguistic limitations, Mauss acknowledged that he could not offer an exhaustive analysis, but he argued that enough material had become available that a sociological/anthropological analysis and assessment of the Bolshevik experiment could and should be offered (1992: 170). Mauss’ analysis must be understood within a larger set of reflections on socialism with which he had been engaged for many years.

Mauss called the Bolshevism a Socialist sect, and he wanted to analyze it in order to assess it. He felt himself “called on [...] to ‘assess’ the Bolshevik

<sup>3</sup> At the more technical level, one of Mauss’ charges against the Bolsheviks was that they had ruptured with the principle of “gift exchange” at the concrete level of debt payments: the new regime repudiated all exterior debt payments held by the Tsarist regime, and simply confiscated any property held by foreign nationals on Russian soil. Mauss here was translating his anthropological notion of “social debts” literally into the realm of debt politics and interdependence in international affairs. This certainly relates to the larger vision gained by Mauss: that socialism as much as capitalism threatens the social logic of gift giving, and that state-control of the economy is no alternative to unabashed market economy.



‘experiment’” (ibid.: 167). Mauss approached the significance of Bolshevism as a social “experiment,” a “try out” (ibid.). Furthermore, it was not just any experiment, but a particularly significant one: “a gigantic social phenomenon” and a “new” one (ibid.: 171). It was clear to him that what had happened in Russia pointed toward elemental social dynamics characteristic of modern politics in the twentieth century, and how right he was. At the same time, this experiment had a further, political significance: it was not just a social experiment, but also a *socialist* one. Mauss thought it was his *duty* to offer such an assessment, before plunging into celebratory or denigrating ideological attitudes toward the October Revolution, which was then stirring the fantasies of political thinkers in France and beyond.<sup>4</sup> As we shall see, he produced a devastating critique of it.

Mauss’ writings exemplified a deep and “concerned” disciplinary reflexivity toward revolutions (and social change as such), one that subsequent generations arguably should have taken more seriously. Mauss’ “duty” to assess the Bolsheviks had of course to do with Durkheim’s political ideas and hence also his own thought.<sup>5</sup> More than that, Mauss saw a *direct* line from those ideas to the soviet experiment. His assessment was of the Bolsheviks, but evenly of Durkheimian thinking: “However brutal, however elementary, however unreasonable the application of these ideas, their very application was a matter of considerable concern to me. Would our dearest, most laboriously acquired and most ardently advocated ideas be proved or disproved in the process?” (ibid.: 172).

This might strike contemporary readers as odd; textbooks still today classify Durkheim as a social conservative opposed to revolutionary change. Surely, it was Marxism and not Durkheimianism that was on trial in 1917 and its aftermath? Yet while Durkheim remained skeptical about revolutions (and on various occasions expressed ambivalence toward the effects of the French Revolution), Mauss knew very well that Durkheim was at the same time attracted to the idea of revolution as a ritual moment of collective effervescence. Moreover, in significant places, in the concluding chapters of his programmatic books, Durkheim did venture into “social engineering,” aiming to somehow recreate social cohesion in the modern context: this, he thought, could only be achieved via a rearrangement of labor and the forces of production. The startling conclusion is that there was a direct line of influence from Durkheim to Lenin. Mauss sums it up nicely:

The idea and the realisation of the soviet corresponded—to the very image—with two of the few moral, political and economic conclusions that Durkheim had always advocated

<sup>4</sup> After the war, the dominant question in French academic circles was how to relate to the Bolshevik revolution. Mauss went against the majority decision to endorse the revolution and the Third International. As SFIO became SFIC, Mauss stayed in the old SFIO, with Blum as a leader. This split from the French socialists and communists brought Mauss a lot of troubles but it allowed him to speak freely and to openly denounce the Bolsheviks. The problem was that few would listen to what he had to say.

<sup>5</sup> For the context and details of the larger discussion see Mike Gane’s excellent 1992 volume.

and that death had prevented him seeing actually materialised. The whole conclusion of both the *Social Division of Labour* and of his *Suicide*, all his teachings on civic, professional and domestic morals, advocated both the constitution of this professional property and the establishment of a moral and political law of the group formed out of the economic association of those united in the same production. Even the purely scientific conclusions of his lectures, his *History of the Family*, led him to make the professional group, if not the universal legatee, at least the partial inheritor of the rights, duties and political powers of the ancient family (1992: 172).

Whether or not Mauss was mistaken as to the scope of this profound notion, and whether or not there are forms of essential secondary groups other than the professional ones, are questions that cannot be answered here. But the closeness of Durkheim's theory and the practice of the soviets should be emphasized. One might even speak of descent, since Sorel's earliest ideas derive from Durkheim's theories, and Lenin has admitted the influence of Sorel, a fact of which Sorel—despite his having become somewhat reactionary by that time—died fairly proud.

Mauss and Durkheim had known Sorel since 1893, and he was one medium through which Durkheim's collectivist approach inspired leading socialists and revolutionary syndicalism. That of course also involved, as Mauss realized much to his own dread, a direct line to Mussolini and indeed therefore also to Hitler's Germany. By the mid-1930s, Mauss had fully realized the "tragic irony" involved. They, the founders of the theory of collective representation, "were satisfied with a few allusions to crowd states, when something quite different was at stake." That great modern societies, emerging from the Middle Ages, could be made "to turn around like children in a ring" was something that Mauss and Durkheim had not foreseen (see Mauss' 1936 letter to S. Ranulf in Gane 1992: 214–15).<sup>6</sup> This all indicates that an anthropological reflection on revolutions must, via Mauss, move beyond or outside both Marxism and Durkheimian functionalism. One young political anthropologist, trained in neo-Marxist conflict theory and Durkheimian functionalism, made such a move in the 1950s and developed an approach to which we now turn.

#### VICTOR TURNER, SOCIAL DRAMA, AND CRISIS: THE LIMINAL CHARACTER OF POLITICAL REVOLUTIONS

The concept of liminality was introduced by Arnold van Gennep in his work on *The Rites of Passage* (1960) and later taken up by Victor Turner in his analysis of The Ndembu ritual. It was clear to both men that the term had applicability

<sup>6</sup> The dangerous political aspects of Durkheim's thought had been pointed out, and with some emphasis, by Arnold van Gennep. In the preface to his 1906 book on Australian religion, referring to Durkheim's reductionist stance that simplified everything as a "need of society," van Gennep wrote, "It is by an identical process of animation that one speaks to us of 'the call of the fatherland,' or 'the voice of the race.' M. Durkheim anthropomorphizes as well as defends society" (quoted in Thomassen 2009: 11, his emphasis). Van Gennep never got an academic position in France.

beyond tribal ritual. In his ethnographic accounts, Turner repeatedly identified parallels with non-tribal or “modern” societies, clearly sensing that what he argued for the Ndembu had far broader relevance. Following Turner, I here propose that political revolutions represent clear-cut liminal situations in large-scale settings.<sup>7</sup> What does that suggestion imply? I start by examining what Turner himself said most directly about political revolutions in his late work, and especially in his famous essay “The Anthropology of Performance,” which also became the title of his last book (published posthumously). This essay is one of the places where Turner alludes to the parallels between the micro level of analysis (e.g., ritual passages among the Ndembu) and the study of “macropolitics.” He never worked out the full implications of these ideas, but he left much for us to build upon.

Turner arrives at the question of revolution after a long discussion of Dilthey, whose work was a crucial encounter and reading experience for Turner (Szakolczai 2004: 69–72). Turner realized that “liminality” served not only to identify the importance of in-between periods, but also to illuminate the human reactions to liminal experiences: the ways in which personality was shaped by liminality, the sudden foregrounding of agency, and the sometimes dramatic tying together of thought and experience. Turner somehow came to identify his own project with the philosophy of Dilthey (see for example Turner 1982: 12–19; 1988: 84–97). His reading of Dilthey allowed him to bridge his analysis of experience with a philosophical debate and the main question that had plagued modern philosophy since Descartes and Bacon: the nature of experience.

Turner argues that Dilthey’s different *Weltanschauungen* become visible in the social drama, as factors giving meaning to deeds that may at first appear meaningless (1988: 90). Turner here recasts Dilthey’s distinction between various types of human worldviews as aspects or tendencies that evolve within the ritual structure. “Social drama,” reminds Turner, “is an eruption from the level surface of ongoing social life, with its interactions, transactions, reciprocities, its customs for making regular, orderly sequences of behavior. It is propelled by passions, compelled by volitions, overmastering at times any rational considerations” (ibid.). The general point that Turner makes is therefore that “there is a structural relationship between cognitive, affective, and conative components of what Dilthey called lived experience” (ibid.). This is shown in the tripartite structure of the social drama, which harkens back to van Gennep’s recognition of the universal sequential structure of ritual passages divided into (a) separation, (b) liminality, and (c) re-aggregation. Turner himself suggests a fourfold division into

<sup>7</sup> I make no claim to originality here, since this perspective was initially developed in Horvath and Szakolczai (1992). The suggestion was made also by Bauman in his analysis of the post-1989 situation in the former Eastern Europe (1994).

“breach–crisis–redress–reintegration,” thus elaborating van Genneep’s original schema, roughly by dividing the re-aggregation phase into two dimensions or moments.

The different worldviews coexist in each phase, but each of the four phases tends to be dominated by one or the other. In the first phase, Turner says, the affective attitude is often primary. The rupture with the existing order needs some kind of emotional appeal, a stirring of emotions, “though an element of cognitive calculation is usually present, and the transgressor’s will to assert power or identity usually incites the will to resist his action among representatives of the normative standard which he has infringed” (ibid.: 91).

In the second, the crisis or liminal phase, all three “propensities” are equally present. However, Turner here makes an extremely important point that is the one that leads him to mention political revolutions: In the crisis situation, “sides are taken” and “power resources calculated.” But this often leads to a schism into two camps or factions, where “one will proceed under the ostensible banner of rationality, while the other will manifest in its words and deeds the more romantic qualities of willing and feeling” (ibid.). Turner invokes as particularly clear examples the American Civil War, the American and French revolutions, the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745, and the Mexican *Insurgencia* of 1810. He also notes that macropolitics is very similar in form to the micropolitics he himself had studied among the Ndembu (Turner first suggested the term “social drama” in his 1957 book *Schism and Continuity*).

This means that schism, or what Gregory Bateson (1958: 175) termed “schismogenesis,” is a process that is particularly prone to unfold in liminal moments, and that it can, under given circumstances, establish itself as a lasting form. This, it seems, can happen in two different ways: The first is when the ritual sequence is not properly “closed,” for example when the third and fourth stages of redress and re-aggregation fail, propelling the crisis situation further into more crisis (Turner says crisis is contagious). The second way is when the schism is officially incorporated into the re-integration ritual phase: recognized and made public, “stated” and staged, “normalized” into the new “structure,” rather than overcome. Turner says that he had noted such a bifurcation in his African fieldwork: “*Either* there was an overt reconciliation of the conflicting parties, *or* there was social recognition that schism was unavoidable and that the best that could be done was for the dissident party or parties to split off...” (1988: 104). What Turner does not mention is that in modern territorial states it is extremely difficult to “split off.”

In principle, the third redressing stage is dominated by the cognitive or “legal” attempt to reinstall order via redressive action. A strong act of “will” is also needed to “terminate the often dangerous contestation in *crisis*,” yet “cognition reigns primarily in judicial and legal redressive action” (ibid.: 91,

Turner's emphasis). But when such action fails to command sufficient assent, will and emotion reassert themselves, and this reassertion may proceed in opposite directions: "On the one hand there may be reversion to *crisis*, all the more embittered by the failure of restitutive action. On the other hand, there may be an attempt to transcend an order based on rational principles by appealing to that which rests on a tradition of coexistence among the predecessors of the current community." Hence, when legal redress fails, "groups may turn to activities which can be described as 'ritualized,' whether these 'rituals' are expressly connected with religious beliefs or not" (*ibid.*).

Turner is here approaching some of the crucial dynamics involved in modern revolutions. These redressive ceremonies are normally not of a religious nature, but they can, for example, involve public confession by those held responsible for breaching the norms. It may, of course, also involve the opposite situation: public confession by or public execution of those held responsible of upholding the former social order, now considered unjust and illegitimate by a successful revolutionary movement or leadership. Legal action is itself heavily ritualized. Revolutions, in their different phases, involve ritualized types of behavior where the ordering forces do not simply stem from rational principles that revolutionary programs refer to, but often come to rely upon Turner's notion of *communitas*, the "metaphorically 'organic' order of society itself, felt rather than conceived as the axiomatic source of human bonding. It is the 'social will'" (*ibid.*: 91). Turner makes reference to his own short study of the Mexican *Insurgencia*, but it is evident that his reflections on the ritualistic nature of revolutionary processes have a more general appeal: we need to understand the "mass" as a moving force in history. Turner's analysis can on this point be complemented by those of Georg Simmel and Gabriel Tarde.

MASSES AND CROWDS AS ANTHROPOLOGICAL OBJECTS:  
THE ROLE OF MIMESIS

Innumerable suggestions swing back and forth, resulting in an extraordinary *nervous excitation* which often *overwhelms* the individuals, makes every impulse *swell like an avalanche*, and subjects the mass to whichever among its members happens to be the most passionate.... The fusion of masses *under one feeling*, in which all specificity and reserve of the personality is *suspended*, is fundamentally radical and hostile to mediation and consideration. It would lead to nothing but impasses and destructions if it did not usually end before in inner exhaustions and repercussions that are the consequences of the one-sided exaggeration.

———Simmel quoted in Borch 2010, my emphases

By "political revolution" we mean not only an overthrow of a regime or a state but also an overthrow that involves a popular movement—the "masses." If there is no broader involvement of the populace, then we are dealing with a coup d'état, and that is something very different. "Masses," however, cannot

act without leadership. Or rather, when they do it hardly leads to revolution: it remains merely a social uprising, a social protest that brings about no structural or institutional change. Such uprisings are plentiful in history; revolutions in comparison are statistically rare. In other words, uprisings can turn into revolutions, but far from always do so. Protest, revolt, and rebellion are not exactly the same as revolution. Revolutions can also be defined simply as “directed” uprisings, as “rebels with a cause,” but a cause needs formulation and leadership. This means that we need to examine both the existence of the mass or the crowd and how they are led. Let us start with the former.

The study of the mass has for more than a century, and particularly since Le Bon and Tarde, been a key concern for sociologists, and for evident reasons. In his 1895 study *The Crowd*, Le Bon argued that modern society was standing on the threshold of an entirely new social order, one in which the crowd was the main defining feature. Le Bon’s saw that “[t]he age we are about to enter will in truth be the *era of crowds*” (2006: 6, his emphasis). As Handler has discussed, anthropology should for good reasons be rather cautious about “mass society” (2005): as an analytical term it easily comes to obfuscate ethnographic detail. Yet there are in fact *certain moments* when the “mass” starts to take on some kind of “real life,” and becomes a “subject” of some sort. In order to understand revolutions, we need to describe crowd behavior in exactly such moments.

The point is that crowds assume a life of their own exactly in ritual moments, whether these are planned or arise spontaneously. Crowds have short lives; they come together but then disaggregate. At a certain moment people return to their homes. In revolutionary moments, hitherto separate individuals actually start to feel and act like a collective body with a sense of shared aims and goals, even worldviews, and become something much more than a social aggregate. Arguably, revolutionary moments represent opportunities for us to develop a more articulate anthropology of the mass, or an anthropology/ethnography of crowd behavior.

While it is true that the study of the mass in modern society belongs to a sociological tradition, it is also true that the sociologists who engaged the question of the mass or the crowd all had a strong “anthropological bent,” and that is no coincidence. Robert E. Park, greatly inspired by Georg Simmel and Gabriel Tarde, became a spokesperson for the sociology of crowds or collective behavior in America. He based much of his sociology on first-hand observation and fieldwork in American urban centers. Simmel’s contribution to the sociology of crowds, his essays on metropolitan sociability, reads like “impressionistic” ethnography. His thinking represents a deeply engaged and “subjective” rendering of crowd behavior, which is also found in Elias Canetti’s “vitalist” theory of crowds. This does not mean that Canetti did “fieldwork” in the traditional sense of that word (nor did Mauss, for that matter), but reflections upon crowd behavior by necessity involves the observer; it involves a psychological/anthropological understanding of how human beings react to limit

situations, when they are carried away by “something bigger.” Durkheim’s notion of “collective effervescence,” unlike most of his concepts, serves us well in this context.

Turner’s analysis of the creation of *communitas* during liminality is of central importance here. Revolutions can be argued to represent almost “pure” cases of social dramas where hierarchies are turned upside down. In line with Turner, Elias Canetti contended that the crowd provides individuals with the opportunity to rid themselves of the inequalities of everyday life, or “the burdens of distance” in Canetti’s terminology. In the crowd, “distinctions are thrown off and all feel *equal*” (1984: 18, his emphasis).

Simmel described the process of de-individualization with the metaphor of the avalanche, referring to a social process by which single acts or single events in almost no time can lead to dramatic results. This indicates that the study of revolutions is the study of how micro and macro events sometimes, in some concrete situations, become closely connected—micro events can produce macro results. This process can only be fully captured once it is related to another social force, namely imitation and the role played by imitative behavior. This was anticipated by Tarde, who was making his reflections around the same time as Simmel, at the turn of the twentieth century. Tarde argued that the tendency towards imitation is the single most fundamental drive behind the creation and development of social institutions (1962 [1890]).

René Girard argues similarly about the fundamental role played by mimesis. He has analyzed mimesis and the relationship between mimesis on one hand, and violence, victimage, and truth of the sacred on the other (1979). Girard focused on the desire of acquisitive mimesis (the desire to “acquire” an object held by another person), and analyzed instances of mimetic “contagion,” or what he also called the “mimetic spiral.” The latter is another crucial metaphor indicating the close connection of micro and macro events in crisis moments. As Bruno Latour (2002) has argued, we deal with situations where the macro is nothing but a slight extension of the micro. Tarde took what one might term an anthropological approach insofar as he proposed to study the “laws of society” from “below,” or rather, from the “middle” of single events. This was a radical alternative to Durkheimian functionalism, and is only now beginning to receive the attention it deserves.<sup>8</sup>

The role of imitation also has an “external” reality that is crucial for revolutions and revolutionaries: revolutions tend to happen in waves, and while fully accepting the shared socio-economic and political configurations which might lead to similar results in different places, it is clear that Tarde’s laws of imitation have a real and direct role to play also at this level of analysis.

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of Tarde as political anthropologist, see Szokolczai and Thomassen 2011.



Note here that two of Durkheim's most significant intellectual opponents—Arnold van Gennep and Gabriel Tarde—are exactly the ones who developed an approach of relevance for the study of transition periods and social dynamics.

STREET POLITICS AND THE SPATIAL DYNAMICS OF MASS  
MOBILIZATION: PUBLIC LIMINALITY AND THE ROLE OF SQUARES

Anthropologists are keen to insist on the importance of the concrete spaces in which social action takes place, whether the household, the village square, or political assemblies. The 2011 events in Egypt and Tunisia once again evidenced the crucial spatial dimension of mass mobilization, as the crowd literally conquered the central square, and peacefully so. If revolutions are social drama, then we need to study the setting or the “frame” which is a necessary component of any ritual action. In elaborating this aspect of ritual behavior in modern society, Turner made explicit use of Bateson's notions of frames and “metacommunication” (e.g., Turner 1988: 102). In *The Rites of Passage*, van Gennep distinguished between rites that mark the passage of an individual or a cohort of individuals from one status to another and those that mark transitions in the passage of time (e.g., harvest, new year), and which involve the whole group (1960: 10). Turner calls the first type “life-crisis rituals” and notes that liminality in such rituals is played out in “hidden places” like caves or lodges sequestered in the forest, in spaces deliberately secluded from the centers of quotidian action. This seclusion was in most societies taken extremely seriously. Under no circumstance could the neophytes be brought into contact with ordinary village life; their “raw” and natural state represented a danger to the very existence of society.

This is something quite different from what Turner adequately calls “public liminality,” which refers to van Gennep's second type of ritual passage. There are different types of rituals that involve the entire group. In addition to the rituals relating to the passage of time, and hence to the semantic-ritual marking of cosmological calendars, Turner mentions collective responses to war, famine, drought, plague, and other disasters man-made or natural (1988: 101). Rituals of this type will be played out in public places, and in fact always in the most central parts of quotidian space: “The village greens or the squares of the city are not abandoned but rather ritually transformed” (ibid.: 102). This public liminality is also what Turner calls “public subjunctivity”: “For a while, anything goes: taboos are lifted, fantasies are enacted, indicative mood behavior is reversed, the low are exalted and the mighty abased.”

The perspectives introduced so far complement each other. The public spatial framing, combined with a crisis in leadership, creates a setting that allows imitative behavior to spread like fire, an unleashing of social forces that can easily spiral out of control. The question is who and what one imitates in a moment where stable reference points are absent. It is no coincidence that

the three most imitative types of human behavior are exactly the ones that tend to roll like an avalanche in revolutionary moments, often in some tragic combination: violence, sexuality, and laughter.<sup>9</sup> Simmel perceptively analyzed the spatial aspect of crowd behavior. As discussed by Borch (2010), Simmel indicated how particularly urban squares or other urban “open spaces” are likely to stimulate crowd formation. Squares—in contrast to narrow streets, or open fields—endow people with a new kind of breathing space, and come to signify liberation in a very real and physical sense, but also a “frame.” Revolutionary behavior is “play” and “ritual” exactly in the sense indicated by Bateson and Turner; the frame that signifies is the square itself. In everyday metropolitan behavior, individuals seek to keep a physical distance from other individuals, but there are moments when individuals do the opposite and seek proximity. Borch expresses it well: “...the metropolitan fear of being touched is counteracted or neutralized by the urge to gather as a crowd in urban space” (*ibid.*, par. 35).

In short, revolutions take highly ritualized forms by appropriating public squares as their ritual stage. Here, again, they closely resemble rites as studied by anthropologists, which are often performed in the village or town square, within a ritual circle, in full view of everyone (and in many small-scale societies this will require a mask). As Turner himself observed, all performances require framed spaces set off from the routine world. But, he notes, “Meta-social rites use *quotidian* spaces as their stage; they merely hallow them for a liminal time” (1979: 467). Not surprisingly, contested regimes use the very same squares for *their* rituals of power. That is why the rising and toppling of statues in central city squares so systematically demarcate the end and beginning of liminality, respectively. In revolutionary activity, spaces are transformed. Modern revolutionaries, just like any tribal society, need the ritual circle: they need to create and conquer it in performance. The study of political revolutions is to a large extent the anthropological study of appropriations of space via ritual. The question then remains: who are the ceremonial masters in public liminality? Who are the ringleaders?

#### REVOLUTIONARY LEADERSHIP AND THE ROLE OF THE TRICKSTER

The leader has most often started as one of the led. He has himself been hypnotized by the idea, whose apostle he has since become. It has taken possession of him to such a degree that everything outside it vanishes, and that every contrary opinion appears to him an error or a superstition. An example in point is Robespierre, hypnotized

<sup>9</sup> I hasten to add that the laughter in question is not the angelical one we can enjoy on a child’s face, transmitting us a primordial, sheer joy of existence; what spreads is something quite different: the demonic, mobbing laughter that is ritually aimed at denigrating or ridiculing others, in public, and very often as a part of mob violence toward designated victims. Turner himself arguably downplayed these destructive, mimetic forces; after all, he liked to think of liminality as a refreshing cultural force.

by the philosophical ideas of Rousseau, and employing the methods of the Inquisition to propagate them.

———Le Bon, *The Crowd* (2006: 114)

In analyzing the Bolshevik revolution, Mauss made a simple but important point: the revolution was taken over by a small group of persons, who gained the upper hand and “carried away” the revolution. Here again, it might be argued that the question of political leadership in modern society does not belong to an anthropological tradition. But a closer reading of Mauss indicates something else. Mauss’ description of the Bolsheviks hits hard. The Bolsheviks often promoted sheer lies, he says, while at the same time demonstrating “an extraordinary cynicism” (1992: 169). Mauss reserves his most devastating judgment for the leaders of the “Revolution”: far from being faithful and self-effacing servants of the people, they were “[d]emagogues and adventurers, reveling in their return from exile” (ibid.: 177); “murky elements [using] the opportunity to accumulate disorders and follies” (ibid.: 171); “pure adventurers, gunmen experienced in raids on banks and farms in America” (ibid.: 178), having no connection to and no genuine interest in the people, who often “were not even Russian,” thus “their savage will, still all powerful today, was not encumbered by any love for this immense people” (ibid.). While fancying themselves heirs to the great European revolutionary tradition, they bear no resemblance to Cromwell or Washington, but rather they “exploit the Russian Revolution, its ideology, or rather they manipulate Russia, its human material, its disproportionate wealth in men and materials”; they are mere “imitators of the ancient tyrants” (ibid.: 178–79).

Mauss’ description strikingly resembles Plato’s description of the Sophists in the Statesman as individuals who know how to talk and argue, who know how to stir people’s emotions, but who ultimately hold no notion of *truth* and hold no values. They are non-beings who trick their way to power but in so doing destroy the community. Mauss’ analysis can be given further analytical precision by invoking the anthropological term “trickster.” The application of the trickster theme to the analysis of political leadership was first proposed by Agnese Horvath (1998), whose analysis I follow closely here. The ambivalent features of the trickster can be recognized at the start of any standard trickster tale or legend (see Radin 1972; Evans-Pritchard 1967; Hyde 1998). The trickster is a vagrant who happens to stumble into the village, appearing out of the blue. He tries to gain the confidence of villagers by telling tales and cracking jokes, thus by provoking laughter. He is an outsider who has no home and no existential commitments. He is also a mime. The trickster has particular affinities with liminal situations. Under normal circumstances, tricksters are jokers that provoke laughter but cannot be taken seriously. In liminality this changes: as an outsider he might easily be perceived to represent a solution to a crisis. However, having no home, and therefore no real human and existential

commitments, the trickster is not really interested in solving the liminal crisis: he simply pretends. In fact, being at home in liminality, or in homelessness, his real interest often lies in perpetuating such conditions of confusion and ambivalence. And in this he might succeed, as the title of Lewis Hyde's book reminds us: *Trickster Makes the World*.

Sophists/tricksters live for the attention of the public, and they play with words and images, but they disregard the real nature of their own acts. They think they are the originators of a new world, they have no sense of *measure*, and they equally disregard social effects. They cannot trust other humans, and the trust that people invest in them will only be used against those same people. The defining feature of terror regimes is not order, system, and repression—it is ambivalence. Mauss sees the revolutionary leaders in such a light. While they fabricate the lie that they are simple vectors of the people's voice, the Bolsheviks are at the same time not ashamed of flooding the public space with their deeds and (non-)personalities; in spite of all censorship and officially sponsored lies, "they themselves tell much of the truth about themselves, they have such pride and such an itch for publicity that their official documents amply suffice as testimony against them" (1992: 169).

Mauss had it right, as he so often did. He could not know that he was anticipating what would take place in Germany, while he was certainly paying attention to the situation in Italy. In both cases, the revolutionary leaders were indeed "outsiders" or marginal figures driven by resentment. Far from being charismatic and therefore "gifted," they were rather genuine human failures and outcasts who in highly liminal moments *somehow* captured power. Crowd leaders, wrote Le Bon, "are especially recruited from the ranks of those morbidly nervous, excitable, half-deranged persons who are bordering on madness." (2006: 114). I do not think political scientists have really been able to capture this process. Mauss' analysis amply indicates that revolutionary leaders in history can resemble trickster figures. Tricksters are trained in upsetting the social order by reversing values and via their rhetorical and theatrical skills. As Weber recognized, in moments of radical social or political change, in "out-of-the-ordinary moments," we see the emergence of charismatic leadership, but what Weber failed to notice is that in such moments—when, as Shakespeare put it, "degree is shaken"—we also see the emergence of a whole series of other sinister figures.

Concerning the role of leadership in liminal moments, it is certainly no coincidence that Turner kept coming back to the figure of the trickster as one of several (archetypical?) liminal figures, although he never subjected them to an in-depth analysis. In one of his last essays, "Body, Brain and Culture," Turner even suggested that the "slippery" tricksters are figures that move between the hemispheres of the brain (1988: 170), creating a real effect but erasing their own trace. The analysis of the trickster as a particularly dangerous

type of political leader that may emerge in liminal situations, as proposed by Horvath (1998), may well represent a breakthrough in our understanding of how liminal moments or periods may be carried in dangerous directions. Turner himself came close to saying something similar (1985: 230).

#### LEADERSHIP AND THE MASSES: SCHISMOGENESIS IN LIMINALITY

Having briefly invoked the roles of “crowds” and “leaders,” one must consider as a separate analytical question the kind of links created between the two in the revolutionary moment and process. Interestingly, Bateson singled out this relationship as one particularly prone to schismogenesis. Writing during the inter-war period, and just after Hitler’s rise to power, he saw the relationship that develops between political leaders and their officials and people as an example of complementary schismogenesis. Bateson called this relationship “psychopathic”: the megalomaniac or paranoid forces of the single person force others to respond to his condition, and so they are automatically pushed to more and more maladjustment (1958: 186).

Bateson and Turner both argued that schismogenesis is particularly likely to unfold in “liminal situations,” to which we can now add: schismogenesis can be positively *produced* by trickster figures who, in the best of Shakespearean traditions, are professionals in creating and escalating division up until violence or destruction breaks out, at which point they manage to represent themselves as saviors (see Horvath and Thomassen 2008). When trickster figures are mistaken for saviors then emotions will be continually and repeatedly incited. Societies can endure and maintain themselves in such situations of oppression. This is why schismogenetic societies need to maintain themselves in a perpetual state of war, presumably surrounded by enemies who try to conquer and destroy them (see again Szokolczai 2009). That is why communism had to hold on to an ideology of permanent revolution, constantly invoking the image of the “enemy”: externally the “capitalist,” internally, the “counterrevolutionaries.” The parallels in symbolic imagery, and in real violence, in other revolutionary societies are as frightening as they are striking.

#### LEGITIMACY AND MEANING FORMATION VIA “REDRESS” AND “PEACE”

Revolutions question existing forms of political legitimacy. The state is the administrator of legitimate violence, said Weber. Revolutions therefore always entail a double aim: to delegitimize the existing order (as non-representative of the “people”) and to legitimize themselves as carriers of the new order (of the “people”). In this revolutionary process, the very notion of “people” is semantically transformed (Wydra 2009). However, the state itself exercises this same double strategy against the revolutionary movement. Physical violence and repression cannot serve as a lasting source of order; as stressed by Weber, rule and power need legitimization. It is also here that an

anthropological reading of the struggle over symbols and meanings becomes relevant or even necessary. In revolutionary moments, one observes a condensed symbolic struggle over the legitimate right to power. The establishment of a new system will be fundamentally shaped by the outcomes of such struggles—struggles over meaning.

Here as well, revolutions function much like ritual moments in which symbols are “in play” as they suddenly become lacking in agreed-upon meaning. Revolutionary periods are the embryo of the meaning-formation upon which the new political regime will be established (*ibid.*), and this often involves new interpretations of pre-existing texts or images (see Manning 2007). It often also involves the momentary co-existence of several schemes or modes of symbolism. Keane uses the term “representational economy” to denote “the dynamic interconnections among different modes of signification at play within a particular historical and social formation. For instance, how people handle and value material goods may be implicated in how they use and interpret words, and vice versa, reflecting certain underlying assumptions about the world and the beings that inhabit it” (2003: 410). Still, at a certain point choices must be made and meaning distilled, something Turner calls “redress.”

This is another way of saying that there is a cultural dimension to revolutions that has been relatively neglected in the comparative approaches of Tilly (1978) and Skocpol (1979). One of historian William Sewell’s critiques of the more structural approaches to revolutions is that they overlooked ideology, and that ideology plays a crucial role in revolutions as both cause and outcome. Sewell (2005) developed an “event-approach” to the study of French revolution that relied upon anthropology via the focus on the role of rituals and the study of indeterminate moments where outcomes cannot be known by actors. Alas, this involves something much more than “ideology”: the culturally pregnant ideas of what the social *is* and *means*, the values that underpin the very possibility of social existence. There *is* a deeply cultural dimension to political revolutions. This was much emphasized in the contributions made to the study of revolutions by Shmul Eisenstadt (1978), who in his comparative study of civilizations stressed how institutional change can be driven by religious or otherwise cultural formations and people’s “*weltbild*.” His approach was much inspired by his little-known collaboration with Victor Turner in the early 1980s (including their 1982 conference in Jerusalem on “comparative liminality”). Eisenstadt realized that Turner’s work on liminality could help to readdress the questions surrounding social and political change in large-scale settings (1995), a perspective that Eisenstadt also adopted in his approach to the axial age debate (see Thomassen 2010).

#### HOW TO END A REVOLUTION—IF AT ALL

We have left in suspense Turner’s last phase of the processual approach, phase four in the “breach-crisis-redress-peace” sequence. His analysis is mostly indicative, but he makes some interesting points. The key question here concerns

the transmission of the revolution, the outcomes, and the lasting effects. Thinking with liminality, this can also be formulated differently. The liminal state, in its classical anthropological usage as referring to life-crisis ritual passages, for example from boyhood to manhood, is always clearly defined both temporally and spatially: there is a way into liminality and a way out of it. Members of the society are themselves aware of the liminal state: they know that they will leave it sooner or later, and they have “ceremony masters” to guide them through the rituals. Compared to liminality in ritual passages, two evident differences appear when the concept is applied to large-scale situations of a wholesale “collapse”: (1) the future is *inherently* unknown (as opposed to the initiand whose personal liminality is still framed by the continued existence of his home society, awaiting his re-integration); and (2) there are no real ceremony masters since nobody has gone through the liminal period before.

Tying together the points made thus far, one could suggest that these two basic differences indicate a situation where liminal moments become extremely dangerous, creating the perfect scene for different sorts of self-proclaimed ceremony masters who claim to “have seen the future,” but who in reality establish their own position by perpetuating liminality and by emptying the liminal moment from real creativity, turning it into a scene of mimetic rivalry (see again Szokolczai 2000: 218). This is exactly what Girard argued in *Violence and the Sacred* (1979). According to Girard, once a process of undifferentiation unfolds, the process of doubling threatens to spread, and it can only be brought to a halt via sacrifice. In the last years of his life, Turner (e.g., 1988: 34) came to recognize the importance of Girard, and in the precise context of the ritual structure: crisis is contagious, like a plague, and sometimes the “redressive machinery ... fails to function,” leading to “a reversion to crisis” (ibid.: 35).

These reflections help us to understand crucial aspects of modern revolutions that are normally not addressed. More problematic is the dominant idea in most comparative approaches to revolutions—that they happen when a sufficient number of individuals make a rational cost-benefit calculation that they can gain from a revolution (and that they calculate the gains as greater than the risks). This does not take into account the liminal setting in which most people are forced to make choices. Human action in liminality poses particular challenges that cannot be understood through a rational choice vocabulary: when pushed to the “limit” by the force of events, humans simply cannot take structures for granted. The notion of “interest” or “rational action” is made obsolete the moment there are no background structures or certainties against which to weigh such “interests.” That is also why people in such situations will search for models that they can follow or imitate.

Another point concerns the paradoxical mixture of uncontrolled emotionality and utmost rationality, expressed in cool, legal, Enlightenment language. Modern political revolutions are far from that rational movement of recreating justice and equality that revolutionaries invoke to tell their own story. Or rather,



they are indeed such rational movements, but they contain an equal element of the carnivalesque setting loose of forces.<sup>10</sup>

Turner's discussion of the contagious nature of crisis also helps us to understand how violence is often difficult to tame once revolutionary processes begin to unfold. The restoration of peace itself is difficult, since it must happen via a reestablishment of viable relations between the contending partners, or a public recognition of an irreparable schism. But this does not always happen. As Turner says, very often the schism produced becomes fatal and enduring (1988: 104).

This relates to the question of outcomes, and the evident fact, systematically obscured in our schoolbooks, that most often modern revolutions, far from providing freedom and rights, lead to *more* state centralization, and very often to more violence, of the clearly Puritan type. The point was perhaps best noted by Mumford in his analysis of the Baroque city: it was "[t]hrough the very workings of democracy [that] baroque absolutism tightened its hold upon society" (quoted in Szokolczai 2000: 183). As Eisenstadt always stressed, the "Jacobin" elements of the French Revolution are an inherent part of modernity, and belong to the core of our revolutionary tradition, and hence they cannot be cast aside as an unhappy side-consequence of otherwise noble principles. Finally, this almost systematic outbreak of internal violence will often take on an outward dimension, propelling the revolutionary movement and the singled out enemies into external warfare, all still in playful combinations of the rational and the emotionally volatile. The meaningful timeframe for studying the French Revolution might not be 1789–1991, or even 1789–1799; it must somehow take into account events as they unfolded between 1789 and 1815, including total war and the destruction and near collapse of the entire Western civilization. The Bolsheviks did, after all, have a model to imitate.

The most direct application of Turner's ideas to large-scale political change has, on this note, been offered by the social theorist Arpad Szokolczai in his analysis of communism, which he considers one particular form of "permanent liminality." Employing again van Gennep's tripartite structure, Szokolczai argued that there are three types of permanent liminality, critically originating in the three phases of the rites of passage. "Liminality becomes a permanent condition when any of the phases in this sequence [of separation, liminality, and re-aggregation] become frozen, as if a film stopped at a particular frame" (2000: 220). He invoked a salient example for each type of permanent liminality: monasticism (with monks endlessly preparing the separation), court society (with individuals continuously performing their roles in an endless ceremonial game), and Bolshevism (as exemplifying a society stuck

<sup>10</sup> Revolutions here resemble the public spectacles produced by the chain gang throughout France until the early nineteenth century. This festival of departing convicts, as Foucault clearly saw, was a "festival of fools, in which the reversal of roles is practised" (1979: 259).

in the final stage of a ritual passage). The first two suggestions build on the insights of Turner himself, Max Weber (and his study of the Protestant ethic), Norbert Elias (and his study of court culture) and Michel Foucault. The understanding of communism as a specific “third stage” type of permanent liminality can be sustained by pointing to the fact that “communism was a regime in which the Second World War never ended” (ibid.: 223; Horvath and Szakolczai 1992). Rather than healing the wounds and looking to the future, communist regimes sustained themselves by playing continuously on the sentiments of revenge, hatred, and suffering, “preventing the settling down of negative emotions” (Szakolczai 2000: 223). This also meant that communist societies were inherently prone to continuous schisms and scapegoating mechanisms. But the obvious question is whether these logics can be confined to communism or are not rather, as Girard would suggest to us, an inherent feature of modernity, even in its liberal forms.

#### CONCLUSION: TOWARD A POLITICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF REVOLUTIONS

I have argued that the study of political revolutions ought to figure more prominently in both ethnography and anthropological theory. Put briefly, anthropology has much to offer political science and political sociology *exactly* in the context of the study of political revolutions and what Turner called “macro-politics.” Revolutions more than any other event in modern history represent those instants of “pure potentiality” that Turner evoked (1969: 41), moments where given hierarchies, social norms, and sacred values are brought into question. Human action and human experience during such events take on a new importance. One can indeed talk about an anthropological approach, linked to Sewell’s notion of “event-history” (2005). This links the study of revolutions to anthropological approaches to drama and ritual, and to the larger performative turn in the social sciences, with and beyond Victor Turner. It is from such a perspective that it suddenly becomes clear why the slogans of the French Revolution might as well have been heard shouted by a cohort of Ndembu neophytes: liberty, equality, fraternity.

I have not argued that anthropology can provide political scientists with the missing piece of information that can help them complete the picture. Rather, we have to give real space to a situation of contingency, uncertain outcomes, and limited knowledge. Liminality, as Bauman said it (1991, 1994: 15), is inherently ambivalent. In liminality, Turner echoes, ambiguity reigns (1988: 102). This implies that causal explanations and structuralist frameworks have their limits. In fact—it is important to stress this—liminality is not a concept that could ever explain anything. But this statement has a value in itself: political theorists have tried for four “generations” now to come up with the perfect model of revolutions, but to invoke liminality is to recognize that there is no perfect model. It is not possible to establish a general model that would

enable us to explain and predict when and where, and under what exact conditions, revolutions have occurred and will occur. As argued by Turner, events and performances are not simply structured, but have their own life. We have to study such moments as real instances of contingency, moments where meaning-formation and symbolism condense and take new forms. That is far from saying that there are no recognizable *patterns* in political revolutions. In fact, the van Gennep/Turner framework proposed here does indicate shared patterns as well as shared *dangers* and *problematics* playing out in revolutionary processes.

Liminality is a world of contingency where events and ideas, and “reality” itself, can be pushed in different directions. For this reason, the concept of liminality has the potential to push theories of political change in new directions. In liminality, the very distinction between structure and agency becomes meaningless, and yet, in the hyper-reality of agency in liminality, and in the serious playfulness of its ritual forms, structuration takes place. This might be as far as we can go in terms of generalizing. The rest pertains to the study of the events themselves.

Let me therefore conclude my argument with two overall considerations regarding the framework proposed. The first relates to a disciplinary debate and the role and status of political anthropology. The reason why there is no real anthropology of revolutions might have something to do with mainstream perceptions of political anthropology, and the fact that we keep tying ourselves to a kind of theoretical baggage that is problematic. The most dominant directions in twentieth-century political anthropology—evolutionism, functionalism, structuralism, and Marxism—have over the last decades been “overcome” with postmodern critiques of representation, often in uneasy blends with various branches of critical theory. The thinkers discussed in this article cannot be placed within any of the dominant “-isms” that developed in the twentieth century. Indeed, most of them were sidelined if not ostracized from mainstream academic life, and their names barely figure in contemporary readers of political anthropology. If what has been argued here holds any value, then it might indicate that we have to reconsider and reconstruct disciplinary genealogies, and in the most general sense. We need to engage with the work of Arnold van Gennep, Gabriel Tarde, Marcel Mauss, Gregory Bateson, Victor Turner, and Rene Girard, and recognize them as maverick figures of political anthropology.

The second point relates to anthropology’s role in the overall attempt to understand political revolutions. The modern world is *inherently* built on a series of revolutions. This represents a foundational aspect of our modernity that anthropological tools can help to throw a critical light on. Revolutions serve as the “zero point of history,” that dramatic moment of foundation, for the most diverse political systems around the globe, including Iran, America, Russia, Egypt, France, China, England, Cuba, and Libya. Both Liberalism

and Socialism are founded on revolutionary appeals and even on what one might term a “revolutionary epistemology.” This indicates that we have to disentangle the study of revolutions from their own ideologies and make comparisons at the level of ritualization and symbolism.

We would like to support the revolutions in the Arab world as a step toward more democracy, freedom, and justice. We tend to forget that they are directed against political leaderships that were or are themselves fashioned on mimetic experiments of Western revolutionary traditions, calling for freedom, brotherhood, and justice. In their national forms that emerged in the postcolonial setting, they merely gave new ideological impetus and fervor to what was already an inherent feature of the modern world. It is not easy to make discernments and take positions in the current situation: power structures are complex and available models for political emancipation all seem overburdened. But what seems clear enough is that we need better ethnographic accounts of revolutions in their unfolding. It also seems that any positioning toward the revolutions that are once again spreading around the world must involve a look inwards at our own modern political revolutions and the disciplinary traditions with which they became entangled. We need to maintain a healthy and reflexive distance from that modernity in order to approach its underlying dynamics, and its theatrical, eternal returns to its foundations. Anthropological theory has much to offer towards such an engagement.

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Abstract: While resistance and rebellion have remained core themes in anthropology at least since the 1960s, anthropologists have paid much less attention to the study of political revolutions as real historical events. Yet there are compelling real-world reasons why they should orient their analytical apparatus and

ethnographic efforts towards revolutionary events. This article advances a series of reasons why anthropology can enrich and supplement existing political science and history traditions in the study of political revolutions. Anthropology can do so via key concepts developed by Victor Turner: “liminality,” “social drama,” “communitas,” “frame,” and “play.” Turner’s ritual approach gains further relevance when linked to another series of concepts developed by Marcel Mauss, Gabriel Tarde, Georg Simmel, and Gregory Bateson, such as “imitation,” “trickster,” “schismogenesis,” and “crowd behavior.” To study revolutions implies not only a focus on political behavior “from below,” but also recognition of moments where “high and low” are relativized or subverted, and where the micro- and macro-levels fuse in critical conjunctions.