THEME SECTION

Revolutionary circles
A morphology of radical politics

Martin Holbraad and Myriam Lamrani

Abstract: Drawing on the contributions of this theme section, this introduction stakes out an agenda for the anthropological study of revolutionary circles. Understood as a powerful model of and for political action, the revolutionary circle renders the desire for radical political change as a function of the circular configuration of the group of people who pursue it. This correlation of political ends with social means puts questions of "political morphology"—actors' concern with the shape of their relationships—at the center of revolutionary action. As the articles of the theme section illustrate, such a concern with social shapes plays itself out not only in questions of political organization, but also those of personal relationships and ethical comportment, practices of secrecy and dissemination, shared activities and values, and their different potentials for transformation over time.

Keywords: circles, political morphology, radical politics, revolutionary, social morphology

Social distancing, flattened curves, sombrero graphs, lockdowns, confinements, bubbles, tiers: this is the rise of the New Durkheimians, as Alberto Corsín Jimenez put it in a tweet soon after the pandemic broke in Spain. The shapes of social relations, the effects of those social shapings upon (and their conditioning by) the distributions of viral contagion, and the manner in which they become the object of collective action and, therefore, human control, are all now standard fare in daily conversation as well as in the media briefings of public health experts and politicians. As well as armchair epidemiologists, we are all armchair sociologists now. At a time when social morphology in Durkheim's sense—that is, the spatial formation and distribution of social relationships (1982: 111–112)—has become a global pursuit, the present theme section uses "revolutionary circles" as a case study in the morphology of politics. That politics is, among other things, about form is near-trivial—political projects have shapes, and attention to "systemic properties," "structures," and "dynamics" is the mainstay of political theory and science. A political anthropology that saw itself as the comparative study of social structures and their attendant regimes of force was similarly morphological (e.g., Fortes and Evans-Pritchard

Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology 91 (2021): 1–13
© The Authors
doi:10.3167/fcl.2021.910101

1940). As with the diagrammatic imaginaries of life with Covid-19 (Montgomery and Engelman 2020), however, our interest in this theme section is in the power that shapes hold over people's political imagination. We see shapes, in other words, as what is at stake not just "in" politics, but also *for* it: morphology as a matter of concern for political actors—a political activity in its own right.

Revolutionaries' characteristic investment in circles is hardly exceptional in this regard. There are plenty of other shapes that capture people's imagination of what the world could or should be like, of how they should organize themselves and relate to each other, and of how powerful effects can be engendered, channeled, or kept under control: pyramids (Sugiyama 2005), mandalas (Tambiah 1973), chains (Lovejoy 1973), segments (Evans-Pritchard 1940), networks (Riles 2000), fractal tubers (Coupaye 2013, Mosko 2009). We hope that what we say about circles in this collection has some bearing on these other examples of morphology as a political activity, too. Nevertheless, we put forward revolutionary circles as something of a limit case in such a context. Inasmuch as revolutionary politics sets up radical and wholesale change as a deliberate and explicit goal to be achieved through concerted and forceful human action—revolution is, in that sense, the politics of modernity par excellence (Berman 2010; Cherstich et al. 2020; Koselleck 1985)—the acute attention that revolutionaries pay to the political efficacies of their own forms of organization is also extreme. If radical politics is largely a matter of "figuration," as Stine Krøijer (2015) has shown—that is, of enacting the form of politics one seeks to bring about (see also Maeckelbergh 2011)—then, for revolutionaries, the circle is a prime political technology, even as it is a technology for their (political) imagination (cf. Sneath et al. 2009). To be sure, there are also other shapes that capture and typify revolutionary imaginations, including, to use an example that Susan Buck-Morss (2000) has explored to much effect, the spatiotemporal form of the "vanguard." Nevertheless, we propose, to be part of a circle, to worry about who is in it and who is not, to theorize and argue over its shape and properties, to police its boundaries or seek to expand or contract them—these are all forms (shapes!) that self-avowedly revolutionary political action can take, and very often does, as the articles in this theme section also show. To do the morphology of the circle, we suggest, is an important part of what doing revolution often involves.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." This saying, attributed apocryphally to Margaret Mead (Sommers and Dineen 1984: 158), captures the gist of the power that can also be attributed to revolutionary circles. Consider the image: a restricted group of people, bound to each other in close relations of intimacy, sharing high-minded ideals and ways of expressing them, if not always agreeing on ways of pursuing them, all of which they gather to debate and forge into programs of action in meetings of often great intensity, charged with a sense of historical moment and destiny. Typically secretive, and often clandestine for fear of persecution, self-consciously marking the sheer distance that their activities place between them and mainstream society and its reigning "system" of politics, the revolutionary circle is as solemn in style as it can be self-righteous in its conduct and sense of mission. Since the stakes are so high—revolution is, to echo Mead's words, a project no less ambitious than "changing the world"—so are the perils. Just as, in some cases, circles can be imagined as expanding or "opening up" to include more members, they can also be fractious, riddled with disputes and animosity, or indeed resolutely closed to outsiders altogether. Fragile as they are, they can be broken, or even "broken up" (sometimes by secret services or the police). By definition, however, revolutionary circles will themselves out of existence, or at least into becoming something else. In the "new world" that their actions seek to precipitate, revolutionary circles will no longer be necessary, though their personnel and *modi operandi* may perdure, now with new roles and in different

forms—the vanguard, yes, but also the Party, the government, the new security services, or, in some cases, what turns out to be yet another heterodox "cell" or "ring" that must, after all, be rooted out.

Such an ideotypical description is of course little more than stereotype. In fact, revolutionary groupings that may conceive of themselves as circles to emphasize their closed-off shape may be far more embedded in and connected with their social and political milieu, operating more like fluid and situational networks with nodes that penetrate deep into broader social orders. For example, in her account of the role of *halaqa*s in the emergence of the revolution of 2011 in Syria, Charlotte Al-Khalili emphasizes the deliberately public-facing activities of these Quranic study circles, which used film screenings as a way to engage with local communities in an effort 'to create a critical mass of people ready to pay the price to practice their rights', as one of the circle's members explained (Al-Khalili, this volume). At the same time, as Caroline Humphrey's article shows, the bounded, inward-looking quality of the circle can be a crucial part of the way its political efficacy is perceived and enacted. As Humphrey quotes Lenin as exhorting, "*konspiratsiya*, *konspiratsiya*, and again *konspiratsiya*!"—by which he meant not conspiracy as such, as she explains, but rather "the principle of secrecy and above all the technical methods for securing it, [including] strictures regarding safe-houses, passwords, aliases, use of disguise and comportment, correct construction of false-bottomed suitcases, fabricated or stolen passports, the chemical components of invisible ink, and constant changes in the complex numerical/alphabetical codes used for writing letters" (Humphrey, this volume).

To be sure, Humphrey's account of the advent and role of the circle of revolutionaries who initiated the Russian Revolution presents something of a myth of origin, to which most subsequent left-wing revolutionary movements have paid heed in one way or other. And if the cases presented by David Cooper and by Al-Khalili, from Nicaragua and Syria respectively, confirm the basic appeal of the idea that a small circle of devoted activists are able through their actions to bring about world-changing effects, these cases also show that the manners in which this idea is enacted in different contexts can vary vastly—from the associations with Quranic pedagogy of the Syrian *halaqa*s to the rigorous self-fashioning of the Sandinistas' rural guerrilla training camps. A prime objective of this theme section, then, is to demonstrate comparatively some of the permutations of "the circle" in different revolutionary settings. As we shall see, these comparisons can be traced morphologically, with reference to the formal properties of the circle, which allow it to operate as a kind of social diagram (cf. Engelman et al. 2019). Just as the diagrammatic quality of the circle formats the political imagination of revolutionary actors in particular ways, so too it provides the formal coordinates of our attempts to compare these acts of imagination as anthropologists.

We should clarify here that in framing the comparative study of revolutionary circles as an exercise in political morphology, we are not proposing a return to structuralist analysis nor, for that matter, to structural-functionalism (see also Humphrey, this volume). The idea is neither to suggest that revolutionary action is undergirded by some deep (circular?) structure of the mind, nor to extrapolate the circle as an analytical model for comparing the operations of revolutionary organization. If anything, what we have in mind is closer to Clifford Geertz's classical idea of cultural artefacts as "models of and for" life (1973). Taking political morphology as a form of political action in its own right—as something, in other words, in which political actors are themselves invested—our interest is in how revolutionaries' own conceptions of and concerns with the shapes of their relationships, and particularly with the circle as a shape of political organization, feature as a point of reference of and for their political action. Indeed, unlike many of the religious schemes for which Geertz developed his proposal, circles are models in a more precise and literal way, owing to their morphological char-

acter: They mark shapes and, as such, can purport both to delineate ("model of") and *to shape* ("model for") revolutionary action. More than on circles as models of social life, then, the focus of this theme section is on the social life of circles as models.

Before going on to chart some of the permutations of this idea in the articles of the collection, we may first note three related ways in which focusing on revolutionary circles contributes to broader attempts to develop a distinctively anthropological approach to the study of revolutionary politics (see Cherstich et al. 2020; Starn 1991; Thomassen 2012).[1] The first has to do with the way revolutionary circles, with that prefigurative logic we have already mentioned, meld together revolutionaries' political aspirations at large (the revolution) with their personal comportment in their intimate relations (the circle). As Cherstich, Holbraad, and Tassi have sought to show elsewhere (2020: 66–93), drawing also on Michel Foucault's famous commentaries on the relationship between revolution and Shi'a "technologies of the self" in 1979 Iran (see Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016), revolution is par excellence a form of politics in which, as the feminist adage has it, the personal is political: it "makes personal demands on people, operating in the most intimate ambits of their lives" (Cherstich et al. 2020: 66). The much-discussed parallels (and sometimes connections) between revolution and religious practice (e.g., Humphrey 2014, 2019; Kharkhordin 1999; Mittermaier 2019), which are crystallized in the overtly Pauline project for the creation of a "New Man" at the heart of even the most vehemently anticlerical manifestations of revolution, bear this point out. But so, we argue, does the revolutionary circle. As the articles of the theme section show in different ways, the moral formation of revolutionary persons is very much at stake within these self-consciously intimate social spaces. To the extent that revolutionary actors conceive of circles as prime instigators ("agitators!") of radical transformation, the erasure of the distance between the political and the personal (the social and the individual, the public and the private) is effectively enshrined into the very origin story of revolution.[2] The circle, one might say, can be posited as the point of origin at which political and social or relational imaginations are revealed to be identical.

The idea of circles as social origin myths—acts of revolutionary "meaning-formation" (Thomassen 2012: 698) charting the social origination of political change—connects to a second, methodological point, about the shape that such an approach gives to the phenomenon of revolution. In contrast to accounts of revolution by political scientists and philosophers (Dunn 1972; Skocpol 1979), who tend to posit revolution as above all an event of violent upheaval—a rupture in and with time, as conceptual historical Reinhart Koselleck suggested (1985)—study of revolutionary circles adds depth to a growing anthropological literature that casts a light on the "dead times" of revolution (e.g., Elyachar and Winegar 2012; Haugbolle and Bandak 2017; Hirslund 2011; Højer 2018; Sabea 2014; Schielke 2015). Adding complexity to the temporality of revolution, here conceptions and practices of anticipation, preparation, prospection, and projection become central temporal modalities of revolution, foregrounding activities such as waiting, gathering forces, attempting to win sufficient support, assessing conditions, considering possible trajectories, and evaluating whether the time is right for action. Seen through the prism of the circles that seek to precipitate it, revolution emerges not just as a matter of rupture (Holbraad et al. 2019), but also as one of understanding how potential futures are mediated by, and constituted in, different manners of rendering the present efficacious enough to produce alternative futures.

Such an emphasis on temporality leads us to a third point about this collection's contribution to a distinctively anthropological approach to revolution, which turns on the relationship between the morphological perspective we seek to explore and the question of history. The study of revolution is of course saturated in and by history and historiography. Unsurprisingly, the figure of the circle is a familiar leitmotif of the way

in which the story of revolutions is recounted, as demonstrated in this collection by the varied historical sources on which Humphrey draws in her account of the circle's trajectory in the Russian Revolution.[3] However, it may be as well to be clear that our aim in this collection is in no way to contribute to this body of work by providing more or better histories of revolutionary circles. Rather, while sometimes drawing on the historiography of the three revolutionary situations it examines, the purpose of the collection is focused more narrowly on exploring the anthropological potentials of political morphology: namely, to articulate the ways in which the configuration of social relationships—their circular shape, in this case—becomes an object of concern for political actors, and the effect that this has on them and their actions.

To be sure, there is an irreducibly diachronic element to this way of framing the question of political morphology, and our approach is in no way incompatible with more historically minded modes of analysis, focused, for example, on the emergence and evolution of political forms in relation to historical forces that may indeed be larger than them (e.g., Starn and La Serna 2019). Certainly, looking at the efficacies of the circle as a political form involves exploring how this way of modeling political action—the circle as a model of and for revolution—constrains and enables in particular ways the development of revolutionary activities, and the ways these are conceived and experienced by those who participate in them. While not purporting to contribute to a historical (or indeed a historicizingly anthropological) approach to revolutionary circles, each of the articles in this theme section illustrates the diachronic horizons of political morphology as we understand it, showing how the political potentials of the circle as a relational shape unfold over time, with people's investment in the circle as a sociopolitical form providing a point of reference in the development of revolutionary action.[4] As such, this collection presents an anthropological perspective of the dynamic forces of revolutionary history insofar as it shows how people conceptualize revolutions in relation to their present and future (see Palmié and Stewart 2016: 208). It is precisely through a sustained focus on political morphology that a diachronic view of the revolutionary circle emerges.

The central questions for this theme section, then, are these: What if the political futures that are at stake in revolutionary action are in interesting ways a function of the circular shapes that revolutionary actors imagine for themselves in pursuing them? What is it about the nature of this shape that is appealing in revolutionary situations? And what does the circle do to the people who imagine themselves within it?

It should be noted that these questions hark back to longer historical trajectories than the framing we offer in this collection in relation to modern revolutions.[5] For example, in his comparative study of the power of the circle as a political form, Marcel Detienne (2008) explores the beginnings of politics in Greek cities embodied by the famed Athenian *agora*—a space where citizens deliberated in assemblies. Since Homer's days, assemblies took place in the form of a circle or semicircle where communal affairs were debated. A concrete shape of "political practice," the assembly for Detienne is a form of "empirical politics" that aimed to promote equality. To prove the point, he compares different types of practices of assembling, such as those of the Greeks, those of Ukrainian and Russian Cossack communities during the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Ollochos' quasi-daily gatherings studied by Abélès in Southern Ethiopia, and, most relevantly for our argument on revolutions here, the Constituent Assembly in revolutionary France.

The French *constituents* adopted the circular or semi-elliptic form, Detienne suggests (2008: 86), to hold peaceful political meetings where speakers could be seen and heard by all, not as a reverence for the shape's Greek origins, but rather as a necessity.[6] As a spatial enactment of equality and justice, Detienne shows, the circle is a shape that most suits "societies aiming to be equalitarian (ibid.). In this "microconfiguration of politics" (ibid.: 99), the circle is constitu-

tive of the political domain where people hold sovereignty over their destiny. What is most interesting about Detienne's account, however, is the way in which his story of the emergence of the National Assembly's circular shape over two years of painstaking deliberation and debate connects the egalitarian qualities of the circle with questions of people's comportment within it. In the context of the work of a series of committees and commissions charged with deciding on the spatial arrangements of the Assembly (work that lasted a full two years, from 1789 to 1791), the rationale that was given for adopting a circular or elliptical shape for the hall of the National Assembly was that every member should be seen by all the rest. While this was indeed the first time an explicitly egalitarian space was requested, Detienne explains, the explicit request put forward by the debating deputies "was for all present to be able to see and to hear, so that nobody needed to shout" (2008: 86). Interestingly, one deputy spelled this out as a question of keeping the peace: "A man who shouts puts himself in a forced state and, on that very account, is prone to violence . . . and he communicates that disposition of his to all those listening to him" (ibid.).

Underlining this telling connection between political goals and social formations, our attempt to ground the figure of the circle in anthropological theory as a political morphology renders of prime interest the sociality that people imagine for the circles they make. Even as revolutionaries aim for radical political change, theirs is an organizational shape that is itself structured by social interactions. Thus, we ask in this theme section what kind of role the social dimension of the circle—the intimacy, the immediacy, the apparent egalitarianism—plays in shaping political imaginaries whose referents may be distant both in space and time. To explore this shift, the contributions gathered here suggest three modalities to think through the potential of the circle to shape revolutionary imaginaries. Whereas a circle indicates an enclosed space, containing a finished time, and embodying stability of form—that of a closed curve whose two extremities merge—the following contributions also show that the apparent constancy evoked by this image can sometimes be misleading. First, the *spatial elasticity* of the circle is in tension with the idea of a strictly bounded form. If there is an inner circle then there is surely also an outer circle that expands and contracts to include and exclude its exiled members (see Humphrey, this volume). Concentricity, one might say, emerges here as a significant morphological condition for revolutionary politics. Second, for all its diagrammatical beauty and perfection, the circle—a series of points that encircle a central invisible point, the core of the circle—is a revolutionary nexus for political change. As such, this form contains the possibility of its own transformation, a *metamorphosis* of the multiple into the one, to integrate distant revolutionaries into a central "political machine" (see Cooper, this volume). Third and finally, under observation, the circular form educes a temporality that may appear finite, strictly anchored in the present, but the possibility of futurity and connections to the past continue to exist within its form, as an instance of *collapsed temporalities* (see Al-Khalili, this volume).

Spatial elasticity and diachronicity: Inner-outer circles

The connection between revolutionary circles and the social ties that grow within and outside of them shines through Caroline Humphrey's article in this volume. Humphrey zooms in on the Russian revolutionary avant-garde known as *kruzhok* (plural, *kruzhki*)—the "small circle," a space of self-education that, in time, evolved to become a space for future revolutionary activism. Exploring the *kruzhok* as a conceptual term and as an essential social relation, she shows how these structures—once they started *carrying out* the revolution—changed into revolutionary circles. Taking the example of Ul'yanov (later known as Lenin), Humphrey demonstrates that "revolutionary circles [were]

brought about by the exigencies of their illegal conspiratorial existence" as well as the shared ideals of the members the *kruzhki*. Indeed, as Humphrey reminds us, rather than mirroring Durkheim's (1982) theory of foundational "collective representations," in Russia, the political ideas came first, and the circle followed. The common vision of how a future socialist society *ought* to be nurtured the social and political circular shapes that these groups adopted.

An interesting thought explored by the author is that these circles nevertheless retain the intimate qualities of the *kruzhok*, its comradeship (but also the complex negotiations of social tensions), and its inclusiveness in the face of a fiercely hierarchical society. Lenin's circle may well have been self-contained, but it was not a constricted space. For alongside strict measures for controlling and protecting its membership to preserve *konspiratsiya*, the circle's concentric form contains the possibility of inward and outward expansion, by incorporating some exiled members while letting go of others. The boundaries of the circle could thus, in the Russian case, stretch and open up to allow multiple circulations, distributed widely across Europe. Stretching geographically beyond its own borders, morphing, expanding, or shrinking to ultimately shapeshift into what Humphrey calls a "trans-spatial and fluctuating skein," the circle could accommodate the migratory flows of its members.

Picture a pebble falling into a pond, creating a circle rippling into more concentric shapes. As time passes and members depart to other regions, the central circle is gradually encircled by other concentric circles across national borders. A condition of its existence in time, as Lenin and other members of the avant-garde were sent into exile to Switzerland, the circle's spatial expansion precipitates the metamorphosis of social relations and political forms. And, as Humphrey argues, if the nonhierarchical and transient *kruzhok* is a social technology for reaching unanimity and bringing together a plurality of people, the circle was to solidify and morph once the socialist ideals that would reshape society were outlined. These ideals were—in the case of Lenin's circle—circulated through gossip, tracts, and newspapers, perhaps in an attempt to create what Anderson (1991) would call an "imagined community" of revolutionaries in exile. However, after the October Revolution, an ideological shift hardened the boundaries of the circle to give rise to a new collective identity, namely the "cell."

As Lenin restructured the Bolshevik political structure from afar, cells, subordinated to the leadership in exile in Switzerland to carry out assignments given from above, started mushrooming. Tested by the shifting allegiances of the cells' members after the failure of the 1905 revolution, in 1919 these new forms became parts of the Bolshevik Party. No longer a reflection of the self-sufficient shape of the circle, cells were now integrated into a political whole (see also Cooper, this volume). The circle was ultimately to sink into oblivion, into nonexistence, and to be replaced by the hierarchically organized structures of the political class. As such, it was inevitable that the circle and its shared ideals would dissolve. This diachronic and spatial aspect of our experiment with political morphology—the inevitable changes of the circle into something else—thus broaches the critical question of the limits of its political efficacy: what happens when the circle is deemed no longer fit for revolutionary purpose?

Metamorphosis: A cog in the machine

If the initial convulsions of revolutions are brought about by a "handful of people," once revolutionaries take control of the fallen state, they inherit, as Benedict Anderson evocatively puts it, "the complex electrical system in a large mansion when the owner has fled" (1991: 160). What kind of shape remains once the revolution is over? The disappearance of the circle through its integration into the political class is the focus of David Cooper's contribution. He tackles this question through a deeper questioning by ask-

ing how *images*—in particular that of the "circle" and the "machine"—condition, indeed, politics and its theorization. In Nicaragua, as Cooper shows, this shift takes the form of an eclipse of the circular image by that of the "political machine." Once the issue becomes one of wielding power, the revolutionary circle—understood as the shape of equality—can revert from the "*one into the several*" (Latour 2003: 149). Thus, the stake of such political metamorphosis also has a morphological component.

Looking at the transformations and continuities that exist between Sandinista underground structures and the revolutionary government after they seized power in Nicaragua in 1979, Cooper explores what happens when revolutionary groups make way for the institutionalization of a *machine of power*. Since the rise of the FSLN party, in the wake of the revolution, rural Sandinistas living at the fringe of power strive to maintain ties with an increasingly distant state. Away from the face-to-face intimacy of their beginnings (when the circle is stretched to its social limits), revolutionaries maintain and negotiate connections with the political apparatus through clientelistic transactions. The FSLN was meant to incorporate these rural communities into the government apparatus, but the power change led to a break-up of the intimate sociality of the circle. As a result, it becomes another political shape altogether, that of a machine of power. So, here the question is about the purchase that these diverging political shapes hold on social relationships.

The juxtaposition of Cooper's two chosen political tropes—the circle and the machine, the one and the several—captures the significance of shapes in revolutionary politics. Not dissimilar to the transition from circles to cells outlined by Humphrey (this volume) in Russia, the passage from one shape to the other in Cooper's article involves the integration of the one *into* the other. What this metamorphosis seeks to achieve is a return to the kind of intimate sociality that was fostered during the revolutionary beginnings. The Sandinistas' story is not uncommon. The institutionalization of revolutions—from Cuba to France or from China to Mexico—and their organization into larger political structures calls for a transformation that often institutes an ever-growing distance between the center and the periphery, never to be fully bridged. Such transitions imply an alteration of shape, often giving rise to an intricate network of connections and clientelism. Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), a political party established in the wake of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), is a prime example of this transfer of power, wherein the clash that ensued between revolutionaries and the new regime pitted revolutionary myths and heroes against the emerging new state.[7] Likewise, in Nicaragua, the machine is in contravention of revolutionary ideals. But what is more, as Cooper argues, it threatens the very structure of sociality of revolutionary circles. By trying to maintain a simulacrum of closeness—the kind of close relationships initially developed between revolutionaries—Sandinistas looked for a way to reintegrate the political machine, in vain. The circle had to morph. From a shape of political new beginnings, it became a cog in the political machine.

Collapsed temporality: The present as a figuration of the future

Presenting a case in which the political and the religious can hardly be separated, Al-Khalili's contribution explores the relationship between ethical self-transformation and the political pursuit of justice in the *halaqa*s—Syrian semi-religious circles, the shape made by a group of individuals sitting for a Quranic lesson that will foster revolutionary action. The *halaqa* is a nonviolent space, not dissimilar in that regard to the French revolutionary assembly (Detienne 2008). In her analysis, Al-Khalili sets the Anas *halaqa* (a specific religious circle that laid the ground to establish the Darayya local council, a revolutionary body aiming at organizing daily life in Syria's liberated areas) up as a paradigm of how temporalities collapse to bring about

a political "figuration of the future" (Krøijer 2015).

Rearticulating the concept of "heterotopia" (Foucault 1986) as "a space where an indeterminate future is already enacted," Al-Khalili explores how the *halaqa* becomes a temporal point of convergence where revolutionary agents are constantly (re)shaping an imaginary that is *in becoming*. Theirs is an image of a utopia "generated through performative discourses and practices" (Al-Khalili, this volume). Indeed, there is a liturgical dimension to be observed in this circle, one that contrasts daily life to the theatricality and sacredness of political rituals. The circular imagery of ritual, we may recall, is in contrast with the linear time of everyday life (Bloch, cited in Stewart 1994: 100). A shape of perfection, cyclical time, and an image of the proper flow of life (ibid.: 94), the circular *halaqa* provides a communal space for exchange of ideas.

Instead of having revolutionary politics shaping the group (Humphrey, this volume), in the example of the *halaqa* it is through the distinctive mode of sociality of a religious assembly that revolutionary ideas come into being. Under the cover of secrecy, students learn about Islam and personal ethics. Considering the political dimension of the *halaqa*s, the question that Al-Khalili asks in the Syrian context is: "What turned a local religious circle into a laboratory of radical political thought and actions, and how did its members become a revolutionary vanguard?" Guiding the *halaqa*s' students toward social change is the notion that putting self-transformation into practice in the present prefigures future revolutionary transformations. In this configuration, different timelines converge and are collapsed, recalling Foucault's (1979) comment about the Iranian Revolution:

> Because they are thus "outside history" and in history, because everyone stakes his life, and his death, on their possibility, one understands why uprisings have so easily found their expression and their drama in religious forms. Promises of the afterlife, time's renewal, anticipation of the savior or the empire of the last days, a reign of pure goodness—for centuries all this constituted, where the religious form allowed, not an ideological costume but the very way of experiencing revolts (*our translation*).

Orientated toward the future, while existing in the present, the *halaqa* collapses temporalities. Providing a clear focus on the intricate temporality of revolution seen through the lens of the circle, Al-Khalili's contribution illustrates that instead of considering revolutions within a linear understanding of time, we must pay attention to the *multiple* temporalities that political morphologies contain, for it is through the ethical transformation of oneself in the present that a wider circle, that of a future society, is constantly in the making.

Conclusion

A delicate balancing act between three interconnected themes—those of time, space, and change—the circle represents a constant reshuffling of what *is* (the social realm) and what *could be* (the ideal realm). As such, the circle appears as a relational technology of social imagination. Clandestine revolutionary circles contrast with the actual enactment of revolutions taking place in public spaces (e.g., the square). If "the study of political revolutions is to a large extent the anthropological study of appropriations of space via ritual" (Thomassen 2012: 694), then that of revolutionary beginnings—and changes in the Russian, Syrian, and Nicaraguan cases—is one of political morphology. The circle is a kind of counter-space, "social processes are regulated in a manner different from how it was conceived and perceived prior to the event" and which gives rise to new conceived spaces (Riphagen 2018: 119). Approaching political upheavals through the lens of the circle has helped us generate some insight into the origins of revolution and the mutually constitutive relation between the circle as a beginning and a vehicle of meta-

morphosis for these political movements. How these acts of metamorphosis operate, we suggest, is intertwined with the ways in which they configure (quite literally) themselves to create new political possibilities.

One of the ultimate goals of the revolutionary circles exampled in this theme section is to generate social justice through ethical self-transformation (see also Porter 2016, 2017). The ethics one upholds is, ultimately, what will foster sweeping societal change. As all of our contributors demonstrate in their papers, such social transformation is never fully realized, for change is always partly deferred to a utopic future that may never come. For the revolutionary circle is a *beginning* (as Al-Kahlili's interlocutors indicate when they say, "Our circle was the mastermind but not the leader of the protests"), not an end. An ephemeral vanguard of the revolution, when deployed at the national level to lay the foundations and integrate the structures of revolutionary politics, the circle renders itself precarious. Crucially, once the ideals of revolutionary circles fade away, giving rise to political apparatuses, the peculiar social shape of relation of the circle—one of intimacy, equality, and resistance—is threatened. This configuration of equalitarian relationships, key in developing new political imaginaries turned toward the future, can only exist through multiple timelines. If the future is revolution's final destination, the circle contains multiple temporalities that create specific imaginaries shaped in the present. Through this image, a peculiar form of political morphology, revolutionaries dream up what they deem to be better tomorrows. The concomitant paradox, as we have seen, is that the success of the circle as an enactment of these aspirations so often takes the form of new figurations of hierarchy talking hold, with the shape of the circle contorted and sometimes, ultimately, dissolved.

Acknowledgments

Contributors to this theme section have all participated in the ERC-funded project *Making Selves, Making Revolutions: Comparative Anthropologies of Revolutionary Politics*, led by Martin Holbraad (ERC-2013-CoG, 617970, CARP). The central idea of this theme section, that circles are a characteristic social form in revolutionary politics that, as such, lends itself to anthropological treatment, was Caroline Humphrey's. Accordingly, the present collection arose during the course of a workshop held at UCL in 2018, in which Charlotte Al-Khalili, David Cooper, Myriam Lamrani, Martin Holbraad, and Morten Axel Pedersen joined Humphrey to discuss a draft of her article on the circle in revolutionary Russia, drawing on their respective ethnographic materials in order to think about the theme comparatively. In addition to expressing our gratitude to Humphrey herself for providing such inspiration, we would also like to thank Charles Stewart, who pointed us in the direction of Marcel Detienne's work, Charlotte Al-Khalili and David Cooper for their attentive editorial work, and *Focaal*'s editors and anonymous reviewers for their many helpful suggestions.

Martin Holbraad teaches social anthropology at University College London, UK. His main field research is in Cuba, focusing on Afro-Cuban religions and revolutionary politics. Recent books include *Truth in Motion: The Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition* (co-author, Cambridge University Press, 2016), and *Anthropologies of Revolution: Forging Time, People and Worlds* (co-author, University of California Press, 2020). ORCID ID: 0000-0003-0109-3539
E-mail: m.holbraad@ucl.ac.uk

Myriam Lamrani is a multimodal anthropologist whose work focuses on images, intimacy, religion, and politics in Mexico and Greece. She is the co-winner of the J.B. Donne Essay Prize on the Anthropology of Art (2019). She is currently an Honorary Research Fellow at University College London, UK and a Marie

Curie Fellow (2021–2024) at Harvard and Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Greece.
E-mail: ucsamla@ucl.ac.uk

Notes

1. The contributors to the present theme section participate in a large-scale research project, titled "Making Selves, Making Revolutions: Comparative Anthropologies of Revolutionary Politics," that "seeks to launch the comparative study of revolutionary personhood as a major new departure for anthropological research, . . . charting the dynamics of revolutionary 'anthropologies' in the original theological sense of the term, examining revolutionary politics in relation to varying conceptions of what it is to be human." (Holbraad 2014).
2. From a comparative anthropological perspective, this places revolution at the opposite pole to "totalizing" political forms which, as Tambiah (1973) argues in his famous discussion of *mandala* (Sanskrit, incidentally, for circle), resist categorization into the terms of modern distinctions between politics, ethics, cosmology, and so on. If the galactic polities of Southeast Asia escape such categorization altogether, one might say, revolutionary circles take them for granted and seek deliberately to *efface* them: modernity's attempt, at the limit, to undo itself (see also Holbraad 2016; cf. Mauss 1990, 1992).
3. We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing out that the figure of the clandestine circle pitting itself violently against the social order it seeks to usurp is also a feature in historical works of liberal opponents of revolutionary politics, such as Robert Conquest and Francois Furet, who present the murky machinations of revolutionaries in decidedly paranoid terms.
4. In the contributions presented here, revolutionaries do take the circle imagery as an "implicit consistency of image" (Stewart 1994: 95) for a specific type of political formation. For people in the *kruzhki* or the *halaqa*s, or among Sandinistas, the circular shape facilitates equality and peaceful exchange of ideas. What happens when the circle expands beyond the people involved is not so much a matter of change of shape; rather, it is an expansion of the circle into a multitude. This movement can be seen, for instance, in the work of Magaña (2020) about the beginning of the political movement of 2006 in Oaxaca (Mexico), the "first revolution of the 21st century" (Osorno 2007), with the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (APPO), which transformed into intergenerational networks involving the youth. Even as self-consciously formed "circles" often disappear as larger (and sometimes pre-existing) networks emerge (see also Kalb and Mollona 2018), in this collection we set out to show that the importance of circles as foundational small-scale structures in many revolutionary settings is not to be underestimated.
5. Providing something of an antidemocratic counterpart to this origin story, in the *Republic* Plato uses a circular shape to illustrate the idea that justice is the highest class of standard and the origin of social contact. The circular allegory is narrated by Glaucon—Plato's older brother—in the legend of the ring of Gyges. This ring magically grants its owner invisibility and anonymity. Under its cover, Glaucon's musing goes, would the ring's owner perform virtuous deeds and resist the temptation of abusing its power? If Glaucon's conclusion is sinister (that the intrinsic value of justice is only measured against its consequences, that it is self-interested, and that under the cloak of anonymity injustice will reign supreme), this tale provides an exploration of the ethics of justice, a series of laws, compromises, and moral choices setting social interactions into motions, and an interesting prism through which to look at revolutionary circles. Although Gyges' ring proves an opposite point (a hierarchic enactment of politics—perhaps what happens when revolutions are institutionalized by the few?), the entanglement of the allegorical circular shape with the ideal of justice offers insights into which qualities the circle offers to move revolutionaries into action.
6. According to Detienne, there is probably no common Greek origin of the circle as a political practice (2008: 80–81). But Greek examples abound; we may recall the women assemblies in Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* who led their very own (and successful) political protest.

7. One such example is the expulsion of both Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa from the Mexican national pantheon (O'Malley 1986).

References

Anderson, Benedict. [1983] 1991. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and the spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.

Berman, Marshall. 2010. *All that is solid melts into air*. London: Verso.

Buck-Morss, Susan. 2000. *Dreamworld and catastrophe*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Cherstich, Igor, Martin Holbraad, and Nico Tassi. 2020. *Anthropologies of revolution forging time, people, and worlds*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Coupaye, Ludovic. 2013. *Growing artefacts, displaying relationships: Yams, art and technology amongst the Nyamikum Abelam of Papua New Guinea*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Detienne, Marcel. 2008. *Comparing the incomparable*. Trans. Janet Lloyd. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Dunn, John. 1972. *Modern revolutions: An introduction to the analysis of a political phenomenon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Durkheim, Emile. 1982. *Rules of sociological method*. New York: The Free Press.

Engelmann, Lukas, Caroline Humphrey, and Christos Lynteris, eds. 2019. "Working with diagrams." Special issue of *Social Analysis* 63 (4): 1–151.

Elyachar, Julia, and Jessica Winegar. 2012. "Revolution and counter-revolution in Egypt a year after January 25th." Hot Spots. *Cultural Anthropology*, 2 February. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/208-revolution-and-counter-revolution-in-egypt-a-year-after-january-25th.

Evans-Pritchard, Edward E. 1940. *The Nuer: A description of the modes of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people*. Oxford: Clarendon Books.

Fortes, Meyer, and Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, eds. 1940. *African political systems*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1979. "Inutile de se soulever?" [Is it useless to revolt?] *Le Monde*, 11 May. https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1979/05/11/inutile-de-se-soulever_2778551_1819218.html (accessed 2 March 2021).

Foucault, Michel. 1986. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics* 16 (1): 22–27.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Ghamari-Tabrizi, Behrooz. 2016. *Foucault in Iran: Islamic revolution after the enlightenment*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Haugbolle, Sune, and Andreas Bandak, eds. 2017. "The ends of revolution in the Arab Middle East." In "The multiple narratives of the Libyan revolution," ed. Matteo Capasso and Igor Cherstich, special issue, *Middle East Critique* 26 (3): 191–307.

Hirslund, Dan. 2011. "Revolutionary waiting: YCL cadres in Nepal's transition." *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 16 (2): 229–269.

Holbraad, Martin. 2014. "Anthropologies of revolution." Project website of Comparative anthropologies of revolutionary politics. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/research/anthropologies-revolution (accessed 8 July 2020).

Holbraad, Martin. 2016. "Afterword: The social warmth of paradox." In *Economies of favour after socialism*, ed. David Henig and Nicolette Makovicky, 225–233, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Holbraad, Martin, Bruce Kapferer, and Julia F. Sauma, eds. 2019. *Ruptures: Anthropologies of discontinuity in times of turmoil*. London: UCL Press.

Højer, Lars. 2018. "Apathy and revolution." In *Recovering the human subject: Freedom, creativity and decision*, ed. James Laidlaw, Barbara Bodenhorn, and Martin Holbraad, 74–94. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Humphrey, Caroline. 2014. "Schism, event, and revolution: The old believers of Trans-Baikalia." *Current Anthropology* 55 (S10): S216–225.

Humphrey, Caroline. 2019. "The guillotine: Reflections of violent revolutionary rupture." In *Ruptures: Anthropologies of discontinuity in times of turmoil*, ed. Martin Holbraad, Bruce Kapferer, and Julia Sauma, 27–51. London: UCL Press.

Kalb, Don, and Mollona, Massimiliano, eds. 2018. *Worldwide mobilizations: Class struggles and urban commoning*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Kharkhordin, Oleg. 1999. *The collective and the individual in Russia: A study of practices*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Koselleck, Reinhart. 1985. "Historical criteria of the modern concept of revolution." In *Futures*

past: On the semantics of historical time, 39–54. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Krøijer, Stine. 2015. *Figurations of the future: Forms and temporalities of left radical politics in Northern Europe*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Latour, Bruno. 2003. "What if we *talked* politics a little?" *Contemporary Political Theory* (2): 143–164.

Lovejoy, Arthur O. 1973. *The great chain of being: A study of the history of an idea*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Maeckelbergh, Marianne. 2011. "Doing is believing: Prefiguration as strategic practice in the alterglobalization movement." *Social Movement Studies* 10 (1): 1–20.

Magaña, Maurice Rafael. 2020. *Cartographies of youth resistance: Hip-Hop, punk, and urban autonomy in Mexico*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Mauss, Marcel. 1990. *The gift*. London: Routledge.

Mauss, Marcel. [1924–25] 1992. "A sociological assessment of the Bolshevism." In *The radical sociology of Durkheim and Mauss*, ed. Mike J. Gane, 165–212. London: Routledge.

Mittermaier, Amira. 2019. *Giving to God: Islamic charity in revolutionary times*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Montgomery, Catherine, and Lukas Engelman. 2020. "Epidemiological publics? On the domestication of modelling in the era of COVID-19." *Somatosphere: Science, Medicine, and Anthropology*, 10 April. http://somatosphere.net/2020/epidemiological-publics-on-the-domestication-of-modelling-in-the-era-of-covid-19.html/.

Mosko, Mark S. 2009. "The fractal yam: Botanical imagery and human agency in the Trobriands." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (4): 679–700.

O'Malley, Ilene V. 1986. *The myth of revolution: Hero cults and the institutionalization of the Mexican State, 1920–1940*. New York: Greenwood.

Osorno, Diego. 2007. *La primera insurrección del siglo XXI* [The first insurrection of the twenty-first century]. Mexico City: Random House Mondadori.

Palmié, Stephan, and Charles Stewart. 2016. "Introduction: For an anthropology of history." *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6 (1): 207–236.

Porter, Ross. 2016. "Tricking time, overthrowing a regime: Reining in the future in the Yemeni youth revolution." *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 34 (1): 58–71.

Porter, Ross. 2017. "Freedom, power and the crisis of politics in revolutionary Yemen." *Middle East Critique* 26 (3): 265–281.

Riphagen, Wladimir. 2018. "Tales of a square: The production and transformation of political space in the Egyptian (counter)revolution." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 40 (2): 117–133.

Riles, Annelise. 2000. *The network inside out*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

Sabea, Hanan. 2014. "I dreamed of being a people: Egypt's revolution, the people and critical imagination." In *The political aesthetics of global protest*, ed. Pnina Werbner, Martin Webb, and Kathryn Spellman-Poots, 67–92. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Schielke, Samuli. 2015. *Egypt in the future tense*. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press

Skocpol, Theda. 1979. *States and social revolutions: A comparative analysis of France, Russia, and China*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Sneath, David, Martin Holbraad, and Morten A. Pedersen. 2009. "Technologies of the imagination: An introduction." *Ethnos* 74 (1): 5–30.

Sommers, Frank G., and Tana Dineen. 1984. *Curing nuclear madness: A new-age prescription for personal action*. Grantham: Methuen.

Starn, Orin. 1991. "Missing the revolution: Anthropologists and the war in Peru." *Cultural Anthropology* 6 (1): 63–91.

Starn, Orin, and Miguel La Serna. 2019. *The shining path: Love, madness, and revolution in the Andes*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

Stewart, Charles. 1994. "Magic circles: An approach to Greek rituals." *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 25 (1): 91–101.

Sugiyama, Saburo. 2005. *Human sacrifice, militarism, and rulership materialization of state ideology at the feathered serpent pyramid, Teotihuacan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja. 1973. "The galactic polity in Southeast Asia." In *Culture, thought, and social action*, 3–31. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Thomassen, Bjørn. 2012. "Notes towards an anthropology of political revolutions." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54 (3): 679–706.