

Revolving Revolutions: Ruptures, Returns, and Repetitions in Haiti and Cuba

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João Felipe Gonçalves

Universidade de São Paulo | São Paulo, SP, Brasil
 bhznola@gmail.com | <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6627-0236>

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the usage of the fetishized term “revolution” as a category of practice in Haiti and Cuba in different historical moments. It argues that this keyword often implies and helps produce a temporality of returns and repetitions of various pasts, and not only future-oriented ruptures, as scholars typically take for granted. The sections about Haiti are mostly based on archival research and consider a long span between the late eighteenth and the late twentieth centuries. The Cuban component has an ethnographic character and is based mainly on fieldwork conducted in the island in the early twenty-first century. Engaging with the anthropologies of time and history, interdisciplinary discussions of the idea of “revolution,” and recent anthropological literature on revolutions, the article mobilizes the Haitian and Cuban cases to contend that some modern usages of the keyword “revolution” combine its sociopolitical meaning with the revolving temporality of its astronomic meaning.

KEYWORDS

Revolution;
 temporality;
 anthropology
 of history;
 Haiti; Cuba

Revoluções giratórias: Rupturas, retornos e repetições no Haiti e em Cuba

RESUMO Este artigo analisa o uso do fetichizado termo “revolução” como categoria da prática no Haiti e em Cuba em diferentes momentos históricos, argumentando que essa palavra-chave amiúde implica e ajuda a produzir uma temporalidade de retornos e repetições de vários passados, e não apenas rupturas e futuros, como os cientistas sociais normalmente pressupõem. As seções sobre o Haiti baseiam-se em pesquisa de arquivo, examinando o período entre o final do século XVIII e o final do século XX. O componente cubano tem caráter etnográfico e baseia-se sobretudo em trabalho de campo realizado no início do século XXI. Debatendo com as antropologias do tempo e da história, com discussões interdisciplinares sobre a ideia de “revolução” e com a literatura antropológica recente sobre revoluções, o artigo mobiliza os casos haitiano e cubano para sustentar que alguns usos modernos da palavra-chave “revolução” combinam seu significado sociopolítico com a temporalidade de seu sentido astronômico.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE
 Revolução; temporalidade;
 antropologia da história; Haiti;
 Cuba.

Es que yo creo en el poder liberador de la palabra. Pero también creo en su poder de destrucción pues así como hay palabras libertadoras también las hay destructoras, palabras que yo llamaría irremediables porque aunque parezca que se las lleva el viento, una vez pronunciadas ya no hay remedio. (...)

Las palabras, aunque poderosas, a veces se empantan en su semántica como el lodo en un charco, y no pueden expresar los múltiples matices del paisaje ni apresar los ires y venires del viento.

– Fernando Vallejo, *El desbarrancadero*

In 1969, the German historian Reinhart Koselleck wrote: “it almost seems that the word ‘revolution’ itself possesses such revolutionary power that it is constantly expanding itself to include every last element of our globe” (2004c, 44). This point still holds in today’s more globalized world, where the vocable “revolution” is often fetishized and disputed, claimed right and left by governments and oppositions alike. But it is no coincidence that Koselleck wrote his essay on the idea of revolution at the end of a decade in which this highly valued keyword travelled the globe in a particularly powerful and rapid movement. The two Caribbean island countries that I discuss here – Haiti and Cuba – provide good examples of the zeitgeist – or, if I may play on words, the *Wortgeist* – built around the term “revolution” in the 1960s.

After the fall of dictator Fulgencio Batista in the last hours of 1958, the word “revolution” took center stage in Cuban political life, being celebrated and disputed in the island and in its growing US-based diaspora. The term had been indissociable from Cuban nationalism since the nineteenth-century, when it denoted the struggle against Spanish colonialism. But, when the new regime led by Fidel Castro began calling itself simply *la Revolución* (“the Revolution”), the term flooded Cuban public culture in an unprecedented way. As public contestations of the official meaning of the word became increasingly proscribed in the island, many opposition groups that were settling down in nearby Miami affirmed that they were the *real* bearers of the “Revolution,” which had been “betrayed” by the new government (García 1996; Guerra 2014; Gonçalves 2017).¹

In the same period and in a neighboring island, another government was also portraying itself as a “revolution.” After being elected president of Haiti in 1957, François Duvalier claimed to be leading a “Revolution,” *la Révolution duvaliériste*, and staged a cult of personality in which he figured as the “Incontestable Leader of the Revolution,” an accolade written into the new Constitution, or as “the Head of the Revolution,” as he was named in the widely distributed *Catechism of the Revolution* (quoted in Pierre-Charles 2013, 89, 158-159). The Constitution and the Catechism were published in 1964, the same year in which a group of exiles who called themselves the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Haiti (Forces armées révolutionnaires d’Haïti,

¹ | Throughout this article I capitalize “Revolution” in either or both of two cases: a) when referring to meanings in which it is typically capitalized in its written form by the agents who mobilize it – even when I specifically discuss oral speech acts; b) in naming specific events normally capitalized in English-language scholarship, e.g. the Cuban Revolution and the Haitian Revolution.

FARH)² landed in Haiti hoping to overthrow Duvalier. After their defeat, the dictator boasted that “no force will stop the invincible march of the Duvalierist revolution” (*sic*; quoted in Dubois 2012, 341).

In both countries, therefore, “revolution” was a polysemic fetish-word whose meaning was disputed in the 1960s. Also, these cases share two features that conflict with usual academic associations of the term “revolution” with innovation and change. First, that signifier was used in both Cuba and Haiti to designate not *only* uprisings and political and social transformations, but *also* long-standing stable regimes which, despite their common authoritarian character and charismatic leaderships, differed in most regards—economic and social policies, racial ideologies, international alignments.³ Second, as I show in this article, in both cases the word “revolution” created a strong connection between their presents and celebrated pasts. These 1960s “Revolutions” were portrayed not simply as continuations, but as *returns* or *repetitions* of past “revolutions,” mainly the antislavery and anticolonial struggles in Haiti (1791-1804) and the wars of independence in Cuba (1868-1878; 1895-1898). In the 1960s in those countries, “revolutions” designated, to a large extent, returns and repetitions of the past.

These past-oriented reiterations destabilize predominant scholarly visions of “revolutions” as merely future-oriented ruptures. Even one of the most sophisticated anthropological theorizations of revolution takes such one-sided view for granted: David Scott reads the Grenada Revolution (1979-1983) as “an unprecedented symbol of the possibility of breaking with the colonial and neocolonial Caribbean past” (2014, 16) and as a synecdoche of a hopeful global revolutionary time in which “the past was largely conceived as a storehouse of disenchantment; it existed to be overcome” (13). In the subsequent neoliberal moment, Scott contrasts, “revolutionary futures” (4) were replaced by a worldwide concern for “trauma” and “memory” that has given the past a political relevance as “a radiant source of wisdom and truth” (13). Of this global present of “futures past,” (2) he says: “it is precisely when the future has ceased to be a source of longing and anticipation that the past has become such a densely animated object of enchantment” (13). For David Scott, the political orientation to the past is the *antithesis* of revolution; the past only gains a positive political role *after* revolution collapses.

Of course, Scott is not alone in this understanding. The few explicit definitions of “revolution” articulated by academics typically frame it as the very opposite of stable regimes and of repetitions of the past. Noticeable examples are Theda Skocpol’s classic statement that “social revolutions are rapid, basic transformations of a society’s state and class structures” (2014, 4) and, more recently, Igor Cherstich, Martin Holbraad, and Nico Tassi’s definition of revolutions as “‘cosmogonic’ ventures” in which radical changes “are pursued *explicitly* and *deliberately*” (2020, 156). Unlike these three works and most anthropological studies of revolutions (e.g., Donham

2 | The name of this group, created in the Dominican Republic after the revolutionary takeover in Cuba, may have been inspired by the name of Cuba’s Revolutionary Armed Forces (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias, FAR), created by the revolutionary government in 1961. Jorge Giraldo Ramírez (2015, 45-46) observes that, of the several Latin American guerrillas that emerged in the 1960s following Cuba’s example, at least four bore the phrase “Revolutionary Armed Forces” in their names. The most famous and long-lasting was the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), but organizations with similar names were also created in Argentina, Guatemala, and Uruguay.

3 | As shown by María Estela Spinelli (this volume), the leaders and supporters of several twentieth-century dictatorships in Argentina also used the term “revolution” to describe their governments.

1990; Thomassen 2012; Hegland 2013; Porter 2016), this article treats the term “revolution” not as an analytical category, but as what anthropologists once called a “native category” or, to use Pierre Bourdieu’s (1991) more apt idiom, a “category of practice” (see also Brubaker 1996). I examine how the term “revolution” has been used in practice by various historical actors in Haiti and Cuba, from the late eighteenth to the early twenty-first century, and the diverse and conflicting meanings such actors have attributed to it. More specifically, I analyze the complex temporalities that this polysemic fetish-term has presupposed and helped produce in those countries in various moments within this long period, to show that the association of that term with historical reiterations have a long history and a persisting positive political value.

To make these arguments, the article begins by discussing the influential statements by Hannah Arendt and Reinhart Koselleck on the temporality of revolutions and by Benjamin Lee Whorf and Edmund Leach on the symbolic representation of time. The following sections examine, respectively, the use of the term “revolution” in two spatially and temporally different settings – Haiti between 1791 and 1804, and Cuba in the 2000s and 2010s – to demonstrate that in both cases that keyword was largely associated with returns and repetitions of various pasts. The next section examines the persistence of that association in Haiti in the period from independence to 1957. Next, the article focuses on the discourse of François Duvalier’s regime in comparison to that of Fidel Castro’s, arguing that each of these regimes portrayed itself, with varying degrees of success, as a “Revolution,” thus giving this vocable a new meaning political stability and state power.⁴

In sum, by discussing multiple uses of the fetishized term “revolution” in Haiti and Cuba in various historical moments, I argue that modern claims about “revolutions” imagine and help produce *not only* ruptures and futures, *but also* stabilities and repetitions, presents and pasts. Needless to say, I do not argue that this is unique to Haiti and Cuba. These countries have been the stage of political events of world-historical relevance and global impact, set in a region crucial for Western modernity, and related to intrinsically modern processes like colonialism, nationalism, capitalism, and socialism. Following the example of Caribbean authors like Frantz Fanon, CLR James, Eric Williams, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, and David Scott, among others, this article treats the Caribbean not as a site of exceptionality, but as a place from which to think theoretically.

4 | I have been doing ethnographic and archival research about Cuba and its diaspora since 2001, whereas my field experience in Haiti has been limited to two months of exploratory research and study of the Haitian language in 2014. This article is thus based on field research in Cuba conducted over several visits between 2001 and 2016 and on the analysis of historical sources and secondary literature on Haiti. This methodological heterogeneity does not raise major problems because one of the points of my comparison is precisely to combine historical and ethnographic materials about different moments in time in order to show the variegated associations of the term “revolution” with repetitions and ruptures.

TIMES, HISTORIES, AND ANTHROPOLOGIES

The earliest analyses of “revolution” as a category of practice in relation to temporality are also the most accomplished to this day: Hannah Arendt’s *On*

Revolution and Reinhart Koselleck’s “Historical Criteria of the Modern Concept of Revolution.” First published in 1963, Arendt’s book anticipates Koselleck’s argument that the modern idea of revolution is based on visions of historical ruptures and novel futures:

The modern concept of revolution, inextricably bound up with the notion that the course of history suddenly begins anew, that an entirely new story, a story never known or told before, is about to unfold, was unknown prior to the two great revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century [the American and the French]. (Arendt 2006, 18-19)⁵

5 | Curiously and significantly, Cherstich, Holbraad, and Tassi (2020, 140) use 35 of the 50 words of Hannah Arendt’s sentence verbatim without due reference.

For Koselleck, the term “revolution” is “a linguistic product of our modernity” (2004c, 44) that became globally ubiquitous thanks to its “lack of conceptual clarity” and “sloganistic usage and utility” (43). Moreover, Koselleck associates this fetish-word with a new temporality that he best analyzes in other essays collected in *Futures Past* (2004a), a historicity characterized by the idea of progress; by a gap between past, present, and future; by an open, uncertain future that can nonetheless be planned, managed, and accelerated; by the view of history as a chain of unrepeatable events and ruptures. According to both Arendt and Koselleck, then, the emergence of the idea of “revolution” as we know it was as revolutionary as the processes it normally describes.

Both thinkers stress that the term “revolution” was imported into the social and political realms from astronomy, in which it had long designated the movement of planets and moons. In their views, this older, cyclical, meaning of “revolution” carries a temporality of *returns and repetitions* – returns of bodies to previous positions and repetitions of celestial phenomena – that is inherently different from the temporality implied by the newer, historical, meaning of “revolution” – a temporality of *ruptures and novelties*. The transitional links between these two conceptions were, for Arendt, the use of the term “revolution” to refer to the political changes in seventeenth-century England, from the abolition to the restoration of monarchy; and, for Koselleck, the view held by several early modern philosophers that different forms of government succeed each other in a natural cycle. In the late eighteenth century, Arendt and Koselleck concur, the term lost its metaphorical-cyclical character and came to denote rupture and novelty.

The spatial (in more than one way) roots of the historical idea of “revolution” are a well-documented instance of a phenomenon that Benjamin Lee Whorf identified in a 1941 text: the Western conceptualization of time through spatial images that act as “surrogates of nonspatial relationships” (1995, 159). One needs not subscribe to Whorf’s sweeping cultural-linguistic theories (rightfully criticized by Silverstein 2000), to agree with his well-grounded observation that in Western modernity

“we can hardly refer to the simplest nonspatial situation without constant resort to physical metaphor” (146). Good examples are two classics of the anthropology of time, from different Anglophone shores of the Atlantic. In 1940, Edward Evans-Pritchard famously distinguished the Nuer’s “oecological time,” which “appears to be, and is, cyclical” (1969, 95), and their “structural time,” which “is relative to structural space” (105). In 1966, Clifford Geertz used an equally spatial language when he described the Balinese “conception of time” as “punctual” (1973, 396).

Decades later, Carol Greenhouse (1996) convincingly pointed fundamental flaws in the anthropological spatialization of time: “the geometry of circles and lines understates the diversity and permutability of the constructions of time that exist around the world. It also ultimately fails even in relation to Western conceptions of time” (85). The supposedly cyclical times that anthropologists and other Westerners like to see elsewhere have diverse meanings in different cultural contexts, for “a cycle might be a pendulum, a static circle, a dynamic cycle, a spiral” (85).

Echoing Whorf, Greenhouse adds that many temporalities cannot even be translated into forms, spatial or otherwise, and that geometric metaphors “build specific Western assumptions into the interpretation of world views at home and abroad” (1996, 86). Not only is the spatial rendering of time ethnocentric, she contends, but it also has negative political effects, since it reproduces the way in which modernity “constructs an ‘other’ in temporal terms that exoticize it and account for its (past, present, or hypothetical) subordinate position in a hierarchy of control” (100).

Granted, these criticisms do not apply to Arendt and Koselleck, who strictly refrain from using caricatures such as those of a non-Western cyclical time and a modern linear time. When they mention “cycles” and “circles,” they both refer to either actual movements in astronomic space or to the metaphoric use of these images by earlier writers. But the persisting relevance of Greenhouse’s warnings is brought home by the centrality of the dichotomy between linear and cyclical times in a volume as recent as Cherstich, Holbraad, and Tassi’s (2020). Although I share with these authors the important point that “revolutions” involve more than simply rupture, novelty, and futurity, their argument relies on an opposition between a “modern” linear time and “other” cyclical times that carries, to say the least, all the epistemological and political problems of Occidentalism (Carrier 1992). Cherstich, Holbraad, and Tassi’s project of “an analysis of revolution that relies on the classic anthropological idea of cyclical time” (2020, 34) is part of their exoticizing search for non-Western, non-modern, non-secular “revolutionary cosmologies” (134).

In order to avoid these facile, misleading, and ideologically-charged oppositions, a quite different “classic anthropological idea” may be of much help. Edmund Leach, in “Two essays concerning the Symbolic Representation of Time” (1971), anticipates Greenhouse’s criticism of scholarly spatial renderings of time,

insisting that “there is nothing intrinsically geometrical about time as we experience it” (126). Leach proposes instead that we refer to what one may call, in a Durkheimian fashion, the elementary forms of temporality:

All other aspects of time, duration for example, or historical sequence, are fairly simple derivatives from these two experiences:

- a) that certain phenomena of nature repeat themselves;
- b) that life change is irreversible. (Leach 1971, 125)

For Leach, humans represent time by recognizing repetitions and changes – or, as I prefer to alliteratively call them, repetitions and ruptures. When examining the temporalities implied in and produced by the polysemic uses of the fetish-word “revolution” in Haiti and Cuba, I follow Leach’s lead, avoiding geometric metaphors and searching for diverse imaginations of time – that is, for various specific combinations of repetitions and ruptures.

My analysis aims to contribute also to the anthropology of history envisioned by Stephan Palmié and Charles Stewart, which “turns history itself, as a form of knowledge and social praxis, into an object of anthropological inquiry” (2016, 207). Since I mostly analyze *past* productions of history, this article *also* involves a historical anthropology (i.e. an anthropological study of the past). But it is mainly an anthropology *of* history, one that investigates the histories imagined in different uses of the term “revolution.”

TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY RETURNS

Focused on political upheavals in Western Europe and continental North America, Hannah Arendt’s and Reinhardt Koselleck’s discussions of the modern idea of “revolution” ignore the violent and complex processes through which the colonial slave society of Saint-Domingue was transformed, between 1791 and 1804, into Haiti, the world’s first nation-state of Black citizens. Their omissions exemplify a larger global erasure of the Haitian Revolution, an erasure that, according to Michel-Rolph Trouillot, is based on a “bundle of silences” (1995, 27). Trouillot argues that, because historical agents have an uneven power to leave traces in the world, the first layer of historical silencing in all times and places resides in the “moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*)” (26; italics in original). This inequality of sources is particularly marked in cases like the Haitian Revolution, whose grassroots protagonists – especially the rank and file who were still enslaved when they took to arms – were mostly illiterate and not fluent in the language that left most traces

behind: that of the colonizers.

This makes it difficult to evaluate how and to what extent the rebels mobilized the word “revolution” – especially its Haitian-language version, written today as *revolisyon* – on the ground. Still, several texts leave no doubt that the term was widely used in Saint-Domingue during this period to refer to local contemporary events. In 1791, a letter from Black leaders Jean-François and Georges Biassou to French officials who had just arrived in the island wielded that word to express the military strength of the insurgents: “you have inaccurate ideas about *the nature of the revolution*... In ordering us each to return to our own homes, you are demanding something both impossible and dangerous. A hundred thousand men are in arms” (2006, 100).⁶

6 | Unless otherwise noted, all emphases in quotations are mine.

The meaning of “revolution” was already disputed at this time: these two leaders demanded that the amnesty for “acts of revolution” granted by the metropolitan National Assembly be extended to the colony’s Black insurgents. As related by historian Laurent Dubois, this claim was contested by a white deputy in the colonial assembly: “[the amnesty] was for those who had committed ‘*acts of revolution*,’ and ‘certainly the crimes committed in Saint-Domingue must be considered differently.’ ... To accept the insurrection as an ‘act of revolution’ was, this deputy recognized, to legitimize it. It meant defining their struggle as politics rather than as ‘crime,’ and recognizing them as *revolutionaries* rather than as ‘brigands.’” (Dubois 2004, 126).

But another French colonist, who was taken prisoner by Black rebels in 1791 and left terrifying accounts of the treatment he and other whites received in the hands of their captors, had no qualms in calling the engulfing situation a “revolution”: “As for the original causes of this *revolution*, you should not have the slightest doubt that they are bound to be in France. ... They [the slaves] would never have taken such a *revolution* on their own initiative” (Le Gros [1793] 2014, 85-86). Not only is this passage a manifestation of the long-lasting racist tradition of negating or minimizing the historical agency of Black people (analyzed by Trouillot 1995), but it also indicates how early some whites came to refer to the events in Saint-Domingue as a “revolution” – even when they saw it, as in this case, as a deplorable thing.

Uses of “revolution” became more common as the events unfolded in the period. For instance, Toussaint Louverture, a man born into slavery who became the foremost leader and mythologized personification of the revolutionary masses, employed this word several times in a 1797 letter that responded to criticisms made by a Frenchman “whose fortune has been temporarily removed by the *revolution* in Saint-Domingue” (2006, 148). In 1801, beginning the long history of the use of the term “revolution” to legitimize Haitian governments, Louverture promulgated a Constitution that preserved Saint-Domingue’s colonial status but named him governor-for-life in recognition of the services “he has rendered the colony in the

most critical circumstances of the *revolution*” (Constitution 2006, 170).

Given the pervasive circulation of French revolutionary rhetoric and symbolism in the Caribbean island, it is no wonder that the word *révolution* was also deployed there. In all quotations above, it carried a connotation of rupture and disorder, evoking a powerful torrent that had turned the world upside down and reached a point of no return. Today, there is no doubt that this revolution represented a momentous and radical novelty. In the words of the Jamaican historian Franklin Knight, “The Haitian Revolution represents the most thorough case study of revolutionary change anywhere in the history of the modern world” (2000, 103).

Still, not everything in this change was about innovation. For Saint-Domingue non-whites, the rupture they accomplished was, in more than one way, *also a return*. The first to rise against colonial authorities were free people of color who called for the repeal of recently implemented racial discrimination laws. Thus, they fought not for novel rights, but for the restoration of a lost status quo ante in which they had been legally equal to white colonists. More importantly, *most* of the enslaved people who rose against their masters in the island had been born free in Africa and brought into slavery in the New World (Fick 1990; Thornton 1993; Dubois 2004; Davis 2016). That is, they too struggled for a return: the restoration of their recently lost freedom. Although from the perspective of world history their victory doubtless signified an unprecedented rupture, from their viewpoint it was *also* a return to a state of non-slavery that they had known in their own personal histories.⁷

This is not only my interpretation; the idea of a revolutionary return was explicit in statements made by several Saint-Domingue leaders. In 1794, Jean-Baptiste Belley lauded his colleagues at the National Convention, in Paris, for the abolition of slavery: “You have given *back* their freedom to two million men snatched by greed from their homeland... you have *returned* [them] to life and happiness” (2014, 113). The Black deputy’s words were partly based on his personal experience: he had been born in Africa and brought into slavery in the colony. In 1804, when declaring Haiti’s independence, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, also formerly enslaved and the country’s first head of state, exhorted his compatriots to take revenge on the French by saying, “[You who] have *revived* liberty by shedding all your blood, know that you have done nothing if you do not give the nations a terrible, but just example of the vengeance that must be wrought by a people proud to have *recovered* its liberty” (Declaration of Haitian Independence 2006, 189).

Most probably, this emphasis on a *return* to freedom is partly rooted in an idea common in the revolutionary North Atlantic of the time, according to which freedom and equality were natural qualities that could and should be restored by political action. Louverture put this view into lapidary prose in 1793: “Freedom is a right given by Nature; equality is a consequence of this freedom” (2014, 124). It was this disseminated idea that made Hannah Arendt acknowledge an element of return

7 | This difference between the analytical perspective and the viewpoint of historical actors on the ground inverts the otherwise similar difference pointed out by Rafael Sánchez in the interview with him and Claudio Lomnitz included in this special issue.

and restoration even in the upheavals which, for her, propelled the modern “pathos of novelty”: “They [American and French revolutionaries] pleaded in all sincerity that they wanted to *revolve* back to old times when things had been as they ought to be” (Arendt 2006, 34).

Arendt is obviously describing a “historical inversion,” the name Mikhail Bakhtin gave in the 1930s to the projection of utopian visions onto idealized pasts. Because the future is so devoid of materiality, the Russian critic argues, a better or ideal world becomes “weightier, more authentic and persuasive” (2006, 147) if it is imagined as having existed in the past.⁸ But, even if the Haitian rebels shared this historical inversion with their foreign contemporary counterparts, they definitely gave a new, concrete and material, meaning to the goal of recovering a past freedom. In Saint-Domingue, a better past was not an abstract fantasy, but lay in the very recent and concrete experience of most grassroots insurgents, who had been free in Africa in their own lifetimes. This makes the idea of a *return* to freedom even “weightier, more authentic and persuasive” when articulated by formerly enslaved people like Belley, Dessalines, Louverture, and, above all, by the Africa-born soldiers they led.

8 | It may not be a coincidence that Bakhtin wrote about historical inversions around twenty years after the Russian Revolution of 1917, whose developments deeply impacted his life and work.

Returns – and even repetitions – of African pasts in the Haitian Revolution were not limited to the recovery of a past freedom. Many contemporary observers – participants and outsiders, friends and foes – noted a strong African component in the rebels’ style of warfare and in their war magic and rituals, a component that has long been analyzed by Haitian thinkers like Jean Price-Mars ([1928] 1954; see also Gonçalves 2022) and is duly stressed today by scholars like Laurent Dubois (2004). Other historians have argued, moreover, that the revolution revived Africa in the Caribbean in other aspects as well. According to Carolyn Fick, the insurgent slaves’ “agricultural egalitarianism” and “independent relationship to the land, African in outlook, formed the foundation of their own vision of freedom” (1990, 250). Taking his cue from Fick, John Thornton (1993) has demonstrated that the political ideology and civil wars of the Kingdom of Kongo played a fundamental role in the Haitian Revolution, and added that “from the beginning [of the slave uprisings], kings and queens were elected in various areas whenever the insurgents succeeded in gaining political control. These elections *harked back to* the older kings and queens of [African] national organizations” that underlay the secret societies of Saint-Domingue (207-208). Therefore, the Haitian revolutionary rupture contained various culturally-specific reiterations of past phenomena.

Not all reiterations related to Africa, though. Joseph Saint-Rémy, a nineteenth-century Haitian historian who collected testimonies of eyewitnesses of the Revolution, relates that, just before proclaiming independence, Jean-Jacques Dessalines and other military officers agreed “on giving *back* to the country its aboriginal name of Haiti” (quoted in Geggus 2002, 208). This renaming was – and

still is—seen in Haiti as the *return* of an indigenous name. As stated by David Geggus, this “symbol of resistance” (2002, 213) “betokened above all a rejection of Europe and its colonial claims. It was a legitimizing link with the pre-Columbian American past” (219; see also Fouchard 1984). One of the greatest historical ruptures in world history, the Haitian Revolution culminated with, and owes its name to, the return of an indigenous past that none of its participants had lived.

TURN-OF-THE-MILLENNIUM REPETITIONS

In 1959, another historical rupture often called a revolution, which also had a global impact, happened across the Windward Passage. A group of young, mostly white and male insurgents, with nearly unanimous popular support, overthrew a dictator and established a populist government that two years later declared itself socialist (see, e.g., Eckstein 2003; Pérez-Stable 2011; Guerra 2012; Gonçalves 2013; Hynson 2019). However, in the island where it happened, this event is known as “the triumph of the Revolution,” whereas the term “la Revolución” denotes other things. The local uses of this fetishized word in Cuba started becoming clear to me in two conversations that I had in my first fieldwork visit to Havana, in 2001. In one, I told an architect friend who was very critical of the government that I planned to research Cuban nationalism “after the Revolution,” by which I meant “after 1959.” Confused, he asked if I was going to study the future, because, he said, “the Revolution is still in power.” Some days later, having learnt my lesson, I told a museum employee, a staunch supporter of the government, that I wanted to do research about Cuba “during the Revolution, since 1959.” Irritated, she corrected me: “the Cuban Revolution began in the nineteenth century, comrade.” These anecdotes indicate that the term “Revolution” in Cuba encompasses periods both *before* and *after* the 1959 rupture.

On the one hand, at least until the protests of July 2021, Cubans used the vocable “Revolution” in a tacit, unquestioned way to refer to their government. Supporters and critics alike colloquially employed this term to designate the socialist regime, and this synonymy had the taken-for-granted character that Stuart Hall (1988) and Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (1991) call hegemony. Unlike people in other countries, Cubans used the word “Revolution” to refer not only to past political events or past social processes, but also to the regime created out of such events and which promoted such processes. Decades after the deep social transformations of the 1960s, it made sense to Cubans of all political persuasions to say that someone was in favor or against “the Revolution”; that “the Revolution” did this or that, delivered (or failed to deliver) goods and services, expected loyalty and gratitude; or, in my friend’s words, that “the Revolution is still in power.” Even after the 2021 protests, when Cubans started openly criticizing the state’s use of the term,

“the Revolution” in Cuba denotes not resistance, but power; not rupture, but order; not a future, but the present.

On the other hand, as suggested by the scolding the museum employee gave me, Cuba’s present-day “Revolution” also projects itself onto the past. As early as 1953, when an ideologically loose group of urban youth started a rebellion against the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista (1952-1958), they claimed to be repeating Cuba’s nineteenth-century anticolonial uprisings. Following the Hispanic American tradition of employing the name “revolution” to refer to any armed movement against a status quo (Vanegas 2010; Sánchez 2016; interview with Lomnitz and Sánchez, this volume; Spinelli, this volume), the participants and supporters of the anticolonial struggles that began in Cuba in 1868 had always called them revolutions. After the end of Spanish rule in 1898, the commemoration of those upheavals became the center of Cuban nationalism, which led to a fetishization of the term “revolution” and to its recurrent use to legitimize any attempt at overthrowing a government by non-electoral means (see Pérez [1988] 2014; Thomas [1971] 2001; Iglesias 2003).

Thus, it is no surprise that the insurgents of the 1950s and those who supported them presented their struggle as a revolution that revived earlier ones. Most notably, they saw themselves as latter-day followers of Cuba’s foremost national hero, writer José Martí (1853-1895), who, in the 1890s, had founded the Cuban Revolutionary Party and organized the last anticolonial revolution of the nineteenth century. Calling themselves “the generation of the centennial,” the 1950s rebels staged their first armed uprising in the year of Martí’s 100th birth anniversary. After their failure, their leader, the young lawyer Fidel Castro, was imprisoned, had his photograph taken under a portrait of Martí that decorated the jail he was in, and, questioned who was the “intellectual author” of the revolt, simply replied, “José Martí.” His visual and verbal acts signaled that he and his “Revolution” replicated the older hero and his previous “Revolution.”

Ever since Fidel Castro came to power on January 1st, 1959, the state has widely reproduced and circulated his photograph under Martí’s portrait and the accolade of “intellectual author” he gave Martí, both of which have become inevitably known by anyone who has lived in Cuba in over six decades. The Cuban regime never established a cult of Castro’s personality during his lifetime, but all state media have repeatedly, ubiquitously, and tirelessly promoted the cult of José Martí and his association with the socialist leader (López 2006; Bejel 2012; Gonçalves 2012, 2015). Castro has delivered most of his important speeches under the giant statue of Martí that overlooks Havana’s monumental Revolution Square. In 1995, he performed a ceremony at the isolated beach on which Martí had landed in Cuba exactly one hundred years before to launch his anticolonial revolution. In 2008-2009, the most widely displayed poster in honor of “the fiftieth anniversary of the triumph of the Revolution” showed a photograph of an old Fidel Castro posing next to the image of

a young Fidel Castro posing next to the portrait of Martí, in a sequence of returns to revolutionary pasts.

The constant reiteration of the cult of Martí is only one of the ways in which Cuba’s socialist “Revolution” has claimed to revolve to revolutions past. Like other regimes that claimed to be revolutionary (Verdery 1991; Burawoy and Lukács 1992; Wedeen 1999; Wu 2014), Cuba’s has cluttered public culture with the unavoidable, massive presence of propaganda in all kinds of media: the print press, radio, television, billboards, monuments, posters, rituals, spectacles, etc. Most Cubans have long been exhausted by and skeptical about these practices, which some call a *machacadera* – literally, repeated actions of crushing something or someone, or an overwhelming rhetoric and imagery that repeats itself endlessly. A middle-aged salesman brilliantly formulated the repetitiveness of this practice when he told me in jest: “Fidel Castro is a genius. He invented a record of one revolution per minute. A broken record always playing the same revolution.”

This salesman’s use of the term “revolution” was an acute criticism of both the form and the content of state discourse, of both its repetitiveness and its fetish-word. If “Revolution” came to be used in a naturalized manner to name the regime, it is partly because this meaning has suffused Cuban public culture for decades. Since the 1960s, for instance, the term has adjectivized the two main institutions in charge of the state’s use of violence: the National Revolutionary Police (Policía Nacional Revolucionaria, PNR) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias, FAR). Another state organization that bears the keyword in its name has a branch in every city block and rural village in Cuba: the Committees of Defense of the Revolution (Comités de Defensa de la Revolución, CDRs), neighbors’ associations of quasi-compulsory membership responsible for political surveillance and for ensuring “voluntary” labor in public works and engagement in governmental campaigns. One would be hard-pressed to find an adult Cuban who does not know by heart the lyrics of the omnipresent anthem of the CDRs: “a committee on every block; Revolution in every neighborhood...”

As the cult of Martí indicates, the temporality of revolutionary *machacadera* is mainly one of reiterations of the past. Three often-reproduced state slogans offer other good examples. One proclaims that *siempre es 26* (“it’s always the 26th”), a reference to the first uprising against Batista on July 26th, 1953; another states *nosotros como ellos, ellos como nosotros* (“we [act/are] like them, they [acted/were] like us”), in which “they” stand for nineteenth-century revolutionaries and the more ambiguous “we” connote both the rebels of the 1950s and contemporary Cubans. And a sentence by Martí, *el Partido es el alma de la Revolución* (“the Party is the soul of the Revolution”), gets a new meaning by being repeated out of context: originally meaning the anticolonial party and the insurrection led by Martí, it sounds to contemporary ears as a reference to the rule of the Communist Party of Cuba, the only one that

has existed in the country since its founding in 1965. *Every* day the radio, television, and morning rituals in all schools retell events that happened “on this day” in past years, most often minute details of the revolutionary struggles of the nineteenth century and of the 1950s. Visual imagery of well-groomed anticolonial heroes in black suits and of hypermasculine bearded rebels in green uniforms is ubiquitous in institutional logos, notebook covers, television spots, t-shirts, stickers, calendars, posters, murals, and billboards. The ever-returning and ever-repeating presence of past revolutionaries is an inescapable, taken-for-granted feature of everyday life in the island.

Ironically, though, the constant *return* of the 1950s has also produced another temporality: that of an insurmountable *rupture* between the times before and those after “the triumph of the Revolution.” Comparisons between the present and the pre-1959 era help give some legitimacy to the regime: even its harsh critics sometimes recognize that, after all, violence, poverty, sexism, racism, everything was worse in the 1950s! Needless to say, such consolations would be preposterous in countries where there is no constant public retelling of the misery and sufferings of a long-gone decade.

Still, most Cubans give critical meanings to this great rupture, by inverting the official reasoning and comparing the misery and sufferings of the present to a supposedly more affluent and fortunate *antes* – “before.” An acquaintance once told me that it was easy to remember his home address: the street was an important one and the house number was “the last year in which Cuba was happy: 1958.” In 2008, I heard a sharp critical comment that combined *both* the rupture and the repetitions implied in the fetish-word “Revolution.” As I was waiting in line to buy bread in preparation for an upcoming hurricane, an elderly woman yelled, “no hurricane can be worse than the one we have been living in for fifty years.” A broken record for a citizen, a nasty hurricane for another, the Revolution I knew in Cuba was doubtless a revolving thing.

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF REVOLUTIONS

Revolving winds in the Caribbean are ever-returning events – as meteorological phenomena and as sociopolitical metaphors alike (see Pérez 2001; Gonçalves 2018; Scott 2018). Historian Claude Moïse, for instance, writes that in his island nation, across the Windward Passage from Cuba, in the period between the American occupation (1915-1934) and the dictatorships of François and Jean-Claude Duvalier (1957-1986), “politics became again, like [it had been] before, a sweeping whirlwind” (1992, 218).⁹ For Moïse, that 1934-1957 interregnum in Haiti, full of recurrent violent upheavals and power abuses, replicated the previous, longer era

⁹ | All translations of sources in languages other than English are mine.

of political instability that had ended with the US intervention in 1915. Of those two tumultuous periods – 1843-1915 and 1934-1957 – he said, “social facts and political actions rebound, turn over themselves, and reemerge from the past in such a way that sometimes we have the impression that the present is behind us” (194). With these words and the whirlwind image, Moïse describes a temporality of repetitions and returns that is indissociable from the term “revolution”: this keyword was widely used in those periods to designate the original processes of 1791-1804 (often simply called “*the Revolution*”) as well as several later attempts at overthrowing governments by force.

As it would happen in Cuba decades later, the Revolution as a founding moment of insurrection became one of the bases of Haitian nationalism soon after independence. In 1822, President Jean-Pierre Boyer, who ruled Haiti between 1818 and 1843, wrote to Greek nationalist leaders to applaud “the revolution of your co-citizens against the despotism which lasted for about three centuries, [a revolution] that cannot leave Haitians indifferent, for we, like the Hellenes, were for a long time subjected to a dishonorable slavery and finally, with our own chains, broke the head of tyranny” (2005, 168). Two years later, when Haiti’s nation-state was barely twenty years old, the politician and journalist Hérard Dumesle published a book about his travels in northern Haiti, focusing on monuments and stories related to the original revolution. He laid the grounds of a national founding myth by composing a poem based on folk narratives he collected about a Vodou ceremony in which, in 1791, the enslaved sworn to take up arms against the French. This event was later increasingly mythologized, and to this day it is repeatedly exalted in oral, written, and visual forms in Haiti, under the name of “the oath of Bois-Caïman” (Price-Mars [1928] 1954; Hoffman 1992; Gonçalves 2022).

By the mid-nineteenth century, the antislavery and anticolonial Revolution had become the preferred topic of Haitian historians (see Geggus 2002), whose discipline, like in many other places (see Duara 1995), first emerged as a nationalistic discourse. And, as elsewhere, their intellectual disputes over the past were often part of broader political disputes over the present. In his study of the long-lasting conflicts between lighter-skinned (*mulâtres*) and darker-skinned (*noirs*) Haitians, David Nicholls (1996) analyzes what he calls “the mulatto legend” and the “black legend [*sic*],” competing versions of history that emerged in the nineteenth century and which disagreed mostly on which of the two groups they portrayed as the heroes and villains of the Haitian Revolution. This historical dispute helped make hegemonic the unquestioned common ground shared by the two legends and their narrators: the celebration of the founding rebellions and the term used to designate them, “the Revolution.” However, according to Michel-Rolph Trouillot, the historical controversy between *mulâtres* and *noirs* put the latter on a moral high ground because of the predominant understanding of the original Revolution among

Haiti’s urban elite: “More perhaps for them than for the common folk, the Haitian revolution [*sic*] was and remains the final symbol of the *regeneration* of the entire ‘black race’ [*sic*] from the abyss imposed by slavery” (1990, 117).

This inseparable association of the original Revolution with Black freedom and racial equality also gave Haiti, in the view of its intellectual and political elite, a cosmopolitan mission to help emancipate all Black people in Africa and the diaspora. This idea was perhaps best encapsulated in Anténor Firmin’s dedication of his monumental *Equality of the Human Races*: “To Haiti. May this book ... contribute to accelerating the movement of *regeneration* accomplished by my race under the blue and bright sky of the Antilles! May it inspire the love of progress, justice, and freedom, among all children of the Black race, spread on the Earth’s immense orb” (1885, v). Throughout the book, to combat the European idea of racial hierarchy, Firmin wielded both physical anthropological data and the historical example of the “revolutionary movement that led to Haitian independence” (544) as proofs of the high physical, moral, and intellectual capacities of Black people.

Anténor Firmin was, besides a respected *savant*, a politician. In 1888, he joined a rebellion against the government that its leaders and supporters called a revolution. This exemplifies that the word “revolution” was increasingly fetishized in nineteenth-century Haiti not only by references to the past, but also – like in Cuba in the same period – by its use to refer to any contemporary armed attempt to overthrow a political status quo. The first of such movements to be successful in independent Haiti had been the Revolution of 1843 against President Jean-Pierre Boyer. Tellingly, one of the leaders of this revolution was the same Hérard Dumesle – like Firmin, an intellectual-turned-revolutionary – whose work had helped mythologize the original Revolution. Laurent Dubois stresses the importance of that past for the 1843 insurgents: they “announced that the fortieth year of Haitian independence would be the ‘first year of the *Regeneration*’” (2012, 122).

This regenerating event opened the first unstable period that Claude Moïse described as a “whirlwind” in which “social facts and political actions rebound, turn over themselves, and reemerge from the past.” That such facts and actions often resurfaced under the name of “revolution” is made clear by Moïse himself: “Laws and constitutions... served above all the goals of those who held power and those who desired it. ‘The Constitution, said President Vincent, is an old general who always spearheaded revolutions’” (1992, 209). The repeated use of the term is evident in a history textbook published in Haiti in the last year of the US occupation, which, besides the successful revolutions of 1843, 1888, and 1908, mentions several “revolutionary” tribunals, committees, leaders, hopes, and fears in the decades between 1843 and 1915 (Dorsainvil 1934). A more recent primary source, a Wikipedia entry in Haitian Creole called “List of Haitian revolutions and coups d’état,” mentions not three, but six successful “revolutions” in the same period.¹⁰

¹⁰ | Available at https://ht.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lis_revolisyon_ak_koudeta_ayisyen, accessed on February 19, 2023.

In a more critical fashion, historians also document this reiteration of revolutions. For François Blancpain, Haiti’s “*repeated* ‘revolutions’” (2016, 195) were one of the main drains of its state coffers in the nineteenth century. And, referring to the recurrent sequences of authoritarian governments and armed insurrections in twentieth-century Haiti, Blancpain writes: “it is this lack of balance between the government and a legal opposition that causes what Jacques de Cauna calls ‘Haiti, the eternal revolution’” (265). The use of scare quotes in these passages exemplifies the typical resistance of scholars to use the *analytical* category “revolutions” to label most upheavals in postcolonial Haiti, which usually lacked popular involvement (e.g., Moïse 1992; Nicholls 1996). Still, it is clear that for a long time the keyword was a fundamental and ubiquitous category of *practice* for those who participated in those whirlwinds. If, as academics tend to agree, militarism was a long-lasting heritage of the original Haitian Revolution, so was the keyword inextricably linked to that militarism: “revolution.”

REVOLUTION AS ORDER

Following the footsteps of previous Haitian intellectuals-turned-revolutionaries, the physician and anthropologist François Duvalier claimed to be leading a “revolution” during his presidency, which lasted from 1957 to his death in 1971. According to the economist Gérard Pierre-Charles, “the effort of Duvalierist ideological propaganda was first of all to present the regime as the application of a revolutionary doctrine” (2013, 111). The dictator boasted titles like “the Incontestable Leader of the Revolution” and “the Head of the Revolution,” and in 1967 the state published “the *Bréviaire d’une révolution*, containing the sayings of Duvalier and appearing in the format of a little red book similar to Mao’s famous volume” (Nicholls 1996, 233).

Given the fetishized value the term “revolution” had acquired in Haiti by then and its accelerated spread across the world at that time, none of this is very surprising. Still, compared to the previous usage of that keyword in Haiti, it is no small irony that Duvalier claimed to be leading a revolution. Firstly, he became president not through a traditional armed movement of the kind that had usually been called a revolution, but by electoral means. His victory was largely fraudulent, but even his harshest critics agree that he was so popular in 1957 that he might have been elected even without fraud (Nicholls 1996; Dubois 2012). Secondly, whereas in previous periods in Haitian history “revolutions” had been a sign of political whirlwinds or “chronic political instability” (Trouillot 1990, 83), *la Révolution duvaliériste* was another name for an established social order, for a stable structure of power. Like its contemporary counterpart across the Windward Passage, Duvalier’s government

claimed to be *The Revolution in Power* – the title of two volumes of his *Essential Works* (see Duvalier 1967).

Also, much like its Cuban counterpart, Duvalier’s regime constantly revived the past to justify its self-presentation as a Revolution – in this case, too, with a capital R. According to David Nicholls, “the most frequently recurring feature” of Duvalier’s electoral campaign was that “again and again the name of Estimé appears; he had begun the revolution which Duvalier himself was to complete” (1996, 209). The reference is to Dumarsais Estimé, a teacher who was brought to power by the Revolution of 1946 and led a progressive government until being ousted by a coup d’état in 1950. Like Fidel Castro, François Duvalier claimed to be reviving past revolutions – and not only one. Listing Haiti’s rulers who had taken part in the original Revolution and the Revolution of 1846, the *Catechism of the Revolution*, widely distributed by the government from 1964 onwards, stated, “Dessalines, Toussaint, Christophe, Pétion, and Estimé are five founders of the nation who live on in F. Duvalier” (quoted in Pierre-Charles 2013, 159). Although the predominant focus of the regime’s discourse was on Duvalier’s present embodiment of Dessaline’s “blood and ideal” (ibid.), it also repeatedly celebrated other heroes. On Toussaint Louverture, for instance, Duvalier wrote, “he teaches us that every revolution that intends to be deep and long-lasting must have the redemption of the masses as its goal” (1967, 54). In Duvalierist Haiti, as in socialist Cuba, past heroes were tools for the promotion of a revolving revolution.

The official discourses of those two Caribbean “Revolutions” share several other features, beginning with the supposed goal of “the redemption of the masses.” Both identified the masses with their leaders, claimed that they defended their nations against imperialism, and attacked their adversaries as privileged, vicious class enemies that deserved no place in their nations. One would be forgiven for thinking that some writings by François Duvalier had been authored by a supporter of the “Cuban Revolution,” like the following: “the Duvalierist Revolution defends equity against ardent egoisms. It raises itself against the omnipotence of castes that intend to turn injustice and exploitation into principles” (Duvalier 1967, 109).

I stress these similarities to point out the complex (and often misleading) polysemy of the term “revolution” in practice; Duvalier’s and Castro’s “Revolutions,” of course, radically differed in most other regards. The Haitian regime was decidedly anti-Communist and pro-capitalism in its discourse and in its policies alike, whereas Cuba’s has been a state socialist system since 1961 (despite many oscillations in its opening to markets, private enterprise, and social inequalities). Accordingly, the “Duvalierist Revolution” had a mostly positive relationship to the United States (despite tensions during the Kennedy administration), whereas the latter country has long been the normalized enemy of the “Cuban Revolution” (despite rapprochements during the Carter and Obama administrations). And the

two “Revolutions” had diametrically opposed racial ideologies. Whereas the Cuban one has perpetuated racism by denying its existence and by celebrating the island’s *mestizaje* (see, e.g., de la Fuente 2001; Sawyer 2006; Fernandez 2010), the Duvalierist one racialized classes in an oversimplified, Manichean dichotomy: the heroic masses as noirs and the corrupt elites as mulâtres (see, e.g., Trouillot 1990; Nicholls 1996; Pierre-Charles 2013).

Most importantly, Duvalier’s regime has been far less successful than Castro’s in its self-promotion as a “Revolution” among its citizens. More research would be needed for a definitive assessment, but there is no indication that Haitians ever came to refer to François Duvalier’s government simply as the “Revolution,” at least not in colloquial parlance and in a taken-for-granted way, as it has happened in Cuba in relation to its own regime. This may be due to several factors, but here I must stress two: the undisguised cult of personality and the blatant brutality of the “Duvalierist Revolution.”

Whereas the latter was named after the dictator himself, in Cuba the usual lack of adjectives for the fetish-word tacitly affirmed its national character: “la Revolución” is obviously the *Cuban* one. If Fidel Castro was glorified mostly in indirect ways, through the cult of the past revolutionaries he was said to embody in the present, Duvalier was *not only* linked to previous heroes, *but also* openly worshipped by the state. Examples include the prayers of the *Catechism of the Revolution* and public displays such as one described by Laurent Dubois: “a neon sign in front of the National Palace flashing a message with his signature at the bottom: ‘I am the Haitian flag, One and Indivisible – François Duvalier’” (2012, 344). In contrast, the Palace of Revolution in Havana, the seat of Cuba’s executive power, is not even seen from the street: its façade is literally hidden behind the giant Martí statue in Revolution Square.

Equally unveiled was the unprecedented brutality of the “Duvalierist Revolution.” According to Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “Duvalierism distinguished itself by *a new kind of state violence*” (1990, 166, italics in original): “violence became potentially ‘total,’ a daily sign of the omnipresence of a state that obeyed no logic besides its own” (169). To understand this, it is useful to compare the two capillary institutions of political control used by the Caribbean “Revolutions” of the 1960s: Cuba’s CDRs, mentioned above, and Haiti’s feared *tonton makout*, the militia of “volunteers” that spread terror with indiscriminate assaults and killings.¹¹ Cuba’s “Revolution” is an authoritarian and repressive system that has long silenced political alternatives, imposed compulsory demonstrations of popular support, and established a complex machinery of everyday surveillance, but its techniques of power have been way more sophisticated and concealed than the “Duvalierist Revolution,” in which, as Laënnec Hurbon puts it, “the state was only known by citizens under the face of pure violence” (1987, 18).

¹¹ | See Pierre-Charles’ comment on the meaning of the “Revolution” for the *tonton makout*, quoted in the presentation of this special issue.

This helps understand why Jean-Claude Duvalier, who succeeded his father as president of Haiti in 1971, employed more subtle forms of repression and replaced the “Duvalierist Revolution” for a more humble “economic revolution,” promoted in a less pervasive and deifying propaganda (see Nicholls 1996; Lewis 2004; Dubois 2012). Tellingly, when the second Duvalier fled Haiti thanks to an immense popular uprising in 1986, this political change was not – and still isn’t – widely called a “revolution.” Some opposition leaders and scholars have described this a “democratic revolution” (see Pierre-Charles and Low 1988; Moïse 1992), but this term never became dominant. Rather, “the 1986 overthrow of Duvalier was spoken of as the ‘uprooting’” – in Haitian, *dechoukaj* (Dubois 2012, 360). Today other keywords seem to have taken the central place that “revolution” once occupied in Haitian public culture. First, in the 1980s and 1990s, came *demokrasi*, “democracy” (Moïse 1992); later, a much less hopeful *kriz*, “crisis” (Beckett 2019), which has prevailed since chronic instability reemerged in 2004 – ironically, the year of the bicentennial of independence. All seems to indicate that, together with the poisonous Duvalier tree, Haitians have uprooted the old use of the term “revolution” as a synonym for the whirlwinds of violent political changes. Meanwhile, in Cuba, “the Revolution” kept revolving.

CONCLUSION

In 1962, the Trinidadian intellectual and activist CLR James wrote an addition to his 1938 book on the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins*. He explains the subtitle of this “Appendix: From Toussaint L’Ouverture [*sic*] to Fidel Castro” in its first paragraph: far from indicating a mere “demarcation of historical time,” it stresses that “what took place in French San Domingo in 1792-1804 *reappeared* in Cuba in 1958” ([1962] 1989b, 391). Thus, CLR James makes it clear that, rather than a temporal continuity, the link he identified between the two Caribbean revolutions was one of historical *reiteration*, that is, a return or a repetition.

This should come as no surprise to any careful reader of *The Black Jacobins*, which aimed to provide Africa’s future anticolonial leaders with practical lessons taken from the past successes and mistakes of Toussaint Louverture. Talking about himself in the third person, CLR James states in the “Appendix” that when he first wrote the book “it [was] African and African emancipation that he [had] in mind” ([1962] 1989b, 402). For him, the enslaved of Saint-Domingue could guide the colonized of latter-day Africa because revolutions are full of returns and repetitions – as suggested, for instance, by “some obscure Rhodesian black [*sic*] in whom burns the fire that burnt in Toussaint” ([1938] 1989a, 376) and by the potential leaders of African independence who may be “reading a stray pamphlet of Lenin or Trotsky as

Toussaint read the Abbé Raynal” (377).

The reference to the two Russian leaders is not accidental. Revolutionary Russia is discussed throughout *The Black Jacobins* with one face towards the future and another towards the past: it sheds light on both the upcoming African revolutions and on the past Caribbean revolution. When James asks, “What should Toussaint have done?” ([1938] 1989a, 282), he is adapting Lenin’s own question, “What is to be done?”, to a past time and to a different place. This gesture is possible because “Lenin and the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution faced much the same problem as Toussaint” (282), and the latter failed “for the same reason that the Russian socialist revolution failed” (283).¹²

Therefore, CLR James’ dictum that “revolution is a great teacher” ([1938] 1989a, 131) applies not only to ongoing processes, but also to past ones: future anticolonial revolutionaries in Africa could and should learn from past revolutionaries in Saint-Domingue and Russia because certain situations and events – such as revolutions – often reappear in history. In fact, CLR James’ sentence is revealingly reminiscent of the old Western topos of *historia magistra vitae*, or “history, the teacher of life” – which, for Reinhart Koselleck, expresses a vision in which “history makes us free to repeat the successes of the past instead of recommitting earlier mistakes in the present day” (2004b, 27). Koselleck contrasts such a pedagogical conception of history based on repetitions and returns to the modern historicity of ruptures and novelties which, according to him, underlies the concept of “revolution.”

CLR James thus combines two historical perspectives which, in Koselleck’s view, are irreconcilable: that of “revolution” and that of history as the teacher of life. Accordingly, in James’ writings, revolutions are *not only* about repetitions of the past; they *also* involve future-oriented ruptures. *The Black Jacobins* describes African anticolonial revolutionaries as “symbols of the *future*” ([1938] 1989a, 377) and its subsequent “Appendix” argues that Caribbean revolutionaries “have brought *something new*” ([1962] 1989b, 417). Connecting the two texts, James comments that his 1962 addition “attempts for the *future* of the West Indies, all of them, what was done [in the book] for Africa in 1938” (1989a, vii). In other words, for CLR James, the Russian, the Cuban, and the African revolutions in different ways *repeat the rupture* represented by the Haitian Revolution. He thus defies the stark opposition between a history of reiterations and a history of ruptures that is posited by Koselleck and most later scholars.¹³

Following CLR James’ lead and discussing several meanings taken by the term “revolution” in different historical moments in Haiti and Cuba, this article has

¹² | Of course, these two failures are of different kinds. Whereas Toussaint Louverture died in a prison in France, by the failure of the Russian Revolution CLR James probably refers to the rise of Stalinism.

¹³ | This difference may be due to the fact that CLR James was not a professional academic, but an activist-intellectual whose writings are inseparable from revolutionary praxis. His concern for practical real-life political matters probably gave him a more complex understanding of revolution and its temporalities.

criticized the usual one-sided academic association of that vocable with ruptures and the future. It has shown that this keyword has presupposed and helped produce various temporalities and historicities, none of them based only, or even mostly, on future-oriented ruptures. As the images of a record, a hurricane, and a whirlwind indicate, modern revolutions like those in Haiti and Cuba may have an inherent *revolving* – returning and repeating – character that merges the astronomical and historical meanings of “revolution” distinguished by Reinhart Koselleck and Hannah Arendt. Like celestial revolutions, the various earthly social and political revolutions in Haiti and Cuba have been to a great extent about *returns* to previous states and about *repetitions* of past phenomena.

My idea of revolving revolutions is a metaphor that self-consciously underscores the astronomical origins, local understandings, and repetitive aspects of the term “revolution.” It does not fall, thus, into the mistakes of spatial readings of time criticized by Edmund Leach and Carol Greenhouse. In fact, I have totally avoided images of “linear” and “cyclical” time – reproduced, most recently, by Cherstich, Holbraad, and Tassi, who, in an Orientalizing manner, associate these images, respectively, with the West and the rest. Using such a binary in the cases I have examined here would have otherized and exoticized the histories of two fully Western countries located in a region fundamental for the emergence of Western modernity (Williams 1944; James [1962] 1989b; Mintz 1985; Trouillot 1992) and which have been the stage of strictly modern “revolutions” of vast global effects and of world-historical importance.

Adopting Leach’s view that all temporalities are combinations of ruptures and repetitions, I have pointed out complexities that otherwise would have been obscured: that the *rupture* brought by the Haitian Revolution was for its protagonists also a *return* to a lost past; that other, later “revolutions” in Haiti were *ever-repeating ruptures*; and that in Cuba “the Revolution” has meant above all a *repetition of revolutions past*, and only secondarily a rupture. Furthermore, in both countries the term for decades designated *long stable presents* synonymous with social order and regimes of power. My analysis not only corroborates Palmié and Stewart’s point that even in the modern West “people operate with multiple tenets of historical thought” (2016, 222), but also indicates that such multiple tenets may be embedded and interwoven in one single fetishized term.

Such complexities were only made evident by applying to the term “revolution” the old anthropological wisdom of interpreting local categories of practice. Moreover, any anthropology of revolutions that does not rigorously treat “revolution” as such will be tautological – as exemplified, again, by Cherstich, Holbraad, and Tassi’s work. They initially affirm that they consider “revolution” “a local category” (2020, 9), but then selectively discuss cases that confirm their a priori interpretation of revolutions as “cosmological projects” or “events that seek to generate and regenerate worlds”

(2020, 155). Well, if one can pick and choose “revolutions” as one pleases among the plethora of uses of the term across times and places, one can pretty much say just *anything* about revolutions. Such a selection not only creates empirical and theoretical distortions, but also raises serious ethical and political problems: it risks turning anthropologists into ideologues that give their academic blessing to some actors in detriment of others in their disputes over the correct definition of the “revolution.”

The story I have told in this article shows, in addition, the political importance of understanding the multiple uses of the term “revolution” in practice. Both nation-states I have examined here were built upon the fetishization of the word “revolution,” and in both places the vocable has met endings that are melancholy for anyone committed to emancipatory social changes. In Haiti, the term has apparently been given up after having been repeatedly used, since independence, to authorize political violence by authoritarian governments and oppositional movements. In Cuba, it now designates an unpopular authoritarian regime that tenaciously resists democratic changes. In both countries, widespread disillusion and hopelessness about the future prevail. Repeated and growing exoduses suggest that for Haitians and Cubans alike the future now resides elsewhere, not in their home islands (Weinreb 2009; Gonçalves 2016; Beckett 2019). One can thus say of Haiti and Cuba today what David Scott wrote, albeit in a radically different way, of postrevolutionary Grenada: they are testament to “the ethical-political experience of the temporal ‘afterness’ of our postcolonial, postsocialist time” (2014, 21). For these reasons too it is pressing that anthropologists engage in a rigorous and fearless ethnographic critique of the various meanings and temporalities of “revolutions” – and not only the ones we like.

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João Felipe Gonçalves is a tenured professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of São Paulo (USP), Brazil. An anthropologist of history and a political anthropologist, his research and teaching focus on issues of historical representations, nationalism, diasporas, the state, and Black intellectual history, especially in the Caribbean, Latin America, the Philippines, and Korea. He has been a visiting fellow in institutions such as the University of Miami's Cuban Heritage Collection, Collegium Budapest, the University of the Philippines, Seoul National University, and Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, Bulgaria.

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