

# Introduction to the Special Issue: Revolution Talks; Ethnographies and Histories of a Political Endorser

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We write this Introduction in 2024, the year of the fiftieth anniversary of two large popular uprisings – one in Ethiopia and one in Portugal – that went down in history as “revolutions.” In each of them a variety of social groups joined forces and defeated an unpopular government, thanks largely to a coup d’état staged by military officers. Both upheavals entailed the collapse of centuries-old social orders known as “empires” – Ethiopia’s monarchy and Portugal’s colonial system – and both generated deep economic, political, and sociocultural changes.

Despite these similarities, there are equally important differences between the Ethiopian and the Carnation Revolutions. The “empires” they helped bring to an end, for instance, were poles apart in their relationship to colonialism: one was the African dynastic realm that most resisted European rule; the other included some of the oldest modern European occupations in Africa. The two revolutions of 1974 differed widely in their aftermaths as well: one resulted in a state socialist regime that collapsed in 1987, and the other in a liberal democracy that lasts to this day. Given their diverging outcomes and legacies, it is not surprising that the fiftieth anniversaries of the two revolutions have not been celebrated with the same levels of consensus or enthusiasm.

Other round anniversaries that took place in 2024 include the centennial of Albania’s June Revolution and Sudan’s 1924 Revolution; the ninetieth year of Spain’s October Revolution and Nazi Germany’s failed Second Revolution; the eightieth year of the Guatemalan Revolution and the Glorious Revolution in Ecuador; the seventieth year of the Democratic Revolution in Hawaii and the beginning of the Algerian Revolution; the sixtieth year of the Zanzibar Revolution and the military coup d’état in Brazil that its leaders and supporters called a “revolution.”

The enduring effects of most of these examples suggest the continuing importance of the term “revolution” in the contemporary world. Such relevance is made even more evident by the fact that 2024 also marked the twentieth anniversary of Ukraine’s Orange Revolution and the tenth anniversary of the end of the Maidan Revolution, without which one could hardly understand the Russo-Ukrainian war. Two other popular insurgences with significant effects today – as different from each other as they are from the Ukrainian revolts – took place forty-five years ago: the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua.

Regarding the latter two, Jack Goldstone, a historical sociologist specialized in early modern revolutions, wrote in 2013:

When I was still a graduate student in 1979, as the Nicaraguan and Iranian Revolutions were unfolding, I expressed my excitement to colleagues about these events. We felt they were fascinating, but at the same time we wondered if there would be any more revolutions in the years ahead. ...

But the years ahead continued to fill with revolutions: the anti-apartheid revolution in South Africa; the Philippines’ “People Power” Revolution that overthrew Ferdinand Marcos; the Polish Solidarity Revolution, the Czechoslovak Velvet Revolution, the other anticommunist revolutions in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union; the Maoist Revolution in Nepal; the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine; and the Arab Revolutions of 2011, to name only the most prominent. (Goldstone 2013, 131)

Goldstone’s examples and those we listed above point to the highly variegated character of political upheavals that are called “revolutions.” That word is used to refer to phenomena as varied as anticolonial and anti-imperialist movements, pro-democracy demonstrations, waves of labor strikes, right-wing coups, rises and falls of leftist governments, and even shifts of dominant parties by way of competitive elections. Not all movements labeled as revolutions were successful, and those that were established regimes of various kinds: state socialist systems, right-wing dictatorships, liberal and illiberal democracies.

Moreover, our and Goldstone’s lists conceal the highly disputed character of the term “revolution.” Several of the mentioned events – like the military coup of 1964 in Brazil, the fall of apartheid in South Africa, and some rebellions of the Arab Spring – are far from being unanimously called “revolutions.” What is more, some of the listed risings fought regimes that claimed to be revolutionary themselves, like those of the Nazis in Germany and of the Communist parties in Central and Eastern Europe, and even the conjugal dictatorship of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, which presented itself as a “Democratic Revolution.” Incidentally, another clear indication of the contemporary effects of processes termed “revolutions” is the fact that the

current president of the Philippines, Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr., is the offspring of the couple whose Democratic Revolution was interrupted by the EDSA or People Power Revolution.<sup>1</sup>

The polysemic and disputed character of the keyword “revolution” is well exemplified by its use in reference to two events whose twentieth anniversaries will take place in 2025: Kyrgyzstan’s “Tulip Revolution” and Lebanon’s “Cedar Revolution.” The former was unintentionally named by the very person it toppled. In December 2004, President Askar Akayev – an ally of Vladimir Putin who had been in power since 1990 – denounced the West’s intention to promote in Kyrgyzstan what he disdainfully and sarcastically called “a tulip revolution.” His prophecy was fulfilled three months later, when massive popular protests led him to flee to Moscow and resign. In response to Akayev’s provocation, the rebels had adopted tulips as their symbol, but when such flowers disappeared from the capital – allegedly removed by the government – the demonstrators started wearing pink armbands and carrying daffodils. The upheaval thus got the alternative names of “Pink Revolution” or “Daffodil Revolution,” but the appellation that eventually prevailed was the one created by the very target of the revolt. At any rate, all three epithets made references to past episodes christened after colors or flowers: Georgia’s 2003 “Rose Revolution” and Ukraine’s 2004 “Orange Revolution” – and, more distant in time and space, Portugal’s 1974 “Carnation Revolution.”<sup>2</sup>

Another “revolutionary” reference to the kingdom *Plantae* also appeared in 2005 to qualify Lebanon’s insurrection against Syrian military presence in the country, but its use has been far less consensual than its Kyrgyz flower counterpart. Coined in Washington, D.C., the label “Cedar Revolution” was promoted by the Bush administration as an alternative to the term “Independence Intifada” – which was, and still is, the most often used in Lebanon and the rest of the Arab world to refer to that turmoil. Even though *intifada* simply means “rebellion” in Arabic, American diplomats and media avoided that expression because of its inevitable association with the Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation. As journalist Jefferson Morley stated at the time, “in a media age, such branding could be crucial. The name given to Lebanon’s popular political movement is shorthand for its historical roots and its future direction.”<sup>3</sup>

The usage of the locution “revolution” to refer to the 2005 events in Kyrgyzstan and Lebanon is clearly associated with pro-Western standpoints – as it is the case with previous processes named after colors or plants, from the Carnation to the Orange Revolutions. But, of course, the polysemic and disputed word “revolution” not always implies such international alignment. In the region we write from – Latin America and the Caribbean – this is probably most obvious in the case of Cuba, where the revolutionary takeover of 1959 led to the establishment of a state socialist regime that has since called itself *la Revolución*. As João Felipe Gonçalves shows in

1 | The process that led to the fall of the Marcos regime in 1986 is variously called the “People Power Revolution,” the “February Revolution,” or the “EDSA Revolution.” The latter label makes reference to EDSA, an acronym for Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, the major ring road in Manila in which the most crucial popular demonstrations against Marcos took place. On Ferdinand Marcos’ concept of “Democratic Revolution,” see Iletto 1993.

2 | Tom Wood, “Reflections on the Revolution in Kyrgyzstan,” *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 30, no. 2 (2006): 43-56; Vladimir Radyuhin, “Moscow and multipolarity,” *The Hindu*, December 30, 2004, <https://web.archive.org/web/20060219033248/http://www.hindu.com/2004/12/30/stories/2004123000391000.htm>; Nick Paton Welsh, “Pink revolution rumbles on in blood and fury,” *The Guardian*, March 27, 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/mar/27/nickpatonwelsh.theobserver>.

3 | Jefferson Morley, “The Branding of Lebanon’s ‘Revolution,’” *Washington Post*, March 3, 2005, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A1911-2005Mar2.html>.

his contribution to this issue, the phrase has long been used in a taken-for-granted way by Cubans of all political persuasions as a synonym for that regime. Still, since at least the wave of demonstrations that swept the island in July 2021, many Cubans have been openly attacking the state’s definition of the term, which they now denounce as a misnomer and sometimes replace by the resonant neologism *robolución* – from the Spanish word for theft, *robo* (Gonçalves 2023).

Following the Cuban model, another Latin American government has been claiming to be “la Revolución” for exact 25 years: the Chavista regime in Venezuela. However, as we began writing this Introduction, in August 2024, thousands of Venezuelans were protesting in the streets – and meeting violent repression – in a sweeping revolt that looked very much like events that have been called “revolutions” elsewhere. But so far it is unclear whether those rebels presented themselves as “revolutionaries” or not. At any rate, their struggle was inseparable from the vocable “revolution,” which may come to designate their own movement, the regime they demonstrated against, or both.

As we wrote these lines, two other large popular uprisings broke out in other continents and have been explicitly called “revolutions” by their protagonists, supporters, and outsiders. Also in August 2024, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, was overthrown by rebellious crowds composed mostly of young students in what was immediately hailed, at home and abroad, as a revolution. According to a CNN reporter, “inside Bangladesh it’s being dubbed a Gen Z revolution,” and, for a freelance journalist writing for Al Jazeera, “this revolution was years in the making.” But a headline in another news outlet of global impact reveals the polysemy of the noun: a profile in *The Guardian* described Hasina, the target of the current revolution, as the “child of [a previous] revolution who eroded Bangladesh’s democracy.”<sup>4</sup>

Specters of past revolutions also haunt another insurgence that unfolded as we wrote this Introduction and that was being dubbed a “revolution” by some. In October 2024, protests broke out in Mozambique against the proclamation of the sixth consecutive electoral victory of the party that has ruled the country since independence in 1975. The Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO, Mozambique Liberation Front) has long used the mystique of the anticolonial revolution it staged against Portugal to justify its rule, but some of its opponents are now using the keyword “revolution” against this self-styled revolutionary regime. When thousands of Mozambicans took to the streets to fight what they denounced as electoral fraud, the main opposition leader, Venâncio Mondlane, described the demonstrations as “the revolution in motion” and welcomed “the Revolution of the Mozambican People.” Judging from comments on Mondlane’s Instagram posts, many of his supporters reverberate this terminology, as do several journalists. In fact, an image that went viral on the Internet shows a young Mozambican rebel crouching against

4 | Helen Regan, “Bangladesh’s ‘Gen Z revolution’ toppled a veteran leader. Why did they hit the streets and what happens now?,” *CNN World*, August 6, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/08/06/asia/bangladesh-protests-hasina-resignation-explainer-intl-hnk/index.html>; Jennifer Chowdhury, “The victory of Bangladesh’s student movement should not surprise anyone,” *Al Jazeera*, August 5, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/8/5/the-victory-of-bangladeshs-student-movement-should-not-surprise-anyone>; Tracy McVeigh, “Sheikh Hasina: child of the revolution who eroded Bangladesh’s democracy,” *The Guardian*, August 6, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/article/2024/aug/06/sheikh-hasina-profile-ousted-bangladesh-prime-minister>.

the background of a street fire and holding a handwritten poster that says: “Revolution now! The time has arrived!”<sup>5</sup>

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On December 8, 2024, as this special issue was going to press, the Syrian state television broadcast the following announcement: “Victory of the great Syrian revolution and the fall of the criminal al-Assad regime.”<sup>6</sup>

## THE NAME

All this suggests that what Reinhart Koselleck wrote in 1969 is still valid today:

The semantic content of the word “revolution” is thus by no means unambiguous. ...

Accordingly our concept of revolution can be defined as a flexible “general concept” that means at least something anywhere in the world, but which in a more precise sense fluctuates enormously from country to country and from one political camp to another. It almost seems as if the word “revolution” itself possesses such revolutionary power that it is constantly extending itself to include every last element of our globe. If this were so then we would have a political slogan whose composition assured its constant reproduction...” (Koselleck 2004, 44)

This special issue is inspired by Koselleck’s observations, which we take as a call for further empirical research on the disputed polysemy of the vocable “revolution.” In fact, we started this Introduction by invoking anniversaries of revolutions because our primary interest lies not in revolutionary processes per se, but in the usage of the word “revolution” in social practice – a usage that, of course, may take place *before*, *during*, and *after* the processes the label is used to designate. In a similar vein, we take all the events we mentioned as an indication not only that people keep *making* revolutions worldwide, but mainly that even more people keep *using* the term “revolution.”

Accordingly, the effort of the essays collected here is to take “revolution” not as an analytical category, but foremostly to study that keyword as, to use Pierre Bourdieu’s (1991) felicitous phrase, a “category of practice” – or as what some anthropologists like to call “a native category.” Our perspective is partly inspired by Roger Brubaker’s (1996) argument that scholars should refrain from treating nations as analytical concepts and, instead, analyze them as categories used in social practice. But there is a crucial difference between our approach to “revolutions” and Brubak-

5 | Venâncio Mondlane (@venancio.mondlanevm7), “Revolução em andamento,” *Instagram*, October 28, 2024, [https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBrldVdujKk/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==](https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBrldVdujKk/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==); Venâncio Mondlane (@venancio.mondlanevm7), “Chamado à Revolução do Povo Moçambicano,” *Instagram*, November 2, 2024, [https://www.instagram.com/p/DB3qQAluc9P/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==](https://www.instagram.com/p/DB3qQAluc9P/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==); Dulce Neto, “Há ingredientes para uma revolução sem pegar em armas; diz Venâncio Mondlane em entrevista ao Observador,” *Observador*, November 7, 2024, <https://observador.pt/especiais/ha-ingredientes-para-uma-revolucao-diz-venancio-mondlane-em-entrevista-ao-observador/>; Paula Cristina Roque, “Mozambique: a revolution born in the search for electoral justice,” *African Arguments*, November 7, 2024, <https://africanarguments.org/2024/11/mozambique-a-revolution-born-in-the-search-for-electoral-justice/>.

6 | “Syrian state TV hails ‘victory’ of ‘revolution’, fall of al-Assad,” *Al Arabiya News*, December 8, 2024, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2024/12/08/syrian-state-tv-hails-victory-of-revolution-fall-of-al-assad->.

er’s approach to nations. Whereas the latter rightfully denies nations the status of actually existing entities – a move that, we agree, is a necessary condition for a non-essentialist study of nationalism – we do not think that such a priori denial can or should be extended to all historical phenomena that are or have been called “revolutions,” for some of them are undeniably more consequential and transformative than others.

As such, the best analogy to the perspective of this collection on “revolutions” is perhaps Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s understanding of “history.” Trouillot famously argues that between the two meanings of “history” – “what happened and what is said to have happened” – there is “an irreducible distinction and yet an equally irreducible overlap” (1995, 3). On the one hand, Trouillot stresses such distinction to counter a naïve positivism that sees historical narratives as transparent depictions of events; on the other hand, he stresses such overlap to oppose a radical constructivism according to which all narratives are equally fictional and therefore equally valid. Similarly, we do *not* assume that all things known as “revolutions” have in fact been revolutions; instead, we *do* take the use of the word “revolution” in practice as an important political and sociocultural reality that needs to be studied by anthropologists.

It is rather surprising that the disputed polysemy of the term “revolution” has not yet emerged as a main topic in the budding field of the “anthropology of revolutions” (for overviews of this field, see Cherstich, Holbraad, and Tassi 2020; Wilson 2023). Despite insightful exceptions such as Pardis Mahdavi’s (2009) study of what young Iranians call their “sexual revolution” and Karl Swineheart’s (2019) analysis of the Andean idea of *pachakuti*, most ethnographies of revolutions have refrained from in-depth discussions of local and contested meanings of the word “revolution” in social and political life. Granted, this has not prevented anthropologists from writing important and sophisticated analyses of revolutions, such as Donald Donham’s work on Ethiopia (1999), Mary Elaine Hegland’s book on Iran (2013), and Yiching Wu’s (2014) analysis of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

But the lack of attention to the disputed semantics of the vocable “revolution” does create conceptual problems sometimes. An example can be found in the otherwise excellent study of a village in eastern Cuba by Mona Rosendahl (1997), based on the first ethnographic fieldwork conducted by a foreigner in the island since the 1960s. Although the book has a chapter titled “Talking about the Revolution,” it focuses not on the term itself, but on local views about Cuba’s regime. There is no inherent problem in such a choice, except that it is based on the simplistic statement that “socialism” is “what people call ‘the revolution’” (4) and on the author’s use of the noun “socialism” to designate the Cuban government. These two premises preclude a critical discussion of the conditions of possibility, limitations, and effects of such supposedly transparent synonymities.

Much more fraught with conceptual and political problems is Martin Holbraad’s work about the “ontology of the revolution” (2014) in Cuba, which uncritically accepts the official self-presentation of the Cuban regime as a “revolution,” refrains from discussing that discourse and its effects, and equates what is simply an anthropology of late state socialism to a programmatically self-declared “anthropology of revolution.” This is analytically misleading and politically dangerous, for it naively assumes that a decades-old sociopolitical order *is* in fact a revolution and reproduces one of the main ideological bases of Cuba’s authoritarian regime.

Furthermore, an ontological approach to revolution not only misses, but also precludes a semantic and political analysis of what people *do* in the world when they *talk* about “revolutions.” This special issue is an exercise in such analysis, applying to “revolution” what Michel-Rolph Trouillot says about history: “there is the more serious question of determining not what history *is* – a hopeless goal if phrased in essentialist terms – but how history works. For what history is changes with time and place or, better said, history reveals itself only through the production of specific narratives” (1995, 25; italics in original). The same is true, we hope to show, for “revolutions.”

### THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

This project started as a panel at the 2016 meetings of the American Anthropological Association in Minneapolis, organized by João Felipe Gonçalves. More directly, this special issue is based on the ensuing conference that we both convened at the University of São Paulo (USP) in 2018.<sup>7</sup> Titled “Revolution Talks: Ethnographies and Histories of a Polysemic Term,” the conference invited participants to discuss the multivocality of the word “revolution” by addressing questions such as:

What kind of processes, groups, or institutions do citizens, state agents, and intellectuals refer to when they invoke a “revolution”? How do they compete for the definition of the term? What kind of ambiguities does the term give rise to, and what are their political effects? How and to what extent does it help authorize certain forms of power and political action? What is the relationship of these local meanings to nationalistic imaginations and forms of temporality? In what contexts does the term “revolution” acquire a fetishized political value, and how? How does the use of this term relate to global, local, and national political economic processes and semiotic traditions and contexts?<sup>8</sup>

The majority of the contributors to this issue presented papers at the USP conference, and, conversely, most of the conference participants contributed to

7 | That conference was funded by CAPES Foundation, grant # 2214/2017. We thank CAPES’ generous support for making that conference and therefore this special issue possible.

8 | Email sent by João Felipe Gonçalves to invited conference participants. As it is to be expected in thematic conferences, each paper addressed such questions in different ways and to different degrees, but we include our original list here hoping that it stimulates further empirical research on these and related issues.

this publication. In the interdisciplinary spirit of the conference, this special issue includes a historian (María Estela Spinelli), a scholar whose work spans both anthropology and history (Claudio Lomnitz), and five sociocultural anthropologists (João Felipe Gonçalves, Rafael Sánchez, Ruy Llera Blanes, Susana Durão, and Victor Miguel Castillo de Macedo) whose works have a marked historical character.

We are happy and proud to publish a trilingual special issue, with three pieces in English, two in Spanish, and one in Portuguese. We wish we could offer translations of each piece into the two other languages, but, having lacked funds for that goal, we still hope this polyglot character can contribute to creating links between language-bounded academic fields and to overcoming global hierarchies of scholarship. The same can be said of the variety of national origins and institutional affiliations of our contributors, which include scholars with diverse trajectories in the Global South and the Global North alike, crossing divides of what Takami Kuwayama calls “the world system of anthropology” (2004, 9).

However, the international division of anthropological labor of such world-system does reverberate in our special issue. Despite the absence of an essay about Brazil, the location of our original conference and this journal is reflected in the geographical focuses of the pieces collected here. Most of them examine the use of the keyword “revolution” in Latin American and/or Caribbean countries – namely, Argentina, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Mexico, and Venezuela – and the two exceptions discuss Lusophone shores of the Atlantic – Angola and Portugal. Therefore, each location included here has regional and/or historical connections to the country from which we write; this is testament to the persistent power of global academic hierarchies and of the international division of anthropological labor.

Nonetheless, we stress two important points regarding the regional scope of this special issue. First, like our own previous work (Gonçalves 2013, 2017; Dias de Andrade 2019, 2020, 2022), three articles included here – on Cuba and Haiti, on the Dominican Republic, and on Portugal – are examples of what João Felipe Gonçalves (2021, 2022) labels “transversive anthropologies” – that is, noncentral anthropologies that study locations abroad and thus challenge the national mission and scope that is expected of them (on the national character of peripheral anthropologies, see Demirer 2011; Thompson and Sinha 2019; Gonçalves and Lasco 2023). This and the fact that we put together pieces on various countries hopefully help correct the persisting national exceptionalisms that plague much of the social science scholarship made in our region.

Second, we couldn’t overstate the facts that this special issue is *not* purposefully designed around a geographic focus and that it is not intended to contribute *only* to specialized knowledge about the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Atlantic World. Although the pieces collected here hopefully add to the scholarship about this area, the principal aim of this special issue is to contribute to a *theoretical* un-

derstanding of the disputed polysemy of the term “revolution.” In other words, our effort is to explore local and regional particularities to shed light on other parts of the globe as well.

## NATIONALISM

One of the clearest lessons of this special issue is not a new finding, but an oft-forgotten truth: the close relationship between the term “revolution” and nationalism.<sup>9</sup> As early as 1983, the classic that inaugurated contemporary studies of nationalism – Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* – stressed that relationship, calling revolution and nationalism “twin conceptions,” a “pair [of] *inventions*, on which patents are impossible to preserve” (2002, 156; italics in original). What is more, Anderson explained that his motivation for writing that book was his initial bewilderment at the conflicts between Asian socialist states and their roots in the troubling fact – troubling, that is, for a Western Marxist like himself – that “since World War II every successful revolution has defined itself in *national* terms” (2; italics in original).

9 | We follow here Gonçalves’ definition of nationalism as “the ideology or discourse that postulates the existence of a ‘people’ as a collective subject, that maintains that there ought to be a unity between that people and the state that rules over it, and that both must be territorially bounded. That is, nationalism is defined by claims not only that the ‘nation’ exists as an entity, but also that it has to be both the subject and the sovereign of the state” (2012, 8).

The very reason for Anderson’s original bewilderment may help us understand why his observations on revolutions have been far less influential than his theories on nationalism. Granted, nationalism being its main topic, his work does not give the same emphasis to both phenomena, but other of his related theses – like the modularity of nationalism and its replacement of religious communities – have been far more consequential for later scholarship, even if often read critically (e.g., Chatterjee 1993; Wedeen 2008). The influence of Western Marxism on academic analyses of revolutions, coupled with that Marxism’s assumption that socialist revolutions are or should be inimical to nationalism, probably contributes to the scholarly downplaying of the national character of actually existing revolutions (Verdery 1991; Gonçalves 2013).

In the specific case of anthropology, to this Western Marxist component should be added the search for and emphasis on non-Western and non-modern elements of revolutions – a search and an emphasis perhaps best represented by the volume written by Igor Cherstich, Martin Holbraad, and Nico Tassi (2020). Important as this approach undoubtedly is, it has not been conducive to studying or even acknowledging the blatant nationalist character of revolutions that Anderson stressed over forty years ago. In addition, our discipline’s well-known predilection for researching the local and the global may lead its practitioners to underemphasize what lies between those two levels, especially the persisting power of nationalism across the globe (for sharp criticisms of this bias, see Tsuda 2003; Boellstorff 2005).

This collection provides several counterbalances to the scholarly minimization of the nationalist character of revolutions. Particularly revealing in this regard

is the interview with Claudio Lomnitz and Rafael Sánchez, who discuss the use of the keyword “revolution” in Mexico and Venezuela. In both places this noun started being used in the early nineteenth century to designate the rebellions against colonial rule – which resonates with Anderson’s view that nationalism first emerged in the colonial Americas. To this we add that the two anticolonial upheavals that preceded the Spanish American ones and that created the world’s first two postcolonial nation-states are widely called “revolutions” too: the American and the Haitian ones.<sup>10</sup> Lomnitz and Sánchez also show that long after independence the vocable “revolution” in Mexico and Venezuela remained indissociable from the performative postulation of the existence of a sovereign “people” and from calls for the recovery of “authentic” national political traditions. Their interview, thus, makes it clear that the term “revolution” kept a remarkable positive and nationalistic value in the subsequent centuries in both countries.

10 | Also, William Sewell (2004) has persuasively argued that the other great Atlantic revolution of the late eighteenth century, the French one, was equally crucial for the emergence of nationalism, as indicated by the fact that some of its participants claimed to act on behalf of a newly imagined collective sovereign called “the nation.”

This political value is perhaps most evident in the processes that came to be known as the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) and the Bolivarian Revolution (1999-?). Despite their differences, both “revolutions” share marked nationalistic discourses and imageries, and are linked to long, stable regimes that have claimed revolutionary credentials. In Mexico, the party that has exercised the longest rule in Latin America (1929-2001) has always boasted the label “revolutionary” in its name, first as the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR, National Revolutionary Party, 1929-1938), then as the Partido de la Revolución Mexicana (PRM, Party of the Mexican Revolution, 1938-1946), and, to this day, under the denomination of Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, Institutional Revolutionary Party). In Venezuela, as we mentioned above, the governments of Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) and Nicolás Maduro (from 2013 to the present) have continuously claimed not only to have a revolutionary character, but, more ambitiously, to *be* “la Revolución” itself. Lomnitz and Sánchez show us that in both countries the locution has had a positive association with popular sovereignty, nationalistic imaginations, and discourses of political authenticity.

Mexico and Venezuela were two of the three areas in which revolts against Spanish colonialism first emerged and spread to other parts of the Empire. The third was the one that would later be christened as Argentina, where such original anticolonial rebellions were also called “revolutions.” It is perhaps not by chance, then, that in Argentina too that word has long kept a positive political value, being claimed by movements that, despite their deep and wide differences, shared the idea of regenerating or recreating the nation. This is well demonstrated by María Estela Spinelli’s analysis, in this special issue, of four coups d’état in Argentina that were presented as “revolutions” by their leaders and supporters.

According to Spinelli, two of such coups in Argentina, those of 1930 and 1955, had the self-proclaimed mission to *restore* older national political traditions against

democratically elected governments headed by popular leaders. In contrast, she argues, the “revolutions” of 1943 and 1966 were supposed to *recreate* the nation through novel socioeconomic orders. Spinelli’s contribution teaches us that the appellation “revolution” in twentieth-century Argentina: a) had a predominantly positive value, for only critics of such coups refused to refer to them as “revolutions”; b) was a highly polysemic term connected to diverging political projects, even among the protagonists of each coup; and c) had a strong nationalist component, for all uprisings it designated were proclaimed to be carried out in the name of a sovereign people and for the sake a better nation – no matter if their idealized national model was located in the past or in the future.

## TEMPORALITIES

Both María Estela Spinelli’s article and Claudio Lomnitz and Rafael Sánchez’s interview show that, pace Karl Marx’s predictions ([1852] 1978) and Hannah Arendt’s ([1963] 2006) and Reinhart Koselleck’s ([1969] 2004) interpretations, “revolutions” may be associated not only with future-oriented ruptures, but also with returns and repetitions of the past. Spinelli stresses that “revolutions” can have restorative as well as innovative goals and motivations; Lomnitz and Sánchez demonstrate that even “revolutions” that attempt to recreate society from scratch may do so in the name of past radical beginnings and of a lost authentic popular sovereignty. Other anthropologists have explored the multiple temporalities of revolutions, but the pieces in our special issue add that such heterochronicity (Wirtz 2014) does not depend on exoticizing visions of “cyclical time” and on the blending of the modern idea of “revolution” with non-Western and non-modern ontologies or cosmologies. Quite on the contrary, such heterochronicity is inscribed in the very modern, Western idea of “revolution.”

In this collection, this is most explicitly argued in the contribution by Gonçalves, which examines the usage of the vocable “revolution” in Haiti and Cuba in different moments between the late eighteenth and the early twenty-first centuries. The piece introduces the idea of “revolving revolutions” to describe the temporality of events that have been imagined as “revolutions” not despite, but thanks to their presentation as returns or repetitions of past “revolutions.” As in the cases examined by Lomnitz and Sánchez, this orientation is deeply associated with the nationalism denoted by the phrase “revolution,” which in those Caribbean islands too was fetishized as the very name of mythical national foundational moments. And, like in Lomnitz and Sánchez’s interview, in Gonçalves’ article “revolutionary” returns and repetitions are not necessarily opposed to ruptures; rather, many “revolutions” are in fact narrated as returns or repetitions of past ruptures – even if sometimes

the new “revolutions” represent not ruptures at all, but the long presents of stable authoritarian regimes like François Duvalier’s and Fidel Castro’s.

An even more complex interplay of “revolutionary” pasts and presents can be found in Ruy Llera Blanes’ article about Angola. The Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA, People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola) has ruled the country since independence in 1975, resting its authority on the key role it played in the revolution of the 1960s and 1970s against Portuguese colonialism. But, as Blanes shows, the recent “resurfacing and replication of the revolution as a political trope” in Angola is due to a popular protest movement that, since its emergence in 2011, has mobilized the term “revolution” against the ruling MPLA. As its nickname – *Revu*, short for *revolução* – indicates, this opposition movement (very much like the one in Mozambique in 2024) presented itself as a new revolution, which both evoked the original, anticolonial one and defined itself against a regime that claims to be its present-day bearer and heir. According to Blanes, this critical revolutionary return has produced a “doppelgänger effect,” a “rhetorical feedback” in which one side’s revolutionary claims feeds the other’s. Blanes’ analysis emphasizes that this dispute has created a pair of “evil twins,” but it also makes it clear that their conflict reproduces what both take for granted: the political value of the word “revolution” and its anchoring in a national rebellious past.

The contemporary return of a revolutionary past is also the focus of Victor Miguel Castillo de Macedo’s contribution to this special issue. But, unlike other articles collected here, his piece focuses on a past *failed* insurrection: the one that took place in the Dominican Republic in 1965. The “Revolution of 1965” or “April Revolution” – also known locally as “the Civil War” or “the April War” – had mainly restorative goals: reverting the coup of 1963, reinstating the old Constitution, and bringing back to power the president ousted by that coup. But, after violent confrontations in the streets of the Dominican capital, the revolt ended with a military intervention by the United States that frustrated such restorations.

Given this melancholy ending, it is perhaps not surprising that Macedo brings into play an element that is absent from other pieces in this collection: nostalgia. His article provides an ethnography of a march that veteran rebels led in 2019 in downtown Santo Domingo to commemorate the anniversary of the 1965 events. Macedo argues that these men turned April 24, the date in which the rebellion broke out, into a “temporal platform for the expression of political grievances” and used urban locations associated with their struggle as the basis for “remembering futures past.”<sup>11</sup> Their temporal-spatial evocations did not aim to promote a new revolution – as the young Angolans analyzed by Llanes did – but to criticize the current political and economic order of the Dominican Republic. According to Macedo, this stance was inseparable from the veterans’ self-criticism of the contradictions and limitations of their own “revolution” and, most importantly, from a strong sense of

<sup>11</sup> | All translations of quotations of Spanish- or Portuguese-language pieces included in this special issue are ours.

nostalgia which, in his words, entails “not the idealization of a pure, pristine time, but the realization of [their] losses.”

Nostalgic evocations of the noun “revolution” should come as no surprise. In her masterful analysis of that “historical emotion,” Svetlana Boym observes that “outbreaks of nostalgia often follow revolutions.” She appears to be referring mainly to collective longings for prerevolutionary times, but Macedo reminds us that revolutions themselves can be the object of nostalgia – the kind of nostalgia that Boym calls “reflective,” which does not desire the restoration of an idealized past, but, rather, uses the past to criticize the present and think of new futures. Most importantly, nostalgic evocations of “revolutions” corroborate Boym’s main argument, that nostalgia “is at the very core of the modern condition,” that “it is coeval with modernity itself” (2001, xvi). Different pieces in our collection reveal that the same is true of revolutionary returns, whether nostalgic or not. There is nothing necessarily non-modern about such returns: they are an integral part of the very modern idea of “revolution.”

## **VIOLENCE**

If April 24 is for some a galvanizing symbol of the failed movement of 1965 in the Dominican Republic, April 25 is for others a fetishized date synonymous with another, much more celebrated, “April Revolution”: the one that took place in Portugal in 1974. This is made clear by Susana Durão’s article in this special issue, which analyzes evocations of the Carnation Revolution in contemporary Portugal in media as varied as posters, pop songs, children’s books, political slogans, and debates in print. She interprets the term “revolution” as a “mobilizing metaphor” identified with ideas of freedom and Europeanness, central to a nationalistic discourse that presents Portugal as a virtuous land that can offer lessons in democracy and peace to its former colonies. The fetishized value of this denomination is well demonstrated by an episode related in Durão’s piece. When, in 2004, the Portuguese government opened an exhibition in honor of the thirtieth anniversary of the Revolution, the wordplay in its title – “April is Evolution” (*Abril é Evolução*) – sparked widespread critical reactions “in defense of the word revolution” by citizens who claimed “that revolution was the word representing a specifically Portuguese model of building democracy.”

That supposed particularity, Durão observes, allegedly lies in the fact that “the Carnation Revolution was largely a military movement ... but went around the world with the image of flowers.” The uprising got its sobriquet because, once the military rose against the government, civilians took to the streets of Lisbon to support them and to offer them carnations, which many soldiers put into their rifles. The repeti-

tion of this gesture allowed for the proliferation and circulation of iconic images of flowers coming out of gun barrels. Such imagery and the Carnation Revolution as a whole became symbols of the trope of a “peaceful revolution,” which also relied on reiterated statements that the military only opened the way for the triumph of “the people.” However, such insistence has been necessary precisely because the insurrection did, *in fact*, involve a military coup, and filled the streets of the Portuguese capital not only with civilians and flowers, but also with soldiers, rifles, and tanks. The repeated symbolic pairing of carnations and “the people” has helped make it possible that the changes of April 1974 in Portugal be unanimously called a “revolution,” and not a coup.

The looming ambiguity between coups and revolutions is far from being unusual. In many places the term “coup d’état” haunts the word “revolution” as its shadow other – or, to use Ruy Llera Blanes’ phrasing, as its evil twin, as its ignoble doppelgänger. Other pieces in this collection also bring this ambiguity to the fore. Lomnitz and Sánchez observe that “revolution” was the name given to *cuartelazos* (military insurgences) in nineteenth-century Mexico and Venezuela; Gonçalves shows that the same can be said of similar violent troubles in Haiti in the same period; and Spinelli unambiguously (and correctly) understands twentieth-century Argentinean “revolutions” as coups d’état. Similarly, we add, the most consequential military coups in Brazilian history – those that put an end to the monarchy in 1889, to the oligarchic republic in 1930, and to populist democracy in 1964 – were called “revolutions” by their leaders and supporters (see Schwartz and Starling 2015; Schwartz 2020; Starling 2024).

The reason for the recurrent ambiguity between “revolutions” and “coups” is quite clear: both terms combine the ideas of political change and political violence. This is true even if violence remains potential, or a threatening shadow – like in the Carnation Revolution and other revolutions whose flowery adjectivization its name inspired, such as the Rose and the Tulip ones. Those events are often celebrated as “bloodless revolutions” or “nonviolent revolutions,” oxymoronic phrases that imply exceptionality – otherwise there would be no reason for some revolutions to be said to be peaceful. To use Mao Zedong’s counterexamples, it would make no sense to laud specific instantiations of activities like “a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery” ([1927] 1965, 28) for being bloodless or non-violent.<sup>12</sup>

That even “peaceful revolutions” may be derided as “coups” by their critics is indicated in a revealing passage in Luis Francia’s essay about his native Philippines (2001). The writer narrates an unusual challenge to the revolutionary status of the 1986 changes in that country: only months after it took place, he tells us, “a friend of mine described the weekend-long People Power uprising in Manila as a coup d’état. ... Expressing a feeling that was still muted among most people I knew, she explained

<sup>12</sup> | The relationship of revolutions with violence is also corroborated by the blurred lines they frequently have with civil wars. The ambiguity between “revolution” and “civil war” is examined by Hannah Arendt ([1963] 2006) and exemplified by the conflicts in the Dominican Republic in 1965 and in Syria between 2011 and 2024.

that the country had merely postponed the bloodshed” (74). In fact, the EDSA Revolution had begun with an aborted coup against the Marcoses by a military group called the Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM). And, after attempting several coups against Corazón Aquino – the first post-EDSA president – the same military officers renamed their movement as Rebolusyonaryong Alyansang Makabansa (RAM, Revolutionary Nationalist Alliance; see Francia 2001, 2021). Clearly, violent or not, one man’s revolution is another man’s coup d’état.

What is more, one man’s revolution may also be another man’s dictatorship. As we mentioned before, the regime that was overthrown in the Philippines in 1986, Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos’ dictatorship, presented itself as a “Democratic Revolution.” As demonstrated by Reynaldo Iletto (1993), that regime’s self-description mobilized a recurrent trope that had long been wielded and disputed by various Philippine political movements: that of an “Unfinished Revolution.” According to this trope, the national struggle for sovereignty had begun in the nineteenth century and – having been interrupted by US colonialism, Japanese occupation, and corrupt rulers – should be recuperated in the present. From Communists to the Marcoses, political groups of various persuasions claimed to be doing just that: recovering an original, unfinished revolution. As stated by Lomnitz and Sánchez in their interview, something similar happened in Mexico and Venezuela: in those countries too many “revolutions” were proclaimed to revolve back to authentic beginnings that had been announced by the independence “revolutions” and had been interrupted by later oligarquies.

Furthermore, different contributions to this special issue reveal another major similarity between the Philippine and several Latin American dictatorships: their usage of the term “revolution” not only to legitimize, but also to *name* their authoritarian rule. The Argentinean coups discussed by María Estela Spinelli used the word “revolutions” to refer *both* to their acts of military takeover *and* to the dictatorships they established. Another important authoritarian military regime that called itself “la Revolución” was the Gobierno Revolucionario de la Fuerza Armada (*sic*, Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces) that ruled Peru from 1968 to 1980. Unlike the conservative self-styled “revolutionary” military regimes of Brazil and Argentina in the 1960s and 1970s, Peru’s “revolutionary” dictatorship had a progressive project that included the nationalization of foreign property and the redistribution of wealth and land (Aguirre and Drinot 2017).

The ideological variety and complexity of authoritarian regimes branded as “revolutions” becomes even more mind-boggling when one includes in this list the long-lasting dictatorships of François Duvalier and Fidel Castro. As shown by João Felipe Gonçalves’ article in this collection, these two Caribbean regimes differed in most regards, except for their personalistic authoritarianism and their self-description as “revolutions.” In the Cuban case, the adjective “revolutionary” is included in

the official names of “the two main institutions in charge of the state’s use of violence”: the national police and the armed forces. In Gonçalves’ words, such useages made the keyword “Revolution” “denote not resistance, but power; not rupture, but order; not a future, but the present.”

In their interview, Rafael Sánchez and Claudio Lomnitz discuss similar processes in other Latin American contexts. After Sánchez underlined “the perverse continuities between the revolutionary tradition and the clearly dictatorial and authoritarian tradition,” or “the linkage between the dictatorial and the revolutionary” in the region, Lomnitz added that “revolutionary” appeals to a political *tabula rasa*, a “foundation or refoundation,” often entail a “state of exception.” Concluding their interview, Sánchez replied that “there is a repetition in these revolutions, but a repetition that over and over again inaugurates a foundational violence.”

Therefore, the violence inherent in the keyword “revolution” needs not be *against* a status quo; it can also be violence performed *on behalf* or *in defense of* a status quo. To put it bluntly, it can simply be sovereign violence. Perhaps one of the best expressions of the deep connection between “revolution” and sovereign violence comes from Gérard Pierre-Charles’ study of François Duvalier’s dictatorship. He writes that, for a typical member of the “revolutionary” militias, the ruthless *ton-ton makout*, “the ‘Duvalierist Revolution’ means the right to carry a pistol, to terrorize any notable who is not identified with the regime, and the possibility to act as he likes, as a true outlaw; it means feeling that he is someone, and this is the revolution” ([1969] 2013, 117; our translation).

## GUESS WHO’S COMING TO DINNER

Besides coups d’état and dictatorships, as Pierre-Charles’ quote suggests, another violent doppelgänger of revolutions made an unexpected appearance in our collection: crime. As other elements, this uninvited guest made itself most visible in the interview with Claudio Lomnitz and Rafael Sánchez. When the former commented that in Mexico “there is always some tension between the figure of the revolutionary and the figure of the outlaw [*bandido*] or the runaway [*prófugo*],” the latter added: “sure, in the sense that both somehow exchange their roles very easily. This happens in Venezuela too.”

The fine line between revolution and crime is further clarified by an anecdote shared by Lomnitz: a regional leader in revolutionary Mexico wrote in his memoirs that he once refused a bribe offered by a customs official by protesting that “he was not a politician to be bribed, that he was a revolutionary, and therefore he was going to steal the money.” In response, Sánchez narrated an equally humorous and equally significant episode about a Bolivian leftist militant who claimed that, because

he was “a very honest man, a revolutionary,” he deserved an administrative post in which he could “grab” other people’s belongings. For Lomnitz and Sánchez, these anecdotes show that the lines between “political” and “personal” appropriation of resources are often complex and blurred.<sup>13</sup>

The bravados by the Mexican and the Bolivian men can be also read to mean that their identifications as revolutionaries justified acts that otherwise could be seen as criminal. In fact, because they typically challenge legal orders, revolutionaries are often accused of committing crimes. That such allegations may be as old as the modern idea of revolution is suggested by an episode of the Haitian Revolution analyzed by historian Laurent Dubois (mentioned by Gonçalves, this collection). In 1791, a white deputy argued that the amnesty given by the French National Assembly to those who had committed “acts of revolution” should not be extended to the rebels of Saint-Domingue because the phrase did not apply to what he called their “crimes.” Dubois acutely comments: “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’” (2004, 126).

Another example of a war of words between “crime” and “revolution” comes from that far-away archipelago that we have already referenced twice in this Introduction. In his study of the Philippine Revolution, Reynaldo Ileto shows that, after the United States took over the Asian islands from Spain in 1898, the same local elite who had supported the “revolution” against the former colonial lords began presenting the nationalist groups who persisted in their struggle no longer as *revolucionarios*, but as *bandoleros* (bandits) or *ladrones* (thieves): “this identification of any armed resistance with banditry provided the [US colonial] government and its Filipino allies with the needed justification to use harsh measures against recalcitrants” ([1979] 1998, 172). A similar situation happened in Cuba soon after 1959. When some of the groups who had fought against Fulgencio Batista took up arms against the new government, the latter responded by branding them as “bandidos,” although until then it had praised the same men as fellow “revolucionarios” (Domínguez 1978, 345-346).

As such, “revolution” seems to often have an “evil twin” relationship with crime similar to that it has with coups d’état and dictatorships: one man’s revolution is another man’s banditry. Moreover, as the Philippine and Cuban examples suggest, today’s revolutionaries can be tomorrow’s criminals. And, considering that some of the Filipinos who fought the Americans were glorified as revolutionaries after Philippine independence in 1946 (see Ileto 1993), the reverse is also true: today’s criminals can be tomorrow’s revolutionaries. To expand Rafael Sánchez’s point, it is not only in Latin America that revolutionaries and criminals may “exchange their roles very easily.” What is more, in situations in which both political and criminal violence

<sup>13</sup> | A similar point is made by the Cubans who, as we mentioned above, critically replace “Revolución” for “robulución” as an appellation for their government.

are pervasive, the ambiguity between “revolution” and “crime” may become a major problem and concern for those who claim to fight for the former.

For over three decades, this was the case of a Latin American country that is unfortunately absent from the essays collected here. Between the 1980s and the 2010s, Colombia was the stage of a bloody war between various groups of drug dealers, revolutionary guerrillas, paramilitaries, and law enforcement agents who, in a kaleidoscopic way, fought each other, allied with each other, fed each other’s violence, and borrowed each other’s methods. Throughout that period, Colombia’s leftist guerrillas, especially the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), were routinely depicted as “criminals” by many opponents, partly because of their acknowledged liberal use of methods like kidnappings, extorsions, assassinations, and drug dealing.

But, beyond accusations on the part of the revolutionaries’ enemies, two extraordinary studies of the justification of violence in Colombia, one by political scientist Jorge Giraldo Ramírez (2015) and one by historian Jorge Orlando Melo (2021), give abundant evidence that Colombian revolutionaries themselves have long been worried that their “revolution” could be mistaken for a criminal evil twin. For example, Melo shows that Colombian revolutionaries were concerned about promiscuity with ordinary crime even before the rise of the drug industry in the 1970s. When the Communist Party of Colombia declared its support, in 1966, of the armed struggle of the recently created FARC, it stated that “the revolution is an unalienable right of the people, and includes all forms of struggle, armed or peaceful,” but warned guerrillas not to commit any “acts of banditry [*actos de bandidaje*]” (quoted in Melo 2021, 156; our translation).

Around twenty years later, when both organized crime and leftist guerrillas were fighting separate but overlapping wars on the Colombian state, the Communist leader Alberto Rojas Puyo expressed his fear that “the very ideas of revolution and socialism may be lastingly besmirched in public consciousness if there are revolutionaries who persist in practices that may be easily assimilated to ordinary crime [*delincuencia común*]” (quoted in Ramírez 2015, 86; our translation). It probably didn’t help much that noticeable criminals sometimes built alliances with “revolutionary” groups and described themselves and their own actions as “revolutionary” (for such strategies and claims by the world-famous Pablo Escobar and his associates, see Salazar 2018, 130, 137, 164, 200). The Colombian conflict shows us that, when both political and criminal violence are ubiquitous, the keyword “revolution” is particularly haunted by a nasty doppelgänger: “crime.”

## A POLITICAL ENDORSER

Is this a crime? Is this a coup? Is this a dictatorship? Or is this a revolution?

All examples in the last two sections show us people disputing whether the term “revolution” can or should be used to describe specific instantiations of violence. In the case of the ambiguity between “revolution” and “banditry,” what is in question is the *political* character of violence. Those who potentially or actually exercise violence in the name of a “revolution” attempt to justify such violence on the grounds of their political visions and aspirations. In turn, their opponents decry that such violence is not political at all, but mere ordinary, self-interested violence.

In contrast, in the case of the ambiguity between “revolutions,” on the one hand, and “coups d’état” or “dictatorships,” on the other, the political character of violence is not questioned; rather, the tension here is between two kinds of political violence: rightful or wrongful. Those who claim to fight or defend a revolution portray their political visions and goals as worthy and laudable; and those who accuse them of staging or supporting coups d’état and dictatorships condemn their violence as having unworthy, unacceptable political objectives. In other words, what is at stake in this second kind of ambiguity is the *moral* character of political violence.

But against its three despicable doppelgängers – coups, dictatorships, and crimes – the term “revolution” is invoked to authorize potential or actual violence as *both* political and moral. Conversely, those who denounce “revolutionaries” as coup-makers, dictators, or as criminals accuse them of committing or threatening to commit some kind of unjustified violence. What *all* agents involved seem to agree upon is that the keyword “revolution” carries a positive value, and that ascribing it – or some of its correlates, like “revolutionary” – to a movement, a regime, an act, a group, or a person bestows on this referent some kind of political legitimacy.

This is what we see in the many examples given by the essays collected here. When guerrillas, militaries, and outlaws describe their armed actions as “revolutions”; when governments claim that their authoritarian rule is “revolutionary”; when citizens evoke “revolutions” past, present, and future to criticize or rise against present regimes; and when the opponents and critics of “revolutionaries” denounce them for committing crimes, for staging or defending coups d’état, for being or supporting dictators, all such social agents perform and reproduce the *positive political value* carried by the terms “revolution” and “revolutionary,” which across the board are implicitly supposed to give validity to the processes, events, and subjects they designate.

The vocable “revolution” thus operates as what we propose to call an *endorser* – that is, a word or phrase whose specific representational meaning fluctuates depending on who uses it in what contexts and to what audiences, but which retains, despite that polysemy, a fetishized positive value, a capacity to mark its various ref-

erents as normatively right. Political life across the globe provides plenty of examples of endorsers, such as “freedom,” “democracy,” and “the people,” or, among more circumscribed publics, “socialism,” “security,” or “human rights.”<sup>14</sup>

To use the phrasing of Jürgen Habermas (1984, 1987), an endorser carries a highly indeterminate *constative* value – or appropriateness to designate specific things in reality – in contrast to a very well-defined *regulative* value – or appropriateness to validate its various potential referents. Being words, and not speech acts, endorsers do not make by themselves what Habermas calls “validity claims,” but people use endorsers in speech acts in such ways that the constative meaning of these terms is highly disputed, whereas their underlying regulative value persists. When people debate whether certain political projects and leaders are the best suited to guarantee “freedom” and “democracy,” for instance, they perform and reproduce the taken-for-granted idea that, whatever they mean, “freedom” and “democracy” are desirable or normatively correct. In fact, the more people dispute the constative meaning of an endorser, the more they reproduce its regulative value as a naturalized, agreed-upon presupposition.

This helps us understand the fact that Koselleck observed decades ago: that “the word ‘revolution’... is constantly extending itself to include every last element of our globe” ([1969] 2004, 44). The extraordinary power of that keyword comes from its endorsing character, that is, from the combination of its constative indeterminacy and its normative determinacy: this is the “composition” that guarantees “its constant reproduction” (ibid.). Each time someone evokes the term “revolution” – or one of its correlates, like “revolutionary” – to describe something in the world, they reproduce the term’s normative political value. This may also help us explain why, having long moved from the realm of astronomy to that of politics, that word is now also pervasive in the market, at least in its adjectivized form: across the globe countless commodities – from cosmetics and cleaning products to cell phones and cars – are advertised as “revolutionary,” a usage in which its normative value remains despite the loss of its political character.

But what concerns us in this special issue is, of course, the role of “revolution” as a *political* endorser. And, as indicated by its troubled relationship with “coup d’état,” “dictatorship,” and “crime,” the keyword “revolution” serves, in its various and disputed political meanings, to systematically endorse violence in the name of national sovereignty – no matter if this violence is committed against, by, or on behalf of an incumbent holder of sovereign power.

<sup>14</sup> | By calling such words “endorsers” we take some formal inspiration from Roman Jakobson’s concept of shifters, that is, “grammatical units,” like personal pronouns, whose meaning “cannot be defined without a reference to the message” (1957, 2). But the inspiration is by analogy only – endorsers are not grammatical units, and their stable element resides not in their descriptive capacity, but in their normative value.

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