

The Revolutionary Leader

Charisma, Authority, and Exception

In the midst of the popular tempest, we must be the invisible pilots guiding the revolution, not by any kind of overt power but by the collective dictatorship of all our allies, a dictatorship without tricks, without official titles, without official rights, and therefore all the most powerful as it does not carry the trappings of power.

—MIKHAIL BAKUNIN

“A specter is haunting Europe,” Marx and Engels famously announced at the beginning of their manifesto, “the specter of Communism” and “all the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this specter” (Marx and Engels [1848] 2005: 5). An iconic opening, and a metaphor for the opposition encountered by communist doctrine on the old continent but also, perhaps, a hint about a specific quality of revolutions: a certain “spectral” contradiction that characterizes them. On the one hand, revolution is often described, by Marx and elsewhere, as an inevitable event ([1848] 2005: 19; Arendt [1965] 2006: 51), as if an irresistible force with an agency of its own, whether collective impulse for change or the very course of history, takes hold of the revolutionaries, acting through them and compelling them to subvert an old world that is no longer sustainable. This is a process akin to mediumship, the experience of being possessed by an unrestrainable “spirit of revolt” (Kropotkin 1975: 3). On the other hand, as much as it stirs people, revolution needs to be ignited by someone. Like a specter it needs to be conjured.¹ Now, these two seemingly divergent conditions—being moved by

1. Marx’s views on the inevitability of revolution should not be exaggerated. Compare, for instance, Marx’s “specter” with Hegel’s notion of “spirit,” understood as perfect self-awareness that gradually manifests itself in world history: an idea that Marx came to reject as he distanced himself from Hegelianism. One might argue that whereas Hegel’s spirit acts through human beings, Marx’s specter is ultimately summoned by them—it requires agency and human initiative—for “it is flesh and phenom-

revolution and being the agent who sets revolution into motion—are reconciled, at times, in a specific figure, one who is usually found addressing the crowds with a firm voice, or caringly reassuring fellow insurgents in times of crisis. It is the revolutionary head: an individual led only by revolutionary ideals and, therefore, fit to lead the revolution and one who is capable of conjuring the specter precisely because he is possessed by it.

Such a view of leadership as a mixture of active and passive traits particularly marks the relationship between the head and his supporters. For in many revolutionary narratives the leader is portrayed not only as someone with authority over his people, but also as subject to theirs. Consider, for instance, the liberal episteme as it developed in the context of the American and French revolutions, and, later, with the Spring of Nations, the wave of democratic upheavals that took place in Europe in 1848. Eager to demolish ancient views of power as a privilege assigned to the king by God—a prerogative to rule the masses deep-seated in the supernatural order of things—these discourses articulated leadership as a quality rooted in a different, earthly source of sovereignty: popular will. Headship thus came to be understood not only as the ability to guide citizens but also as the faculty to execute their decisions (Baker 1990: 284), a twofold capacity to lead the community while ultimately being led by it. This concept has been interpreted, particularly by early liberal thinkers, with a stress on the need to shepherd the uneducated multitudes to make sure they exercise their authority in an orderly and effective manner (Foucault 1988a: 72; Sa'adah 1990: 153–60; Dawson 1972: 26), but, in revolutionary forms, whether inspired by liberal tenets or otherwise, this notion has often carried an emphasis on the unrestricted leading role of the people. Thus, the head of the revolution is not simply someone who strives to fulfill the wants of his fellows; rather, he appears to be completely subject to such wants, and motivated, even possessed, by them.² A vessel filled, in theory at least, with the wishes of others.

It is this view of the leader as a conduit for popular will that informed Robespierre when he notoriously declared, “I am the people” (McPhee 2012: 125). While it is true that many revolutionary discourses have dismissed similar statements as a dangerous gateway to tyranny, it is also true that the idea that one can channel

enality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition” (Derrida 2012: 5). Incidentally, Marx also uses a spectral analogy with reference to capitalism, whose uncontrolled growth resembles “the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the underworld that he has called up by his spells” (Marx and Engels [1848] 2005: 12).

2. Michael Taussig has successfully shown that the dynamic of possession, which involves an invasion of one's body perpetrated by a spiritual other, “is a movement parallel to the circulation of the ghostly magic of the Nation State through the ‘body’ of the society” (1997: 139), so that, one might argue, often the leader's claim to be possessed by the people is part of a broader process where the people are, in turn, possessed by the state.

the desires of other human beings is often found in these discourses. Marxist revolutionaries of the past century, for instance, maintained that without a vanguard party leading the way to revolution, “the energy of the masses would dissipate like steam not enclosed in a piston-box” (Trotsky 2008: xvi), but they also clarified that, in the final analysis, “what moves things is not the piston or the box, but the steam” (xvi). They therefore promoted a view of leadership as a *dispositif* that is, at the same time, operated by the energy of the people and necessary for this energy to be made operative: a mechanism that will cease to function when the conditions are right for communist society to be established and for people to rule themselves. Conversely, anarchist thinkers stressed that the masses are fully able to achieve liberation without the help of vanguards (Malatesta 2015: 176). Among them, however, some held that one can enable this autonomous process of emancipation by relating to the people as the “midwife of their spontaneous emancipation” (Bakunin 1992: 20), whereby the yearnings of the exploited can be made more explicit without being directed from above: a facilitator whose only function is to “illuminate those hopes and aspirations which exist in the great majority in vague forms” (Kropotkin 1971: 47).

Notwithstanding their differences, these traditions thus share a fundamental outlook on the dynamics of revolt: the idea that paving the way for revolution is an occupation founded on the capability to be inhabited and moved by the longings of other human beings. This notion continues to be debated within these discourses, and today is even closer to their core than in the past, as intellectuals assessing these traditions have realized, or further confirmed, that vanguardist strategies inevitably diminish the role of the people, and should therefore be abandoned in favor of more participative tactics of resistance (Ward 2004: 90–98; Amster et al. 2009; Carter 2011; Hardt and Negri 2017: 3–22; cf. Marusek 2018). Bearing this in mind, in this chapter we encounter different takes on what it means to lead. In particular, we see how, at times, revolutionary heads have manipulated the epistemes we have briefly outlined and, while presenting their actions as expressions of the will of the people, have in fact created a gulf between themselves and the masses, cultivating the idea that, while revolution might have certain rules, those rules do not apply to those who lead. At other times, as we will discover, these epistemes have been combined with local political and religious categories, so that, contrary to typical post-French Revolution articulations of authority, revolutionary leaders are perceived not only as individuals who are able to amplify the will of other humans but also as liaisons between different planes of existence: intermediaries who can channel spiritual forces and divine beings, lending their bodies to such supernatural entities so that they may take an active role in revolution. By unpacking these othering forms of leadership we shed light on the role played by power not only during revolutionary outbreaks but also in their aftermath. This, in turn,

allows us to comment more broadly on how notions of leading and following are discussed and put to practice in different ethnographic settings.

THE ORDINARY AND THE EXTRAORDINARY

Before we consider unconventional forms of headship, we need to unpack familiar ones further, exploring how leadership features not only in revolutionary theories but also in well-known analyses by scholars who have observed revolutionary phenomena: an operation that requires some preliminary clarifications. Leaders, as we have seen, are supposed to be vectors of popular will, to be in tune with it, as in a description of Fidel Castro by Ernesto Guevara in which el Che portrays the interaction between the leader and the Cubans as a “dialogue of two tuning forks” ([1967] 2009: 17): a process whereby Fidel and the masses reach communion with each other and “vibrate in a dialogue” (17), so that the leader appears to be one *with* the people. Often, however, the revolutionary head is also expected to be one *of* the people, a principle that, at times, has pushed those who are at the forefront of the revolution to disguise their identities in order to remark that their individuality is not particularly relevant, as they are just ordinary workers who happen to work for the general good. This is the case, for instance, with Mikhail Bakunin’s famous notion of “invisible dictatorship,” a strategy of revolt criticized by other anarchist thinkers but one which, in Bakunin’s view, would allow revolution to be led by clandestine cells that are “recognized by none, imposed by none” (Bakunin in Confino 1974: 259); due to their anonymous character, these cells would be completely exempt from self-interest, egotism, and ambition. A more current example is provided by Subcomandante Marcos—until recently the most visible figure of the Zapatista movement—whose masked persona stood as an undifferentiated symbol for all the underprivileged of the world, meaning that Marcos was, at the same time, “a black person in South Africa, an Asian person in Europe, a Chicano in San Isidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel” (1995: 310–11).

Given this stress on the “ordinariness” of leadership, it comes somewhat as a surprise that, when European sociological inquiry has set out to analyze the status of revolutionary leaders, it has often done so by focusing only on the unique characteristics of these figures, paying attention to traits that supposedly set them apart from commoners. The seminal work of Max Weber comes to mind, particularly his analysis of the notion of charisma, defined as a feature that allows certain individuals to come across as “endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities” (1968: 48): attributes ascribed “to prophets, to people with a reputation for therapeutic or legal wisdom, to leaders in the hunt, and heroes in war” (48). Charisma implies a sense of vocation, the feeling that one has been called to do what others cannot, a characteristic that, according

to Weber, is more important for the success of the charismatic head than public recognition (49). Charismatic leadership, thus, inevitably contrasts with other forms of headship that are based on inherited privileges, formal procedures, and traditional rules (24, 51), as the charismatic head often feels that his role is to upset these habitual practices and to bring about unexpected revelations, innovations, or completion. Consequently, charisma stands out, in the Weberian framework at least, as “the greatest revolutionary force” (53), a power capable of swiping away norms and routines that are perceived as too static (52, 63).

Together with this radical potential, however, Weber recognizes another defining trait of charismatic authority, one that might, in a sense, bridge the gap between the emphasis on the ordinary nature of leadership as found in many revolutionary discourses and the Weberian focus on the extraordinary abilities of the leader: the notion that charismatic leadership cannot be enduring, as it always gives way to other, more conventional forms of authority. With reference to this point, Weber identifies a trajectory in the development of charisma. Whereas an exceptional individual justifies his status through his sense of vocation, his successors, who often lack his supposedly unique talents, articulate their legitimacy by demonstrating a link with him. This dynamic generates, for Weber, the need to formalize charisma, to turn it into a quality whose transmission is regulated by norms; thus, while charisma was once the opposite of routine, it becomes a routine in itself, particularly after the leader’s death: a matter of holding an office rather than an exhibition of exceptionality (54–59). This routinization can be observed, according to Weber, not only with dynamics of succession among leaders, both revolutionary and otherwise, but also, specifically, in revolutionary praxis (64). It is for this reason that, for example, the professional army was disbanded and replaced with a voluntary, one might say charismatic, army of the people during the French Revolution, only to be formalized again under Napoleon when he portrayed himself as heir to the revolution (36).

Undoubtedly, Weber’s model has been subjected to criticism, particularly his idea that the routinization of charisma is linked, especially in the modern age, to an increasingly disenchanting view of the world, one where authority tends to be expressed through rational and bureaucratic procedures rather than in terms of supernatural gifts. This latter notion has been debunked by current sociological research, as scholars have shown that the divine still has a role to play in some modern articulations of leadership (Landy and Saler 2009): a dynamic that becomes apparent later in the chapter. Besides, whereas Weber believed that routinization might bring about less-authoritarian articulations of power, as the leader’s successors might seek legitimacy through the consensus of the people rather than by claiming exceptional traits (Weber 1968: 29, 61), more recent analyses have focused on the despotic sides of routine. In particular, these studies have shown that often bureaucratized expressions of power rely on a specific tendency—found in some individuals’ psychological makeup—to follow authoritarian figures that

present themselves as protectors of rules and conventions (Adorno et al. 1993). Yet the relation between exceptionality and routine continues to attract scholarly attention and, rather than dismissing these concepts, contemporary inquiries have highlighted how, contrary to what was implied by Weber, the two are inherently interdependent, particularly when it comes to revolutionary leadership: a dynamic that is elucidated by philosopher Giorgio Agamben.³

Agamben argues that even when authority finds its justification in routine and norms, often those in power feel they have to break such rules, temporarily and paradoxically, in order to preserve a sense of law. They have to create exceptionality to sustain the routine. To illuminate this paradox Agamben explains how, in exceptional cases like war or other states of emergency, legal codes are habitually suspended, as such intense and unpredictable circumstances cannot be faced using conventional, fixed legal instruments. An exception is therefore made: Actions that might be considered unlawful, such as the exercise of violence, become, at least to some extent, legitimate (Agamben 2005a: 14, 29). This temporary suspension of rules, however, is not necessarily equivalent to a complete absence of norms. This is not only because such states of exception are frequently envisioned within legal codes but also, on a deeper level, because the exceptional fact, whether war or something else, becomes, in a sense, a law unto itself that dictates what needs to be done until conditions are safe for conventional laws to be reestablished (2005a: 14, 29). Naturally, as Agamben shows, this return to routine never happens smoothly because, whereas under normal circumstances law is used to regulate facts, in states of exception, as we have seen, law and fact fade into each other (2005a: 14, 29), so that it becomes impossible to distinguish fully between transgression and execution of the law (1998: 57). Consequently, an ambiguous situation is created, one that, Agamben argues, might offer fertile terrain for new and revolutionary articulations of authority.

More specifically, Agamben shows how the state of exception can be seized or prompted by a revolutionary group or leader that might declare the *de facto* annulment of a legal code seen as unjust and, therefore, in contradiction with the very idea of law (2005a: 28–29). In Agamben's view the truly revolutionary potential of this process of opposing the law in the name of a higher, more just law lies in the fact that, at least in theory, a perpetual state of exception can be established. In this scenario, justice never becomes fully crystallized into laws and routines that are, by definition, coercive and, therefore, potentially authoritarian (62, 88), a view also supported by other philosophers (Benjamin 2002: 236–52). Agamben,

3. Agamben's work also presents a profound critique of the Weberian notion of modern disenchantment, as the philosopher shows how modern thought, particularly when it comes to understanding the notion of power, continues to deploy theological categories, so that one could argue that modernity brings theology to completion (Agamben 2011: 287). On the subject see also Schmitt 2005: 36.

however, contends that a perpetual state of exception can also have the opposite result. Whether it is an established form of authority or a revolutionary one that seeks to establish a new order, power can declare a constant state of emergency in order to strengthen its grip. In other words, those with authority can continuously act outside the law with the excuse of doing so to retain the true spirit of the law (Agamben 1998: 50), violating the rights of their subjects to protect the notion of right (88), which might entail, for example, killing dissidents without it being considered homicide (83), thereby holding absolute power.⁴ In this sense, the exception becomes, truly and dangerously, the rule. By portraying leadership as the capacity both to protect the order of things and to break such order, the leader occupies a position that is unbound by restrictions, both extraordinary and ordinary, both internal and external to the norm. The unpredictability of revolution becomes, therefore, indiscernible from the predictability of routine: a condition that can be observed in some expressions of revolutionary headship.

EXTERNAL MASTERS AND VOLATILE HEADS

In his study of late socialism in the USSR, Alexei Yurchak captures the scenario described by Agamben, documenting, historically and ethnographically, a case exhibiting a perpetual state of exception. Yurchak shows that, following the first effervescent years of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Soviet Union entered into a routinized phase. This is not only because Joseph Stalin replaced magnetic leader Vladimir Lenin as the guide of the state—thus acting, as Weber would argue, as a routinized version of Lenin's charismatic authority—but also because, in time, Soviet revolutionary practices had started to appear somewhat predictable. The slogans of the leading party had acquired a formal character devoid of substance, and were performed mechanically and wearisomely without paying attention to their meaning, almost as ritual formulas framed in an archaic and incomprehensible idiom (Marcuse 1969: 87–89).⁵ Furthermore, whereas the early stages of the Soviet Revolution were characterized by an attempt to experiment with language and art in order to create new and revolutionary forms of communication, even under Lenin, although more visibly under Stalin, the Soviet Union became marked by a constant friction between the party vanguard and the artistic avant-

4. Agamben argues that nowadays such deviation of the state of exception is increasingly becoming a standard form of governance (1998: 20–38).

5. According to Herbert Marcuse, this ritualization had the purpose of preserving the original purity of the Soviet message in the face of contradictions, presenting it as “a truth that must be believed and enacted against all evidence to the contrary” (1969: 89). This reflected, in Marcuse's view, the fundamental paradox that characterized the Soviet Union: a context that had succeeded in bringing about Marx's promises of emancipation, but that, at the same time, prevented these promises from turning into a reality by making use of authoritarian means (89, see also Bauman 1985).

garde, and by the enforcement of extremely standardized forms of aesthetics that left no room for innovation (Yurchak 2006: 38; see also Stites 1989; Buck-Morss 2000: 42–89). The Soviet context, therefore, appeared to be entrenched in static, unmovable routine. Such a stagnant state of affairs, however, was only possible, as Yurchak demonstrates, because Stalin craftily fashioned himself as an “external master” (Yurchak 2006: 39), a leader who defines the routine by being outside of it, as a constant exception to the rigid codes and norms he is supposed to enforce.

To convey this point, Yurchak points out that Stalin would comment on the correctness of scientific publications dealing with philosophy, linguistics, genetics, agriculture, chemistry, and physics (2006: 43, 45), fields in which he had no certified expertise but that were nevertheless placed under his scrutiny for approval. Similarly, the leader would judge the aesthetic value of films, literary texts, and works of art, discerning whether such discourses were compatible with the Soviet revolutionary orthodoxy, even to the point of assessing whether musical compositions were harmonious enough to be compatible with the physiology of human hearing, and therefore suitable for listeners within the Soviet project (2006: 46; see also Groys 1992; Paperny 1993; Todorov 1995). However, rather than evaluating these matters against a publicly available Leninist-Marxist canon—a set of principles and texts that could be commented upon by everyone—he would appraise them against an “external canon” (Yurchak 2006: 41) to which he had exclusive access, applying regulations that supposedly only he could grasp. Thus, whereas Stalin was allowed to assess virtually every aspect of reality, none could judge whether his actions were compatible with the Marxist tradition, because he presented himself as defining such tradition from an objective, external position unreachable by others. Under the surface of the dull routine of Soviet life there was thus a permanent state of nonroutine wherein the leader was exempted from scrutiny.

Yurchak further shows how this process continued after Stalin died and was succeeded as head of state by Nikita Khrushchev. With the passing of the external master, there was no guarantor who could certify the correctness of things; it therefore became increasingly difficult to discern rules from exceptions, as any statement or behavior could potentially be considered a deviation from the canon (Yurchak 2006: 47). In consequence, the general tendency was to replicate whatever was perceived as orthodox praxis under Stalin, because with none to define the norms from a position external to them everyone tended to stay safely within the rules. Even Khrushchev, who had publicly denounced Stalin’s cult of personality as an obstacle to the communist project and urged for a return to Lenin’s original message, behaved as if the ghost of Stalin were closely monitoring him, always being careful not to step outside accepted discourses in his speeches (48, 74). Such caution produced even more rigid and often empty discourses: texts written in a plain form so that their accuracy could not be questioned. In the words

of one of Yurchak's informants, after Stalin any communiqué by Soviet leadership could be read "top to bottom and bottom to top with similar results" (50). Any new debate over this peculiar state of affairs only justified it, a situation exemplified by the idea, formulated by some Soviet linguists at the time, that such monotonous use of language correctly represented the single Marxist-Leninist reality that, in the Stalinist interpretation, had to pervade all aspects of life (50).

Similar dynamics could be observed in Libya under the rule of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, another context heavily characterized by the enduring effects of a state of exception becoming a routine. Having seized power in a revolutionary coup in 1969, Gaddafi eradicated the Libyan monarchy and, as part of his revolutionary project, devised, as we have seen in chapter 2, a specific form of governance, the *Jamahiriyah*, the "State of the Masses" or "Peopledom" (Anderson 1986: 264). Blending his own understanding of socialism and Sunni Islam together with elements of the Libyan tribal ethos (as previously explained), Gaddafi created a system of governance based on interconnected popular assemblies: congresses where Libyans would regularly meet and discuss both internal and external policies, governing themselves, at least in theory, directly and without the aid of a state apparatus in a form of "supervision of the people by the people" (Gaddafi [1975–81] 2005: 18). During his forty years in power, Gaddafi seemed to have succeeded in establishing the absolute primacy of the masses, thus fulfilling what has been, as discussed above, the aim of many a revolutionary project. In actual fact, however, the colonel retained absolute control over Libya. Although he had no official leading role, presenting himself simply with the honorary title of *Qaid al Thawra*, the "Guide of the Revolution," Gaddafi often altered or ignored decisions made by the popular assemblies (Cherstich forthcoming). More importantly, the colonel never participated in the system he had created; even though, according to the rules established by Gaddafi's revolutionary scheme, it was compulsory for every adult healthy Libyan to take part in the assemblies, he himself never did so (*ibid.*). Therefore, much like Stalin, Gaddafi acted as an external master of sorts, a leader excluded from obligations who, from this advantageous position, imposed such obligations on others.

With reference to this point, it is also important to clarify that Gaddafi cultivated a constant sense of exception by making sure that his status could never be pinpointed. While it is true that the enemies of his revolutionary endeavor fueled propaganda aimed at representing him as a dangerously unpredictable and unstable "mad dog" (Reagan in Hagger 2009: 115), it is also true that Gaddafi actively presented himself as a constantly mutable being that escaped definitions. For example, he continuously changed his appearance, resorting to paraphernalia and even to plastic surgery (Cherstich 2014b: 98–101). More importantly, he constantly altered his programs, allying himself with other national governments and then unexpectedly declaring them to be adversaries of his revolution, or remarking

that Libyans were free subjects who should not have to pay any form of taxation, yet occasionally asking them to pay for gas, electricity, or other services. His ruling thus appeared to be characterized only by exceptions (98–101), and Libyans often felt that they could not keep up with the ever-changing decisions of their leader. As explained by a taxi driver interviewed by Igor Cherstich in the city of Tripoli, the center of Gaddafi's power, the capricious head of Libya might literally “wake up tomorrow and decide to ban smoking, and then we will all have to quit cigarettes” (102). In the following chapter, we will analyze how this volatile condition came to an end, and how Libyans finally codified Gaddafi's status, choosing to frame his shifty figure within a precise interpretation of his nature. For now, however, it suffices to say that the most dramatic consequences of Gaddafi's a-normative style of governance was the perception that no one was ever safe. As in the Soviet case, Libyans often practiced circumspection, because in the confusing absence of parameters, any action could be considered an expression of dissidence and be harshly punished by Gaddafi's police or by his notorious secret service (Cherstich 2014b).

TRICKSTERS AND VECTORS OF THE DIVINE

When confronted with such erratic forms of leadership, commentators have often analyzed the persistent propensity to foster exceptionality and unpredictability as a strategy of domination. As with an examination of the Bolshevik Revolution provided by Marcel Mauss in one of the earliest attempts at an anthropology of revolutionary phenomena, where the sociologist, a socialist himself (Graeber 2004: 17), criticizes the Bolsheviks as a “socialist sect” (Thomassen 2012: 685; see also Kalb 2018 for a trenchant critique). Although willing to recognize the Russian Revolution as an unprecedented attempt to implement communist principles (Thomassen 2012: 686), Mauss describes the Bolshevik leaders as “murky elements [using] the opportunity to accumulate disorders and follies” (Mauss in Thomassen 2012: 695), swindlers who manipulate the instability characterizing the revolutionary process to keep the people confused and subjugated: “Pure adventurers” who “exploit the Russian Revolution” (695). More recently, similar considerations have pushed anthropologist Bjørn Thomassen to draw a parallel between revolutionary leaders and the trickster (695–97), a figure found in a number of ethnographic accounts where the term is used to describe seemingly analogous supernatural beings featuring in different mythological narratives (Hyde 1995). Much like the Bolshevik leaders in Mauss's analysis, or Gaddafi's ever-changing way of ruling, the trickster is a mischievous entity, a God, hero, or spirit who has affinity with liminal situations where norms are shaken and become blurry (Hyde 1995): an embodiment of the state of exception that transcends precise categorizations. In some tales the trickster helps to solve a conflict by being external to

it, that is, by avoiding taking sides or assuming definitive positions. More often, however, the trickster's real agenda is to perpetuate instability (Hyde 1995), so that this character operates as an outsider with "no existential commitments" (Thomassen 2012: 695): a deceiver who retains no allegiance with the parties involved in a quarrel and that has no interest in resolutions.⁶

Incidentally, Thomassen's proposition calls to mind the tenets of some controversial European revolutionary theories. His suggestion that revolutionary heads could be metaphorically seen as tricksters reminds us, for instance, of the theories of French anarcho-syndicalist Georges Sorel, who, much to the disdain of other anarchist philosophers, advocated the tactical necessity to frame revolutionary actions in mythological and epic terms in order to appeal to the supposedly irrational masses (Sorel 2009; Graeber 2004: 18). Attracted by legendary and ancestral narratives, the crowds will be led, in Sorel's theory, by a revolutionary elite who reinforce the myth by engaging in unpredictable, symbolic, conspiratorial acts of violence, constituting figurative tricksters of sorts (Sorel 2009). More importantly, however, Thomassen's reference to the trickster might allow us to better situate the external masters we have encountered in the previous section. On the one hand, through their revolutionary ventures, leaders like Gaddafi or Stalin appear to be focused on upsetting an old, pre-revolutionary order and creating a new one, as creation, newness, and, in a sense, revolution are often listed as defining features of the trickster. On the other hand, these figures remain, like the mythological outsider, forever external to things and deeply uncommitted. Uninterested even in their own projects of change, they are concerned only with maintaining a state of uncertainty that favors their authority, as "the defining feature of terror regimes is not order, system and repression—it is ambivalence" (Thomassen 2012: 696). The metaphor thus helps us to shed light on some styles of revolutionary command, although it also prevents us from grasping the way in which leadership is expressed in other contexts.

To fully assess Thomassen's use of the allegory of the trickster one has to remember that in some settings the relationship between authority, revolution, and divinity unfolds in a way that is neither allegoric nor necessarily tricksterish. Take, for instance, the case of Liberation Theology, a synthesis of Christian doctrine and Marxist principles that plays an important role in a number of Latin American revolutionary movements. In such discourse the supernatural facets of revolutionary authority are not understood in metaphorical terms, but as actual reality, as affiliates of this branch of theology share with other mainstream Christian thinkers the idea that, following the death and resurrection of Christ and the coming of

6. Thomassen notices that in the case of the Nazi and Fascist uprisings, Hitler and Mussolini were "indeed 'outsiders' or marginal figures driven by resentment" (2012: 696). Far from being charismatic and gifted leaders à la Weber, these leaders were "rather genuine human failures and outcasts who in highly liminal moments somehow captured power" (696).

the Holy Spirit as recounted in the Gospels, the authority of Jesus is truly “present in the entire church, the body of Christ” (Boff 1985: 40). Unlike other theologians, however, these thinkers have often stressed the need to downplay the more hierarchical aspects of the church, putting great emphasis on the Christian notion that the poor are privileged recipients of God’s grace. Their work has therefore focused on empowering those who are at the margins both of society and of the church; an attempt, one might say, to unleash the inner leadership that is truly present in the deprived through the works of the Holy Spirit, so that they can lead their own liberation. What is more, in sharp contrast with the eternally uncommitted trickster, these theologians have often shown great commitment to helping grassroots organizations to emancipate themselves in an unconditional pursuit of social and political justice: an aspect that has led some critics—both within and outside Christian churches—to accuse Liberation theologians of being willing to resort to armed insurgency, thus bypassing Jesus’s command to unreservedly love one’s enemies (Berryman 1987: 75, 195).

In light of these reflections one realizes that, rather than following a specific model—be it that of the trickster or others—revolutionary leadership takes multiple forms and is informed by specific cultural, political, and religious traditions. It is also important to clarify that, as much as it might be illuminating for some cases, the figure of the trickster is not the only trope from the anthropological repertoire to be found in analyses of the rapport between the divine and revolutionary heads, as anthropologists have often preferred to use other well-known themes from the ethnographic literature in their investigations. A case in point is Lucia Michelutti’s study of the Bolivarian Revolution, a socialist process that began in Venezuela in 1999, and a context in which leadership is best understood, in Michelutti’s view, through the anthropological notion of “divine kinship” (2017). The concept, which is used by ethnographers to describe kin ties between humans and supernatural figures, has often been applied in the study of the “divine kingship” claimed by royal families who trace their lineage back to divine ancestors (Frazer [1890] 1993; Hocart 1970; Sahlin 2017; Graeber 2017).⁷

Michelutti, however, employs the notion to examine the role taken by President Hugo Chávez, who, despite his death in 2013, “continues to shape Venezuelan revolutionary selves” (2017: 233).⁸ Such persistent influence has, according

7. In some ethnographic contexts divine kings are seen as “stranger-kings”: leaders whose ancestry is foreign to the land they rule, and who are often viewed as individuals who remain somewhat outside of conventional society (Sahlin 2017). Bearing in mind that the style of ruling of this particular type of king is often described as being unbound by moral rules and categories, these kings share a certain similarity with the trickster. For an analysis of how such similarity stands at the heart not only of divine kingship but also the very notion of sovereignty, see Agamben 2005: 65–73; Graeber 2017.

8. On the role of divine kinship in contemporary democratic politics, see Michelutti 2014; Forbess and Michelutti 2013.

to Michelutti, largely to do with the way in which the leader framed his authority during his career. In particular, Michelutti shows how Chávez gained popular consensus by stressing his descent from both African slaves and indigenous Venezuelans, translating the tricksterish capacity of the revolutionary leader to avoid definitions into self-portrayal as one of the people rather than an exception from them: an embodiment of the diversified, mestizo culture of the country (239). Chávez, however, traced a relation of descent not only with the different ethnic components of Venezuela but also with its various religious traditions, thus effectively articulating his lineage in semi-divine terms.

As Michelutti explains, Chávez presented himself as the heir of Simon Bolívar, a Venezuelan hero who fought to establish the independence of various Latin American countries, and after whom Chávez named his own revolutionary project. Now Bolívar, as Michelutti demonstrates, plays an important role in local Venezuelan Afro-Indian cults, where the hero is prayed to as a spirit pertaining to the *corte libertadora* (court of the liberators), one of many courts of spirits that include not only precolonial and African gods, but also deified figures of Venezuelan history and famous revolutionary leaders, both local and from other Latin American countries (236–37). Bearing this in mind, one can appreciate how Chávez presented his leadership as inherited through a pedigree that was, at the same time, divine and revolutionary. Michelutti also elucidates how in his lifetime Chávez—now seen by many as a spirit himself (236–37)—revitalized Venezuelan popular religion as part of his project to de-marginalize the popular classes (238), thus indirectly supporting such claims of divine investiture. Furthermore, the leader often described his revolutionary mission using messianic themes from local Evangelical traditions, thus hinting at another spiritual lineage that linked him back to Christ, whom he described as the first socialist (238): a genealogy visually expressed by juxtaposing photographs of Chávez with those of saintly figures and the Virgin Mary (244).

Michelutti demonstrates how, despite articulating his leadership in genealogical terms and emphasizing his role as successor to previous spiritual and revolutionary leaders—practices that, as we have previously seen, Weber posited as part of routinized authority—Chávez acted as a classic charismatic head. Local Venezuelan politicians often imitated his rhetoric, mannerisms, and style, organizing their public appearances in the same format as those of popular national television programs where the leader regularly appeared to speak to his people, behaving therefore as routinized versions of the original head, as “mini-Chávezs” of sorts (Michelutti 2017: 241–45). Such routinization was particularly evident, in Michelutti’s opinion, in Chávez’s successor Nicolás Maduro. Despite claiming on various occasions to have spoken with the spirit of Chávez—thus receiving supernatural validation from his predecessor and confirmation of his status as new head of the Venezuelan revolutionary project—Maduro needed constant democratic

elections for his authority to be justified, whereas Chávez's charisma largely stood by itself (241–45). As a result, many Venezuelans felt free to criticize Maduro and other politicians for some of the shortcomings of the Bolivarian Revolution, but not necessarily Chávez (241–45), thereby emphasizing the leader's exceptional capacity to merge with his people: a direct charismatic relationship that required no mediators and that persisted after the death of the head.⁹

THE AFTERLIFE OF LEADERSHIP

The case of Chávez stands out as an instance where the revolutionary leader has highlighted the supernatural dimension of his authority to such an extent that—despite never explicitly claiming to be more than a human being—his semi-divine presence pervades people's memory. It is important to stress, however, that in other contexts similar processes of postmortem deification take place even if the leader has not cultivated a relationship with the divine when alive. In fact, at times, the figure of the deceased might be reinterpreted through religious categories that, unlike with Chávez, are completely antithetical to his agenda, and not necessarily with the aim of glorifying him. In such cases the leader's transfiguration into spiritual being might serve the purpose of fashioning an explanation for the misdeeds he committed when he was alive: a way to frame a critique of the head's revolutionary project that makes sense in light of local understandings of laws regulating the relation between gods and humans. This phenomenon is exemplified in Caroline Humphrey's (2003) analysis of popular perceptions of Stalin among the Buryat people—a Mongol subgroup forming a minority in Russia—whose Buddhist practices were violently persecuted under the Stalinist regime. As described by Humphrey, the Buryat saw Stalin as the reincarnation of a mythical blue elephant that features in a well-known Buddhist narrative, an interpretation that, in Humphrey's view, allowed them to contextualize the oppression they suffered within a familiar supernatural logic.

According to the story, the blue elephant belonged to a rich patron who decided to build a great temple-pagoda. The animal helped with the construction, and was so fatigued by the endeavor that his inner organs became visible through his skin, although, as a result of his holy commitment, the elephant reached enlightenment (2003: 188). However, when the pagoda was completed and a lama came to bless all those who helped in building it, the priest forgot to laud the elephant. Enraged, the animal renounced his enlightened status, decided to avenge the offense, and swore to destroy Buddhism three times in his next incarnations (188), a curse that,

9. The level of Maduro's popular support, however, should not be underestimated. This is a necessary clarification given the recent events taking place in Venezuela and current interference by the American government in the politics of the country.

according to the Buryat, had tremendous consequences for the Buddhist faith. Humphrey recounts that the Buryat were unsure about the first reincarnation of the elephant, but identify the second in Langdarma, a ninth-century Tibetan king who persecuted Buddhism, and the third in Stalin. Such exegesis, Humphrey argues, carried an element of reassurance, as the Soviet leader embodied the third and last threat posed by the elephant, so that after his death Buddhists could finally be safe from the animal's curse (189). At a deeper level, however, the narrative also helped the Buryat to make sense of various aspects of Stalin's life as expressions of the ineluctable laws of karma. The leader, according to the Buryat, was able to succeed as a revolutionary head because he had achieved great merit when he helped build the temple in the form of the elephant. Yet, by the same logic, Stalin inherited the terrible vow made by the animal, and he was therefore forced by destiny to persecute Buddhism. In theory, as per the rules of karma, Stalin could have compensated for the misdeeds of his previous lives by means of good deeds, but in his case, as the Buryat told Humphrey, the doom generated by the oath of the elephant was so strong that none could have possibly overturned it, not "even the Buddha and the deities" (189).

Interestingly, Humphrey demonstrates that, because of this reading of the figure of Stalin, the Buryat regarded him with a degree of empathy, as a man partially exculpated of personal blame: a character forced by spiritual dynamics greater than himself to perpetrate terrible deeds (182). Yet this view also allowed the Buryat to have compassion for themselves, and to excuse the fact they were forced to be complicit with the leader's crimes. To elucidate this particular point, Humphrey explains that the Buryat minority inhabited an area that was perceived to be at the borders of the state, a place close to other neighboring powers and therefore, from the perspective of the Soviet leadership, prone to infiltration by enemy spies (178). The Buryat's status as a suspect people was further enhanced by the fact that the Soviet regime saw them as a community so attached to reactionary supernatural beliefs as to be unfit for the revolution. As a consequence, special restrictions were enforced on them and their fidelity to the state was continually questioned and required constant confirmation. It is therefore plausible that, although the order to repress Buddhism came from Soviet leaders, some Buryat persecuted their own lamas to protect themselves from accusations of being traitors (197). When Humphrey was told that during the anti-Buddhist purges "they took the lamas behind the hill and shot them" (197), her interlocutors possibly used "they" to mean a mixture of "us" and "them." By articulating Stalin's wrongdoings as an inevitable consequence of the cycle of rebirths, the Buryat thus portrayed both the revolutionary leader and themselves as perpetrators who were also, at the same time, victims: tragic figures who were obliged to commit evil against the dictates of their better selves.¹⁰

10. Humphrey draws a parallel with psychoanalytic theory, and particularly with the notion of paranoia, understood as "displacement onto external people and events of internally generated,

This ethnographic case is particularly intriguing as it offers an understanding of the identification between a leader and his people that contrasts with familiar views of the mechanics of revolution. In some canonical revolutionary traditions, as we have explained, the will of the people is canalized through the head—and made one with him—so that it can operate as a force that can change society and the course of history. In Buryat perceptions, however, a stress is placed on the limitations of human willingness in the sense that those who lead and those who are led can only partially affect events, as both have to endure the cosmic consequences of the actions of others. Incidentally, this view also carries an alternative conceptualization of the inevitability of revolution, a notion that, as briefly mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, characterizes Marx's revolutionary approach as well as others. Whereas in the Marxist episteme revolution features as the unavoidable consequence of historical factors—a concept that will be tackled in greater depth in the next chapter—among the Buryat we encounter the idea that the success of a revolutionary endeavor, and indeed of every endeavor, is the result of an inexorable destiny of which human history is but a consequence. The life, death, and exploits of Stalin are therefore reinterpreted by this community who lived at the margins of his political project, and inscribed within an assessment of history that differs from that which, theoretically, inspired the Soviet venture. This is one way for those at the periphery to make sense of power: by viewing it through the lens of their own categories. It is important to clarify, however, that far from being a peculiarity of the viewpoint of those who live at the outskirts, radical rearticulations of the figure of the leader can often be found at the epicenter of revolutionary projects. This can be clearly seen when assessing other facets of the Soviet context, and particularly if we examine the vicissitudes that characterized the death—and, in a sense, the afterlife—of Vladimir Lenin.

As demonstrated by Alexei Yurchak, after his passing Lenin was the object of a strategic reinterpretation carried out by his successors (2015). To elucidate this process Yurchak recounts how the Bolshevik leader was embalmed, his remains displayed in a mausoleum right at the symbolic center of the Soviet Union, Moscow's Red Square, and presented as a relic of the revolution. Over the years, Soviet scientists deployed different means to prevent the body from decomposing. Yet, as Yurchak shows, such operations were aimed at maintaining Lenin's appearance, including minor details like the original pigmentation around the armpits, rather than preserving his flesh (2015: 117). Various parts of Lenin's body were in fact replaced by nonorganic material so that, although standing as a faithful simulacrum of the leader, eventually the mummy only contained a small percentage of the original organs and tissues (117). According to Yurchak, this transfiguration into a "form without substance" was part of a broader maneuver aimed at transforming the revolutionary leader into a static vestige that had little to do with

unconscious quandaries" (2003: 29), a tendency to trace the cause of one's internal turmoil to the faults of others or to destiny, understood as an otherly force par excellence.

the real Lenin: a process that had already begun during the leader's final years. When Lenin's health deteriorated, his peers had started to fight with each other over supremacy, and Lenin was marginalized in order to limit his capacity to designate a successor: a marginalization that, paradoxically, took the shape of consecration. By promoting the notion that "Leninism as a teaching was bigger than the flesh-and-blood person called Lenin" (122), prominent figures of the Russian Revolution encouraged the collection of the writings of their leader, texts that were deemed so fundamental to the preservation of revolutionary orthodoxy as to be considered almost holy: items that not even Lenin could edit or comment upon (122). Such a deification of sorts—which contrasted with Lenin's attempt to discourage people from constructing a personality cult around him—allowed his successors to keep him at bay and to exercise power without being bound by his influence. By consecrating Lenin his peers thus turned him into a symbol stripped of agency.

Yurchak further elucidates how, quite ironically, by transforming Lenin into a still image, his successors made it possible for Leninism never to be a fixed doctrine. Although ensuing Soviet leaders all described Lenin's revolutionary thought as the fundamental and unchangeable basis of their politics, each of them—from Stalin to Gorbachev—produced drastically new interpretations of Leninist theories in order to justify their own style of leadership. This constituted Lenin as an icon "behind which they could hide" (123), an image that allowed those in power to present themselves as nominal heirs of the great leader and, at the same time, implement ideas that were not condoned by him. Such a state of affairs, according to Yurchak, was reflected in the techniques used to maintain Lenin's mummy, which involved a "dynamic method of preservation that required regular reem-balming, submerging the body in baths in special solutions for long periods of time, filling it with new liquids and substances" (127), so that Lenin's body was "continuously examined, fixed, resculpted, and reembaled" (117) as a way of keeping it eternally the same by constantly altering it. The mummy thus appeared as a "living sculpture" (128), not only in the sense of being a "sculpture of the body that is constructed out of the body itself" (128) but also, more profoundly, because the relic was an entity whose features appeared immutable, but whose inner fabric constantly changed. As such, according to Yurchak, Lenin's simulacrum epitomized the Soviet party which, despite being represented by different leaders, was destined, in the Soviet narrative at least, always to remain the same: the eternal detainer of power, whose existence transcended that of individual heads and whose authority endured, notwithstanding its radically different incarnations.¹¹

11. Yurchak draws a parallel with the bodies of royals. As famously elucidated by Kantorowitz (2016), in medieval legal theories the body of the monarch was seen as double, in that it encompassed both the actual body of the king and the immortal body of kingship which survived after the king's death. In funerary rites the effigy of the king—which reproduced his features and often contained his

CONCLUSION

Bearing in mind the complex mixture of permanence and alteration that characterized Lenin's afterlife—and, more broadly, the Soviet context—we can move our attention toward a particularly intriguing facet of revolutionary leadership, a specific trait that is found in many of the cases we have touched upon, and that we can now briefly unpack by way of conclusion. The aspect in question is the degree of fluidity that seems to mark the instances of headship we have examined. Doubtless, there are recognizable and recurrent characteristics of leadership, not least the fact that in many of the contexts we have analyzed, leaders tend to be prevalently male: an aspect that testifies to dynamics of exclusion on the basis of gender that appear to be ingrained in some revolutionary projects. Nonetheless, leaders are also characterized by variation and flexibility: a tendency to escape monolithic categorizations and definitions.

This propensity for undefinedness can be observed, for instance, in the case of the tricksterish “external masters”: heads who constantly change their policies and stances, presenting themselves, as we have seen, as permanent exceptions to norms and rules, purposely keeping their revolutionary enterprises unclear, mutable, and open-ended in order to stay in power. A similar tendency, however, can be found even in the context of leaders who embrace extremely codified revolutionary agendas—at times with very specific references to distinct canons like the Marxist tradition, as in the case of Lenin—as these figures too elude classifications, and are constantly reinterpreted and expanded upon. In the light of these dynamics one can detect a certain element of “unfinishedness” that typifies at least some expressions of revolutionary authority, an openness to conceptual reorganization that demonstrates that even when considerable effort is put into presenting the leaders' personas and their ventures in a specific fashion, the actions of those who lead may still be radically rearticulated by those who are led.

Should one be inclined to support the notion of a leaderless revolution—as in the case of the anarchist episteme elucidated at the beginning of the chapter—this propensity for malleability and reinterpretation might reveal an inherent partiality, incompleteness, and defectiveness in the very practice of leadership, as revolutionary processes seem to be structurally prone to multivocality, differentiation,

hair or other parts of his body—stood in opposition to the corpse of the king, making the imperishable essence of kingship visible (Yurchak 2015: 130). Similarly, Lenin's mummy, an effigy of sorts, represented the “immortal, infallible, perpetually renewed body of the sovereign party” (2015: 147) that persisted even after the death of individual leaders. Somewhat in a similar vein, Rafael Sánchez shows how in Venezuela, power holders “monumentalize themselves” (2016: 4), cultivating a statuesque demeanor in order to, supposedly, embody the changeless will of the people: a maneuver that allowed them to artificially homogenize Venezuela's ethnically heterogeneous population and to reinforce their authority. On the relation between the bodies of deceased leaders, statues, and monuments in postsocialist contexts, see Verdery 1999.

and openness: the result of people putting forward their own different interpretations of the world and of what might be wrong with it, rather than merely relying on a leader's giving voice to their different emancipatory aspirations. Conversely, if one was to embrace some recent Marxist analyses (Laclau 2005), the indefiniteness of leadership might not necessarily appear to be detrimental to revolutionary policies, as "unfinished" leaders, precisely because of their capacity to avoid being fully defined by detailed revolutionary programs, might be able to represent a range of different groups whose demands for change are not met, thus turning the existence of particularisms into an occasion for cohesion among the exploited. This might give rise to the tracing of a clearer differentiation between those who have power and those who, despite their differences, are subjugated by it, so that revolutionary action against the former can take place (*ibid.*).

Regardless of whether the fluidity of leadership might be the ultimate proof of its ineffectiveness, or the expression of its radical potential, the fact that revolutionary heads inevitably appear to be multifaceted and prismatic figures who are constantly shaped by the gaze and the perception of other human beings speaks, in the end, to a particular idiosyncrasy of revolutions, and that is the unavoidable prominence of the people—in whatever way such notion is understood—in the unfolding of upheaval and revolts. Doubtless, one cannot read all revolutionary phenomena through the lens of the canonical view of leadership as a mere function of the will of other human beings. Nonetheless, a certain primacy of the "others," even when revolutionary endeavors seem to revolve around a particular "self," appear to feature both in familiar and unfamiliar expressions of revolutionary authority.