

On the Meaning of Revolution

One of the most overused and misunderstood words in the English language is the word “revolution” and its derivatives (“revolutionary”, “counterrevolution”, etc.) Nowadays, practically any new product in the market –and even any slight improvement in any product– is labelled “revolutionary.” However, in socio-political terms very few events in history could be considered to have been truly revolutionary.

Before the 17th Century, the word “revolution” was mainly used to describe the revolving motion of celestial bodies. But the word in the sense of representing abrupt change in a social order has been employed since at least 1450. Political usage of the term was well established by 1688, when it was used to describe of the replacement of King James II with William III in the crown of England. This incident was termed the “*Glorious Revolution.*” *

Oddly enough, an earlier upheaval –the English Civil War– was not considered revolutionary; although by the end of it, in 1649, public antipathy towards king Charles I was high enough to allow republican leaders such as Oliver Cromwell to abolish the monarchy completely and establish the Commonwealth of England. The trial and execution of that king in 1649 was the first regicide of the modern world –to be emulated by the French revolutionaries in 1793.

Since the French Revolution, the term and its derivatives has acquired a series of controversial sub-themes which have colored its meaning for centuries, and become associated with class-struggle, nationalism and armed insurrection. And in the case of the American Revolution, the word was also tinged with anti-colonialism and grassroots popular democracy.

After English historian Arnold Toynbee coined the term “Industrial Revolution” in the late 19th century to describe Britain’s rapid economic development, all successive scientific and technical progress began also to be labelled as revolutionary, and all the earlier socio-political usages of the word became associated with progress and social improvement.

Since that time, many men and women –mostly on the Left of the political spectrum– have become famous as revolutionaries. Unfortunately, just as in the case of the celestial bodies, our revolutions always seem to rotate and regress back to the original unsatisfactory state of affairs. The French Revolution ended in *La Terreur* and the self-crowning of Napoleon; while the communist revolution envisioned by Marx and Engels in 1848 engendered the totalitarian monstrosities of Stalinism and the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the 20th century that caused the deaths of many millions.

Furthermore, the elements of armed insurrection and defiance of the duly-established state, associated with the word “revolution,” has also produced new forms of tribalism, such as fascism in the 20th and sectarian terrorism in the 21st centuries.

Perhaps ancient astronomers understood the meaning of revolutions better than our contemporaries –now building the new tower of Babylon on climate crisis quagmire.

* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolution>

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