

## Topic Page: [Revolution](#)

Definition: **revolution** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

In a political sense, fundamental change in values, political institutions, social structure, and leadership brought about by a large-scale, successful revolt. The totality of change distinguishes it from coups, rebellions, and wars of independence, which seek to achieve only particular changes. The term is also used to indicate great economic and technical changes, such as the Industrial Revolution or the Agricultural Revolution. See *also* American Revolution; French Revolution; Russian Revolution

Summary Article: **REVOLUTION**

From *The Dictionary of Alternatives*

This word is commonly used to refer to a sudden overthrow of the status quo and its replacement by an entirely different state of affairs. That the word is also used for the turning of a wheel conveys this sense of social arrangements being turned upside-down. Many believe in the necessity of revolution for a fundamental reformation of society. The argument is that existing political and social institutions must be swept away if better ones are to emerge. Democratic SOCIALISTS and the reformist left prefer the idea of change achieved gradually by an incremental transformation of society, mirrored by changes in individual consciousness and behaviour. Finally a revolution may be conceived not as a deliberate strategy so much as the emergent effect of other social, political and economic changes, as in the industrial revolution.

Revolution has often been pursued as a part of a strategy for bringing about a new society, led by revolutionaries organized into parties dedicated to the overthrow of existing states and institutions. LENIN's political strategy rested upon his determination to turn the more radical elements of the Russian Social Democratic Party into an effective and dedicated revolutionary organization. MARXIST revolutionaries typically see themselves as a vanguard acting on behalf of the masses; in other cases revolutions have been brought about by small groups in pursuit of their own interests. For example, it might be argued that the English Revolution of 1642–53 merely replaced monarchical rule with that of the Whig Grandees. The historian Christopher Hill argues that the real revolutionaries of the period, radical groups such as the DIGGERS, RANTERS and LEVELLERS, were initially encouraged in order to mobilize mass support and then ruthlessly suppressed when Whig aims had been achieved. This has been a common fate for revolutionaries: many surviving Bolsheviks were purged early on in Stalin's consolidation of power over the SOVIET UNION.

It was the French Revolution of 1789 that provided the archetypal model for revolutions that were to follow and that demonstrated the rising power of the middle classes as opposed to the authority of the crown and nobility. The slide of the French Revolution into repression also provided a warning of what was to come in many later revolutions. The revolutions that took place during the long revolutionary century from 1840 to 1970 were inspired predominantly by the UTOPIAN hopes of LIBERAL reformers, SOCIALISTS, ANARCHISTS and COMMUNISTS. Following on the European industrial revolution, the rapidly expanding middle classes demanded more political influence. The result was a wave of largely unsuccessful 'bourgeois' revolutions from 1848 onwards. At the same time the newly created industrial working classes were beginning to organize themselves into TRADE UNIONS and revolutionary parties inspired by the leadership of revolutionaries such as BAKUNIN and MARX. The

result was that bourgeois revolutions often paved the way for attempts to bring about more radical social change from below.

In 1905 there was a failed liberal revolution in Russia that paved the way for the socialist revolution of 1917. In 1918 the Kaiser was overthrown in Germany by a popular revolution which resulted in the establishment of the short-lived Weimar Republic. This was followed by an abortive socialist revolution led by LUXEMBURG and Karl Liebknecht in 1919. The Xinhai Revolution in China overthrew the Qing Dynasty, establishing the Republic of China in 1911. By 1949 this had been overthrown by a socialist revolution led by MAO's peasant armies. The 1936 Spanish Revolution quickly went beyond the establishment of a republic as a result of the action of both anarchists and socialists, until crushed by Franco. The pattern was repeated again in CUBA where the last major socialist revolution took place in 1959 following the establishment of a discredited liberal democratic administration.

The Cold War between the Soviet bloc and Western capitalist states led to a number of attempts to sponsor 'revolutions' throughout the developing world or to oppose such revolutions with pro-Western counterrevolutions. Such revolutions were often only nominally communist or liberal democratic. The concept of 'permanent revolution' also arose in the twentieth century to describe a constant and dynamic transformation of society towards full communism following partial socialist revolutions. The phrase, most associated with Trotsky, originates in the idea that socialism must develop on an international scale because it could not survive within state boundaries. MAO instigated the 'cultural revolution' from 1966 to 1976 in a bid to transform Chinese society at a more fundamental level rather than simply changing the institutional and political structures of the state. In retrospect this has come to be seen as a disastrous measure that discredited communism both within and outside China. Since 1960 there have been many further revolutions, some claiming an affinity with socialism and others with bourgeois liberalism, particularly in the ex-colonies of the great nineteenth-century powers. In many cases these have turned out to be no more than *coup d'états*, a simple replacement of one ruling élite with another. The year 1968 saw a wave of protests and near-revolutionary conditions in many Western states, most notably in France, but this seemed to mark the end of the revolutionary decades rather than a new era of radical political change.

This is not to argue that revolutions are no longer a feature of contemporary politics. Revolutions in Iran (1979) and Afghanistan (1996) established fundamentalist Islamic states. The satellite communist parties of Eastern Europe were largely overthrown in bloodless revolutions such as the 'velvet revolution' in Czechoslovakia in 1989. Since the rise of neoliberalism it could even be argued that MARKET capitalism has become a revolutionary movement backed by the crusading right-wing ideology of the US translated into military force. There are also still some revolutionary movements on the left, such as the ZAPATISTAS in Mexico, but most ANTI-CAPITALIST organizations work through protest and more LOCAL forms of DIRECT ACTION.

Revolution may be seen as an emergent process that arises naturally through other changes. The terms 'industrial revolution', 'scientific revolution' or 'technological revolution' all capture this sense of the rapid transformation of everyday life, just as the 1960s have been described as a 'sexual revolution'. Though not entirely uninfluenced by the political aims and interests of various groups, such revolutions tend to occur in an unforeseen way through complex combinations of social, economic, technological and political factors. Often this form of change interacts with deliberate political revolutionary attempts. Those on the Left have generally moved away from the idea of violent and sudden political revolutions. This is partly because the political scene appears much less likely to give rise to revolutionary

opportunities and partly because the 'failure' of many revolutions has left many much less confident that this is an effective method to bring about a better society. Left reformers now tend to support engagement with existing institutions in the pursuit of incremental political change. The problem with this strategy is familiar. Attempts to bring about significant reform tend to be resisted by powerful vested interests. It should be noted that revolutionary and reformist change are not necessarily incompatible. The two may be pursued as part of a single strategy: reforms may produce an appetite for more radical change. However, in practice, reforms often reduce the pressure for more significant change. Many Marxists have argued that the rise of the welfare state and sectional forms of trade unionism has stabilized the capitalist system.

The desirability of revolution is one of the biggest dividing lines between utopians. Many anarchists and Marxists would agree that those currently in power will not let go of it without the resort to violence. Therefore, they argue, it is a sad necessity that violent revolution will be necessary in order to bring about any progress towards a free society. One of the major disagreements between revolutionary anarchists and Marxists has concerned whether a revolution should be followed by a transitional period in which the old institutions of the state are retained in order to achieve full communism gradually. Anarchists, including KROPOTKIN and Bakunin, have worried that retaining these institutions leads to the re-emergence of a hierarchical society. Other radical utopians would argue that there is a close link between ends and means, and that trying to achieve freedom through violence is always doomed to failure. Only NON-VIOLENT RESISTANCE and a revolution in personal consciousness can hope to change society in ways that will not lead to new forms of oppression. There is currently no way to resolve such a debate. That future revolutions would need to be different from those of the past, and that the prospects for them seem much more uncertain, is less contentious.

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Revolution. (2007). In M. Parker, V. Fournier, & P. Reedy, *The dictionary of alternatives*. London, UK: Zed Books. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/revolution>

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## Harvard

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## MLA

"Revolution." *The Dictionary of Alternatives*, Martin Parker, et al., Zed Books, 1st edition, 2007. *Credo Reference*, <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/revolution>. Accessed 15 Sep. 2019.