

Can the Trump Phenomenon Be Considered Revolutionary?

Written by Mark N. Katz

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MARK N. KATZ, JUN 8 2025

Can Donald Trump be considered a revolutionary leader? Can the Trump phenomenon—especially since the beginning of the second Trump administration in January 2025—be considered as a revolution? There are many who would unhesitatingly answer these questions in the negative. Trump's actions, after all, have been largely conservative, and not progressive like Marxist revolutions in the 20th century claimed to be or democratic revolutions of the late 20th and early 21st centuries actually were through ending authoritarian rule. Trump's critics, by contrast, have described him as anti-democratic, authoritarian, or even counterrevolutionary, but—as international relations theorist Stephen M. Walt declared in *Foreign Policy*—not a revolutionary.

Many Trump supporters, though, have described not just him, but themselves, as revolutionaries. Many of those who participated in the January 6, 2021, attempt to halt Congressional certification of the election of Joe Biden as president in November 2020 saw themselves as acting similarly to the American revolutionaries of the late 18th century. Trump supporters, though, are not the only ones who have described the Trump phenomenon as revolutionary. Elon Musk himself described the abrupt actions of Trump's "Department of Government Efficiency" (DOGE) to drastically reduce both federal spending and the federal workforce as revolutionary. Even before the start of the second Trump administration, Heritage Foundation President Kevin Roberts declared "that we are in the process of the second American Revolution, which will remain bloodless if the left allows it to be." The "Project 2025" which he oversaw has been described as the blueprint for "Christian nationalist regime change"—and that the second Trump administration has been acting to implement it despite Trump's distancing himself from the project during the 2024 presidential election campaign.

Are these claims about Trump being a revolutionary leader or the Trump administration (especially its second term) being a revolutionary project accurate? Just the fact that such claims have been made, in my view, make them worth investigating. Whether and to what extent the Trump phenomenon can be considered a revolution, though, is something that cannot be answered definitively—at least, not yet.

In this article, I will discuss how various theories of revolution as well as analogies with previous revolutions can provide suggestive, even if not definitive, answers about whether and to what extent the Trump phenomenon can be considered a revolution. Specifically, I will discuss the Trump phenomenon as revolution with regard to 1) whether how Trump came to power can be considered revolutionary; 2) whether the Trump phenomenon can be considered a political and/or social revolution; 3) what Trump's revolutionary goals are, and how likely they are to be achieved; 4) Trump and the question of taxation by revolutionary regimes; 5) Trump and the international dimension of revolution; and 6) Trump and the trajectory of revolutionary regimes.

The How of Revolution

Revolution has occurred by several different means, including rural revolution, urban revolution, *coup d'état*, revolution "from above," revolution "from without" (foreign sponsored revolution), and even revolution "by osmosis" (Katz 1997, 4-9). Many revolutions have been violent and have taken years to unfold. More recently, there have been revolutions that have unfolded very quickly and even non-violently—such as the democratic revolutions of the late

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Cold War and early post-Cold War eras (Mitchell 2012; Goldstone 2014, 104-16). However, they have occurred, though, one common feature is that they have done so through extra-legal means.

By this definition, the Trump phenomenon cannot be considered revolutionary. Both in 2016 and in 2024, Trump was duly elected under the terms of the U.S. Constitution by winning a majority of the electoral college vote on both occasions (even though he lost the popular vote in 2016). Had the violent attempt on January 6, 2021, to halt Congressional certification of Joe Biden as the winner of the electoral college vote in 2020 succeeded, this would have been an extra-legal event needed for the revolution that many of its perpetrators claimed to be undertaking. But it didn't.

The case for the Trump phenomenon constituting revolution, though, rests less on how Trump came to power than what he did after returning to the White House in January 2025: the rapid dismissal of large number of federal employees, the cut-off of funds appropriated by Congress to several institutions, and the abrupt deportation of large numbers of immigrants—all without specific Congressional approval and even in defiance of federal court rulings. According to *The Economist*, “Mr. Trump is leading a revolutionary project that aspires to remake the economy, the bureaucracy, culture and foreign policy, even the idea of America itself.”

Comparisons with Adolf Hitler are always fraught, but there are, unfortunately, certain similarities between Hitler and Trump. Hitler launched a failed putsch in Munich in November 1923, went on to gain power via electoral and parliamentary means in 1932-33, and then moved to quickly dismantle Germany's fragile democracy in 1933. Trump (or at least the supporters whom he encouraged) failed in an extra-legal effort to prevent Biden from succeeding Trump in January 2021, but Trump went on to regain the presidency legitimately in the 2024 elections, after which he acted swiftly to dismantle, sideline, or weaken the federal departments and agencies which he believed had stymied him during his first term. There are, of course, many differences between Hitler and Trump, but the most important one to note here is that while Hitler really did dismantle democracy in short order, Trump may have weakened it but has not destroyed it—yet.

What Sort of Revolution?

Some theorists have drawn a distinction between political revolutions which led to regime change and social revolutions that have led to a more thorough transformation of society. Examples of social revolutions which scholars have cited include the French revolution of the late 18th century, and the Russian, Chinese, and Iranian revolutions of the 20th century (Skocpol 1979, 40-42; Foran 2005, 33). Social revolutions, though, have generally been regarded as involving political revolutions (regime change) as well.

The Trump phenomenon, by contrast, appears to be far more a social revolution than a political one. Trump has not fundamentally changed the American political system, much less replaced it with a new one. But Trump's efforts to dismantle “DEI” (diversity, equity, and inclusion) and “wokism” (essentially any liberal initiatives aimed at helping or just protecting various underprivileged groups), dismiss large numbers of federal workers, shut down or greatly weaken federal agencies and federally funded institutions, and cancel grants to “woke” universities he dislikes all seem to be aimed at bringing about a social revolution.

But what sort of social revolution is this? It is certainly not a “progressive” one that some scholars claimed other social revolutions aspired to be (even when they acknowledged that their lofty goals were not achieved). As Dan Edelstein recently argued, though, the idea that revolution is something positive is historically a relatively recent one, and that revolution has previously been regarded as something destructive (Edelstein 2025). And Trump's actions certainly have been destructive when it comes to the federal work force as well as universities. Indeed, his actions have amounted to a furious assault on educated elites whom he and his supporters distrust and resent.

What Trump's assaults on both the federal work force as well as the universities resemble is Mao Tse-tung's unleashing of the Red Guards on the bureaucracy that Mao himself created as well as on educated elites in the 1960s-era “Cultural Revolution.” Trump has also been described as similar to Stalin in favoring loyalists over those with expertise. In this regard, Trump has acted like some previous revolutionary leaders have done. But what is he

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trying to create, and what prospects does he have for achieving his vision?

Revolutionary Goals

While what Trump and his supporters are against is relatively clear, identifying what they are for is less so. This is because, as with other revolutions, those backing Trump consist of a coalition generally united on what they oppose but not in what they support. So what are the components of the Trump revolutionary coalition, and what are their priorities?

White Christian nationalists have clearly been an important component of Trump's coalition. But, as the *New York Times* reported, Trump has also attracted support from non-White voters. The common denominator is that both White and non-White Trump supporters tend to be non-college educated and working class. By contrast, White and non-White Trump opponents tend to be college-educated and have higher incomes. Trump, though, also received strong support from reputedly the world's richest man, Elon Musk, as well as many other conservative billionaires. Also supporting Trump are Republican deficit hawks focused on balancing the federal budget, those who prioritize lower taxes, and those who oppose illegal and sometimes even legal immigration.

The interests of these various groups are not completely aligned. Working class Trump supporters see their interests being served (whether accurately or not) by strict controls on immigration and high tariffs as means of protecting American jobs. By contrast, billionaires oppose high tariffs—especially those applied to inputs for what they manufacture in the U.S. or what they manufacture abroad to import and sell in the U.S. This group also opposes limits on visas for foreign high tech talent whom their businesses heavily rely upon. There are also certain high tech “visionaries” such as Elon Musk who see the adaptation of artificial intelligence as enabling the drastic reduction of the workforce which they see as no longer needed in the federal government and elsewhere.

There are those who want to reduce federal expenditures in order to reduce the federal deficit, while there are others who prioritize reducing taxes even if doing so expands the federal deficit. Finally, there are conservative Christian nationalists who want to “take back” America and oppose not just secularism, but liberal Christian leaders such as Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV. Thus, while Trump's various supporters share a common opposition to “DEI,” “wokism,” “liberal elites” (especially universities), they do not have a unified, much less coherent, vision of what it is they want. Indeed, Trump himself has frequently made bold statements about what he wants but then reversed himself. As with the television competition he used to host (“The Apprentice”), he seems less interested in setting forth a coherent vision of his own policy than in serving as the arbiter among contending factions and personalities among his supporters.

This may not seem consistent with what in retrospect appear like the much clearer visions of past leaders of democratic, Marxist, or Islamist revolutions. In fact, though, the seizure of power by revolutionaries espousing varying ideologies in the past have often been followed by periods of ideological dispute and power struggle among the victorious revolutionaries (Goldstone 2014, 29-32). This was certainly true in France in the late 18th century and Russia, China, and Iran in the 20th century (Brinton 1965; DeFronzo 2015, 48-51, 104-06, 271-3). The late 18th century American revolution was also followed by serious contention and even rebellion (Wood 2002, 151-4). To the extent that the Trump phenomenon is a revolution, then, the struggle for supremacy among its supporters is very much consistent with what has occurred in past revolutions and not different from them.

Trump, Taxation and Revolution

Scholars have observed that while dissatisfaction with high levels of taxation has often been one of the grievances against *anciens regimes* that revolutionary forces have exploited, once in power these revolutionaries have often been far more efficient and ruthless about extracting resources from their nations through taxation and other means than the regimes they replaced. Jack Goldstone, for example, noted that in four countries he studied, “state finances were greatly strengthened by changes in the level and enforcement of taxation” after revolutions occurred (Goldstone 1991, 437). Given the efforts by the Trump administration and its supporters to lower income taxes, Trump has definitely not acted like previous revolutionary leaders once in power.

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Trump, though, appeared to be acting under the assumption that the high tariffs he imposed on America's trade partners would provide more than enough revenue to make up for revenue lost through lowering income taxes. In this sense, Trump was acting in a manner similar to other revolutionary leaders except that he sought to impose tax increases on other nations. What Trump did not understand (or want to understand) is that it is importers, not exporters, who pay tariffs, and that importers do not pay taxes on goods and services that they decide to no longer import.

It is interesting to note, though, that once Trump apparently came to realize that the high tariffs he announced would not lead to the greatly increased revenues which he had expected, his initial reaction was to propose raising taxes on the wealthy—an idea that his populist former adviser, Steve Bannon, also advocated. This is an idea, however, that Republicans in Congress flatly rejected. If Trump's willingness to raise taxes on the ultra-wealthy make Trump at least somewhat revolutionary, Congressional Republicans—as well as the wealthy individuals who do not want to pay increased taxes—are distinctly unrevolutionary with regard to taxation.

The International Dimension

The Trump phenomenon is not just limited to the United States but is part of a wider illiberal conservative nationalist movement that has grown strong in many European countries. Common features of these movements (including Trumpism) is their opposition to immigration (especially from the Global South) and to “wokism.” These movements also share an affinity for autocratic or illiberal democratic rulers, especially Victor Orban of Hungary and Vladimir Putin of Russia. These movements also claim to be the defenders of Christianity, albeit a distinctly intolerant version of it. Like fascist, Marxist-Leninist, Islamist, and democratic transnational revolutionary movements, the Trump phenomenon is part of a transnational movement which might be termed White nationalist, Christian nationalist, or simply anti-woke. But also like these other transnational movements, this White nationalist/Christian nationalist/anti-woke one is highly varied and could experience differences and disagreements within and between its various national components.

Trumpism both derives support from such movements elsewhere and supports them as well. Many Trump supporters have regarded Hungary's Viktor Orban as an inspiration and role model. Trump, for his part, has displayed a preference for working with authoritarian and illiberal democratic leaders such as Orban of Hungary, Recep Tayib Erdogan of Türkiye, Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Zayed of the United Arab Emirates, Nayib Bukele of El Salvador, Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, and Vladimir Putin of Russia. However, Trump's expectations about how Putin would work with him to end the war in Ukraine have been disappointed. And Trump has differed with Netanyahu on several policy issues of importance to Israel.

Cracks, then, have emerged in this “illiberal international”. Whether they will persist, or other ones will emerge, is not yet clear. If they do, however, this would actually be similar to the fractiousness that emerged in previous transnational revolutionary movements—particularly among Marxist-Leninists and Islamists. Nor, given Trump's transactionalism, would it be surprising if, like previous revolutionary leaders, he found it expedient to collaborate with his ideological opponents. Efforts by Western democratic leaders to cooperate with Trump despite their differences with him on many issues suggests that they think this is possible. If Trump does cooperate with them, he would not be the first revolutionary leader who prioritized interests over ideology.

Trump and the Trajectory of Revolutionary Regimes

Some revolutions give rise to regimes that last for years, decades, or even centuries. Others give rise to regimes that do not last long at all for various reasons, including defeat by foreign forces, successful counterrevolution, internal squabbling, or follow-on leaders changing course (even while proclaiming fealty to the original revolutionary leader's vision). What direction the Trump phenomenon will take obviously cannot be foretold. But some possibilities can be explored.

In *The Anatomy of Revolution*, Crane Brinton discussed how revolutionary movements consist of coalitions between moderates and extremists. While they work together to overthrow the old regime, their interests diverge afterward.

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While the moderates are successful at first, their inability to deal successfully with the problems of ruling that they encounter leads to a sharp division between them and the extremists, who then oust the moderates. Once in power, the extremists introduce far more draconian policies (even a “reign of terror”), but then fall out with each other. The conflict between extremists provides the moderates with an opportunity to return to power, after which the revolutionary nature of the regime diminishes and normalcy resumes (Brinton 1965).

Will the Trump phenomenon adhere to this pattern? At the beginning of his first term, Republican moderates thought they could co-opt Trump and some even thought they had done so, but Trump soon fell out with and replaced them with loyalists (who in Brinton’s schema would be regarded as extremists). The January 6, 2021 attack on Congress was certainly the work of extremists. At the outset of Trump’s second term in 2025, two groups that supported him—the MAGA base on the one hand and Elon Musk along with his DOGE initiative on the other—could be described as extremists. Elon Musk’s dramatic late spring 2025 split with both Trump and Congressional Republicans over Trump’s budget bill could be seen as the falling out among the extremists that Brinton described.

This split between Trump’s extremist supporters, though, does not seem to provide an immediate opportunity for the moderates to return to power. This may have to await the 2026 Congressional elections that could result in Democrats retaking control of the House of Representatives, the 2028 Republican presidential primaries that could result in the nomination of a moderate, or the 2028 presidential elections that could result in the election either of a Democrat or moderate Republican.

If Trumpism recedes or dissipates through electoral means, then it will have proved to be less of a revolutionary than a temporary populist phenomenon. But if Trump and his allies interrupt or cancel the normal cycle of elections, as some of Trump’s opponents fear, then this would be the political revolution aimed at solidifying his anti-woke, authoritarian nationalist social revolution.

By Way of Conclusion

As noted at the beginning of this article, the question of whether the Trump phenomenon constitutes revolution cannot be answered definitively. A review of what some scholars have written about different aspects of revolution as well as some analogies that can be made between the Trump phenomenon and previous revolutions suggest that it *could* be considered one. But even if Trumpism can be considered revolutionary, a more important question is whether or not it will succeed at implementing its revolutionary goals. Past revolutions have shown that the more ambitious the goals of the revolutionaries, the less likely they are to be achieved. Much pain and suffering, though, can occur through the vigorous attempt to implement them.

If the Trump phenomenon either ends or continues via electoral means, then it will not constitute a political revolution. But if it remains in power as a result of extra-legal means, then this will be the political revolution that could reinforce its social revolution. But however it continues, the Trump phenomenon will inevitably run into a problem that other revolutions reliant on a charismatic leader have encountered: the charismatic leader does not last forever. And while Trump has succeeded in uniting disparate groups with differing interests, it is not clear whether anyone else can do so as effectively, or at all. Indeed, whether Trump himself can continue doing so in light of differences that have already emerged between him and Musk is uncertain. Finally, it must be noted that even if the Trump phenomenon turns out to be an unambiguously revolutionary one, many revolutions that appeared successful at first eventually failed.

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