

# Anatomies of Revolution

Written by George Lawson

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GEORGE LAWSON, AUG 6 2019

Revolutions are all around us, without us always noticing them. Take the place where I live: Highbury in North London. In the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, rural workers marched on Highbury and burned down its manor house as part of what became known as the Peasants Revolt, an uprising that began as a local tax rebellion, but which turned into a general crisis. In nearby Stoke Newington can be found the Newington Green Unitarian Church, also known as the Meeting House, which was frequented during the 18<sup>th</sup> century by a number of prominent dissenters, most notably Mary Wollstonecraft and Richard Price. Amongst those who came to hear Price speak were Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson.

Heading towards where I work, at LSE, can be found Clerkenwell Green, perhaps the epicentre of revolutionary London. Over the centuries, Clerkenwell Green and its surrounds have been home to Chartists, Suffragettes, and a myriad of groups supporting independence movements around the world. During Lenin's exile in London, the communist newspaper *Iskra* was published here in a building that is now the Marx Memorial Library. Down the road in De Beauvoir Town, over 300 hundred communists, including Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, Kollontai, and Luxemburg met (in a church no less) over two weeks in May 1907 in order to develop a common revolutionary programme that could overthrow Tsarist Russia and build a communist state. And these are just some of the many revolutionaries who have made London their home or headquarters. The list ranges from the well-known figures above, to which could be added Karl Marx, Simón Bolívar and Ho Chi Minh, to lesser known characters such as Madan Lal Dhingra and Francisco Caamaño.

These personal connections are not the only signs of the importance of revolutions. Experiences of revolution are central to the making of the modern world – their legacies live on in systems of government, constitutions, legal codes, military strategies, holidays, monuments, music, and more.

Yet, in the contemporary world, revolution often appears as an attenuated force, a once radical project that has been domesticated, made safe for a world of surveillance capitalism and low intensity democracy. In recent years, figures such as Emmanuel Macron and Elon Musk have been labelled as revolutionaries, while the hugely popular musical *Hamilton*, and the even more popular *Star War* series, have eulogised revolutionary struggle. This broadening of the concept of revolution goes beyond its take-up by the mass media and in popular culture: [www.revolution.com](http://www.revolution.com) is a venture capitalist firm, [www.revolution.co.uk](http://www.revolution.co.uk) is a software company, and [www.revolution.com.au](http://www.revolution.com.au) is a flea and heartworm treatment for dogs and cats.

And yet, it takes only a moment's thought to realise that revolution remains much more than an investment strategy, gaming company or pet service. Indeed, 2019 has been a bumper year for revolution. Events in Sudan, Algeria, Venezuela and Hong Kong are illustrations that revolutions remain a living force in a world of injustice, oppression, exploitation and debasement. If revolutions are attempts to overturn existing conditions and generate alternative social orders, then ongoing movements are a reminder of the enduring human proclivity to confront injustice, even as the conditions from which injustice arises change across time and place.

If the fuel that ignites revolutionary fires changes across time and place, then it follows that revolutions are not static objects of analysis, but processes that change in form across time and place. Revolutions have been conducted by nationalists in Algeria and Angola, slaves in Haiti, constitutionalists in America and France, communists in Russia,

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China, Nicaragua, and Afghanistan, radical military groups in Libya and Ethiopia, peasants in Mexico, Cuba, and Vietnam, a curious coalition of leftists, students, merchants, and clergy in Iran, and an even curiously mix of Islamists, youth, labour organizations, and 'ultra' football fans in Egypt. At the same time, the concept of revolution exists in every major language group in the world. A study of its etymology would need to take in the Greek concepts of *epanastasis* (revolution), the Arabic terms *thawra* (revolution) and *tamarrud* (rebellion/insurgency), the notions of *mered* (rebellion), *hitkomemut* (uprising) and *meri* (revolt) in classical Hebrew, the Chinese word *geming* (change of life, fate, or destiny) and the Latin verb *revolvere* (to return).

Revolutionaries too are nothing if not adaptable. Lenin enthused over Taylorism and other forms of capitalist production, just as militant Salafists borrow from anti-colonial, Marxian and post-modern traditions. Protestors in Tehran in 1979 wore Che Guevara t-shirts, just as revolutionaries around the world sang local variants of the Internationale and, more recently, donned Guy Fawkes masks.

It is because revolutionary practices are so malleable that there is such confusion about the place of revolution in the contemporary world – a major shift in the meaning and practice of revolution is underway. If revolutions in the past offered a ruptural transformation premised on a sharp break between existing and future conditions, revolutionaries today tend to work in the niches and cracks of contemporary societies – they favour multiple (small 'r') revolutions rather than the single (big 'R') Revolution associated with England, Haiti, France, Mexico, Russia, China, Cuba, Vietnam, Iran, and other 'great' revolutions. While big 'R' Revolution presented itself as a Messiah bringing redemption to history's injustices, small 'r' revolutions are humbler. Their promise is not earthly salvation, but the striving for the *possibility* of radical transformation, of something better, even if that something better will never be realised. It is this ethos that can be found in attempts by those in the Rojava cantons to generate radical forms of libertarian municipalism, in spaces intended to foster new solidarities around climate justice, and in cross-sectoral alliances that challenge existing hierarchies. Contemporary revolutionaries are not blueprints, but multiple and indeterminate, based on improvisation and experiment rather than rulebook and recipe.

Revolutions in the contemporary world therefore fit within a longer tradition of revolutionary trial and error. Although revolutions have existed, at least in some form, throughout human history, their greatest impact has been felt under global modernity – the configuration of political, economic and symbolic processes that have served to recast domestic and international orders over the past two to three centuries (Buzan and Lawson 2015). The resulting constellations – the modern states-system, industrial capitalism, and major political ideologies – are formations that contain a global reach.

In many ways, therefore, global history over the last two centuries or so is a shared story. Struggles for and against imperialism, the extension of capitalism around the world (and resistance to its spread), the emergence of universalist doctrines, and technological developments have, with varying degrees of coercion, brought the world within some kind of commons. In this sense, modernity is, as Ernest Gellner (1988) puts it, a 'tidal wave' of homogenizing pressures. But the tsunami has not been evenly felt. Although processes such as industrialisation, imperialism and rationalisation have affected most parts of the world, they have not done so in a uniform manner. Indeed, the dislocation wrought by modernity has provoked a multiplicity of responses: market openness and protectionism, democracy and authoritarianism, religious renewal alongside secularism. At its heart, modernity is a contradictory process, one marked by greater affluence but also rising inequality, and global forms of governance alongside drives for local autonomy. It is a profoundly ambivalent set of processes. And it is within this ambivalence that revolutions have assumed their most virulent form.

Martin Wight (1978/1946: 92) wrote in the late 1970s that over half of the preceding five hundred years had featured some kind of conflict between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary states. The period since the publication of Wight's book may well be the most revolutionary in history – we are living in a 'new age of revolution' (Goldstone 2016: ii). Although no revolution has delivered in full on its promises, revolutions have brought dramatic changes in their wake. The French Revolution introduced the notions of nationalism and popular sovereignty, concepts of political 'left' and 'right', the metric system, and a conflict between absolutism and republicanism that dominated European politics during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Russian Revolution pioneered a model of state-led industrialization that was a powerful draw for many states around the world during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Chinese, Vietnamese and

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Cuban revolutions exemplified variants of southern revolution that resonated around the insurgent 'Third World' during the Cold War. The Egyptian Revolution of 1952 established a form of military-led social transformation that inspired revolutionary movements in the region during the 1950s and 1960s, just as comparable uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt inspired unrest in North Africa and the Middle East in 2011. The 'people power' uprisings in Eastern and Central Europe in 1989 have served as the lodestone for a range of unarmed revolutions in the contemporary world.

Whichever form revolutions have taken, they stand as a challenge to status quo authority, both at home and abroad, by virtue of the example they set in overcoming seemingly overwhelming forces and in their capacity to generate substantial changes both to the texture of their home societies and to international orders. Revolutions and the *avoidance* of revolutions, whether through autocratic modernization, reform programmes or counter-revolution, are not occasional punctuation marks, but the very grammar of modern world history.

Revolutions matter, therefore, in three main ways: as *substantive* processes that have played a central role in shaping the modern world; as *analytical* categories that speak to the ruptures – and hopes – sparked by modernity's ambivalences; and as *normative* projects for and against which people have fought and died. In examining how revolutions emerge, unfold and end, what is needed is a 'global historical sociology' of revolutionary change, one that explores the multiple pathways that revolutionary processes take (Go and Lawson 2017; Lawson 2019). Such a global historical sociology has three dimensions.

First, an 'inter-social' account that stresses the ways in which transboundary interactions play a generative role in how revolutions begin, endure and end. Most work on revolutions falls within one of two stools: first, internalist accounts that see revolutions as the result of logics that take place within a specific society; and second, comparative internalist accounts that compare these endogenous logics in discrete settings. Neither do enough to connect and theorize the space between revolutionary sites. As such, both fall victim to 'methodological nationalism' – the bracketing (and, oftentimes, the reification) of the nation/state/society as the preeminent, natural site of research. An inter-social approach does something different. It adopts a *descriptive* inter-social account that recognizes the generative impact of transboundary events on revolutions. And it outlines an *analytical* inter-social account that theorizes the ways in which the interactions between social sites (polities, economies, cosmologies, normative frameworks, and more) enable revolutionary dynamics to take place. These dynamics include the formative role played by inter-state competition, forms of transnational learning, the emulation of more 'advanced' social orders, the amalgamation of new technologies onto existing organizational arrangements, the spread of counter-revolutionary projects, etc. This 'interactive multiplicity' – the way in which the connections between diversely located entities-in-motion drive social change – is a core component of historical development (Rosenberg 2016). It is also a core component of revolutions.

Second, it historicizes revolutions. Although historical study has been a long-standing feature of revolutionary studies, this has not always equated to a historicist approach in which a concern for the constitutive impact of time and place takes centre stage. As noted above, one of the most enduring features of revolution as a practice is its malleability. Revolutions are not a single thing, but shapeshifters that modify their form according to the context in which they take place. Being attentive to these shifting modalities starts with a concern for the singularity of revolutionary episodes. No two revolutions are ever completely alike. However, examination of the many forms that revolution assumes demonstrates that there are regularities within revolutionary dynamics, regularities that emerge from assembling events into causal pathways, abstracting these pathways into critical configurations, and using these configurations to explain a range of cases. In this way, it is possible to detect causal pathways within multiple cases that are sufficiently robust to sustain wider explanations. For example, changing inter-social ties are the principal field within which revolutionary change takes place – hence the rapid increase in revolutions after the collapse of empires, at the end of inter-state wars, and in the midst of shifting client-patron relations. And crucial to how revolutionary events unfold is the ability of a state elite to limit fracture and maintain the loyalty of the coercive apparatus as the revolution develops. If there is no single template for how such revolutions take place, there are variations on a theme, a theme that adapts to meet new circumstances.

Third, and linked, a global historical sociology of revolutions is premised on a 'relational' approach that sees revolutions as emergent rather than dispositional. All revolutions are formed by the interaction of entities-in-motion –

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they are confluences of events that are embedded within fields of action that are, in turn, derived from historically specific conditions. All revolutions have navels – they accumulate from events and sequences that are ordered into broader configurations. This makes revolutions significant both to historical and contemporary societies. It is the requirement that revolutions contain an essential set of characteristics that led some people to presume that the age of revolutions was over. It is not. Rather, revolutions in the contemporary world are changing in accordance with contemporary conditions. This opens up a final challenge: the identification and assessment of future anatomies of revolution.

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