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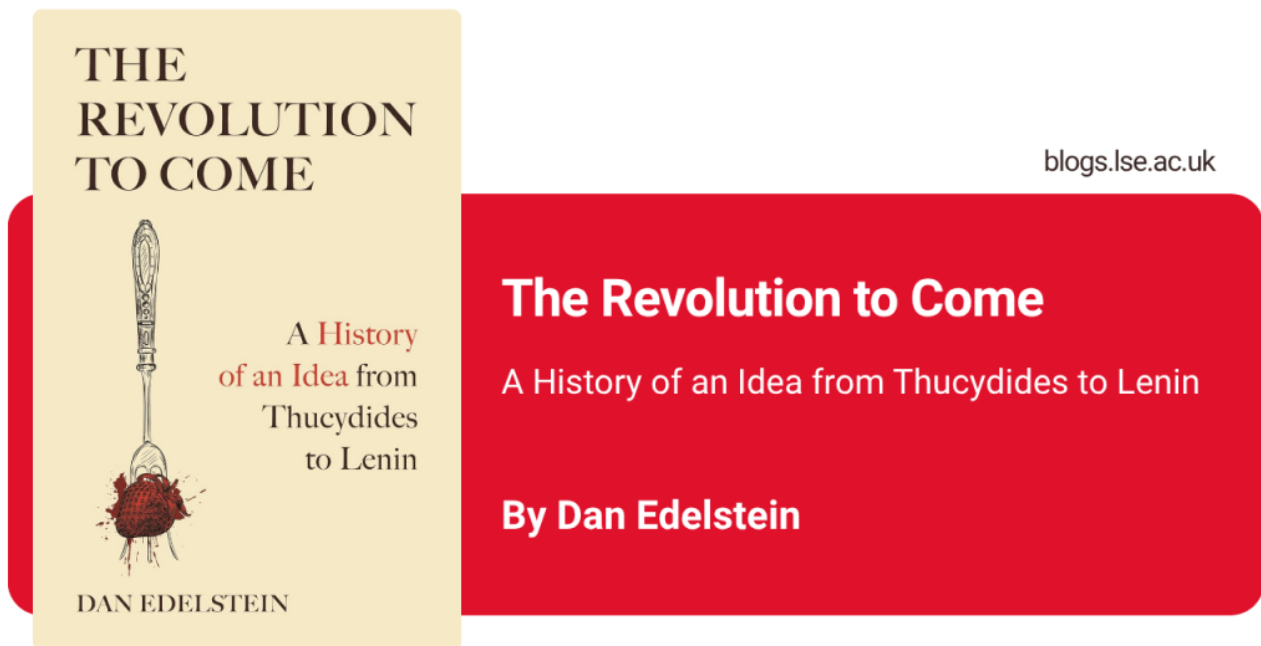
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How the meaning of revolution has changed over time

The Revolution to Come by Dan Edelstein is a sweeping intellectual history of “revolution,” tracing how the concept evolved from ancient Greece to Leninist Russia. Blending intellectual history with political theory, this impressive and necessary study reveals how and why revolution shifted from a notion of cyclical change to a future-driven ideal, writes Edoardo Vaccari.

***The Revolution to Come: A History of an Idea from Thucydides to Lenin.* Dan Edelstein. Princeton University Press. 2025.**

What do we mean when we say “revolution”? Scientists are working to bring about the “**energy revolution**” that will save the planet. Revolutionary venture capitalists “**disrupt**” the market by introducing new business models. Progressive groups promise all sorts of revolutionary palingenesis. Paraphrasing **historian Keith Michael Baker**, in our times “everywhere one looks, one finds the term invoked, generously and indiscriminately, to cover an ever-broader variety of changes” (204). But precisely because of the overuse of the word, as **St. Augustine remarked** of time, if we are asked what revolution is and try to explain, we are baffled (264). Stanford professor Dan Edelstein has come to our aid. *The Revolution to Come* attempts to answer the question by recovering the shifting meaning of the idea of revolution through time, from Periclean Athens to Bolshevik Moscow, and beyond. How did key thinkers in classic and modern times understand and employ the word revolution? What does this entail for the way we use the term today? Only a long-range genealogy, Edelstein suggests, can give us a clue to this riddle.



A long view of revolution as an idea

The Revolution to Come is an expansion of his previous work, and particularly of *Scripting Revolution* (2015), which he edited with K. M. Baker. Its extensive timeline departs from other recent contributions to the field, particularly Enzo Traverso's *Revolution: An Intellectual History* (2021). Traverso focuses on 19th and 20th century Marxism, adopting a cultural lens. In contrast, Edelstein's "big picture" approach connects it to works in the history of ideas that deal with specific terms through vast swaths of time, such as Martin Jay's *The Virtues of Mendacity* (2010), Jacob Soll's *Free Market: The History of an Idea* (2022), or Darrin M. McMahon's *Equality: The History of an Elusive Idea* (2023).



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The book is structured in four major blocks following a chronological timeline. The first part, “Fortune’s Revolution,” explores Greek and Roman thought, but the main bulk of the book revolves around the modern period: Part II, “Constitutions and Revolutions in the British World” examines the English and American revolutions. Part III, “Modern Times,” focuses on the Enlightenment and **the French Revolution** and forms the axis around which the text rotates. And the fourth and final section, “Progress of Revolution” traces the global spread and transformation of revolution in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

From cyclical to deliberate change

Edelstein opens with Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. But the main protagonist of this initial section is Polybius and his concept of *anacyclosis*, the natural revolution that political systems undergo through time. Much like planets rotating in their orbit, different forms of government grow, stabilise, and decline, finally falling back to their point of departure. Crisis and decay cannot be avoided, but only slowed down by adopting what Polybius sees as the best of political regimes, a mixed constitution like that of the Roman Republic. Revolution is an inescapable fact of politics, but one that should be curbed, not evoked (58).

According to Edelstein, it is in the 16th century that European intellectuals begin to translate *anacyclosis* with “revolution” (62). The sense of the term is still negative, but its hidden catalyst is now **Machiavelli’s “Fortuna”** (fate) rather than simply nature. This new meaning of “revolution” is later inherited by the protagonists of the Glorious **Revolution** in the 17th century. They too reaffirm the Polybian ideal of mixed government against the whims of Fortune’s wheel. However, at this point, a subtle but significant semantic shift also takes place. Thinkers like **Sidney** and **Locke** begin to treat revolution as a deliberate act, albeit with a conservative aim: a return to the “ancient constitution” against the expansionist ambitions of a tyrant (86). The American Revolution follows suit, prioritising stability over change. For Edelstein, this episode belongs to a revolutionary tradition that still sought to rebalance an upended order, rather than creating a new one.

Towards a better future

Although 1789 is the first instance of a revolution with a “future-facing identity,” 1793 marks the point at which the term undergoes its final redefinition (180). The Jacobins take a **new understanding of revolution** to its extreme consequences. In the wake of the **philosophies of Condorcet and Voltaire**, this new conception of the word has become inextricably wedded to the idea of progress. Revolution is no longer a painful but necessary means to reestablish a lost political harmony. On the contrary, it is a positive and sought-after occurrence that accelerates the march towards **a better future**. It follows that revolution must keep going until heaven on earth is achieved in the fastest possible way, i.e., it must become “permanent.” According to Edelstein, with

Robespierre and Saint-Just the authority and legitimacy of revolution stops resting on popular will. It now stands on its own, and the path of blood that it leaves behind is justified by the promise of final and complete human redemption – what Edelstein calls the logic of “prospective retrospection” (235).

The final part of *The Revolution to Come* follows the trail of this new understanding of revolution across two different strands. On the one hand, Napoleon uses it to reconfigure and spread modern liberalism by combining individual rights with limited popular sovereignty and a strong government. On the other, Marx, and later Lenin, emphasise radical transformation and the dictatorship of the proletariat. In both, democratic mechanisms are sidelined in favour of top-down, centralised control. However, while the communist dispensation has now exhausted its strength, Edelstein seems to suggest that liberalism continues to harbour a problematic compatibility with authoritarian governance (209).

Understanding history in context

The Revolution to Come impressively blends erudition and breadth of vision with readability. By combining historical method with literary criticism and political theory, Edelstein manages to convey a central insight, namely that if we really want the past alive, we need to understand what words and concepts meant in their own time and context, and to what effect they were used. Without this type of effort, history remains a sealed book.



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Edelstein does not meddle too much with questions of methodology, staying away from the theoretically heavy approach common to many intellectual historians, especially in the so-called “**Cambridge School**” spearheaded by Quentin Skinner and JGA Pocock, or Rheinhardt Kosellek’s *Begriffsgeschichte* approach, which focused on mapping concepts over time. This certainly makes for an easier read and will hopefully attract a broader audience outside of academia. But it also leaves certain questions open, especially around how ideas get transmitted across time and what ultimately shapes them – material conditions or intellectual efforts. Are we supposed to derive a

normative lesson from the book? Certain sections, particularly the one on liberalism, and parts of the conclusion seem to hint at that, but leave the final answer suspended.

All in all, this is a necessary read and not just for those interested in intellectual history. Edelstein puts some order around an overused and often misunderstood concept, providing both a solid basis for more in-depth research and a more nuanced understanding of our language.

Note: *This review gives the views of the author and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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