

What is a Revolution?

The Oxford Dictionary defines 'Revolution' as:

1. A forcible overthrow of a government or social order in favour of a new system.
2. A dramatic and wide-ranging change in the way something works or is organised or in people's ideas about it.
3. An instance of revolving. "One revolution a second".

The word 'Revolution' can be used to describe wide-ranging changes which are not related to politics. For example:

- The 15th century 'print revolution'.
- The 17th Century 'scientific revolution'.
- The 'technical' Industrial Revolution.
- The 20th century 'scientific –technical' revolution.
- The post-WW II 'green revolution'.
- The sexual revolution of the 1960's
- The 4th Industrial Revolution

However, we are focusing on the political use of the term "Revolution".

Before the 17th century, the concept of a "revolution" meant to "revolve", "restoration" or return to the state of originality; taken from the Latin word *revolutionem*. This is how it was used in the English Revolution of 1688.

It is only after the 1776 American Declaration of Independence, 1789 French Revolution & the 1804 Haitian Revolution that "revolution" came to mean an overthrow, overturn and a radical new departure.

Political vs. Social Revolutions

All revolutions involve the participation of the masses.

'The most indubitable (undeniable) feature of a revolution is the direct interference of the masses in historical events. ...The history of a revolution is for us first of all a history of the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny.' – **Leon Trotsky**

However, revolutions can be distinguished into political and social revolutions.

Political revolutions bring changes to who holds political power, how people are governed and what rights they enjoy.

The term political revolution came to be associated with the French Revolution of 1789. This revolution saw the overthrow of the divine right of absolute monarchy in the name of liberty, individual rights (including the right to property, the rule of law and representative government).

Social revolutions produce changes which are deeper and more wide-ranging than political revolutions. There is an overthrow of the old order and a new class (or bloc of classes) become new rulers. There are changes in property relations, ownership patterns and the agrarian question. These changes benefit ordinary people socially, politically and economically.

The term **Social revolution** came about as Marxism and the working-class movement grew between 1830 and 1848. During that time, the concept of revolution as political liberation came to be replaced by the idea of revolution as the drive to social equality.

Examples: Russian Revolution (1917), Chinese Revolution (1949), Cuban Revolution (1959)

Some points about 'Revolutions'

- The masses are centrally involved in revolutions.
- Revolutions are both a result of preparation and a profoundly new beginning
- A "revolution" is a protracted (long) process. It goes through phases and may take many years.
- Not all revolutions succeed (some are defeated). Others fail by falling short of their economic, political & social aims.
- Some revolutions are cut short as a result of abrupt reversals. The effect is that of not holding power for long enough to initiate a deep process of structural transformation.
- Although not the main defining element, most revolutions give rise to violence or civil wars. There have also been times when revolutions have come about through democratic elections – for example, Chile (1970) and Venezuela (1998)