

***Britain's Political, Cultural & Industrial
Revolutions:
As Seen by Eighteenth-Century Observers
and Later Historians***

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¹ With thanks for stimulating discussions from panel chair Annelien de Dijn, fellow panellist Hanca Jürgens, and all ISECS seminar participants; to Anne-Marie Mai for the invitation to publish; and to Tony Belton for his as-ever critical reading of the text.

Summary

Using previously unknown evidence from contemporary onlookers (both famous and little-known), this essay identifies and classifies the major references to 'Revolution' in eighteenth-century Britain. At the start, the most common category of comments referred to abrupt political-regime change. The 'Happy Revolution' or what became later known as 'the Glorious Revolution' of 1688/9 was the prototype. This political terminology was revived in the 1770s, to denote, whether in praise or blame, the American colonists' revolt and, after 1789, the massive upheavals in France.

Alongside that, a much less well known strand of commentary referred to social and cultural change in terms of 'revolution' or 'the world turned upside down'. The meanings of this usage are probed to show that it encompassed some elements of change (commercial, cultural) that historians commonly label as 'evolutionary'.

Furthermore, there was a new category of comment in the later eighteenth century, which referred to economic transformation. These industrial usages borrowed much more from earlier social applications than from references to political processes, although both shared the same word. Hence there was a late eighteenth-century/ early nineteenth-century language of 'industrial revolution' or equivalent long before Toynbee in 1881 named Britain's transformation as 'THE Industrial Revolution'.

Finally, the essay explores the potential confusions between the different applications of 'revolution' in the eighteenth century. Given the diverse modes of change, from micro- to macro-, historians need a new and better vocabulary to differentiate between the rival strands. Forcing political, cultural, social, sexual and economic 'revolutions' into one universal mould obscures more than it illuminates. Let's have some Macro-Transformation alongside the inevitable Revolution.

Essay



Time for Revollusion by Nasan Tur:
© Nasantur (2008)

Revolution – *Revollusion* in this strikingly mis-spelt version from Berlin – is a word and, more importantly, a concept of great potency. It appears and reappears in many historic contexts and always offers a challenge to interpreters.² So it was in the eighteenth century. So it has continued thereafter. And so today it should stimulate analysts to broaden the vocabulary of dramatic change to incorporate Revolution in all its variants.

For some literary theorists and anthropologists, sometime back, the power of words in their deepest structures was summarised by the formula that ‘language determines consciousness’. Most historians, coming from a deeply empirical discipline, refrain from engaging with such abstract formulations. Even those most sympathetic to the linguistic turn tend to be unwilling to grant language or the ‘linguistic episteme’ supremacy over everything. After all, human history existed in the many long eons before either speech or writing was developed. Hence when historians do reflect upon these theoretical debates, they tend to prefer the alternative formulation that ‘consciousness determines language’.³

² P. Calvert, *Revolution* (London, 1970); idem, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution* (Milton Keynes, 1990); and I. Kramnick, ‘Reflections on Revolution: Definitions and Explanations in Recent Scholarship’, *History and Theory*, 11 (1972), pp. 26-63, provide good introductions.

³ Compare G. Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages* (New York, 2010); with warning against absolutising language from Alexander Spirkin, ‘Consciousness and Language’, in his *Dialectical Materialism* (1983), 3.3, in www.marxists.org/reference/archive/spirkin/works. See also J.A. Lucy, *Language Diversity and Thought: A Reformulation of the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis* (Cambridge, 1992); W. Croft, *Typology and Universals* (Cambridge, 1990); S. Pinker, *The*

That said, once words/concepts do appear, they often contribute a potency of their own. Hence it is much more feasible, ultimately, to think in terms of a rich dialectical interchange between consciousness and language. People develop new terms to describe new circumstances and new imaginings. But then powerful words/ concepts also acquire sticking-power – even too much so. Later generations thus may have a struggle to break from old terminologies and to reinvent their language.

Political Revolution

In the case of Revolution, the word itself was far from new in the seventeenth-century. It was used in English and numerous other European languages to refer to the regular turnings of a wheel or, in the sixteenth century, to the newly-discovered orbits of the planets around the sun.⁴ A long-established model of political change in history, derived from the classical world, also proposed that systems of governments changed in a merry-go-round. They revolved from the rule of one – to the rule of the few – to the rule of the many – and back to the rule of one – and so on, *ad infinitum*. In practice, changes were often variegated. Aristotle, for example, noted that a revolution could refer either to a significant adaptation of an existing constitution or to a complete switch from one type of constitution to another.⁵ Yet, however multifarious, cyclical models usefully contained both change *and* ultimate continuity, putting short-term upheavals into a deeper pattern.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the term ‘Revolution’ was pressed into use in England at the time of the mid-seventeenth-century civil wars. Things were manifestly changing. In 1654, Oliver Cromwell was one who referred, approvingly, to God’s revolutions: ‘The Lord hath done such things amongst us as have not been known in the world these thousand years’.⁶ In this case, he was clearly thinking of not only of a beneficial transformation but also of an unrepeatably moment in world history. Others, like the little-known pamphleteer William Beech, were less cheery. He deplored England’s ‘present distempers’ as produced by

Language Instinct: The New Science of Language and Mind (New York, 1994); and, for historians’ debates, E.A. Clark, *History, Theory Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004).

⁴ Famously by Nicolaus Copernicus, *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium: On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres* (1543).

⁵ Aristotle, *The Politics*, transl. J.A. Sinclair (Harmondsworth, 1962), p. 190: Bk V, ch.1.

⁶ Cromwell’s speech at dissolution of his first Parliament, 27 Jan. 1654, in C. Hill, *God’s Englishman: Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution* (London, 1970), p. 251. For other mid-seventeenth-century usages, see also C. Hill, ‘The Word “Revolution” in Seventeenth-Century England’, in R. Ollard and P. Tudor-Craig (eds), *For Veronica Wedgwood, These: Studies in Seventeenth-Century History* (London, 1986), pp. 143-51.

‘the late revolution of government in this nation’ (1651).⁷ Beech’s meaning was Aristotelian rather than eschatological – referring to the constitutional change from executed monarchy to the new republican Commonwealth under the Rump Government (1649-53). Such usages, however, remained comparatively rare. The celebrated – and contested – designations of the mid-seventeenth-century upheavals as the ‘Puritan Revolution’ (S.R. Gardiner)⁸ or the ‘English Revolution’ (T.H. Green; Christopher Hill)⁹ were the handiwork of much later historians.

It was instead the constitutional upheavals of 1688/9 which brought the term into wider currency and a new meaning. The challenge to James II by his son-in-law (and nephew) William of Orange led to the overthrow of an anointed king. The country’s governance did not collapse. But James II, realising that he could not halt the intruder, fled to France. In his place, a specially constituted Convention Parliament not only established the joint monarchy of William III and his wife Mary II but significantly amended the framework of government. The 1689 *Bill of Rights* (note the assertive title) enacted a number of constitutional principles, although it did not introduce a fully written constitution.¹⁰ And the 1689 Act of Toleration for the first time established, by law, freedom of worship for all Trinitarian Protestants, including the Protestant Dissenters who stood outside the established Church of England.¹¹

By any token, these were dramatic changes. Within months, writers were saluting the ‘Great Revolution’.¹² The bloodless nature of William’s progression across England was particularly welcomed, in contrast to the divisive civil wars of the 1640s.¹³ Other positive

⁷ W. Beech, *A View of England’s Present Distempers, Occasioned by the Late Revolution of Government in this Nation ...* (London, 1650).

⁸ S.R. Gardiner, *The First Two Stuarts and the Puritan Revolution, 1603-60* (London, 1908).

⁹ T.H. Green, *Four Lectures on the English Revolution* (London, 1912); later revived by C. Hill (ed.), *The English Revolution, 1640: Three Essays* (London, 1940). Hill also identified the English Revolution as a classic ‘bourgeois’ revolution: see C. Hill and E. Dell (eds), *The Good Old Cause: The English Revolution of 1640-60 – Its Causes, Course and Consequences* (London, 1949); in second edn, with introduction by C. Hill (London, 1969), pp. 20-4, 470-6; and C. Hill, *Reformation to Industrial Revolution, 1530-1780: Economic History of Britain, Vol. 2* (1969; repr. 1980), pp. 213-74.

¹⁰ The language of ‘Rights’ harked back to the 1628 *Petition of Right*, claiming intrinsic rights for the people, rather than grants by royal favour. The provisions of the 1689 Bill of Rights also drew ideas from the 1654 Instrument of Government, drawn up at the start of Oliver Cromwell’s Protectorate: J.R. Tanner, *English Constitutional Conflicts of the Seventeenth Century, 1603-89* (Cambridge, 1962).

¹¹ Further Acts of (limited) Toleration were passed for Scotland (1712) and Ireland (1719).

¹² See J. Welwood, *Vindication of the Present Great Revolution in England* (London, 1689); and T. Beverley, *The Late Great Revolution in this Nation ... to be Duly Ascribed to the Supreme Spirit, now about to Move in the Fulfilling All Prophecy ...* (London, 1689).

¹³ Outside England, there certainly was fighting, which was bloody but not long protracted: the supporters of the departed James (Latin *Jacobus*), who were quickly named as Jacobites, were defeated by the Williamites in Scotland at the Battle of Dunkeld (Aug. 1689) and in Ireland at the Battle of the Boyne (July 1690).

names followed: the ‘Wonderful Revolution’, the ‘Happy Revolution’.¹⁴ And the version that stuck was euphoric. The ‘Glorious Revolution’ was a distinctly Whig nomenclature, reflecting the views of the moderate constitutionalists among the ruling gentry, merchants and professionals. Over time, this positive name became a standard usage, especially after the final Jacobite defeat in 1745.¹⁵ The terminology celebrated the connotations of Protestantism, nationalism, constitutionalism, and non-violence. Furthermore, a significant element of the perceived ‘glory’ of 1688/9 was the absence not only of civil war but also of social upheaval from below.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that the English populace was not so much passive at William’s arrival but broadly acquiescent. James II had made himself unpopular by a series of high-handed actions. After William’s landing in south-west England, the citizens of Exeter were the first who had to decide. It would have been difficult for the Dutch invader to proceed, if a major regional capital had held out against him. Indeed, when William’s army first arrived outside the stout city walls, Exeter’s gates were obdurately closed.¹⁶ But a messenger went inside to parley. James’s supporters lost heart and some fled. Next day the West Gate was opened and William entered with civic pomp, attended by his army, many local gentlemen, and his exotic guards of 200 armed Swiss mercenaries, 200 Laplanders wearing bear-skins, and 200 Surinamese from the Dutch Republic’s south American colony. After that signal success, his march to London became an increasingly triumphal procession. William accordingly won with a public parade not a back-stairs *coup d’état*. The rebellious English people would have been quite capable of resisting him – but did not.

William became, in his own restrained style, an iconic saviour. For Northern Ireland Protestants, he became a special favourite, familiarly known as ‘King Billy’. A celebrated painting depicted his landing at Torbay. In regal style, the would-be monarch sits easily astride a prancing white horse, his sword at the ready, and his ships just off-shore: a determined leader for the people, like a shining knight of old.¹⁷

¹⁴ See R.B. [R. Burton, pseudonym of N. Crouch], *The History of the House of Orange ... A Brief Relation [of events] ... till the Late Wonderful Revolution* (London, 1693); and R. Steele, *The Crisis: Or, a Discourse Representing the Just Causes of the Late Happy Revolution ... With Some Seasonable Remarks on the Dangers of a Popish Successor* (London, 1713).

¹⁵ See variously J. Gale, *A Thanksgiving Sermon ... in Commemoration of the Deliverance of this Nation from the Gunpowder Plot; And of the Late Glorious Revolution in 1688* (London, 1713); and E. Pickard, *National Praise to God for the Glorious Revolution, the Protestant Succession, and the Signal Successes and Blessings with which Providence has Crowned Us: A Sermon* (London, 1761).

¹⁶ An inconspicuous plaque today records the site of the West Gate (demolished in 1815) and the city’s momentous decision in November 1688, which averted a potential civil war in England.

¹⁷ National Maritime Museum: Jan Wyck (1652-1702), *William III Landing at Brixham, Torbay, Nov. 1688* (1688).

To be sure, objections can easily be made to the standard name for 1688/9. Generations of students have written essays debating the proposition that ‘The Glorious Revolution was neither glorious nor a revolution’. Historians still remain divided on the issue. Some downplay the novelty of these events, while others stress their radical nature.¹⁸ Yet, since the politico-religious settlement was redrawn, there was certainly a ‘revolution’ in Aristotle’s broadest sense of a significant constitutional restructuring.

When, much later, the political philosopher Edmund Burke asserted polemically that 1688/9 entailed nothing more than ‘a small and a temporary deviation from the strict order of a regular hereditary succession’,¹⁹ he was wrong. The Bill of Rights included the phrase ‘*the throne being thereby vacant*’, following James II’s flight, which was taken to constitute his abdication. That declaration in itself represented more than a minor deviation. It flatly contradicted the first principle of hereditary monarchy. Theoretically, the throne is never vacant: ‘the king is dead, long live the king’. This time, however, it was declared legally to be so – as had occurred *de facto* between 1649 and the restoration of Charles II in 1660. Monarchy again survived in 1688/9 but by parliamentary say-so, not through a process of hereditary claims.²⁰

Following this crisis, ‘Revolution’ quickly became the accepted term of art for the overthrow of a tyrannical ruler, following by a new constitutional regime, guaranteeing specific rights for the people. William III as Prince of Orange had declared his cause to be ‘for the preserving of the Protestant Religion, and for the restoring of the Laws and Liberties of England, Scotland, Ireland, etc’.²¹ The idea of restraining absolute monarchy had potentially European-wide appeal. One English observer in 1690 had a startling claim to prescience when he foretold the coming of similar revolution in France.²² In fact, this forecast proved to be just under 100 years premature. It showed, however, how infectious hopes were raised among English critics of absolute monarchy, especially the French variety.

¹⁸ Among a huge literature, contrast W.A. Speck, *Reluctant Revolutionaries: Englishmen and the Revolution of 1688* (Oxford, 1988), 211-51; and S.C.A. Pincus, *1688: The First Modern Revolution* (New Haven, 2009).

¹⁹ E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London, 1790), ed. C.C. O’Brien (Harmondsworth, 1979), p. 101.

²⁰ Thus when Mary II died in 1694, William III remained unchallenged as king, although superior hereditary claims were held not only by the exiled James II, plus James’s Catholic son the Old Pretender, but also by William’s sister-in-law Anne, who succeeded him as Queen (1702-14) only after his death. After that, the crown was allotted by the 1701 Act of Settlement to the Hanoverian Elector George I, who was impeccably Protestant and a descendant of the Stuarts, but far from the most senior in terms of strict hereditary right.

²¹ From the declaration, read aloud in Exeter Cathedral by its author the Whig Bishop Gilbert Burnet, see J. Whittle, ‘An Exact Diary of the Late Expedition of his Illustrious Highness, the Prince of Orange’ (1688): www.dsnell.zynet.co.uk/Guides/Word/William_III_in_Exeter.doc.

²² E. Petrie, *The Fate of France: A Discourse, wherein ... it is Shewed that by the Happy Revolution in England, all the Designs of the French King for Universal Monarchy are Disappointed; and the Rational Grounds to believe his Downfall Near* (London, 1690).

Given this legacy, it was not surprising that the revolt of the North American colonists in the 1770s generated talk of further ‘revolution’. They were fighting a war of independence, not only to oust a monarch who seemed to them a tyrant but also to establish a new republic. That was constitution-changing in a big way. Interestingly, some colonists had proposed finding a new king to replace George III. Perhaps the exiled ‘Bonnie’ Prince Charlie, the Jacobite Young Pretender, might cross the Atlantic to reclaim at least some of his long-lost patrimony?²³ Drawing upon their Whig constitutional inheritance, however, the American rebels were ready to manage without a king, even while their elected Presidents were given extensive proto-monarchical prerogatives.

Evidently, something dramatic was afoot – and something more far-reaching than a rerun of the ousting of James II in 1688/9. The ‘American Revolution’ was saluted in Philadelphia in 1779;²⁴ in France in 1781 by l’Abbé Reynal;²⁵ and in Britain in 1784 by the Nonconformist minister Richard Price (his tract also being translated into French).²⁶ Insofar as there was a single iconic hero of the American upheavals, he was George Washington. The first commander-in-chief and then first President was also portrayed on his white horse, symbolising purity. His dress is always shown as soldierly, never lavish; and, when he holds out a sword, it is extended not vengefully but with firm intent.²⁷

Again, however, there is scope for debate about the extent to which the American ‘revolution’ was truly revolutionary. It remains a set topic for students to discuss. Historians too continue to disagree.²⁸ All accept, however, that the disfiguring affront to liberty in the form of legally-accepted slavery in the southern colonies/states was not ended or even ameliorated by the events of 1776/83. In that regard, it could be argued that the American Civil War (1861-5) was a much delayed component of a protracted multi-staged struggle for freedom, which began in 1776 and did not really end even with the Emancipation

²³ M.G.H. Pittock, *The Invention of Scotland: The Stuart Myth and the Scottish Identity, 1638 to the Present* (1991), p. 194.

²⁴ Anon. [Gouverneur Morris], *Observations on the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, 1779).

²⁵ G.T.F. Reynal [l’Abbé Reynal], *Révolution de l’Amérique* (Paris and London, 1781).

²⁶ See R. Price, *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution, and the Means of Making it a Benefit to the World* (London and Boston, 1784), transl. as *Observations sur l’importance de la Révolution de l’Amérique* (1784).

²⁷ P. Hannaford (ed.), *The Essential George Washington: Two Hundred Years of Observation on the Man, the Myth, the Patriot* (Vermont, 1999); W.E. Woodward, *George Washington: The Image and the Man* (New York, 1926).

²⁸ Contrast J.P. Greene (ed.), *The American Revolution: Its Character and Limits* (New York, 1987); and idem (ed.), *The Ambiguity of the American Revolution* (New York, 1968); with, among many others, G.B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (London, 2006).

Proclamation of 1863.²⁹ Moreover, it should be acknowledged the oppression of the indigenous Americans was not halted by Independence.³⁰ And the new ‘democratic’ Republic excluded all women from voting, as was customary at that time.³¹ Thus there were clear social limits to the extent of change. On the other hand, the settlement was undeniably radical in ending monarchy, in instituting a written constitution, and in throwing off the tutelage of a distant power. Hence the revolutionary tag became the standard name for the American struggle. And so it remains.

Ultimately, however, it was the French Revolution that became the classic prototype. In its exuberance and in its terror, it overshadowed all its precursors. The events following upon the fall of the Bastille in July 1789 were immediately hailed as revolutionary, long before the French king was executed in January 1793.³² Moreover, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* in August 1789, while picking up the terminology of the English Bill of Rights, went much further in its democratic and universalist implications.³³ There was much popular involvement and conflict, both for and (in some regions) against the unfolding changes. As is well known, things became extraordinarily complex. France’s first Republic (1792-1804) was then up-ended by an upstart Emperor (1804-1814/15), who was followed by an eventual (though not permanent) restoration of the Bourbon monarchy in 1815.

During this saga, there was at one stage a chivalrous man on a white horse. He was General Lafayette, the French nobleman who had fought with the rebels in the American War of Independence and who in 1789-91 tried to broker a constitutionalist settlement in France. Perhaps he might have become the French equivalent of George Washington, as a new president?³⁴ Yet no single person could embody all the complexities of the convulsions in France. Not Lafayette, who was ousted by the Jacobins; not Robespierre, who grossly overdid the Terror and was felled by his own guillotine; and not Napoleon (also depicted on a white horse) who after all turned the First Republic into Empire.

²⁹ For introductions to a massive bibliography, see S. Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Anti-Slavery* (Cambridge, 2009); G.B. Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006); and J.P. Kaminski (ed.), *A Necessary Evil? Slavery and the Debate over the Constitution* (Madison, 1995).

³⁰ See variously K.W. Townsend and M. Nicholas, *First Americans: A History of Native Peoples* (Boston, 2013); and F.E. Hoxie and others (eds), *Native Americans and the Early Republic* (Charlottesville, 1999).

³¹ See K. Taschek, *Daughters of Liberty: The American Revolution and the Early Republic, 1775-1827* (New York, 2011).

³² For positive reactions, see W. Roscoe, *The French Revolution: A Song* (London, 1789?); and A. Geddes, *A Secular Ode on the French Revolution, Translated from the Original Latin* (London and Paris, 1790). For a sharply critical response, by contrast, see Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, cited above n.19.

³³ J.I. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution and Human Rights, 1750-90* (Oxford, 2011).

³⁴ For G. du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette, see B. Tuckerman, *Life of General Lafayette: With a Critical Estimate of his Character and Public Acts* (New York, 1889); and H.G. Unger, *Lafayette* (Hoboken, NJ., 2002). An equestrian statue of Lafayette, with his sword aloft, can be viewed in Paris, on Cours la Reine, VIIIe arrondissement, while many more monuments abound in the USA.

Instead, the most emblematic figure became the imagined Marianne, who was an anonymous woman of the downtrodden people. Symbolically, she was simultaneously a nurturing mother, a passionate fighter for Republican liberty, and a secularised madonna.³⁵ Her image memorialised the mass participation that made the French Revolution so much the paradigmatic political revolution, notwithstanding the fact that full female voting rights were not actually granted in France until 1944.

Of course, there always remains scope for debate as to how revolutionary was this great popular upheaval, both at the time and in the long term.³⁶ And the same applies to other similar events. To take another example, Isaac Deutscher in 1967 gave an elegantly revisionist account of the Communist Revolution of 1917. He saw the outcome of its radicalism as being new-communist whilst still remaining deeply old-Russian.³⁷ Since the central government remained as or even more autocratic under Soviet rule as it had been under the Tsars, Deutscher's perception was a just one. Nonetheless, the Communist movement detected a classic sequence of popular topplings of tyrants at times of economic crisis: the English, the French, the Russian, the Chinese, and the Cuban Revolutions.

But that endorsement has by no means monopolised the terminology. So post-1989 the popular uprisings against the Marx-inspired communist regimes have also been dubbed 'revolutions' rather than, from a Marxist viewpoint, as 'counter-revolutions'. These democratic movements, being broadly non-violent, are given gentle names. They range from the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia (1989)³⁸ to the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003),³⁹ Orange Revolution in the Ukraine (2004),⁴⁰ and so forth.⁴¹ But, again, their radicalism remains open to debate (and remains to be seen). Moreover, in the long run, the often-masked power of continuity gives its own collateral verdict.⁴²

³⁵ M. Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle: Republican Imagery and Symbolism in France, 1789-1880*, transl. J. Lloyd (Cambridge, 1981).

³⁶ Contrast studies such as F. Fehér (ed.), *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity* (Berkeley, 1990); with revisionists who downplay its radicalism, such as F. Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution, 1770-1814*, transl. A. Nevill (Oxford, 1996); and O. Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto, 1992). The ever-widening debates are well represented in S. Desan, L. Hunt and W.M. Nelson (eds), *The French Revolution in Global History* (Ithaca, 2013).

³⁷ I. Deutscher, *The Unfinished Revolution: Russia, 1917-67* (Oxford, 1967).

³⁸ J.F.N. Bradley, *Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution: A Political Analysis* (New York, 1992).

³⁹ G.C. Monson, *Georgia after the Rose Revolution* (New York, 2009).

⁴⁰ A. Wilson, *Ukraine's Orange Revolution* (New Haven, Conn., 2005).

⁴¹ These upheavals are often known collectively as 'colour' revolutions, even though far from all the names are actually those of colours: see e.g. L.A. Mitchell, *The Colour Revolutions* (Philadelphia, 2013).

⁴² P.J. Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History* (London, 2007), pp. 26-48; and idem, 'Why is the Formidable Power of Continuity so often Overlooked?' (Nov. 2010), Blog/1 on website: www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk.

Today, the term risks becoming applied too widely. References to a ‘Twitter Revolution’ and/or a ‘Facebook Revolution’, electronically generated by the social media, often contain a significant element of hype.⁴³ Nonetheless, the concept has evolved a clear meaning in political context. It refers to the mass overthrowing of an autocracy (whether violently or otherwise) which leads to constitutional regime change, in the name of the people, usually with a democratic or popular franchise (albeit sometimes excluding particular groups).

Hence ‘revolution’ is the accepted name for many historic and current political upheavals. Indeed, however much the revolutionary nature of particular conflagrations, old and new, remains disputed by students and historians, the name is unlikely to be dislodged.

Industrial Revolution

Sympathetic borrowing then spread the remit of this powerful word. By the nineteenth century, onlookers were increasingly impressed by the massive technological transformations of the economies of first Britain, then France, the USA, Germany and an increasing number of countries around the world. Political language provided an obvious resource. Three summary ‘revolutionary’ usages came: in French from the economist Jérôme-Adolphe Blanqui – *‘la révolution industrielle’* (1837);⁴⁴ in German from the manufacturer and communist theorist Friedrich Engels – *‘eine industrielle Revolution’* (1844);⁴⁵ and in English from the historian and social reformer Arnold Toynbee – *‘the Industrial Revolution’* (1881; in print 1884).⁴⁶ This evocative name then gained general currency and remains in popular usage today.

Not surprisingly, given the difficulties of distilling complex changes into simple phrases, this identification has been much challenged too. Was there ‘an’ industrial revolution or instead a long process of ‘industrialisation’? Hence did economic transformation really stem from one dramatic upheaval or is it better understood as cumulative and evolutionary? If there were big changes, did these processes entail an immediately malign ‘immiseration’ of

⁴³ Among numerous commentaries, see J.H. Parmalee and S.L. Bichard, *Politics and the Twitter Revolution: How Tweets influence the Relationship between Political Leaders and the Public* (Lanham, Md, 2012); and D. Wolman, ‘The Facebook Revolution’, *Wired*, 16 (2008), pp. 212-17.

⁴⁴ J-A. Blanqui, *Histoire de l’économie politique en Europe depuis les anciens jusqu’à nos jours* (Paris, 1837): it is worth noting that Blanqui had two close family members who were activists during the Revolution, his father being a moderate Girondin reformer and his younger brother, a revolutionary firebrand.

⁴⁵ F. Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1845* (Leipzig, 1845; in Engl. transl., London, 1887).

⁴⁶ A. Toynbee, *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution of the Eighteenth Century in England* (London, 1884).

the working class? Or produce a beneficial long-term improvement in living standards?⁴⁷ Or a widening gulf between rich and poor, no matter whether absolute poverty was alleviated or not? Given such uncertainties, was the early impact of technological innovation as widespread or drastic as used to be thought?

Indeed, had any really significant changes occurred before 1800? After all, the classic name for *the* Industrial Revolution did not appear in general currency before the 1880s, fully 100 years after the 1780s, which (by some accounts) is termed the decade of developmental ‘take-off’?⁴⁸ Put simply, is *the* Industrial Revolution really a ‘myth’?⁴⁹

Part of the definitional problems stem from the contrasting natures of political and economic transformations. They may both have massive effects in the long term. But, in their immediate form, they differ. Political conflagrations may have long prior causes but they tend to explode in dramatic convulsions of the body politic. The events are noticeable and preoccupying. People have to take sides – indeed, big political revolutions (as in the English, American, French, Russian and Chinese examples) all contained elements of outright civil war. Industrial transformations, by contrast, also have long lead times but may start incrementally, almost unnoticeably – and they don’t usually lead to civil war, although they may promote exploitative warfare and commercial aggression overseas.

Within Marxist orthodoxy, of course, the really big upheavals were deemed to constitute both an economic transition and a political revolution in one: a bourgeois transformation from feudalism to capitalism in the case of the English⁵⁰ and French

⁴⁷ For still-continuing debates, see A.J. Taylor (ed.), *The Standard of Living in Britain in the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1975); J.G. Williamson, *Did British Capitalism Breed Inequality?* (Boston, Mass., 1985); C.H. Feinstein, ‘Pessimism Perpetuated: Real Wages and the Standard of Living in Britain during and after the Industrial Revolution’, *Journal of Economic History*, 58 (1998), pp. 625-58; G. Clark, ‘The Condition of the Working Class in England, 1209-2004’, *Journal of Political Economy*, 113 (2005), pp. 1307-40; and R.C. Allen, ‘Pessimism Preserved: Real Wages in the British Industrial Revolution’ (Oxford University Dept. Economics Working Ppr, 2007).

⁴⁸ A schematic but influential account is available in W.W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth* (Cambridge, 1968), later sub-titled *A Non-Communist Manifesto* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 1971).

⁴⁹ See M. Fores, ‘The Myth of a British Industrial Revolution’, *History*, 66 (1981), pp. 181-98; with a firm rebuttal from, *inter alia*, A. Musson, ‘The British Industrial Revolution’, *History*, 67 (1982), pp. 252-8. Revisionist interpretations, cutting England’s eighteenth-century growth rates down to size, were in considerable vogue in the 1980s: see e.g. N.R. Crafts, *British Economic Growth during the Industrial Revolution* (Oxford, 1984). A later study envisages an earlier start-date and a much later completion: see J. de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behaviour and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2008). Helpful guides to the complex historiography are available in D.C. Coleman, *Myth, History and the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1992), pp. 43-65; and P. Hudson, *The Industrial Revolution* (London, 1992).

⁵⁰ Contrast Hill, *English Revolution* (cited above n.9); and critics such as C. Russell, ‘The Bourgeois Revolution: A Mirage?’ *History Today*, 40 (Sept. 1990). Some Marxists tried to ‘save the phenomenon’ by redefining England’s victorious landowners as an ‘agrarian bourgeoisie’, in alliance with urban merchants.

Revolutions,⁵¹ a proletarian transformation from capitalism to communism in the case of Russia in October 1917⁵² and China in 1949.⁵³ Yet those linkages proved hard to substantiate. Even fellow Marxist historians notably disagreed as to when key transitions from great epoch to great epoch were supposed to have occurred.⁵⁴

Some theorists tried to finesse the difficulties. Sub-stages are introduced, such as, in Europe, ‘mercantile capitalism’ as the precursor of ‘industrial capitalism’. Or, in the East, the special ‘Asiatic mode of production’. But the inevitable progression within Marxist history of one discrete economic epoch after another, in a globally applicable sequence, was thus sullied. Orthodox communists, including Josef Stalin, sternly disapproved.⁵⁵

Yet the lesson of all these variants was clear. Historically significant economic transformations remain complex and their ramifications are often hard to date with precision. Changes can be slow-moving as well as immediate and dramatic; broad similarities can be detected but also many regional and sub-regional variations.

Furthermore, once notable economic crises have died down, the underlying structures may prove to have changed less than at first seemed to be the case. For example, ‘capitalism’ while often deemed by Marxists to be on its last legs,⁵⁶ has proved notably resilient and adaptable. It has taken different forms within different national and cultural traditions.⁵⁷ As a result, it has proved impossible to fit all these different political and economic ‘revolutions’ neatly together.

Nevertheless, major technological transformations do occur, on their own timetables. The outcome of the debates has broadly upheld the fact that various eighteenth-century

⁵¹ See variously H. Heller, *The Bourgeois Revolution in France, 1789-1815* (New York, 2006); A.B.C. Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1964); T.C.W. Blanning, *The French Revolution: Aristocrats versus Bourgeois?* (Basingstoke, 1987); and N. Davidson, *How Revolutionary were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* (Chicago, 2012).

⁵² E.g. V.I. Lenin, *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* (London, 1929); K. Kautsky, *Marxism and Bolshevism: Democracy and Dictatorship* (London, 1934); and subsequent debates.

⁵³ In China in 1949, it was the rural peasantry that was deemed to play the role of the insurgent proletariat: see R.A. Thaxton, *Salt of the Earth: The Political Origins of Peasant Protest and Communist Revolution in China* (Berkeley, Calif., 1997). In 1966, a dissatisfied Mao Zedong launched a further ‘proletarian cultural revolution’, based upon an idealisation of the peasantry: see W.L. Chong, *China’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution: Master Narratives and Post-Mao Counter-Narratives* (Oxford, 2002); M. Gao, *The Battle for China’s Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution* (London, 2008); and P. Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (Cambridge, 2008). Since 1978 this policy has been abandoned.

⁵⁴ See the inconclusive essays in R. Hilton (ed.), *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism: A Symposium* (London, 1976); and T. Bottomore (ed.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Oxford, 1983; 1987), pp. 483-5.

⁵⁵ Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History*, pp. 174-83.

⁵⁶ Left-wing analysts in the 1970s (and after) often referred to ‘late capitalism’, in the belief that the final meltdown was nigh: see E. Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1973), transl. J. de Bres (London, 1978); and F. Jamieson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London, 1991).

⁵⁷ For varieties of ‘capitalism’, see Corfield, *Time and Shape of History*, pp. 179-82; F.L. Pryor, *Capitalism Reassessed* (New York, 2010).

inventions, like the application of steam power, proved ultimately of massive significance. In the long run, the combined forces of commercialisation, urbanisation and industrialisation are generating a world-historical ‘macro-change’. Historians still disagree on the details and implications. Yet quietly the ‘myth-argument’ has vanished. Some prefer to write about Britain’s economic development without referring to ‘*the Industrial Revolution*’, since many changes were evolutionary.⁵⁸ But in every case references to a long-term process of ‘Industrialisation’ are unavoidable.⁵⁹

A very few literal-minded historians, it is true, do sometimes argue that there could be no such development as the Industrial Revolution before the name existed. Yet that objection, and the assumption behind it, should be firmly rejected. In the first place, numerous things with names don’t exist in material form (e.g. *unicorns, dragons*)⁶⁰ while things without names may exist long before they are identified and named (e.g. *infectious diseases*). In particular, long-term trends generally take considerable periods of time before they become generally known and named. And, in the second place, there *were* in fact many miscellaneous references in eighteenth-century Britain to profound social, cultural, and technological innovations. These variants (discussed in the next section) provided a linguistic seedbed from which new terminologies eventually emerged.

My own preference is to differentiate political from industrial revolutions, by terming the latter Macro-Transformations. Yet while historians may propose, linguistic communities dispose. The known terminology has behind it (paradoxically) the great power of continuity. Hence the complex processes of Industrialisation are likely to continue starring as ‘the Industrial Revolution’ for some time to come.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Evolution was long ago canvassed as an alternative by N.S.B. Gras, *Industrial Evolution* (Oxford, 1930). But a recent evolutionary account still sticks with the traditional name, see M. Zmolek, *Rethinking the Industrial Revolution: Five Centuries of Transition from Agrarian to Industrial Capitalism in England* (Leiden, 2013).

⁵⁹ See e.g. globally T. Kemp, *Historical Patterns of Industrialisation* (London, 1993); and, with reference to England, K. Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation in England, 1700-1870* (Basingstoke, 2000).

⁶⁰ ‘Existence’ in this context refers to their material being, rather than their histories as intangible words, concepts and myths.

⁶¹ See e.g. T. Crump, *A Brief History of how the Industrial Revolution Changed the World* (London, 2010). Analysts of ‘Big History’ (studying the very long-term) and of climate change often end their stories with the ‘Industrial Revolution’ as the final ‘big’ turning point, for good or (in the case of climate change) for ill.

Socio/ Cultural/ Economic Revolution

All these terminological changes were part of a long-term shift in majority perceptions, in western Europe and north America, from cyclical to linear Time.⁶² Of course, deeply rooted attitudes did not change in complete synchronisation. A minority continued to espouse cyclical models of change: ‘what goes round comes round’. The cyclical histories by Oswald Spengler and Arnold J. Toynbee in the early and mid-twentieth century are famous examples.⁶³ However, linearity has gradually become the default assumption in the West,⁶⁴ even to the extent that many people find it hard to imagine that earlier societies viewed things differently. Thus great revolutions (whether industrial or political) were no longer seen as conventional stages in a repetitive cycle but rather as new milestones on history’s unique journey.

Interestingly, one indicative sign of a strengthened linearity was the novel habit of numbering the centuries in sequential order.⁶⁵ A pioneering example in England was a study by a clerical historian, who invited readers in 1756/7 to study *The Ecclesiastical History of England to the Eighteenth Century*. People in earlier eras often contrasted ‘time out of mind’ with ‘nowadays’; and, if they sought greater precision for religious or administrative purposes, counted individual years.⁶⁶ But thinking in terms of successive centuries encouraged a sense of history’s grand sweep, incorporating substantial differences between past and future. A classic example came from Denis Diderot, when confidently justifying his *Encyclopédie*. He announced that it would ‘collect all the knowledge scattered over the face of the earth’ and ‘transmit this to those who will come after us, so that the work of past centuries may be useful to the following centuries’.⁶⁷ Each hundred-year span became unique. So in

⁶² Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History*, pp. 49-56, 80-8. The shift was never absolute, as cyclical ideas have never disappeared, while elements of linearity also featured long before the eighteenth century – e.g. in religions with linear models of original sin and eventual redemption such as Christianity and Islam.

⁶³ O. Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (London, 1926-9), 2 Vols; A. Toynbee, *A Study of History* (Oxford, 1934-59), 11 Vols.

⁶⁴ For influential discussions on these themes, see R. Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, transl. and introduced by K. Tribe (New York, 2004). However, it is important to appreciate that there were elements of linearity in sundry thought systems before the eighteenth century, just as elements of cyclicity survive thereafter.

⁶⁵ Century enumeration, first codified by Biblical scholars, spread slowly in public usage through the works of historians like F. Warner, *The Ecclesiastical History of England to the Eighteenth Century* (1756/7), 2 Vols.

⁶⁶ Year counts might follow religious calendars (as in the Christian use of *Anno Domini* – years of the Lord) or enumerate regnal years, starting from the accession of a new monarch.

⁶⁷ D. Diderot (1765) in S.J. Gendzier (ed.), *Denis Diderot’s Encyclopaedia: Selections* (New York, 1967), p. 92.

1800 an Anglican preacher greeted, rather nervously, the ‘solemn Spectacle’ of the incoming nineteenth century, with the thought that the world was being ‘launching into the current of an unexplored AGE, without knowing whither the tide will carry us’.⁶⁸

Revolutionary terminology fitted easily into this sort of mind-set. Change might generate the unexpected. Throughout the eighteenth century, the term was used in a variety of socio-cultural contexts. One case came from the Whig essayist Joseph Addison in 1711. He observed in *The Spectator* that: ‘I must observe a very great *revolution* that has happened in this article of good-breeding [manners]’.⁶⁹ He was jokingly contrasting a shift in styles: while city society had been traditionally ceremonious, country folk had been characterised by rustic simplicity. Yet in his own day, when smart society was abandoning excess formality, the country people were adopting stately ceremony. A further letter to the *Spectator* playfully put the story into geo-physical form, suggesting that, with every mile away from London, both dress and manners became more and more old-fashioned. Travellers could thus move backwards through time as they left the metropolis and headed into the provinces.⁷⁰ In reality, needless to say, that picture was not literally accurate.⁷¹ This spatio-temporal assumption, however, implied that the expanding metropolis of London was in the vanguard of history’s progression. And, in fact, by 1700 England’s capital city was already experiencing something truly novel. Not only had it already surpassed in population its old rival, Paris but it was on the way to becoming by 1800 one of a select handful of million+ cities world-wide.⁷²

International commerce was one of the key factors promoting economic transformation, both as cause and consequence. Hence another commentator in the *Spectator* wrote presciently in May 1711 that: ‘Trade, without enlarging the British territories, has given us a Kind of additional Empire’.⁷³ And before long, the country’s existing colonial possessions were being expanded and new ones added.

Daniel Defoe, the ever prolific wordsmith, defined the impact of commerce in the new vocabulary of upheaval. There has been a ‘Revolution of Trade’, he announced in 1728,

⁶⁸ G. Beaver, *Reflections on the Revolution of a Century: A Sermon ...* (Sherborne, 1800), p. 11.

⁶⁹ L [J. Addison], *The Spectator*, no.119 (17 July 1711).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, no.129, 28 July 1711.

⁷¹ Historians of dress stress that fashions were quickly diffused across the country, via commercial networks focusing upon London and the expanding provincial towns: see e.g. A. Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1979), pp. 137-8, 176-80, 198-200, 207-10.

⁷² By 1750 greater London (c.676,000 inhabitants) was Europe’s most populous city, having surpassed Paris (c.565,000 inhabitants) and the declining Constantinople (c.625,000 inhabitants): see T. Chandler, *Four Thousand Years of Urban Growth: An Historical Census* (Lewiston, NY., 1987), p. 484. By 1800 London’s population of almost one-million made it, like Edo (Tokyo) and Beijing, one of a highly select handful of great cities world-wide: P.J. Corfield, *The Impact of English Towns, 1700-1800* (Oxford, 1972), p. 10.

⁷³ *The Spectator*, no.69 (19 May 1711).

adding that the ‘Revolution in Trade, brought a Revolution in the very Nature of Things’. As a result, he argued, the poor no longer lived as dependent peasantry, toiling ‘for Cottages and [feudal] Liveries’ but worked instead ‘for Money, and to live, as we say, at their own hands.’⁷⁴ Again, his verdict, like many a snappy dictum, was exaggerated. The monetisation of the British economy was a very long process. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, confident references to the country’s growing trading power were commonplace. Together, these commentaries signified a long-term process of commercialisation, tagged by some later economic historians, with a nod to Defoe, as a ‘commercial revolution’,⁷⁵ or, in heterodox Marxist terms, as the advent of ‘commercial capitalism’.

Complex socio-economic changes, however, were harder to pin down and to name than were political upheavals. Mid-eighteenth-century commentators were often vague and indeterminate. The world was ‘turn’d upside down’. Things were ‘topsy-turvy’. Traditional and formal distinctions of ‘rank’ and degree were mutating into what began as a much more flexible language of ill-defined social ‘class’.⁷⁶ Distinctions between rich and poor had certainly not disappeared. Yet there was now a growing and diversifying middle stratum, with a greater acquisition of wealth and a visible display of conspicuous consumer goods. In 1754, two more sweeping declarations showed both the sense of change and a lack of precision in defining it:⁷⁷

Were the same persons, who made a full tour of England thirty years ago, to make a fresh one now, they would find themselves in a land of enchantment [wrote one onlooker in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*]. England is no more like to what England was then it resembles Borneo or Madagascar.

Also in 1754 an anonymous ‘Rusticus’ averred in the *Connoisseur* that:

Very extraordinary revolutions have already happened in the habits of this kingdom; and, as dress is subject to unaccountable changes, posterity may perhaps see without surprise our ladies strut about in breeches, while our men waddle in hoop-petticoats.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ D. Defoe, *A Plan of the English Commerce: Being a Compleat Prospect of the Trade of this Nation ...* (London, 1728), p. 36, tracing changes since the sixteenth century: also available in W.R. Owens and P.N. Furbank (eds), *Political and Economic Writings of Daniel Defoe* (London, 2000), Vol. 7, p. 150.

⁷⁵ See L.B. Packard, *The Commercial Revolution, 1400-1776* (London, 1930); and, from a later generation of scholarship, R. Davis, *A Commercial Revolution: English Overseas Trade in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London, 1967).

⁷⁶ P.J. Corfield, ‘Class by Name and Number in Eighteenth-Century England’, *History*, 72 (1987), pp. 38-61; also in P.J. Corfield (ed.), *Language, History and Class* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 101-30; and available in website: penelopejcorfield.co.uk/Essays Pdf7.

⁷⁷ *Gentleman’s Magazine*, no.30 (1754).

⁷⁸ ‘Rusticus’ in *The Connoisseur*, no.36 (3 Oct. 1754), p. 211.

Here the author's satirical prediction turned out to be halfway correct. 250 years later, many women in Britain do wear trousers (with or without 'strutting'), although in the western world it is still unusual for men to wear dresses, notwithstanding the sporting of a dashing sarong in June 1998 by the fashion icon, footballer David Beckham.

Over time, the eighteenth-century commentator's tones tended to become more enthusiastic. In 1767, for instance, a report on new turnpike roads and early canals remarked excitedly that 'never was a more astonishing Revolution' than in England's transport in recent years, with new canals and turnpike roads. As a result, the mobility of goods and people became much easier. The English were literally 'released from treading the cautious steps of our forefathers'.⁷⁹ By the early 1780s, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was happy to observe that: 'The discoveries and improvements of the age ... diffuse a glory over this country unattainable by conquest or dominion'.⁸⁰

Needless to say, not everyone approved of every trend. The cleric-cum-economist Dean Tucker, who was signally impressed with the new wealth and size of England's inland manufacturing towns, expressed alarm at apparent changes in gender roles – always a sensitive issue. Seeing women making advances to men in the social throng at fashionable resort city of Bath in 1783, he sighed that 'revolutionary principles are continually gaining ground'.⁸¹ In fact, it may be doubted whether female initiative in courtship was truly a novelty. The point was rather that the social mingling and relaxation of traditional restraints was part of the country's diversifying urbanisation, in which Bath was a magnificent urban showcase for conspicuous consumption, cultivated leisure, urban entertainments and commercialised medicine.⁸² Interestingly, Tucker's nervous apprehension also implied a linear rather than cyclical view. His fears offered a pertinent reminder that linearity can encompass what is seen as change-for-the-worse as well as *vice versa*. Changes in sexual mores are a case in point. Behaviours, which for some constitute liberation from stuffy conventionality, may represent, for others, a shocking collapse of public standards and personal morals.⁸³

Together, these overview comments (and many others like them) on socio/economic/cultural change in eighteenth-century Britain have a number of common

⁷⁹ H.S. Homer, *An Enquiry in the Means of Preserving and Improving the Public Roads of This Kingdom ...* (Oxford, 1767), p. 4.

⁸⁰ Cited in M.D. George, *England in Transition: Life and Work in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, 1931; in 1964 edn), p. 107.

⁸¹ Josiah Tucker, cited in Corfield, *Impact*, p. 23; and G. Shelton, *Dean Tucker and Eighteenth-Century Economic and Political Thought* (London, 1981), p. 253.

⁸² Corfield, *Impact*, pp. 52-9; R.S. Neale, *Bath: A Social History, 1680-1850* (London, 1981).

⁸³ For difficulties in dating and defining long-term trends in sexual behaviour, see references in n.98 below.

characteristics. They tend to be sweeping and generalised, often lacking specific details. They are certain that things are changing but often unsure precisely how to name the trends. Increasingly, they appear to be expecting further transformations to follow, rather than a reversion to olden times. Their open-endedness hence tended to indicate linear rather than cyclical assumptions. For example, some pioneering medical reformers begin to urge that the hideous disease of smallpox could be eradicated, not only in Britain but throughout the world (as was, remarkably, achieved within 200 years).⁸⁴ Often the emphasis is upon generic social and cultural transition, but sometimes specific economic and technological innovations are noted.

Transformations of this kind are generally assumed to be non-violent and gradualist. Evolution is subsumed within the word ‘revolution’, referring to the magnitude of the outcomes of even many small incremental changes. And the tone, especially when invoking technology, becomes increasingly optimistic over time – even euphoric. An admirer of the power of science in 1836 was particularly rhapsodic about the advent of a completely new world. No cyclical history for him: ‘The world will take a quite different appearance than it has had hitherto to man; productive of a thousand times more means for human happiness, than the human race may be wanting; – a paradise beyond the common conceptions’.⁸⁵ The eighteenth-century mantra of Improvement is mutating visibly into the Victorian confidence in Progress.⁸⁶

There is no agreement between these contemporary commentators about a single start date for fundamental change. Defoe might correctly trace England’s overseas commercial development back to Elizabethan times but others tended to make comparisons (as is often done) with the generation before their own or with life before some big event in recent times.

One justly celebrated account, penned in 1807 by the poet-cum-historian-and-essayist Robert Southey, deserves reconsideration in this context. Initially, his analysis appeared under a pseudonym, in the guise of *Letters from England, Translated from the Spanish*. Pretending to be a curious outsider was a well-known literary device which allowed an author to draw fresh attention to quotidian developments that were otherwise too easily taken for granted. Southey’s

⁸⁴ See variously J. Haygarth, *A Sketch of a Plan to Exterminate the Casual Smallpox from Great Britain ...* (London, 1793); G. Pearson, *An Inquiry concerning the History of the Cowpox, Principally with a View to Supersede and Extinguish the Smallpox* (London, 1798); and context in D.A. Koplow, *Smallpox: The Fight to Eradicate a Global Scourge* (Berkeley, Calif., 2003).

⁸⁵ J.A. Etzler, *The Paradise within the Reach of All Men, without Labour, by Powers of Nature and Machinery: An Address to all Intelligent Men* (1st pub. Pittsburgh, c.1833; London, 1836), Pt 2, p. 212.

⁸⁶ See D. Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven, 1990); J.B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into its Origin and Growth* (London, 1920); and P. Bowler, *The Invention of Progress: The Victorians and the Past* (Oxford, 1989).

imaginary Spanish gentleman was far from happy with every trend but he was mightily certain that multitudinous transformations were afoot, and dramatic ones too.⁸⁷

Perhaps no kingdom ever experienced so great a change in so short a course of years, without some violent state convulsion, as England has done during the present reign [i.e. post-1760]. I wish I could procure materials to show the whole contrast: – A metropolis doubled in extent; taxes quintupled; the value of money depreciated as rapidly as if new mines had been discovered; canals cut from one end of the island to the other; travelling made so expeditious that the internal communication is tenfold what it was; the invention of the steam-engine, almost as great an *epocha* as the invention of printing; the manufacturing system carried to its utmost point; the spirit of commerce extended to every thing; an empire lost in America, and another gained in the East: – these would be parts of the picture. The alteration extends to the minutest things, even to the dress and manners of every rank of society.

Four specific points about this listing are worth highlighting. In the first place, it's very comprehensive, embracing urban, financial, transportation, technological, industrial, commercial, imperial and social trends. All these have been celebrated (and in some cases also debunked) by later historians, often under the title of 'revolution'. Secondly, the timetabling seems clear but cannot be taken too literally. Southey's summary suggested that all these novel developments had taken place since 1760, while earlier commentators (writing before that date) had also projected the origins of change backwards by some generations. Complex transformations turn out to have many complex birth-dates.

Thirdly, Southey's commentary shows that educated contemporaries by the early nineteenth century were no longer lamenting the loss of the American colonies but were instead celebrating the buoyant speed of Britain's imperial expansion in India. Majority opinion was directed outwards, untroubled as yet by anti-colonialism. And, fourthly and very notably, there is Southey's quick and just appreciation of the impact of technological innovations: the new steam engine, put on a par with the advent of printing; and the new '*manufacturing system*'. So no 'Industrial Revolution' in so many words; but a verbal equivalent. In 1815, Robert Owen's *Observations on the Effect of the Manufacturing System* picked up the term,⁸⁸ confident that it would be understood by his readers. These usages were acknowledging not just the growth of industrial output but the long-term implications of the systematisation of mass production into factories.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ R. Southey, *Letters from England: By Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella – Translated from the Spanish* (London, 1807), ed. J. Simmons (London, 1951), pp. 362-3.

⁸⁸ R. Owen, *Observations on the Effect of the Manufacturing System, with Hints for the Improvement of those Parts which are most Injurious to Health and Morals* (London, 1815).

⁸⁹ Far from all production was moved into factories; but these buildings came to epitomise industrial change: see e.g. the classic account by P. Mantoux, *The Industrial Revolution in the Eighteenth Century: An Outline*

Even the astute Southey, however, did not cover everything. He might have mentioned the growing use of inoculation, followed by vaccination, against smallpox. That development led the way towards today's world-wide medical intervention against infectious diseases and preventable illnesses. He might have mentioned the onset of unprecedented global population growth, triggered both by rising fertility and by declining mortality, especially among the very young. Or the spread of literacy, among women as well as men. Or the emergence of the professions. And he might have mentioned the pioneering experiments to tame electricity – which ultimately became even more potent in its applications than the steam-engine. But it's hard to identify absolutely every significant long-term trend that is unfolding under one's nose. (Can you?)

Collectively, these eighteenth-century comments added up to a strong acknowledgement of insidious and complex innovations, whether for praise or blame.⁹⁰ Change did not preclude the survival of continuity. As already noted, that pervasive feature of life has its own power and tenacity. But the balance between continuity and change was shifting in the course of the long eighteenth century, even if not every implication was immediately apparent. A French visitor to Britain in 1816, who arrived expecting the victor nation of the prolonged European fighting to be exhausted, was astonished at the country's affluence. As the dynamic hub of its international networks, it displayed an 'unlooked for opulence, [which] overflowed with its treasures the British Empire'.⁹¹ All such comments, of course, remain subjective, some more so than others. Yet together they spelt fundamental change.

Varieties of Macro-Change

Scholars have been earnestly debating these terms and themes at least since Arnold Toynbee's days. But it's clear that a subtler and more varied vocabulary is needed for purposes of clarification. As it is, one common pattern is for a bold historian to identify a new 'revolution', only to be followed by a chorus of criticism cutting these claims down to size. Or at times it works in reverse. A bold new revisionist study debunks an upheaval that has the name of 'revolution' and a debate follows to restore its revolutionary status.

Students of eighteenth-century Britain often express bewilderment at the proliferation of rival claims and the absence of consensus, after more than a century of debates since the 1880s.

of the Beginnings of the Modern Factory System in England, transl. M. Vernon (London, 1929); and case studies in G. Rimmer, *British Factory Towns during the First Industrial Revolution* (London, 1970).

⁹⁰ For the rival strands of optimism and pessimism, see P.J. Corfield, research-in-progress on eighteenth-century British culture as observed by contemporaries.

⁹¹ Cited in George, *England in Transition*, p. 112.

Was the long eighteenth century a period of conservative tradition or one of modernising innovation?⁹² One of neo-feudal aristocratic revival⁹³ or post-revolutionary commercial/imperial expansion?⁹⁴ Was it a stable, deferential and pious society dedicated to ‘church and king’?⁹⁵ Or one where a slow-moving process of secularisation was emerging insidiously across the culture?⁹⁶

Was there also a gender revolution?⁹⁷ A sexual revolution?⁹⁸ The advent of the modern family?⁹⁹ The invention of the ‘modern’ personality?¹⁰⁰ Was there an Enlightenment in Europe or not? And, if so, did the offshore British Isles partake in the process?¹⁰¹

Can the economy in these years be helpfully defined as ‘capitalist’?¹⁰² And, if so, of what sort? Or ‘mercantilist’? And if so, meaning what exactly?¹⁰³ Was there a financial revolution?¹⁰⁴ An agricultural revolution?¹⁰⁵ A commercial revolution?¹⁰⁶ A transport revolution?¹⁰⁷ A consumer revolution?¹⁰⁸

⁹² For the eighteenth-century debates at different times, compare overviews by F. O’Gorman, ‘The Recent Historiography of the Hanoverian Regime’, *Historical Journal*, 29 (1986), pp. 1005-20; and P.J. Corfield, ‘British History: The Exploding Galaxy’, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 34 (2011), pp. 517-26.

⁹³ As argued by H. Wellenreuther, *Repräsentation und Grossgrundbesitz in England, 1730-70* (Stuttgart, 1979).

⁹⁴ See e.g. C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford, 2004).

⁹⁵ For two contrastingly different conservative interpretations from different generations, see L.B. Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (London, 1929), esp. Vol. 1, pp. 1-76; and J.C.D. Clark, *English Society, 1688-1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice* (Cambridge, 1985 edn).

⁹⁶ Contrast views in J. Morris, ‘Secularisation and Religious Experience’, *Historical Journal*, 55 (2012), pp. 195-219; D. Erdozain, “‘Cause is not Quite What it Used to be”: The Return of Secularisation’, *English Historical Review*, 127 (2012), pp. 377-400; and P.J. Corfield, “‘An Age of Infidelity”: Secularisation in Eighteenth-Century England’ (in publication pipeline).

⁹⁷ R. Trumbach, *Sex and the Gender Revolution, Vol. 1: Heterosexuality and the Third Gender in Enlightenment London* (Chicago, 1998).

⁹⁸ See alternative chronologies, ranging from the later seventeenth century in F. Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex: A History of the First Sexual Revolution* (London, 2012), to the long nineteenth century in H. Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex and Contraception, 1800-1975* (Oxford, 2004); and the 1960s in S. Szreter and K. Fisher, *Sex before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England, 1918-63* (Cambridge, 2010).

⁹⁹ R. Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family: Aristocratic Kinship and Domestic Relations in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York, 1978).

¹⁰⁰ See variously L. Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (Harmondsworth, 1979), pp. 268-9; and D. Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, 2004).

¹⁰¹ See R. Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Making of the Modern World* (London, 2000); and ensuing debates.

¹⁰² Relatively few historians currently apply this term simply to eighteenth-century Britain, but see e.g. P. Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism: Working Women in the English Economic, 1700-1850* (Basingstoke, 1996).

¹⁰³ On these debates, see D.C. Coleman (ed.), *Revisions in Mercantilism* (London, 1969).

¹⁰⁴ P.G.M. Dickson, *The Financial Revolution in England: A Study of the Development of Public Credit, 1688-1756* (London, 1967); C. Wennerlind, *Casualties of Credit: The English Financial Revolution, 1620-1720* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011); and P. Temin and H-J. Voth, *Prometheus Shackled: Goldsmiths Banks and England’s Financial Revolution after 1700* (Oxford, 2013).

¹⁰⁵ Contrast E. Kerridge, *The Agricultural Revolution* (London, 1967), locating change in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; with J.D. Chambers and G. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution, 1750-1880*

Or, yet again, was there an interim stage of proto-industrialisation?¹⁰⁹ Was there (as already noted) a big-bang eighteenth-century Industrial Revolution or a slow-moving Industrious Revolution; or was the whole idea nothing but a myth?¹¹⁰ Did the era actually ‘unbind Prometheus’ by setting science free to revolutionise production (Prometheus being a mythic figure who represented the spirit of scientific enquiry)? Or are claims for a scientific revolution overdone?¹¹¹ And, above all, can any or all of these conflicting verdicts be reconciled?

It’s helpful, when responding, to begin by differentiating between different sorts of revolution/evolution. Often one term is used when the other is really what is meant. Hence let historians stick to ‘revolution’ as the well-established name for great political overthrows of tyrannies which lead to democratic (or constitutional) regime change, taking the French Revolution as the paradigm case.

At the same time, however, let’s also talk about ‘transformations’ or evolution or macro-change for epic long-term developments, which take place incrementally, often with many short-term oscillations. It is true that Evolution¹¹² just does not have the same radical ring to it as does Revolution. Nonetheless, the fact that many forms of socio/cultural/intellectual transformations may be slow in their unfolding does not detract from their massive significance over time.

Finally, three contrasting late eighteenth-century usages highlight again the case for linguistic variegation. The following three references to ‘revolution’ are all approving in tone. Yet their applications are very different. Viewing events in France with enthusiasm, Thomas Paine announced in 1790 that ‘*The Revolution in France is certainly a forerunner of other*

(London, 1966), focusing upon the long nineteenth century. A later synthesis sees lengthy evolution combining both periods: see M. Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England: The Transformation of the Agrarian Economy, 1500-1850* (Cambridge, 1996).

¹⁰⁶ See examples cited above n.72.

¹⁰⁷ Again for an array of datings, see F.D. Baron, *The Transport Revolution, 1750-1830* (London, 1967); P.S. Bagwell, *The Transport Revolution from 1770* (London, 1988); A.D. Cameron, *Thomas Telford and the Transport Revolution* (London, 1979); and P. Hay, *Brunel: His Achievements in the Transport Revolution* (Reading, 1973).

¹⁰⁸ N. McKendrick, J. Brewer and J. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialisation of Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1982).

¹⁰⁹ For these debates see L.A. Clarkson, *Proto-Industrialisation: The First Stage of Industrialisation?* (Basingstoke, 1985).

¹¹⁰ See works cited above, n.48.

¹¹¹ Compare the different approaches in H. Butterfield, *The Origins of Modern Science, 1300-1800* (London, 1950); H.F. Kearney, *Origins of the Scientific Revolution* (London, 1964); and I.B. Cohen, *The Newtonian Revolution: With Illustrations of the Transmission of Scientific Ideas* (Cambridge, 1980).

¹¹² See P.J. Bowler, *Evolution: The History of an Idea* (Berkeley, Calif., 1989).

revolutions’.¹¹³ The context was clearly socio/political, and the impact both immediate and long-term.¹¹⁴ Two years earlier, the agricultural writer Arthur Young welcomed the successful technology transfer of mechanised spinning between England’s cotton to woollen industries. ‘*A revolution is making*’, he noted presciently. Here the context was socio/industrial, and the pace of change at times rapid, at times evolutionary. And in 1791 the Dissenting clergyman-cum-chemist-cum-political-theorist Joseph Priestley mused happily upon the spread of literacy and education: ‘*We may all perceive that we must be at the eve of great revolutions, such as will rouse the faculties, and call forth the exertions of great numbers [of people], at present, probably, unknown*’.¹¹⁵ The context, this time, was socio/cultural and the pace of change, although not its significance, was generally slow but hard to reverse.

These three authors were all sharply perceptive. They were, however, clearly naming different modes and types of historical development. For them, the powerful word ‘revolution’ came to mind. Yet, after so many debates, it’s time for today’s analysts to find a more sophisticated and variegated vocabulary. There are plenty of choices, from Transformation or Macro-Change to Evolution or Micro-Change.¹¹⁶ Moreover, let’s avoid having to decide between either/or alternatives. Long-term developments are not obliged to be only rapid throughout or only slow-paced. Sometimes they are modulated, varying in momentum over time. Come on, colleagues! Time to differentiate our REVOLLUSIONS!



¹¹³ Letter from Thomas Paine to Edmund Burke, 17 Jan. 1790: Sheffield City Library, Wentworth Wodehouse Muniments; also in Northamptonshire Record Office (A/iv/73a); repr. in *Durham University Journal*, 43 (1951), pp. 50-4; and cited in F. O’Gorman, *The Whig Party and the French Revolution* (London, 1967), p. 44.

¹¹⁴ A. Young, *Annals of Agriculture* (1788), cited in Corfield, *Impact*, p. 98.

¹¹⁵ J. Priestley, *The Proper Objects of Education in the Present State of the World ...* (London, 1791), p. 14.

¹¹⁶ See Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History*, pp. 75-8, 108-11, for variants of gradual change, such as: alteration, adaptation, acceleration, amendment, entropy, fluctuation, flux, improvement, innovation, mutation, modification, modulation, progression, refinement, transformation, transfiguration, transmogrification, transition, variation, vicissitudes (let alone all the terms for decay, degeneration and decrepitude); as well as variants for dramatic change, such as: break-point, breakdown, broken symmetry, broken lines, caesura, cataclysm, catastrophe, conjuncture, convulsion, diagenesis, dialectical transition, disaster, dissolution, hiatus, pathway shift, paradigm shift, phase transition, radical discontinuity, rupture, schism, sea-change, step-change, take-off, turn, tilting point, turning-point, or watershed.