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The revolution to come: a history of an idea from Thucydides to Lenin

by Dan Edelstein, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2025, 432 pp., $35.00/£30.00 (hb), 9780691231853

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BOOK REVIEW

The revolution to come: a history of an idea from Thucydides to Lenin, by Dan Edelstein, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2025, 432 pp., $35.00/£30.00 (hb), 9780691231853

As a schoolboy I absorbed the standard lessons about Socrates. Accused of "corrupting the youth," he was put to death by the democrats of Athens. The moral of the story was always clear: philosophy is pure and noble because it seeks truth, but politics is corrupt and wicked because it manifests power (which hates the truth to be spoken about it). It is staggering to think how many Western worldviews have been shaped by something like this dichotomy, and where the fable of Socrates plays more than a glancing role.

And yet within 35 pages of reading Dan Edelstein's *The Revolution to Come*, these particular scales had fallen from my eyes. For Socrates's trial took place a mere four years after the overthrow of The Thirty, a vicious oligarchic regime under which one in twenty Athenians died in just eight months. Their ringleader was Critias, a student of Socrates (he features in Plato's dialogues). "While no known mention was made of his ties to Critias during Socrates's trial, it is likely for these connections that he was tried and executed." Accusations of corrupting the youth were not some vague stitch-up. One such youth, at least, was "responsible for horrific attacks on his fellow citizens." Hence, in "lashing out against Critias's erstwhile teacher, the Athenians could find some measure of retribution" (35). Suddenly, the moral of the story looks an awful lot less clear.

Edelstein has a remarkable gift. Again and again he presents you with some historical fixed point that you think you are familiar with – and then shows either that you have it upside down or pointing in the wrong direction. And then he sets you straight. The Socrates example is, in the scheme of this splendid book, really just a trivial example. I could cite a dozen more. But let's focus on the big one, the pivot upon which the book turns.

The American Revolution officially begins in 1776, the French in 1789. A mere 13 years apart, and even sharing some of the same historical actors. Surely, they must be more or less the same kind of thing: instantiations of a single broad historical process, culminating in the North Atlantic, at the end of the eighteenth century, for roughly the same reasons? Certainly, this has been the overwhelming presumption in historical work. And yet Edelstein turns this framework on its head. What if the American Revolution is the culmination of a millennia-old understanding rooted in a Roman recasting of Greek political thought, whilst the French is the first eruption of a radically new, radically modern, conception marking a distinctive break with all earlier Western theory?

This perhaps sounds too revisionist to be plausible. Or perhaps (at the other extreme) not original *enough*: merely a rehash of arguments already made by figures as eminent as Burke and Arendt? Not so. Edelstein is easily cleared of both charges, thanks to his judicious blending not only of the historical facts but also of the underlying philosophical ontologies that powered crucial moments of historical change. I ended the book completely convinced. (Indeed, I ended it wondering how I had not already seen this for myself, so obvious did it now appear – the mark of the very best kind of argument.)

The first part of Edelstein's case ascribes central importance to the role of Polybius, a transplanted Greek writing in Rome, who adapted the teachings of Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle to make them compatible with the institutional framework of the conquering Italian

Republic. From Aristotle, Polybius knew that there were three healthy forms of constitution – monarchy, aristocracy, and *politiea* – and three unhealthy forms: tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy. The problem was that no such constitutional form was stable. All arrangements were subject to *metabolē*, regime change, and more often than not this came about because of *stasis*: political violence, and even outright civil war. Human communities were condemned to cycle endlessly between different forms of regime, holding *stasis* at bay only more or less successfully, and only ever for limited periods. Time itself worked in this circular, repetitive manner; politics could not break free of its ontological moorings. The future could thus only offer repeat performances of past configurations, and the best that could be hoped for was to delay inevitable corruption and decline. This the Roman Republic achieved by blending the different constitutional forms: temporarily putting a halt to violent instantiations of *metabolē* by hitting upon the combination of Consuls, Senate, and Tribunate. But it wouldn't last forever. Nothing ever did, because nothing ever could.

Edelstein shows how Polybius's notion of *anacyclōsis* – the time-fated endless churn through constitutional arrangements, with no possible end or escape from the grim realities of human politics – was transmitted through the Italian Renaissance and became our word "revolution". But at this stage in its career the word was still tied to its Polybian intellectual framing. A revolution was a discrete event that signalled the shift from one constitutional form to another. It was also something to be deeply wary of. To bring one about usually required violence, chaos, the potential obliteration of peace and stability, which functioning politics was in the first place meant to secure. No self-respecting person described themselves as a revolutionary, and no sane person wanted a revolution to last longer than absolutely necessary. Although there is no space here to do his work justice, Edelstein makes an overwhelmingly persuasive case for seeing both the English Civil War and the American Revolution as continuations of this Polybian understanding; of dealing with *metabolē* against the backdrop of *stasis*. The Founding Fathers were the last Polybians – hence why they looked to Rome as their model for a blended constitution, hoping to hold back the ravages of cyclical time for as long as possible.

In France, things were otherwise. During the eighteenth century, thanks in large part due to the technological and scientific advances that were dynamically interacting with the philosophical aspects of the Enlightenment, understandings of time itself began to change. What if, rather than being condemned to an ontological condition of inescapable cyclicity, humans could break out of this? What if the future could be *different*? What if, rather than being stuck in an endless cycle of repetition, humanity could access an upward trending arc of *progress*? And if time itself could be like this, what did that mean for politics?

Well, for a start, "revolution" could take on a whole new meaning. Rather than signalling just another crank of the wheel, another shuffling of the same old deck, changing the constitution might *itself* instantiate progress on the upward arc of history. After all, science was clearly progressing, so why not society? If the future did not have to be like the past – if it could be decisively *better* than the past – then politics could both reflect that change and, crucially, bring it about. (Indeed, would it not be morally incumbent upon all good people to make this happen, as quickly as possible, by whatever means necessary?) But if so, then the nature of revolution must take on a new meaning. Rather than being a single, discreet, quickly concluded event marking transition from one regime to another, it would be a *process*, extended over whatever time was required to forge the better future. The revolution could be ongoing; perhaps it might even need to be *permanent*. And if the promise of time now included the promise of progress, and the point of revolution was to bring about a future state incomparably better than that of the present, well then sacrifices might have to be made. Who could rightly complain about breaking eggs today, if all could thereby have

omelettes tomorrow? Indeed, any who *did* complain were standing against the revolution, and thus against progress, and thus against humanity itself. Even worse, they might previously have been revolutionaries themselves. Apostates! Traitors! Thus emerges a new historical phenomenon: the *counterrevolutionary* – a scourge to be hunted, like no other.

Again, there is no space here to do justice to Edelstein's treatment. Suffice to say that he thoroughly convinces that the French Revolution makes sense only when understood in this post-Polybian intellectual framework, and that subsequent violent revolutions across the world have exhibited the same structural groundings. (He makes a particularly compelling case that, for all his Hegelianism, Marx's theory of revolution owes its biggest debt to the France of the 1790s. And from Marx, so to Lenin). He also convinces that the meaning of what constitutes the revolution – what sacrifices it thus requires; which eggs may legitimately be broken; which apostates hunted to extinction – is of such central importance that this cannot (*will* not) be left up for grabs, or even for debate. Eventually, the "true" meaning of the revolution will be stipulated by whoever has the power to make the stipulation – and who recognises that if they do not make such a stipulation, they will be yet another of Saturn's children: devoured by their father. It is no accident that modern revolutions always end in authoritarian dictatorship. It is a necessary outcome of their underlying logic.

Much more could be said about this wonderful book; the above only scratches the surface of the virtues on display. Not least that it is so eminently *readable*, yet without sacrificing the intellectual rigour and range required to pull off the author's ambitions. At times, I felt like I was wrapped up in an epic novel, charting the intertwined lives of two central protagonists, with a host of intriguing supporting characters encountered along the way. I know of no greater praise for a work of this kind. It is intellectual history at its finest.

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