

## **Anakuklosis: Revolution or Going on in the Same way?**

Gregory Cameron, September 2017

(This is a significantly reduced version of a paper which engages with a variety of theories of revolution in light of the return of the concept to describe recent technological developments. In reducing the paper for presentation almost all scholarly apparatus has been dropped. The bibliography gives an indication of the texts consulted.)

For those of us old enough to remember, records rotated at 33 and a 3rd, or 45, or 78 revolutions per minute. The possibility of more than one revolution per minute has been something of a modernist dream. It is no wonder then that in 1978 the Irish punk band Stiff Little Fingers would release a song entitled 78 Revolutions Per Minute, albeit on 45. The lyrics of the song unequivocally suggest a notion of revolution as the people's attempt to transform present social and political conditions even though the title indicates a speeded up going round in circles. The irony of 78 rpm, in an age of 45's, seems to have been lost on the band. Worse still, 1979, the year after the imagined revolutions was the year of Margaret Thatcher's election. It is difficult to know whether this inaugural moment of what is today referred to as neoliberalism should be thought of as revolution or as reaction, but it is clear that since this moment many on the left have felt as though we were going round in circles, even spinning our wheels. So much so, that today it is the recording technologies themselves that are often thought of as revolutionary.

The notion that communications technologies can be revolutionary has a rather convoluted history. Clearly today when we speak of revolutionary commodities or technologies we are not speaking of a technology that takes us back to some previous condition, what the ancient Greeks referred to as anakuklosis, going round in circles. We are speaking of a break from tradition and from past practices. This is the sense of revolution that began to be used in the 18th century and became increasingly dominant after the French Revolution of 1789. As Kosselleck suggests, the modern concept of revolution has intimate ties with the Enlightenment, with notions of progress, and with changing understandings of time and history in general. That the modern concept began life within the context of scientific discoveries and the cyclical movement of celestial bodies didn't stop it from becoming primarily associated with social and political upheaval and overturning. Nonetheless, it wasn't long after the French Revolution that it again shifted referent. This second shift brings us closer to our own peculiar problem. It was in the early years of the 19th century that revolution was first used in reference to the industrial changes that had been going in England and then Europe since around the 1760s.

In some respects, it is difficult to say exactly what is going on with these changes of referent. We have become so acclimatized to speaking of the scientific revolution, the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, that the difference between these referents fades into the background. Connotations begin to overshadow historical facts. And these connotations are themselves constantly developing and shifting meanings and implications. How can scientific changes brought about by specific and otherwise unconnected people in disparate places during a rather extended period of time be equated with a social and political upheaval involving thousands and taking place relatively abruptly? And how can these be related to the development of mass production, urbanization, and the mechanization of

production and distribution over 60 or so years and gradually involving the entire planet?  
What do all these so called revolutions have in common?

To complicate matters still further, in McLuhan's most sustained discussion of a communication technology as revolutionary, he appears to suggest that a technology brings about a revolution only on condition that those under the influence of the technology do not react to the technology. In reacting to the conditions brought about by technological changes all sorts of upheaval are possible, even those we normally--that is if there is a normal here--refer to as revolutions. Revolutions, by contrast, appear to occur without those undergoing the changes being particularly cognizant of the fact. The technology does its work on us and the conditions in which we live without our noticing the changes underway. It is only with hindsight, or with the introduction of a new technology, that we become aware of the changes through which we have gone.

Nothing could be more at odds with the understanding of revolution that underlies discussions of the scientific or French or Russian revolutions, all of which in yet another peculiar turn could be thought of as reactions in McLuhan's schema. Absent from McLuhan's argument is any suggestion of human agency or even dialectic between objective and subjective conditions. Indeed, it is only reactionaries who show evidence of an awareness of change. It is hard to understand why, given such auspicious origins, the notion of a technological revolution has caught on quite so well!

While it is difficult to know exactly what McLuhan was up to, one might assume that in the 60 odd years since he claimed that communications technologies were revolutionary some clarity might have been brought to this use of the term. Nothing could be further from the truth. Beyond a generally vague reference to some kind of change, revolution has become so indeterminate, so rich in connotations, that rather than being what Kosselleck calls a "general concept", it seems to have become an empty signifier. Like the ubiquitous excellence and innovation, anything and everything can be revolutionary. Gone are references to ends and the seemingly essential link to progress. Revolution appears today to imply an intense period of change, rather than an attempt, whether intentional or not, to transform things for the better.

Indeed, what makes excellence and innovation, and now perhaps revolution, stand out in their ubiquity is not that they signify a commitment to that which excels or a fetishistic attachment to the new, rather they stand out because of a non-specific commitment to the positive, and not the positive in the sense of good, but rather an indeterminate positivity as a kind of generalized atmosphere. Anything and everything, regardless of how disruptive, inconvenient, ineffective or destructive it is, insofar as it is excellent and innovative, should be experienced positively. The terms are so effective that it becomes hard to know what it might mean to be opposed to that which is so designated.

Importantly, however, revolution has not always had positive connotations. Insofar as it came to be associated with an overthrowing of a given social or political organization, how the term has been evaluated has been determined by who was doing the evaluating. Within the context of the Cold War, revolution was primarily viewed negatively from the centres of capitalist power. Increasingly, throughout the 20th century revolution came to be linked with communism and viewed as a threat and not something to be tossed about willy nilly. Even

the American Revolution, the self-perceived inaugural revolution, changed its name for a while to the War of Independence. It was as if association with radical extremists had to be avoided at all costs. It is not difficult to assume in this change an element of ideology.

The return of the concept of revolution, linked initially to the introduction of new technologies and then carried over to commodities in general, appears to have received a major boost from the events collectively known as the Arab Spring. In keeping with the suggestion that revolution has become ideology, while people in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and other places throughout the Middle East were taking to the streets to overthrow their governments, here in North America this decidedly political revolution was quickly transformed into a technological revolution. Here, rather than the Egyptian Revolution or the Tunisian Revolution, the various upheavals were referred to as the facebook or social media revolution, a revolution that came to include the various demonstrations in Europe and North America, including the Occupy Movement. These references, however, rapidly dissipated when it became clear that the political revolutions, especially the Egyptian Revolution, were not going to result in a reproduction of American style democracy.

References today to Egypt's failed revolution proliferate. The fact that events did not unfold according to western projections meant that the revolution was no revolution and, seemingly in complete ignorance of the meaning of the word democracy, was decidedly not democratic. And yet, surprisingly, the perceived failure of the revolution led not to the dropping of the term revolution and its association with social media, but with the dropping of the reference to Egypt as an indication of social media as revolutionary. The marketing ploy itself appeared to have been successful even if the revolutions were not. Paradoxically, this may indicate that despite attempts to eliminate all indications of critical or social and political connotations, the use of the term revolution may not be as empty as marketing campaigns clearly desire. Perhaps the ideology of revolution remains haunted by past associations despite best efforts to eradicate these connotations.

That the concept of innovation has come to occupy the space previously occupied by progress should be self-evident, and yet it is also clear that the two concepts perform quite different functions. Innovation is decidedly not progress. While progress, when used in relation to specific activities, suggests a movement towards a particular, even if vaguely articulated, goal, innovation suggests little more than a willingness to use the latest techniques and technologies. While progress at least suggests "getting better", innovation has no intrinsic relation to improvement. At best, innovation means change, but even this is not essential. A corporation committed to innovation is claiming not to be committed to any particular practice or procedure, it is not claiming a commitment to achieving better results. Indeed, innovation is so vague in reference to how something is changed that it eliminates all reference to ends. It is in this sense that innovation does not quite manage to reach the stage of ideology. Commitment to innovation simply means a commitment to change, it cannot legitimate a failure or unintended consequence, in fact, it cannot legitimate any practice whatsoever except insofar as it is said to be innovative. But as already mentioned innovation does conjure up positive images and it is this generalized positivity that tends towards, but never quite reaches, ideology. Innovation offers no promises and makes no gestures towards a better world. Progress can be shown to be a lie, a ruse, a manipulation-- in a word, ideology: innovation can be none of these things. Even doing nothing may be innovative within certain contexts.

If anything could count as an ideological concept it would have been the concept of progress. Importantly, despite the enormous changes that have occurred over the past 50 or so years, this concept in its ideological sense is almost never heard today. We do still hear of progress with respect to specific ends, the fight against diseases would be the most common, but the ideology of progress appears to have more or less vanished. That this is the case says a great deal about the present day ideological climate. Progress, from certain perspectives, might appear to be the ideal ideological concept within present conditions, but progress implies a direction and a destination, it projects into the future and in doing so it sets out, however vaguely, a goal to be attained. In its ideological uses, progress implies a movement towards a better state, not just a specific end, but a better condition for all. During the 19th century and for much of the 20th, this was the decisive characterization of capitalism, but also its most blatant contradiction.

Within the context of the ideology of progress, revolution was understood either as one of the means by which progress was achieved or a continuously present threat. How it was to be understood, positively or negatively, depended on who was speaking and the context of its use. Nonetheless, while having an evaluative dimension the term was primarily descriptive. Revolutions were events in which a given order or way of thinking was overthrown by another order or way of thinking. Revolutions were ruptures or radical transformations and as such tended to be identified in hindsight. One could desire a revolution in order to bring about some imagined condition, but in the midst of things one had no idea if what one was going through was a revolution or not. While the term was contentious and debates raged about what revolution meant and what was to count as a revolution, it was intimately linked to the notion of progress and used as if it designated a possible fact about the world and its orientation towards the future. Today by contrast the revolution appears to have lost almost all its objectivity and become primarily evaluative, meaning something like "significantly different". Intimations of change are there, connotations of progress persist, but no one anticipates debates about whether or not the new moisturizer will be later understood as inaugurating a radical transformation of existing conditions. Indeed, revolution today appears to be little more than an intensified innovation.

Revolution today, despite retaining some of its past denotations and connotations, has come to be used primarily as an evaluative synonym for innovation. Revolutionary retains some intimation of better, of significant change, but otherwise it is more often than not merely an intensified innovation, more or less empty in terms of promise and with little or no intimation of progress. "Revolution" merely imbues even the smallest of adjustments with an aura of positivity, nothing is overthrown or radically disrupted: the revolution occurs and everything goes on more or less as before--only more so.

It was Polybius in the middle of the 2nd century BCE who is said to have first used *anakuklosis* to indicate the inevitable rise and fall of political regimes, the inevitable return to a point of origin from which the process would yet again be repeated. Perhaps it was this that McLuhan intimated when he spoke of revolutions as something the majority hardly even noted as they were occurring. Perhaps what is retained of this going round in circles, this eternally going on in the same way, is the inevitability of the revolution, not in the sense of contradictions accumulating to a point of no return, but as a kind of impersonal force of nature through which we have to live, like periods of bad weather or bouts of the flu. To be

sure we will have to adjust, to be sure everything will be turned upside down and inside out, to be sure there will be suffering and loss of livelihood or even life, but then revolutions are like that. Their inevitability is something we simply have to accept as part of the nature of capitalist social conditions. After a while we just become acclimatised. Yet another turn to an ideological climate that may be showing signs of desperation.

It is not difficult to find evidence that revolution has finally been thoroughly incorporated into the ideological framework of late capitalism. We have already considered the fickle and decidedly eurocentric response to the Egyptian Revolution; one could also consider the ways in which the US election played out. Amid the shouts of social revolution inaugurated by new technologies and the declarations that the world was now run by innovative youth, the left and the right both passionately supported two white male candidates in their 70s with platforms from the 1970s. If anything could have indicated that from a social and political perspective nothing had changed it should have been the 2016 election. As if to confirm the point left and right dragged out well worn slogans concerning fascist and communist threats. It was almost as if the politically engaged had to search through the dustbins of history in order to hammer home the fact that not only had nothing changed, but the gender of the president wasn't going to change either.

The election of Donald Trump (sometimes referred to as Twitler) itself appears to have finally let some of the wind out of the bag of the social media revolution. And let's not forget that the so-called rise of the right is not a rise but a return or better yet a re-appearance. An age of revolutions seems again to be developing, but we now appear to be going round in circles again--anakuklosis. The faint glimmer of the real that had accompanied the term is decidedly growing dimmer, but its return perhaps suggests that it has not yet gone out. Revolution may not mean better, but it does still mean that things will change and the positivity it evokes is attached, however loosely, to the ends it may achieve. Even if these ends are never specified, they may evoke a sense of hope within contexts of relative hopelessness. Revolution is losing the commitment to ends implied by progress, but it is not yet quite as empty as innovation. It may be the ideological concept that innovation and excellence were waiting for.

There can be little doubt that the return of the use of the word revolution in the western popular imagination is simultaneously an indication of yet another misplaced hope of the left and a means by which the right incorporates the aspirations of the people by way of marketing campaigns. But it may also be a sign longing for a signified. "Revolution" may not have yet regained the power of "progress" in the 19th century, but the longing for a concept that either inspires hope or whitewashes hopelessness appears to have returned. Perhaps the battles will again be fought out under the banner of revolution, but, today, within the centres of capitalist power, revolution is as excellent and innovative as the commodities it helps circulate. Perhaps merely another indication that things are going on in the same way.

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