

How revolutionary are revolutions?

Revolutions are the building blocks of modern society and have, and continue to, merged and subtly weaved the very fabrics of life. Revolutions signify and involve change monumental change. Revolutionary, or indeed radical, is a grave understatement in describing revolutions. Indeed, that is if you can describe booming economy, increased standards and dramatic alterations to society suffused with bloodshed, anarchy unemployment and depressions as radical.

The changes that swept throughout the Europe during the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries epitomise the word 'revolution': that vibrant paradox of both increase and decline. The notion of a romantic affair with little people fighting establishment and monarchy was reinforced: men such as Thomas Paine and the Tolpuddle Martyrs. Century old movements such as Chartism were completed by 1918. Political intrigue occurred as all forms of government came under scrutiny, with the Reform Act of 1832. Thinking and ideology reached its zenith.

The Industrial, Agrarian, Transport and Social revolutions are a testimony to the men of the period. This was the age of the middle class. The aristocracy were declining due to a series of further reform acts until 1867. Two fifths of men could claim the vote now and the potency of the merchants was rapidly rising.

During the reign of George III the population rose from seven to fourteen million. People flocked to the towns (the population of which doubled too) for employment. Unfortunately, this led to town degradation and poor sanitation, as they were unable to support the influx of people. Thus the agricultural departments were called upon to supply produce to the people and funding was given. A surge in interest occurred: more money enabled landowners to experiment with new ideas. Men such as Lord Townsend introduced radical plans to reshape the face of farming. Better dietary habits ensued: productivity increased. Jethro Tull and others stumbled across equipment such as the seed drill that would maximise efficiency. As a direct result of this Britain's economy flourished. Banking establishments were founded as were insurance policies. The next issue caused nation-wide repercussions, which would echo around the country.

Enclosure, love it or hate it made landowners rise, tenants fall. Social and moral values aside however, enclosure benefited the economy. The new money allowed for increased impetus upon industry. Wealthy entrepreneurs arrived, who were willing to devote their attention and savings to developing the country's natural resources. Coal, iron and cotton could be found in abundance, and those were ruthlessly exploited.

The British trading arena was widened by its conquest in the Seven Years war. Thus mass manufacturing occurred: vast machines rose from the ashes of rough appliances, churning and belching out coal, iron or cotton. People felt free to meddle with factories, like Richard Arkwright in textiles. However the real break through took place in 1706 when Thomas Newcomen designed a steam engine. James Watt took up the mantle and improved upon it, developing cylinders. Thus steam power thrived. The development of transport and in particular the railways is intrinsically linked to that of steam and coal. These two powered the fledgling empire yet it was the railway that drove this empire forward. By 1870 13,000 miles of track had been laid across Britain. Cheaper, quicker travel reduced costs of bulk goods and once more maximisation proceeded. The agrarian, transport and industrial revolutions fused Britain into the super-power of the period, radically altering daily routine. Miserly, three field systems that had existed since the dawn of mediaeval time were replaced. Speed and journey times were improved. Modern industry was established. The value of the nation rose.

The social revolution simply reinforced Britain's dominance and mastery of the known world. The Factory Act of 1833, Poor Law Amendment of 1834 and the Health and Education Acts allowed for Britain to secure and aid their peoples. Both internally and outside the country, all was 'ship-shape', to excuse a naval term.

These few revolutions altered the people's perceptions and the way the country and indeed the world were run. Generally revolutions have created new radical ideas: political or pragmatic. Without revolutions, without change, life would be primitive, basic. If we removed all revolutions we would revert back to the dawn of time, the origins of man. Revolutionary is an understatement.