Modern Intellectual History (2026), 1–9
doi:10.1017/S1479244326100882

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

REVIEW ESSAY

Revolution and Democracy

Geneviève Rousselière

Political Science, Duke University, USA
Email: genevieve.rousseliere@gmail.com

(Received 31 March 2026 UTC; revised 31 March 2026 UTC; accepted 15 April 2026 UTC)

Stephen Sawyer, *Demos Rising: Democracy and the Popular Construction of Public Power in France, 1800–1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2025)

Dan Edelstein, *The Revolution to Come: A History of an Idea from Thucydides to Lenin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025)

The specter of the French Revolution haunts modern politics. Was it an uprising that opened the path to modern democracy—toppling aristocratic privilege, proclaiming the rights of man and the citizen, and inaugurating popular sovereignty—or a durable setback to liberalism, its promise undone by the bloodbath of the Terror and Napoleon's Caesarism? From Michelet to Jaurès and Soboul, 1789 marks the opening act of a better world, while, from Burke to Furet and Schama, violence, Jacobinism, and authoritarianism reveal the dangers inherent in revolutionary politics itself. One might hope that rigorous historical work could settle this division. Historiography, however, suggests otherwise: interpretations of the French Revolution often reveal not the nature of modernity, but the political orientation of the interpreter. Any historian entering this arena must contend with that risk.

Two recent books boldly accept this challenge and offer new perspectives on the enduring problem of the emancipatory possibility of revolutions for modern times. Stephen Sawyer's *Demos Rising: Democracy and the Popular Construction of Public Power* treats the French Revolution's heritage as a protracted administrative revolution through which the people seized a new mode of self-government. In contrast, Dan Edelstein's *The Revolution to Come: A History of an Idea from Thucydides to Lenin* locates the French Revolution as the tipping point in the history of the idea of revolution—arguing that the faith in progress characteristic of modern revolutions becomes the harbinger of authoritarianism. Whereas in Sawyer's view democratization itself is a revolution, Edelstein warns that modern revolutions are unlikely to bring about liberal and pluralist democracies.

Both books are impressive in scope and ambition. Each proposes a new way of understanding how the French Revolution radically altered the way we think about revolution itself. Their methodologies diverge: Edelstein writes squarely in the history

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100882 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of political thought, combining *longue durée* scholarly historical analysis with a flair for storytelling; Sawyer blends intellectual, social and administrative history into what he calls a "pragmatic history of the political," providing a focused study of fifty years of French experience inspired by both Tocqueville and Foucault. Both are provocative—and highly recommended—though perhaps written for somewhat different audiences.

The rise of the demos

There are two revolutions at play in *Demos Rising*. The first one, the French Revolution, projects its shadow on the second type of event that is the subject of the book: the slow rise of a self-governing people in France. Sawyer calls this the democratic revolution—not a violent political convulsion, but a dilated administrative process covering the first half of the nineteenth century. Instead of being spectacular, like the storming of the Bastille, the democratic revolution consists of countless small, decentralized, and mundane acts that turn into institutions.

Sawyer works with several distinct meanings of "democracy" and spelling them out provides an entry point into the problem motivating the book. Following Tocqueville, he takes democracy first as a social condition that was achieved by the end of the French Revolution: a society of political equals without order or privilege. Social equality, however, did not translate into the second meaning of democracy: a regime in which the people self-govern. The series of authoritarian regimes in early nineteenth-century France makes this gap painfully clear. Hence the problem: how can a society of equals govern itself? And is democracy as a *political* regime the best way for a (socially) democratic people to govern itself?

A common narrative sees nineteenth-century France gradually achieving democracy through universal suffrage in the 1848 Revolution and then the institutions of the Third Republic. Sawyer proposes an alternative narrative: if democracy is indeed a form of self-government (and not merely a social condition), then it should not be understood as an electoral regime but as the administration of daily life. Hence the third, and most important, meaning of democracy in this period (and in this book). We should observe democracy not in the voting booths and national assemblies, but in the many administrations that were vastly expanded and transformed in the first half of the nineteenth century. This third sense of democracy—democracy as public administration—is not a retrospective projection. Showing that nineteenth-century actors understood the concept in this sense, Sawyer asks readers to embrace this unfamiliar perspective and consider it possible for democracy to be "everywhere," even under ostensibly authoritarian regimes, as French people of this period widely believed.

The book is organized around eight substantive chapters with an implicit dual structure: one thread traces intellectual developments that supported democratization (notably Chapters 1 and 7) and the other analyzes how these ideas were implemented in sites of governance. Sawyer argues that a new conception of the individual's relation to society gave rise to social sciences and political theories that transformed the tradition of social-contract theory. A wide range of intellectual sources are mobilized, with original readings of thinkers such as Sismondi, Hegel, Blanc, Allart, Proudhon,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100882 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Fouillée, and Comte. This intellectual history shows that democratization, more than just the popular control of political power, implies understanding humans as social beings whose freedoms flourish through regulation.

Demos Rising opens by presenting the "democratized" theory of the social contract. In this renewed theoretical frame featuring a social contract in constant revision, individuals are not atomized rational agents endowed with abstract will but instead socially encumbered individuals bearing obligations. The deep influence of Hegel in French thought shows in these treatises, in which democracy comes from the administration of daily life rather than political institutions. Throughout the book, Sawyer emphasizes the priority of public welfare in the discourse of governing elites and thinkers across the political spectrum. Furthermore, social discourse, central to the democratic movement, was largely religious in nature, leading to the idea (present in Tocqueville's thought) that "a renewed Catholicism could rightly be considered the religion of democracy" (192). From Saint-Simon to Comte, via Lacordaire and Buchez, a new democratic social science emerged that conceived democracy as grounded in common, nonsecular values rather than in the abstract individualism of classical contractual theory.

A pragmatic history of the political

A major strength of Sawyer's book is its effort to bridge intellectual history with what he calls the "pragmatic history of the political" (14); that is, the exploration of the different sites where democratic administration was exercised: "the environment, municipal governance, public health, the workplace, large capitalist enterprise, religion, and empire" (14). These democratic regulatory practices "filled the void left by the destruction of natural privilege as the foundation for social and political order" (156).

Among the domains investigated by Sawyer is the management of forests, an urgent project in the postrevolutionary period as elites became aware of the ecological disasters created by the massive deforestation of the late eighteenth century. The politicization of environmental regulation, he argues, was a "revolution in the relationship between human beings and their forests" (40). New forest codes were met with resistance from local populations who relied on forest resources for their subsistence. Debates on the necessity to regulate the environment arose in which arguments pitted the "public good" against the interests of landowners, capitalists, and peasants.

A central piece of evidence to support Sawyer's thesis is the introduction of local administrative elections in the early 1830s, which injected popular participation into public decision making (80). These administrative elections, he argues, are the core of the democratization at play in this period: a form of "decentralization"; that is, an execution of state power responsive to local demands. The construction of municipal administration in Paris was central to the city's democratization after the revolution destroyed the patchwork of privileges and authorities that characterized the old regime. Chapter 4 thus examines struggles over public-health regulation through analyzing reports of the Conseil de salubrité (Public Health Council) and the popular demands

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100882 Published online by Cambridge University Press

transpiring in publications such as the democratic almanacs. Public-health reforms, Sawyer contends, emerged from the intersection of a public-service ethos and popular demands that recognized the links between poverty, hygiene, and disease. Raspail's writings on hygiene exemplify this new awareness.

Two chapters examine regulation in the domains of labor and capitalist enterprise. The Conseil des prud'hommes (labor council), an old institution revived by Napoleon to settle conflicts in the workplace, evolved into an avenue for worker and employer participation on a principle of equity. This institution played a key role in Louis Blanc's imagination of a workplace managed by workers themselves, leading to his publication of *L'organisation du travail* (1839), and the 1848 leitmotif of "organizing labor" democratically. As the new industrial world was in dire need of regulation on the side of production, so was capitalism on the side of investment and entrepreneurship. The mottos of "public welfare" and "public ethos" that Sawyer invoked in other domains also played a central role in the state's necessity to channel entrepreneurship towards areas of public interest. Hence the rise of the *société anonyme*, a joint-stock company that allowed large investments under governmental authorization.

The last chapter studies the challenges of colonialism in a democratic society, and wonders how Tocqueville, the theorist of democracy, could have endorsed imperial expansion. Colonization was considered a potential solution to the impasses of democracies: it would extend economic possibilities to those who were crushed by the new inequalities of democratic society. Yet there was no democratic administration of colonies and the colonized were not considered a part of the polity's "self." Colonization only made the antinomies of democracy more salient. Here Sawyer proposes an important nuance to his thesis—and to his reliance on Tocqueville's thought—and introduces the question of the nature of the demos that is rising by showing the exclusions that democracy generated.

Demos Rising persuasively shows that early nineteenth-century meanings of democracy differ from ours, which helps explain how the political revolution of 1848 was prepared by a long subterranean administrative revolution in many aspects of daily life since the French Revolution. That the people participated in this transformation is undeniable. Sawyer's cases show struggles between governing elites seeking to coordinate individual freedoms for the public good and different social groups (peasants, workers, employees, small capitalists) who resisted and negotiated reforms and governmental initiatives. Yet it remains unclear whether administrative expansion in these instances can be coherently presented as democratic in the sense of "the self-government of the people." For one thing, it is questionable whether there is a coherent "self" of this people, and even further, to what extent it is the people that governs rather than its elite.

A central claim of the book is that "the demos built the modern administrative state, warts and all" (240). Yet its case studies do not always seem to illustrate this idea neatly. Forest codes, for example, were initiated by elites responding to ecological crisis; popular input mainly adjusted policies. Hygiene and labor regulations largely emerged from governmental initiative aligned with bourgeois interests. Sawyer demonstrates that administrative expansion happened out of care for the people's needs, in the name of "public interest." However, imposing policies and institutions in the name of public welfare is clearly not sufficient to call them democratic in the sense of "self-government."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100882 Published online by Cambridge University Press

One may reasonably ask to what extent the demos was constituting itself, or whether it was being constituted. If so, the nineteenth-century expansion of administration would be no less important but maybe would warrant a slightly different interpretation. This issue reflects a general question we should have about the "self" that is at play when we describe a type of society as exercising "self-government." What is the story behind the different classes and population categories that constitute this self (or, for that matter, are persistently excluded from it)? If the nineteenth century sees the "rise of the demos" as a "self-governing people," who exactly is this people who is rising? Are there parts of the people who are rising when others are excluded from this process? Sawyer's excellent book opens new questions about the nature of modern democracy when we see it as both self-government and public administration.

Revolutions that were

In contrast to *Demos Rising*, which focuses on half a century in France, *The Revolution to Come* offers a sweeping history of the concept of revolution from Thucydides to the Arab Spring, spanning more than two millennia and several continents. Edelstein's point is not to recount a series of world-historical revolutions—though he does so with considerable brio—but to trace the transformation of the very *idea* of revolution. His central claim is that its meaning changed decisively in eighteenth-century Europe, dividing world history into two epochs and impacting the way revolutions themselves were conducted.

A significant normative insight is inscribed within this ostensibly descriptive genealogy of a concept. Edelstein uncovers a logic at work within modern revolutions that, he suggests, should immunize us against the temptation to glorify or seek out such events. Modern revolutions, he writes, promise a new world of justice and freedom, yet call for an authoritarian resolution. Democracy is what they promise, but a Leviathan is what they deliver.

At first, the great lines of Edelstein's chronology will be familiar to historians of political thought. The history of revolutions is characterized by a rupture, indeed a conceptual revolution, brewing in the eighteenth century and first realized in practice in the French Revolution. Prior to this shift, the idea of revolution had been largely shaped by its critics: revolutions were seen as dangerous and destructive events. In antiquity, a revolution designated the revolving cycle of regimes. By contrast, the eighteenth century introduced the transformative belief that the future need not resemble the past, and that instead it *had to* be much better than it. That's the belief in the necessity of historical progress, an offspring of the Enlightenment's faith in the power of reason. Until then, revolutions were seen as dangerous and chaotic events that undermined law and order. From the French Revolution on, they became seen as desirable engines of justice and freedom.

The initial chapters of the book retrace the evolution of the idea of revolution from antiquity to early modern times in Europe. In fact, the word "revolution," Edelstein argues, did not exist as such in antiquity. Instead, the Greeks had two distinct concepts—*stasis* (social turmoil) and *metabolè* (regime change). Though analytically separable—regime changes could occur without civil strife and sedition did not always result in regime change—the two were often linked in practice and regarded as equally

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100882 Published online by Cambridge University Press

undesirable. The question, then, became how to prevent revolutions. The response of the ancients came within their specific relation to historical time. As they did not believe in the possibility of breaking the cycle of revolutions, they wondered whether time could simply be frozen to arrest *metabolè* and *stasis*.

Inspired by the model of stability implemented in the constitution of Sparta, Plato and Aristotle proposed versions of mixed constitutions as a means of preventing revolutionary decay. Edelstein credits Polybius, however, as the real inventor of the idea of revolution as it came to be understood in early modern Europe. Even more importantly, despite being ostensibly a historian rather than a philosopher, he conceptualized the cure to revolutions in Book VI of his *Histories*. Taking Rome rather than Sparta as the example of the perfect constitution, Polybius imagined a cycle of regime devolutions (*anacyclosis*) that could be stopped by a properly balanced mixed constitution. The influence of Polybius looms (perhaps surprisingly) large during the Renaissance and until the American War of Independence, as Edelstein demonstrates, showing how translations of Polybius were crucial for "revolution" to become the term that described not only *stasis* and *metabolè*, but also *anacyclosis*, or cyclical constitutional change.

Although the book does not dwell on the connection between revolution and republicanism, this relationship forms an important theme. Contemporary political theory associates republicanism with a history of resistance to domination. Yet, as Edelstein shows, classical republican theory historically relied on the Polybian idea that revolutions should be arrested: what republicans aimed to accomplish was ending the instability of *anacyclosis*. Yet, in the writings of Cicero (and much later the English republicans), the priority of freedom as a political goal created a tension between stability and resistance to an unjust status quo. This conceptual tension is solved within the mixed constitution: stability and freedom both come from the constitutional order that balances between the ever-fighting parts of the population—the few and the many—which ensures that no part can dominate. Classical republicanism thus emerged as both emancipatory and conservative; it could legitimate revolution, but only in order to end it.

For Edelstein, modernity begins with the Enlightenment's reconceptualization of time as progressive rather than cyclical. The belief in progress, he insists, was not rooted in religious providentialism but in confidence in reason, as the writings of the Abbé de Saint-Pierre and Condorcet show. The Enlightenment opens a new existential orientation of mankind: time is creative rather than repetitive. And because reason, by definition, is a problem-solving faculty, it implies that humans can solve the sempiternal problems riddling all societies—*stasis*, violence, poverty, inequality, and even the disagreements that feed conflicts. From a calamity to be avoided, revolutions became a rational instrument for realizing a just world, arguably a world rid of all political problems and eventually of politics itself.

An important aspect of this analysis is that, for Edelstein, the standard to count as an ancient, rather than a modern, is one's relation to time, and in particular the belief in rational progress applied to politics. According to this classification, Machiavelli belongs to the ancients, as do the American revolutionaries. Edelstein calls the latter "the last of the Polybians," for their orientation both towards history (they sought to re-create classical republican models) and towards constitutionalism (they enshrined pluralism in a mixed constitution). In a chapter that relies heavily on John Adams,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100882 Published online by Cambridge University Press

an admirer of Polybius, Edelstein concludes that "the Constitution of 1787, built on ancient principles and English precedents, was not designed with progressive political ideas in mind" (143).

The revolution to come

The French Revolution marks the first decisive leap into the future and thus inaugurated modernity. It embodied the new conception of a revolution as "a historical break with the past, in the name of a better, fairer, and even freer future" (149). Edelstein does not seek to present yet another account of the causes of the French Revolution. Instead he offers a structural interpretation of its trajectory, arguing that it established a pattern characteristic of subsequent revolutions. First, modern revolutions descend into internecine violence because the faith in rational progress animating revolutionaries fosters commitment to a single, uncontestable goal. Second, they end in authoritarian regimes because conflicts generated by competing interpretations can be resolved only by silencing all opponents.

In an original and tightly argued chapter, Edelstein presents the complex lines of dissension that ran through the different episodes of the revolution. He singles out (rightly in my view) the quarrel over the representation of sovereignty as the driver of these never-ending conflicts. Different groups (Jacobins, Girondins, the Convention, the Commune, the sections among others) battled to be recognized as the legitimate representatives of popular sovereignty, constantly generating new subgroups, new alliances, and new enemies. Because only one interpretation could prevail, the designation of competitors, albeit close allies of yesterday, as enemies of the revolution gave the justification for their physical elimination. What we get from this narrative is a new account of the Terror as a logical consequence of the anti-pluralist logic of the revolution itself. Yet violence failed to stabilize the regime, necessitating the rise of a "Leviathan"—a role Robespierre could not ultimately fulfill.

It should be noted that Edelstein does not claim to provide the *causes* of the French Revolution (or any revolution, for that matter), even though he maintains that there is evidence that ideas (such as the belief in historical progress) have some kind of impact on historical events themselves. Instead of a causal story, the book traces patterns common to modern revolutions. These patterns, however, do not simply reappear by accident: they are carried by the representations of historical actors. Once actors conceive themselves as revolutionaries, prior revolutions supply scripts that shape their conduct. This is evident, Edelstein claims, when one reads the modern revolutions with an eye to the script of the French Revolution, which is the object of later chapters. The nineteenth century witnessed revolutionary enthusiasm across continents, from Haiti to Gran Columbia and Italy. An underlying conceptual war, however, waged between the "liberal politics of moderation" and the "modern theory of political progress" (230). Napoleon gets credit as a liberal who realigned "the 'high' enjoyment of individual rights with a 'low' exercise of popular sovereignty and a 'low' participation in republican governments" (207). Edelstein, however, does not paint liberalism as the solution. Even liberal impulses in the revolutionary atmosphere of the nineteenth century were accompanied relentlessly by authoritarianism.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100882 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Why are modern revolutions so troubling according to Edelstein? It is not that they are more violent than the classical ones (the book opens with the bloodbath of the revolution at Corcyra). Rather, modern revolutions (i) promise freedom, justice, and democracy, and deliver authoritarianism; (ii) are inherently anti-pluralist; and (iii) create internecine fights. For Edelstein, the modern revolutionary mind-set is the problem. "By opening up the future as a space to be colonized by a just society, the modern doctrinaires of progress encouraged their followers to value the world to come so highly that they were willing to accept the temporary suspension of democratic beliefs" (234). Edelstein characterizes here the first socialist revolution of October 1917 but he extends this idea to all modern revolutions. It seems to me quite clear that Edelstein's condemnation of modern revolutions as a mirage ending in oppression is inspired more by the utter devastation caused by socialist revolutions in the twentieth century than by the French Revolution itself. Recognizing the death toll and the ruins in the countries that underwent these revolution leads the author to condemn not the specifics of the ideal itself, but the logic that made an untenable goal necessarily end in disaster.

The Revolution to Come is brilliant in many ways. It would be wrong to think that each chapter is just an illustration of the general thesis of the book. Instead, I found that individual chapters offer rich historical analysis rather than mechanical illustrations of an overarching pattern. The chapter on the French Revolution, for example, foregrounds the conflict over sovereignty more than it does the revolutionaries' belief in historical progress. Yet this raises questions about the precise status of the book's central claim. The belief in historical progress is certainly not what *caused* the French Revolution. The sans-culottes certainly had not read the Abbé de Saint-Pierre. If the belief in historical progress does not *cause* revolutions, then what role does it play? Is it a necessary but not sufficient condition? At the same time as the concept of revolution witnesses a transformation, so do other ideas that have a key role in all these modern revolutions, such as democracy and popular sovereignty. If we grant the general pattern that Edelstein discerns in modern revolutions (anti-pluralism, internecine violence, resolution in authoritarianism), how exactly can we disentangle the respective roles of these ideas in the creation of this pattern? How can the different variables be isolated so that the connection between this one particular idea and the general course of all modern revolutions can be determined?

That revolutions often end in authoritarian regimes is hard to deny. Twentieth-century revolutions provided a series of cases that make Edelstein's claim more than plausible. But one may wonder whether revolutions should be judged by their immediate outcome, or by the longer trajectory that they inaugurate. Should the French Revolution be assessed by the Terror and by the Empire? Or should it be assessed by the emancipatory hope it created in the rest of the world? Or should it be placed in the longer history of a country that democratized and became liberal—in large part because of the deep institutional transformations that were the legacy of the revolution? What about the long-term consequences of the nineteenth-century revolutions of liberation and unification across Europe and South America? If we are to look at history not descriptively but normatively, the standards we apply to determine the failure of a political enterprise lend us radically different judgments.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100882 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Ultimately Edelstein's condemnation of modern revolution leaves open the problem of the legitimacy of revolutions. If revolutions are all certainly going to end up destroying rather than furthering democracy, is it legitimate to start a rebellion that can be the spark of a revolution? I doubt that Edelstein aims to say that resistance to oppression is illegitimate. Is it, then, that revolutions can be taken to be legitimate only if revolutionaries aim for a pluralist constitution that only tweaks an existing regime, and accept realistically that the wealthy and the powerful should have an equal say with the many because inequality has always existed and will always exist? Again, I doubt that this is what the author means, though that seems a rather logical consequence of the historical claim that revolutions have good ends only when aiming for a mixed constitution.

Finally, I wondered about the connection between the danger of revolutions (i.e. their tendency to end in violence and authoritarianism) and the "progressive" agenda, which Edelstein faults for its anti-pluralism. If the goal of a revolution is not an unprecedented future, but a return to a previous state (as was the case in premodern times), does it make less likely that conflicts will arise, that enemies will be made, and that a Leviathan will rise from the chaos? If, instead of dreaming of a society with no injustice, one aims to "make our country great again," does it make it less likely that polarization and violence will occur? As we are learning the hard way, reviving the past brings about divisions, violence, and authoritarianism as much as imagining a better future.

Conclusion

Demos Rising and *The Revolution to Come* relate democracy to revolutions, though in radically different ways. In Sawyer's argument, our collective story is one of democratization, even when this process is not linear and cannot be taken for granted. The French Revolution had a key role in this realization, even though the deeper democratic revolutions are not spectacular but protracted and institutional. For Edelstein, revolutions promised democracies yet brought authoritarian regimes repeatedly. In both books, however, Caesars and Leviathans loom as democracy's persistent enemies—sometimes summoned unintentionally by well-meaning democrats.

Both books ultimately propose warnings, albeit different ones. *Demos Rising* asks readers to be wary of regimes that appear democratic but are only simulacra. The key to saving democracies is to invest in all institutions of popular participation, and not just in political elections. In turn, *The Revolution to Come* warns readers that good intentions and faith in progress have often paved the way to authoritarianism. If democracy is to endure, Edelstein suggests, its foundation lies not in utopian futures but in the preservation of political pluralism and in vigilance against democratic backsliding.

Cite this article: Geneviève Rousselière, "Revolution and Democracy," *Modern Intellectual History* (2026), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100882

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100882 Published online by Cambridge University Press