



FEARED

Age of
Revolutions

Progress and Backlash
from 1600 to the Present

ZAKARIA

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from 1600 to the Present*

FAREED ZAKARIA



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One of the sages of Mishnah is quoted as saying, “May you be covered in the dust of your Rabbi.”

To my teachers and mentors, who have helped me on my journey and whose dust I bear with gratitude.

Khushwant Singh, Girilal Jain, Robin W. Winks, Paul M. Kennedy, Samuel P. Huntington, Stanley Hoffmann, Robert O. Keohane, Joseph S. Nye Jr., James F. Hoge Jr., Leslie H. Gelb, Richard M. Smith, Mark Whitaker, Jonathan Klein, Richard Plepler, Jeff Zucker.

Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

—Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels,
The Communist Manifesto

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AGE OF REVOLUTIONS

INTRODUCTION

A MULTITUDE OF REVOLUTIONS

THE COMEDIAN ROBIN WILLIAMS SOMETIMES TALKED ABOUT POLITICS IN HIS stand-up routines. He would begin by reminding people of the origins of the word. “Politics,” he would explain, comes from “ ‘Poli,’ a Latin word meaning many, and ‘tics’ meaning bloodsucking creatures.” He always got a big laugh. In fact, alas, the word derives from ancient Greek, from *polites*, which means citizen and itself comes from *polis*, meaning city or community. Aristotle’s *Politics*, written in the fourth century BC, is a book about the ways to govern communities, and it discusses all the elements of politics that we would find familiar today—the nature of power, types of political systems, causes of revolutions, and so on. Politics is one of those rare human enterprises that hasn’t changed that much over the millennia. Its outward forms have shifted, but its core concern remains the same: the struggle for power and what to do with it. In 64 BC, Rome’s greatest orator, Cicero, ran for the office of consul. His younger brother decided to write for him a guide of sorts to winning elections, a set of practical lessons for his sometimes too idealistic sibling. Among his suggestions: promise everything to everyone, always be seen in public surrounded by your most passionate supporters, and

remind voters of your opponents' sex scandals. More than two thousand years later, political consultants charge hefty fees to dispense the same advice.

Despite these constants, in recent centuries, politics has taken on a particular ideological shape that would have been alien to those living in the ancient or medieval world. Modern politics around the world has been characterized as a contest between the Left and the Right. The simple demarcation of Left and Right has traditionally said a lot about where someone stands, whether in Brazil, the United States, Germany, or India: on the left, a stronger state with more economic regulation and redistribution; on the right, a freer market with less governmental intervention. This left-right divide had long dominated the political landscape of the world, defining elections, public debates, and policies, even provoking violence and revolution. But these days, this fundamental ideological division has broken down.

Consider Donald Trump and his run for the presidency in 2016. Trump was a departure from the past in so many ways—his bizarre personality, his ignorance of public policy, and his flouting of democratic norms. But perhaps the most significant sense in which Trump was different was ideological. For decades, the Republican Party had espoused a set of ideas that could be described as the Reagan formula. Ronald Reagan became an extraordinarily popular Republican by advocating limited government, low taxes, cuts to government spending, a muscular military, and the promotion of democracy abroad. He also ran on a platform that was socially conservative—in favor of banning abortion, for instance—but he often downplayed these parts of the program, particularly once in office. To his many fans, Reagan was a sunny, optimistic figure who celebrated America's free markets, openness to trade, and generous immigration policies and wanted to spread its democratic model to the rest of the world.

Trump argued against most elements of the Reagan formula. While he did advocate some of the same policies—low taxes and limits on abortions—he devoted the vast majority of his time and energy to a very different agenda. Trump’s hour-long campaign speeches could be boiled down to four lines: *The Chinese are taking away your factories. The Mexicans are taking away your jobs. The Muslims are trying to kill you. I will beat them all up and make America great again.* It was a message of nationalism, chauvinism, protectionism, and isolationism. Trump broke with many core elements of Republican economic orthodoxy, promising never to cut entitlements like Social Security and Medicare, which reversed decades of Republican fiscal conservatism. He denounced George W. Bush’s military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and condemned his geopolitical project of spreading democracy. In fact, Trump savaged nearly every Republican standard-bearer in recent memory, and all the party’s living presidents and [almost all the living nominees](#) rejected him. And while genuflecting before the Reagan myth, Trump could not have been more different—an angry, pessimistic figure who warned that America was doomed and promised a return to a mythic past.

Trump is not alone as a man of the right in breaking with traditional right-wing ideology. In fact, he’s part of a global trend. In Britain, the Conservative Party under Boris Johnson openly embraced a policy of big spending. He and other advocates of Brexit ignored conservative economists who insisted the United Kingdom would suffer from losing free trade with the European Union. Hungary’s populist leader, Viktor Orbán, freely mixes big government programs with attacks on immigrants and minorities. Italy’s right-wing leader, Giorgia Meloni, denounces consumerism and market capitalism while building a new nationalist movement based on identity—ethnic, religious, and cultural. Outside Europe, Narendra Modi in India has promoted economic growth and reform, but he and his party have also

zealously pursued an agenda of Hindu nationalism, at the expense of Muslims, Christians, and other minorities. In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro's right-wing party described its project as returning the country to its Christian past, from which it had been led astray by cosmopolitans, leftists, and minorities. Left-wing movements have also cropped up that share with their right-wing counterparts a scorn for the establishment and a desire to take down the existing order. Figures like Bernie Sanders in the US and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK have failed to gain power, but left-wing populists have won control of Latin American countries with long-dominant conservative parties such as Chile, Colombia, and Mexico.

Platforms vary from country to country, between right-wing populists and left-wing populists, but they share a dismissive attitude toward norms and practices like free speech, parliamentary procedures, and independent institutions. Liberal democracy is about rules, not outcomes. We uphold freedom of speech, rather than favoring specific speech. We want elections to be free and fair, rather than favoring one candidate. We make law by consensus and compromise, not by decree. But increasingly there are those—frustrated by the process, sure of their virtue, loathing the other side—who want to ban what they regard as “bad” speech, make policy by fiat, or even manipulate the democratic process. The ends justify the means. This dangerous illiberalism is more prevalent on the right, but there are examples on both sides of the aisle—Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico is a classic illiberal populist from the left.

British prime minister Tony Blair presciently observed in 2006 that the twenty-first century was seeing the fading of “traditional left-right lines.” Instead, the great divide was becoming “[open versus closed](#).” Those who celebrate markets, trade, immigration, diversity, and open and free-wheeling technology are on one side of this divide, while those who view all these forces with some suspicion and want to close, slow, or shut them down are on

the other. This divide does not map easily onto the old left-right one. One sign of a revolutionary age is that politics get scrambled along new lines.

ORIGINS OF REVOLUTIONS

I was standing with Steve Bannon in the Campo de' Fiori, one of the oldest squares in Rome, when he pointed excitedly to the statue standing in the center of the square. It was June 2018, and Bannon was in town to encourage a coalition of two very different populist parties that had collectively won half the vote in the recent Italian elections. His message was that these two groups, though perhaps appearing far apart on the traditional political spectrum, were allies on the new political landscape. They both embraced “closed” policies toward trade, immigration, and the European Union and were opposed to the established left- and right-wing parties that had dominated Italy for decades and had, with slight variations, all supported free-market reforms, open trade, European integration, and multiculturalism. Bannon is a colorful, controversial, and volatile personality who lasted only a few months as Donald Trump’s chief strategist in the White House. His star has long faded, and though he never had much direct impact on policy (nor much of a moral compass), he did have insights into the populism that is coursing through the world. Ignoring the dozens of vendors selling everything from olive oil to T-shirts, Bannon began praising the dark, brooding figure in flowing robes with a hood almost completely covering his face. It was a monument to Giordano Bruno, a philosopher-monk who was put to death at that very spot in 1600 AD. Bannon was so interested in Bruno that years earlier, he’d filmed a documentary about him that was never completed.

Bannon reveres Bruno because he was a defiant radical who openly challenged the establishment of the day, the Catholic Church. Bruno dissented from the church’s most important dogmas, insisting that the Earth

was not at the center of the world and that the universe was in fact infinite. “Galileo, who is the hero to us today, actually recanted,” Bannon said, speaking of the famous Italian astronomer who also insisted that the stars did not revolve around the Earth. “It was Bruno here that actually was burned at the stake, five hundred years ago,” because he refused to recant. (The offices of the Papal Inquisition, set up to suppress free thinking and heresy, stood overlooking the Campo.)

I pointed out to Bannon that there was one important difference between his Italian hero and his American patron. Bruno was a progressive. He was taking on the conservatives and traditionalists, arguing for ideas that would later become a foundational part of the Enlightenment. That didn’t seem to bother Bannon. To him, Bruno was a bold free-thinker who defied the existing power structure. At his core, Bannon is a revolutionary who wants to take down the establishment, attacking it from any side he can. He admires Lenin for his revolutionary tactics. He admitted that he was drawn to Bruno because Bannon believed that in times of turmoil, take-no-prisoners radicalism is the only option. “George Soros said the other day about the Italian elections, we live in revolutionary times,” Bannon said. “I believe that. I think you’re seeing a fundamental restructuring.”

It is strange that we use the word “revolution” to describe radical, abrupt, sometimes violent change in society. In science, where the word was first used, it means something else entirely. Revolution, in its original definition, is the steady movement of a body around a fixed axis, often the regular orbit of a planet or star. That suggests order, stability, a set pattern—movement that always returns the object back to its original position. The Earth revolves around the Sun in an established, predictable manner. The second meaning of revolution, which began to be used soon after the first and is now the most common, is a “[sudden, radical, or complete change](#),” a “fundamental change” or “overthrow”—movement that takes people far from where they were. The

French Revolution is the archetypal use of the word in this sense.

Why does a single word have two almost opposite definitions? The English word comes from the Latin word *revolvere*, meaning “to roll back.” That spawned not only “revolve” but also “revolt,” which grows out of the idea of “rolling back” one’s allegiance to a king or institution. Perhaps there is some strange affinity between these two meanings. We see that dualism right from the start, in the most famous initial use of the word in science, by the astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus. In 1543, Copernicus published his treatise *On the Revolutions of Heavenly Spheres*, which used the word in its first, scientific meaning. But while Copernicus was using “revolution” in its regular sense, he was proposing a thesis that radically reordered our understanding of the cosmos, moving the Earth from the center of the universe to the periphery. For the way it overturned both astronomy and theology, the shift he set in motion came to be known as the Copernican Revolution. His was a “revolutionary” theory in both senses of the word.

Our times are revolutionary in the commonly used sense of the word. Wherever you look, you see dramatic, radical change. An international system that had seemed stable and familiar is now changing fast, with challenges from a rising China and a revanchist Russia. Within nations, we see the total upending of the old political order, as new movements that transcend the traditional left-right divide gain ground. In economics, the consensus that emerged after the collapse of communism around free markets and free trade has been overturned, and there is deep uncertainty about how societies and economies should navigate these uncharted waters. In the background of all of this is the full flowering of the digital revolution and the coming of artificial intelligence—with new and disruptive consequences.

In fact, our seemingly unprecedented moment also constitutes a revolution in the other sense of the word, a nostalgic desire to roll back to where we began. Radical advance is followed by backlash and a yearning for a past

golden age imagined as simple, ordered, and pure. This is a pattern we see throughout history: aristocrats pined for knightly chivalry even as the gunpowder age dawned; Luddites smashed machines to try to hold back the industrializing future; and now politicians are touting family values and promising to turn back the clock, to make their countries great *again*.

Modern history has seen several broad, fundamental breaks with the past. Some of these were intellectual, like the Enlightenment, while others were technological and economic. Indeed, the world has gone through so many industrial revolutions that we have to number them—the First, Second, Third, and now Fourth. There have been even more political and social revolutions, and they too are happening today.

For decades now, we have watched a world in overdrive, with accelerating technological and economic change, fluctuating conceptions of identity, and rapidly shifting geopolitics. The Cold War yielded to a new order that began to crack just a few decades after it formed. Many have celebrated the pace and nature of these changes; others have decried them. But above all we need to understand just how disruptive they have been, physically and psychologically, because this age of acceleration has provoked a variety of backlashes. We must understand and respond to them.

Consider the epigraph to this book: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.” Those lines sound like they could have been written today, perhaps by a right-wing intellectual who laments the breakdown of traditional society and yearns for a return to simpler times. But they were in fact published in 1848, in a similarly revolutionary age, when the old agricultural world was rapidly being replaced by a new industrial one, when politics, culture, identity, and geopolitics were all being upended by gale-force winds of structural change. And they were written not by conservatives, but by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, in *The*

Communist Manifesto. Marx brilliantly understood the enormously disruptive effects of capitalism and technology, and the many problems they caused, even though his solutions to those problems proved disastrous wherever and whenever they were tried. That this statement could have come from the right today shows vividly that we are moving into a new era of politics, one that upends the divisions of the past.

A REVOLUTION AMONG NATIONS

These revolutions *within* nations are happening at the same time as a revolution *among* nations—a fundamental reordering of global politics. From 1945 onward, for over three-quarters of a century, the world has been remarkably stable. First, for the almost half century of the Cold War, the two nuclear-armed superpowers deterred each other. Their intense competition often transmuted into bloody conflicts in places like Korea and Vietnam, but among the most powerful states—the ones that could start a third world war—there was a deadlock. Then, after 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed, we entered something extraordinarily rare in history, at least since the fall of Rome: an era in which there was just one superpower.

The closest analogue was the British Empire in its heyday, yet in the most important geopolitical arena, Europe, nineteenth-century Britain always remained one great power among many, all constantly jockeying for advantage. But America after 1991 towered above all other nations everywhere, and this produced something as unprecedented as a unipolar world: the absence of great-power competition itself. For most of history, political and military struggles among the richest and most powerful nations had defined international life and made it inherently tense and unstable. But suddenly, after 1991, there was a calm borne of the lack of competition. How could there be rivals? China was still an impoverished developing nation, making up less than 2 percent of global GDP. Russia was reeling from the

communist collapse. Its GDP declined by 50 percent during the 1990s, even more than it had during the Second World War. Even economic competitors like Japan and Germany were not really in the game. Japan had entered a long period of stagnation, and Germany was consumed with integrating its eastern half into the newly reunified country.

Washington in its unipolar phase was determined to shape the world in its own image. It made mistakes, sometimes by being overly cautious, other times by greatly overreaching. But there were two crucial effects. First, unipolarity created an era of global stability—no major geopolitical struggles, no arms races, and no great-power wars. Second, American ideas became global ideas. The United States encouraged the rest of the world to globalize, liberalize, and democratize. Markets, societies, and political systems all opened up, while technology connected people across the planet on vast open platforms. All of this seemed natural and inevitable, the expression of innate human desires. Americans certainly thought so.

There was a sense that politics mattered less than in the past. Economics had triumphed. I recall a senior Indian official telling me in the 1990s that even if his party lost, the opposition would come in and enact very similar policies because the other side also recognized that it needed to find ways to attract investment, improve efficiency, and grow. As Margaret Thatcher said when justifying her laissez-faire policies in Britain a decade earlier, “There is no alternative.” And the 1990s and early 2000s—a time of stability, low inflation, global cooperation, and technological progress—really seemed to embody the idea that economic liberalization was inevitable. But that wasn’t quite right. These forces were in fact undergirded by America’s overwhelming military and economic power as the global, unipolar anchor. So was the proliferation of liberal democracies around the world.

One important note: when I use “liberal” throughout this book, I generally do not mean its modern American connotation, where it is used

interchangeably with “left wing.” Rather, I refer to classical liberalism, the ideology that came out of the Enlightenment in opposition to monarchical and religious authority. While a contested term that today’s right and left squabble over, it is typically understood to mean individual rights and liberties at home, freedom of religion, open trade and market economics, and international cooperation within a rules-based order. Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton were both, in this sense, classical liberals, with Reagan emphasizing economic liberty and Clinton equality of opportunity (in order to be able to exercise one’s liberty). The new populists, from the right and left, attack the entire liberal project. They are suspicious of neutral procedures like freedom of speech, believing it vital to punish the speech they abhor. The Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives, Mike Johnson, has been openly critical of one of the pillars of America’s founding, the separation of church and state. In the extreme, these illiberal populists are willing to discard the rules of electoral democracy to achieve a higher goal, the election of a candidate or passage of a policy they support. In fact, Mike Johnson was one of the architects of the strategy to invalidate Joe Biden’s election as president in 2020.

An international system dominated by a liberal hegemon—like Britain in earlier times and now the United States—encourages the spread of liberal values. But the linkage can work in reverse as well. As American dominance started to erode, openness and liberalism came under pressure. America remains extraordinarily strong, but it is not quite the colossus it was during the unipolar moment. The first challenge to American hegemony was the first major backlash—9/11, a vicious attack from a part of the world where liberalism had yet to take hold and where Islamic fundamentalism stood in violent opposition to Enlightenment values. But the bulk of the damage came not from the attackers themselves—a band of terrorists who lacked the power to change the world—but from the United States’ massive overreaction.

Above all, America sapped its strength by deciding to occupy Afghanistan and then invade Iraq. The failure of those interventions broke the mystique of America's military might. Worse, the invasion showed the US violating the rules-based order it had long championed. Next came the global financial crisis of 2008, which dispelled the aura of America's economic might. In the 1990s, the United States' economy seemed to be a model for the world, especially its dynamic and efficient financial system. Developing countries used to enviously copy aspects of the American system, hoping to replicate its success. But when the crash hit, it revealed a financial system that was studded with hidden, catastrophic risks, convincing many that there was little worth emulating. As one of China's top leaders, Wang Qishan, told Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson in the midst of the crisis, "You were [my teacher](#), but ... look at your system, Hank. We aren't sure we should be learning from you anymore."

This was all happening as American political stability was also cracking. Congress had lost the ability to perform some of its most basic functions, like passing a budget. Threats of government shutdown became routine. Long-standing norms and practices in Washington were eroded, even destroyed. Filibustering of bills became routine, and nominations that were once waved through quickly were slow-walked, throwing sand into the government's gears. Raising the debt ceiling became an existential partisan battle risking national default. Political [polarization reached a peak](#) not seen since the aftermath of the Civil War.

This is not a case of a pox on both sides. One of America's two great parties, the GOP, has fallen prey to a populist takeover that cares less for the norms of liberal democracy and more for maintaining a revolutionary radicalism. President Trump questioned or reversed time-honored policies at home and abroad, leaving many allies worried about America's reliability. And then, in a protracted effort that culminated in the Capitol riot of January

6, 2021, Trump tried to overturn his election defeat and stay in power, something no American president had ever done in the country's history. Following his lead, in another unprecedented move, the majority of House Republicans voted against the certification of Joe Biden's election as president, even though dozens of court rulings had dismissed all allegations of fraud. The shining city on a hill was not glittering anymore.

The erosion of America's standing would mean much less if the country were not facing new challengers. Over the last three decades, the rising tide of growth across the world has resulted in a phenomenon I have called "the rise of the rest," with countries like China, India, Brazil, and Turkey all gaining strength and confidence. Of course, the two most disruptive forces by far have been the rise of China and the return of Russia, bringing new and profound tensions to the international realm. After a thirty-year "[holiday from history](#)," we once again live in a world that is shaped by great-power competition and conflict. This animosity has sabotaged the forces that seemed to be binding us all together—trade, travel, and technology—as new barriers spring up every day. Covid-19 accelerated the tendency toward protectionism and nationalism as countries searched for ways to be more self-reliant. Then there is the war in Ukraine, which has returned us to an age of geopolitical conflict of the oldest kind, over territory. We have witnessed the kind of warfare that many of us believed had been relegated to history books and black-and-white documentaries of World War II: European cities crumbling under merciless bombardment, civilians fleeing their homes by the millions, tanks rolling into the smoldering ruins. As American power has receded in the Middle East, regional powers have tried to fill the power vacuum, with tensions rising, and many intense local conflicts—from Syria to Yemen to Gaza. Asia has seen the return of classic balance-of-power politics, as China searches for greater influence and many of its neighbors court America's assistance to balance against the rising Asian hegemon. The