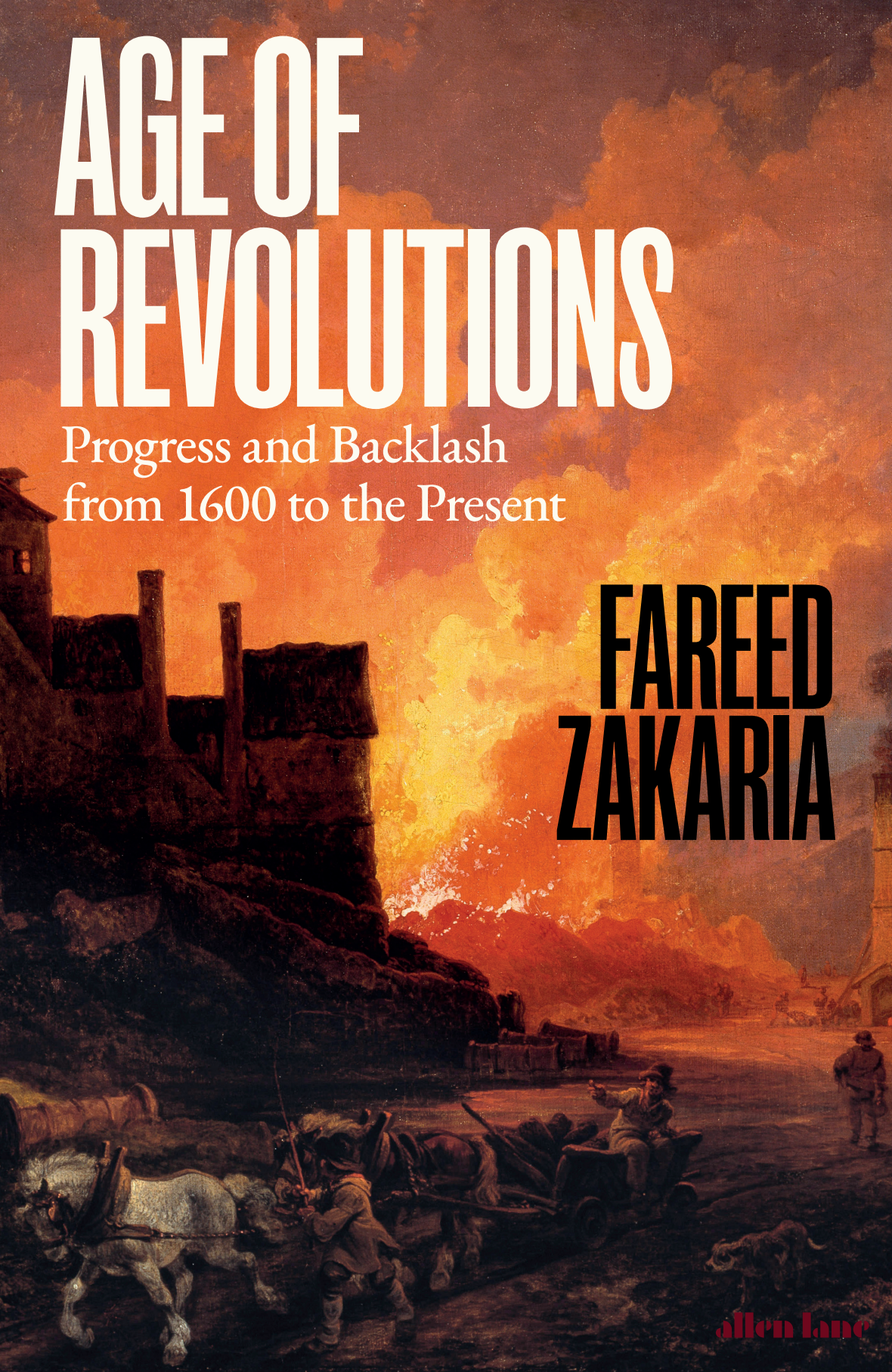
AGE OF REVOLUTIONS

Progress and Backlash 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,
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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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.)

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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

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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.

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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

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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.

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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

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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

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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

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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 language of cooperation has given way to talk of nationalism, competition, and conflict.

Even where the danger of war doesn't loom, a new atmosphere has descended. After three decades of liberalization, democratization, and openness, we are seeing a backlash. Ever since the financial crisis, market economics has been losing its halo. Today, everywhere you look, politics trumps economics. With Brexit, the United Kingdom chose to sever its preferential trade ties with its largest market, the European Union, for reasons that can only be described as political. Xi Jinping in China abandoned the market-driven approach that had catapulted his country into the top tier of nations, instead doubling down on state control. Donald Trump did not succeed in building his border wall, but he did impose higher duties on foreign goods than any American president had levied since Herbert Hoover signed the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act in 1930. Trump's successor, Joe Biden, has insisted that many of his spending plans be anchored with "Buy America" provisions. Other countries have tried to follow suit. Across the globe, countries are privileging resilience, self-sufficiency, and national security over growth and efficiency. Immigration, once celebrated and encouraged, has become a dirty word, and countries view immigrants with a jaundiced eye. Cultural shifts that seemed impossible to reverse—like the right for a woman to get an abortion—have been reversed.

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"Do we embrace the challenge of more open societies or build

defenses against it?" asked Tony Blair in 2006. More and more leaders have chosen the "closed" path. Once again, they believe that this time there is no alternative.

CHANGE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

What makes a period revolutionary? Are there other predictable consequences of a revolutionary era? And how does it all end? These are some of the questions I try to answer in this book. I do so by going back in time to try to understand previous ages of revolution—their origins and their aftermaths—and then examine our present age.

I begin with the dawn of the modern era, the first liberal revolution, which—in defiance of centuries of monarchy—created the republican form of government that now dominates the world. It took place in the Netherlands in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century but might not have changed the world if elements of it had not spread to Britain in 1688. That latter episode was described in 1689 as the "Glorious Revolution" by one of its supporters, and resulted in the supremacy of Parliament. In the long run, it put Britain on the path to become the world's leading industrial power, spreading its liberal ideals and practices far and wide—ideas that have outlasted the British Empire. I then look at two revolutions, one that failed spectacularly, the French Revolution, and one that succeeded beyond belief, the Industrial Revolution. They have both, in very different ways, shaped the world we live in now. And finally, I spend the second half of the book trying to understand our present age, which, like many earlier eras, is a period when revolutionary change has torn through multiple realms at once—economics, technology, identity, and geopolitics. I devote a chapter to each of these current-day revolutions.

While the examples I study have many variations, a basic pattern persists. First we see broad structural changes—tremendous advances in technology and accelerations of economic activity and globalization. These disruptions trigger another significant shift—in identity. As people begin to face new opportunities and challenges, they start

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defining themselves differently. You might think that I am describing our current era of identity politics, but consider the late sixteenth century: the Netherlands' economic rise and new technologies like the printing press gave birth to a new sense of identity among its people. They now saw themselves as Protestants, as Dutch, and, most important, as separate from the Habsburg Empire, their Catholic overlords.

A similar transformation took place when Europe and the United States industrialized, changing the roles of the landed gentry and creating a new category of people: the "working class." To be conservative once meant to be a landed aristocrat, deeply suspicious of markets, merchants, and manufacturers—whose interests were in those days promoted by liberals. But those identities soon changed as industrialization created a whole new elite in the West, one based on money rather than bloodlines. Conservatism became a defense of the new commercial elite, and liberals moved toward solidarity with the working class. More recently, the post-industrial age—marked by technological leaps and globalization put into overdrive—has produced its own revolution in identity, moving culture to center stage and shifting workers who were once left wing to the right. Sometimes this identity revolution is about positive affirmation, instilling a sense of pride in one's own background. Other times it is negative, stoking grievances and hostility toward others. Either way, it is powerful and consequential.

These three forces—technology, economics, identity—together almost always generate backlash that produces a new politics. Human beings can absorb only so much change so fast. The old politics, inherited from a prior era, often cannot keep pace. Politicians scramble to adjust, modifying their views and finding new coalitions. The result is reform and modernization or crackdown and revolt, and often some combustible combination of both.

Today, transformations within nations have also produced a geopolitical revolution, with several countries challenging the US-led liberal order—especially an ambitious China and an aggressive Russia. China owes its rise to economic and technological revolutions that

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have catapulted the country into the ranks of major powers, while Russia under Vladimir Putin has harnessed identity politics and jingoism as a response to his nation's structural decline.

When you consider the multitude of dramatic changes in the world today, we are living through one of the most revolutionary ages in history. These changes do not always take place simultaneously, and not all the revolutions play out the same way. I have described a series of forces that often coincide, but it would be impossible to cleanly separate out cause and effect in every case. Each revolution is somewhat different. But all of these changes do seem to interact and reinforce one another. They tend to give rise to backlashes of some sort. Past examples show how managing changes well leads to stable and successful outcomes, while mismanaged changes careen toward dismal failure. In the sweep of history, there has been real movement forward—toward greater collective prosperity and more individual autonomy and dignity. There have been forceful reactions, too, as those left behind cling desperately to the past and fight back with dogged determination. But in the long run, as King Arthur tells Sir Bedivere, the last of the Knights of the Round Table, in Tennyson's poem: "The old order changeth, yielding place to new."

I cannot and do not cover *all* revolutions. Readers in the US will perhaps be surprised that the American Revolution plays only a minor role in this book—for all its political audacity, it did not immediately transform society's deeper structures. (It is better thought of as a war of independence; many colonists were initially trying to preserve their rights as Englishmen that they believed the British government had "usurped.") You will find little discussion here of many other revolutions that shaped our world. Undoubtedly, communist takeovers and Islamist uprisings have had profound consequences. They have often resulted from economic and technological upheaval, and the formation of new identities, and are in that sense related to earlier revolutions in the West. Consider the way rapid modernization destabilized Iran, drove people toward fundamentalist Islam, and ended in the ouster of the shah in the Iranian Revolution. Some revolutions

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were directly inspired by the revolutions I discuss; Lenin's Russian Revolution consciously borrowed from the French Revolution, as did Mao's Chinese Revolution, with devastating effects. But rather than dwell on each revolution from around the world, I have chosen to stay with the main Western plot line, which is a kind of master narrative that has cast a long shadow on politics everywhere.

The story I'm telling is deeper and more fundamental than a debate over whether markets work better than the state. It is about the push and pull between the past and the future. Since the sixteenth century, technological and economic change have produced enormous advances but also massive disruption. The disruption and the unequal distribution of its benefits stoke huge anxiety. Change and anxiety, in turn, leads to an identity revolution, with people searching for new meaning and community. And all these forces then produce a political revolution. Throughout this story, we will see two competing plotlines: liberalism, meaning progress, growth, disruption, *revolution in the sense of radical advance,* and illiberalism, standing for regression, restriction, nostalgia, *revolution in the sense of returning to the past*. That dual meaning of revolution endures to this day. Donald Trump sees himself as a revolutionary, but one who wants to bring back the world of the 1950s.

I am not an unbiased observer of these trends. I believe that economic growth, technological innovation, and cultural openness have helped the vast majority of people live better lives, with greater control over their own destinies. I respect and understand the many concerns that people over the ages have raised about rapid change and the growing freedom and autonomy of individuals, but I have no desire to return to the comforts of an imagined past. For many people, the dimly remembered "golden age" was not so golden after all, with vast swaths of society largely excluded from power and prosperity. I grew up in an India where "community" often went hand in hand with social conformism, repression, and patriarchy. I do believe that sometimes the pace of change needs to slow down, that elites should be careful not to impose radical and abstract notions of progress on

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a society, and that those left behind deserve more help than they are getting. It is important to appreciate the organic nature of society, which can absorb only so much disruption without being torn apart. But at the end of the day, there is only one plausible path in the long run: forward.

We cannot predict with certainty what shape our revolutionary age will take—whether progress or backlash will dominate the years ahead. The future is not some settled fact out there for us to divine. It will depend on human actions and interactions over the years and decades to come. Backlash sometimes sounds like a temporary setback, a phase along the road of progress. But societies can spend decades under a reactionary regime, as in Iran. We also face new and in some cases unprecedented challenges, like climate change, itself an environmental reaction unleashed by human agency. If unaddressed, it could be the revolution that overwhelms all others—and that will surely transform politics along with much else. There are many possible futures out there; we have to work toward the one we desire.

THE ORIGINS OF LEFT VERSUS RIGHT

Before we get to the new politics and culture, with its open-closed divide, let's first understand the old order being replaced—the traditional left-right division. Where did that split come from in the first place? How did we end up thinking of people as left wing and right wing? The terminology begins in a revolutionary era: France in the late eighteenth century. And it arguably is the work of one man: an architect named Pierre-Adrien Pâris.

Pâris was not considered a talent of the highest order. He was competent at execution, though, and was often tasked with additions or renovations, especially courtyards and gardens. He worked on such projects as the Paris Opera and even the Élysée Palace. Pâris was eventually invited to design a large room at Versailles, the seat of the French monarchy, where the Estates General, the parliament of sorts that advised the king, would meet in 1789. No one knew it

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at the time, but this period in French politics was about to be filled with drama and world-historical change: the French Revolution. That atmosphere of upheaval produced the division of Left and Right.

When the Estates first met, their seating chart reflected the power structure of the French state since medieval times. The king or his representative was at the center, to his right sat the clergy, to his left sat the nobility, and at the back of the room, looking straight at the king, sat the people. But the commoners quickly compelled the three medieval estates to merge into a single unified body with true law-making power—the National Assembly.

The new legislature moved from dealing with minor fiscal issues to tackling much larger questions about the church's power and the monarchy's future. As discussions grew more intense, seating division by class and region gave way to a more spontaneous arrangement, with people sitting next to those with whom they agreed—ideological clusters. On August 29, 1789, the conservative Baron de Gauville noted in his diary, "We began to recognize each other; those who were loyal to their religion and the king took up positions to the right of the chair so as to avoid the shouts, speeches, and indecencies that enjoyed free rein in the opposite camp." Thus began the division in France between those on the right, who wanted to conserve the existing order, and those on the left who wanted to push forward the power of the people. That divide, forged in the fires of the French Revolution, is why, more than two centuries later, we still speak of the Left and the Right.

As the left wing gained momentum, getting Louis XVI to share power with the people, the seat of government was moved from Versailles to Paris. For Louis, this was easy, as he had a pied-à-terre in the city—the Louvre. The National Assembly, however, needed an urban home, and Pierre-Adrien Pâris was engaged once again, this time to transform the indoor riding ring of the Tuileries Palace into a legislative chamber.

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It does not appear to have been a resounding success. The new space was a long, narrow hall with poor ventilation. More important,

because of the room's shape, the prior oval arrangement gave way to a strictly rectangular one—a chair for the presiding officer flanked by long rows on his right and left. This new geometry exacerbated the tendencies that had already developed in the old chamber. As historian Timothy Tackett writes, "The structure of the hall compelled everyone to sit either on the left or on the right: a physical reality that invariably contributed to the polarization of the Assembly."

A few years later, the left-right division was deeply entrenched in French politics and viewed by all as deleterious to cooperation and sensible politics. So the Assembly decided to reconstruct its chambers with a semicircular seating arrangement that had no aisle separating left from right, so some people sat in the middle. But the deeper divide, in political orientation, had already set in.

In fact, this division soon spread well beyond France. In Britain, whose government was deeply hostile to the French Revolution, groups supporting the French Revolution and related causes sprouted up and were crushed. But the demands of later nineteenth-century British reformers sounded familiar to French ears. A group called the Chartists, for instance, called for universal male suffrage, the removal of property qualifications for members of Parliament, and annual general elections featuring the secret ballot. In the House of Commons, the Chartists' supporters were sometimes described as the "parliamentary left." In Italy, liberals also echoed the themes of elections, limits on monarchical powers, and individual rights, under the banner of "the left" (*la sinistra*). The German debate came later and was slightly different—with a stronger respect for state power and less attention to individual rights—but there were "leftists" who were democrats there as well.

Decades after the French Revolution, in 1848, most of Europe was convulsed by a movement to destroy the old order and usher in a new, more democratic one, led by people often described as leftists or left-wing radicals. In the short run, the Revolutions of 1848 failed. But in the ensuing years, many of the revolutionaries' ideas were quietly adopted in country after country. Naturally, these pressures from the

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Left produced a response from the Right, a conservative movement dedicated to opposing left-wing disruption and preserving the existing order. Conservatives often idealized the staunch monarchies of Russia and Austria-Hungary, just as liberals denounced them. The divisions between liberals and monarchists were reflected in international politics, where absolutist monarchies banded together to crush democratic uprisings and defeat freedom fighters, allied in a shared desire to suppress political change. And so the left-versus-right debate became an all-encompassing one, with the old monarchical and aristocratic order squaring off against the new, more democratic forces pressing for change. In the twentieth century, the divide was reinterpreted to be centrally about economics. It continued through the world wars and the Cold War. But it has run its course, and today we are seeing a new set of divisions.

Although the French Revolution was a fiery struggle between the old order and the new, France itself was not actually the inventor of modern politics. The failure of the French Revolution makes this plain. The first constitution enacted during the revolution was quickly contested and gave way to others. Since that original document was signed, France has adopted fifteen more constitutions and been governed by three monarchies, two empires, five republics, a socialist commune, and a quasi-fascist regime.

The successful establishment of modern politics began somewhere else, through a less tumultuous revolution, in a place that has had functioning constitutional government and a thriving economy ever since—a small, water-logged country in the north of Europe, which blazed a trail for the great powers of the future.

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PART I

REVOLUTIONS PAST

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1

THE FIRST LIBERAL REVOLUTION

The Netherlands

SOME YEARS AGO, THERE WAS A BOOMLET OF BOOKS about how the Greeks or the Jews or the Scots "saved" or "invented" the world. In that spirit, one could argue that the Dutch invented modern politics and economics. By the seventeenth century, the tiny United Provinces of the Netherlands had become the wealthiest nation on the continent, boasting the highest per capita income. With the establishment of the Dutch Republic (as the confederation was also known) in 1588, the Dutch created a successful social, economic, and political order that would last some two hundred years and catapult them to the top of the ranks of nations. Their Golden Age produced some of the world's most gifted artists. Those painters—Rembrandt and Vermeer, among others—presented images from the world's first merchant society, portraits of manufacturers and traders. When Dutch artists depicted the interiors of homes, even modest ones, they showed landscapes and portraits hanging on the wall, paintings within paintings that revealed how access to beauty had become the norm not just for elites but for the middle class and workers, too. Politically, the Dutch system stood out for rejecting absolute monarchy, which was standard in the rest of Europe at the time, and embracing republican forms of representation. As scholars like Simon Schama and Jonathan Israel have pointed out, in its

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celebration of individual rights, its embrace of markets and trade, and its toleration of religious minorities, the Netherlands saw the earliest flourishing of classical liberalism anywhere in the West.

The Dutch also set the trend that has defined power in the modern world: that the dominant country is not the one with the largest population or the strongest army but the one with the most prosperous economy and innovative technology. The great economic historian Angus Maddison argued that "in the past four centuries there have been only three lead countries," defined as the global frontrunner in technology and labor productivity. Since around 1890, that leader has been the United States. For most of the nineteenth century, it was the United Kingdom. And before that, Maddison contended, the "Netherlands was the top performer." Even today, almost five centuries after their Golden Age, the Dutch boast one of the highest average incomes on the planet and routinely rank in the top ten on the United Nations Human Development Index (which measures quality of life: wealth, life expectancy, and education). Not bad for a tiny place with just seventeen million people.

Back in 1566, when a smattering of Dutch principalities revolted against their Habsburg rulers in Spain, few could have foreseen the world-historic impact this rebellion would have, let alone imagined that the small, soggy Netherlands, then a collection of mostly little towns along a chilly, flood-prone coast, would create the modern nation-state. So why the Dutch, and not the great landed empires like France, Spain, or even Ottoman Turkey? The answer lies in the three great waves of change that were sweeping through Europe at the time: newfound *globalization* as the West, no longer a backwater, launched the Age of Exploration; *innovations* in technology and finance, spurred by incessant war-making and the drive for economic expansion; and a radical *identity revolution*, sparked by the Protestant Reformation.

Many established empires feared and resisted these structural changes. But for reasons of geography, politics, and culture, the Dutch Republic was the only country in sixteenth-century Europe that capitalized on all three revolutions. In so doing, it became the most

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prosperous nation in Europe and probably the world. Today, as we undergo our own great waves of globalization, technological innovation, and identity revolution, the Dutch story has much to tell us. The story of their rise, Golden Age, and downfall shows the power of trade, openness, and free thinking—as well as the grave risks that arise when economic growth and ideological change leave many behind.

FALSE START IN VENICE

There was one important precursor to the Dutch Republic, a state that was just as small, low-lying, and entrepreneurial as the Netherlands but ultimately failed to become a model for the modern world: Venice. By the fifteenth century, it and other Renaissance republics in Italy were dazzling the rest of Europe with their wealth and scientific achievements. In Venice, the oldest and most powerful of these city-states, traders were the leading economic and political force, importing textiles, spices, and other exotic goods from Asia via the Middle East. Venice's technologically advanced navy dominated the Eastern Mediterranean and established an empire of ports and territories stretching from Croatia to Greece to Cyprus. The Venetians were not just powerful but creative, too. They perfected the accounting method of double-entry bookkeeping to keep track of complex commercial transactions. They innovated politically, regularizing the transfer of power through elections following the death of the city-state's leader as opposed to automatically passing the throne to an heir. In a Europe dominated by kings and emperors, Venice stood apart. Asserting its sovereignty in a world of much larger rivals, it claimed the impressive superlative "the Most Serene Republic."

But the Venetians' efforts to create a modern state ultimately failed. Over time, their political institutions ossified. Venice's executive, the doge, had seen his power steadily decline. Cliques of nobles ruled the city-state. These oligarchs descended from ambitious merchants who had risen through risky ventures and merit to attain noble titles. But these rich elites pulled up the ladder after themselves, denying nobility

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