BOOKS

YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION. DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU MEAN BY THAT?

Two new books, by Fareed Zakaria and Nathan Perl-Rosenthal, demonstrate the concept's allure and perils.

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

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The same set of historical episodes might, with equal plausibility, be described from one point of view as representing continuity and from another as representing radical transformation. Illustration by Leigh Guldig

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In June, 2018, the political commentator Fareed Zakaria found himself in the Campo de' Fiori, in the center of Rome, with Steve Bannon, who was then

President Trump's chief strategist. Bannon—whom Zakaria describes as a "volatile personality" and as a conduit for the international resurgence of nativist sentiment—had come to Italy to help convince two populist parties, one on the left and the other on the right, that their interests were aligned. He drew Zakaria's attention to a monument to Giordano Bruno, the sixteenth-century poet and cosmologist who held Copernican views about the universe and was burned at the stake for heresy. Where Galileo sold out and recanted, Bannon explained, Bruno was a real hero. Zakaria was surprised by Bannon's admiration for Bruno, who is widely regarded as a progressive, proto-Enlightenment figure. But Bannon was less interested in the substance of Bruno's opinions than in his uncompromising defiance. It was Bannon's conviction, Zakaria writes, "that in times of turmoil, take-no-prisoners radicalism is the only option."

In his new book, "Age of Revolutions: Progress and Backlash from 1600 to the Present" (Norton), Zakaria concedes the turmoil but resists the radicalism. Everywhere you look, he says, you can see dramatic change. The rules-based international order has been destabilized. Traditional left-right divides have been transfigured. The trade-friendly economic consensus of the post-Communist era has yielded to protectionism and autarky. Given that we may be living through "one of the most revolutionary ages in history," he thinks that lessons can be drawn from previous revolutionary ages, especially those that involved actual revolutions.

The concept of revolution, Zakaria notes, is a slippery thing. How is it that Bannon, of all people, identifies himself as a revolutionary? Zakaria finds the problem embedded in the word itself. "Revolution" was originally employed to describe the orbital movement of a celestial body around a fixed axis. A full revolution is completed by returning to a starting point. But before long the word acquired a secondary meaning, designating a rupture that renders everything utterly different. The word now refers at once to predictability and to transformation. "Revolution" is hardly the only word that contains its opposite—"to sanction" and "to dust" are similar in that way—but in this particular case

Zakaria sees something profound. Revolutions contain the seeds of their own undoing: “Radical advance is followed by backlash and a yearning for a past golden age imagined as simple, ordered, and pure.”

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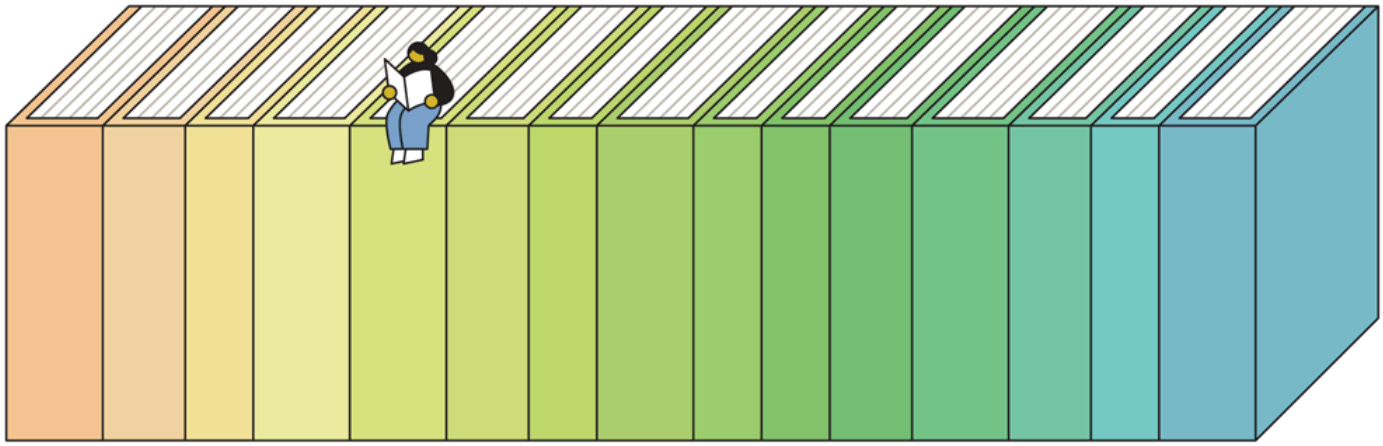


Illustration by Rose Wong

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Taken to its logical conclusion, this idea would represent a cyclical idea of history—a fatalist notion that has recently found favor among conservatives. Zakaria believes that we can and do make progress. But he is wary of the assumption that history tends to move in the direction of ever-greater human flourishing, a Whiggish view he associates with such frustrated optimists as Steven Pinker.

Zakaria's book represents an attempt to distinguish between revolutions that have inspired thermostatic reactions and revolutions that have endured.

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The most auspicious models, Zakaria suggests, might be found in the Netherlands and in England. In the sixteenth century, all of Europe was confronted with a series of economic, technological, and social shocks: the globalization spurred by the Age of Exploration, the innovations that emerged from war and from the necessity of economic expansion, and a "radical *identity revolution*" driven by the Protestant Reformation. After most of the Netherlands threw off Habsburg rule, in 1579, the Dutch formed a republic that capitalized on these changes. For reasons of geography, they were accustomed to diffuse authority. The need to reclaim land from the sea, and the collective action required to do so, Zakaria explains, had insured that feudal centralization never took hold: "People had to work together to get anything done." Technological development, in the form of windmills and dikes, was a necessity for survival, and precocious urbanization provided an infrastructure for industry and trade. The cultural shift to Protestantism encouraged freethinking. Finance was democratized in the form of the world's first stock exchange, and the leaders of the republic were wise enough to ally themselves with the country's commercial interests.

The Netherlands might have been early to liberalize, but that didn't mean it was exempt from what Zakaria describes as the "familiar story" of reaction: "rapid advancement, dislocation, and then a wave of conjured memories of a lost golden

age." The Dutch Republic was split between the economic dynamism of tolerant coastal technocrats and the atavistic impulses of more conservative rural populations that had been left behind by liberal merchants and bankers. The country's Golden Age came to an end in 1672, when the French invaded. A version of liberalism, in the form of a young William of Orange, nevertheless survived and, sixteen years later, was ported across the Channel to lead a constitutional monarchy. England, like the Netherlands, was prepared to make a seamless transition to a liberal dispensation. The brilliance of England's Glorious Revolution, Zakaria thinks, lay in the collaboration of the country's Whig and Tory élites in a "*bipartisan* escape from dangerous polarization," and in their agreement that "English prosperity defined the national interest, not dynastic glory or religious zeal."

A good revolution, as Zakaria tells it, is not initiated by political actors. It occurs when exogenous shocks—in the form of economic or technological trends—are tamed by competent management. Liberalism flourished in the Netherlands and England because revolution was a "bottom-up process" in those countries. When Dutch and English leaders saw fit to intervene in the course of human affairs, they were content merely "to implement, confirm, and codify the transformations that had *already* taken place in society, beneath the surface of politics." These revolutions succeeded insofar as they were scarcely needed. A good revolution respects the limits of natural forces. A bad revolution crosses a line and provokes the backlash necessary to maintain equilibrium. Zakaria's counterexample to the Netherlands and England is France, whose revolution was a "grisly failure" insofar as revolutionary élites "tried to impose modernity and enlightenment by top-down decree on a country that was largely unready for it." The Reign of Terror and the consolidation of power under Napoleon, Zakaria says, prove that social change "must take place organically."

Zakaria's descriptions of revolutionary activity make a great din—when things aren't "plunging" or "soaring," they have "skyrocketed" or "ricocheted"—but his evocations of historical inflection points feel dutiful and formulaic. They are also confusing. After a while, one can't help but wonder what Zakaria means by "revolution." What he calls the "Dutch revolution" seems to refer to the entirety of the country's Golden Age, which lasted about ninety years and ended with the republic's abrupt decline. We're invited, with fine illogic, to compare the success of the Industrial Revolution with the failure of the French Revolution, even though a failed industrial revolution would be no industrial revolution at all. He identifies the English Revolution with the Glorious Revolution, treating decades of bloodletting and repression as mere prelude to a crowning moment of liberal reconciliation. By this reasoning, one might claim that the Russian Revolution culminated in glasnost.

Nor is it clear what Zakaria means by "top-down" or "bottom-up." The French Revolution failed because the élites tried to force top-down change, but the Glorious Revolution—which might better be described as a coup by Dutch commercial interests—somehow reflected a wise acquiescence to bottom-up processes. The specifics of revolutionary activity seem of secondary interest. Zakaria takes solace in the fact that civilization seems able to heal itself. The revolutions of 1848, for example, may have been "crushed" by societies mired in primordial autocracy, but everything that they hoped to enact—the proliferation of human freedoms—was "almost invariably adopted through gradual reform." The implication is that what the vanguard struggled to achieve by fiat was going to happen anyway. All they had to do was sit tight.

Most revolutions have, at one point or another, had their revolutionary credentials challenged. Events that purportedly failed to rise to the radical occasion include the English Revolution (merely a bid for bourgeois power, skeptics say), the Mexican Revolution (a rivalry between warlords), and even the French Revolution. The American Revolution is a recurring example. At the time, it seemed as though an awful lot changed after 1776; in retrospect, many things in

fact remained the same. Some historians have introduced further distinctions without introducing further clarity. The colonists' struggle against the British, it has been suggested, qualified as a political revolution but did not meet the criteria for a social revolution. This, however, is just a restatement of the observation that the same set of historical episodes might, with equal plausibility, be described from one point of view as continuous and from another as a break. The word "revolution" may be perfectly useful as a compliment we pay to inflection points for developments that are, by consensus, important. But the attempt to provide a load-bearing definition might be more trouble than it's worth.

In "The Age of Revolutions: And the Generations Who Made It" (Basic), Nathan Perl-Rosenthal, a professor of history at the University of Southern California, offers what he calls an "anti-exceptionalist history of the age of revolution." In his view, there is an alternative way to understand why the great transatlantic revolutions that straddled the turn of the nineteenth century—in the United States, France, Haiti, and Latin America—are often said to have "failed." Unlike Zakaria, Perl-Rosenthal doesn't really believe that counter-revolutionary or illiberal reversals prove that the early revolutionaries were overweening. He argues, instead, that the degree to which these revolutions met (or did not meet) their egalitarian aims should be understood in the light of processes that took a full generation to unfold. In 1972, Henry Kissinger asked the Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlai, what he thought of the French Revolution. Zhou is said to have responded that it was "too early to tell." (The story apparently turns on a miscommunication —Zhou was probably referring to the events of 1968 rather than those of 1789— but it persists for a reason.) Perl-Rosenthal doesn't go that far, but, like a professor who generously grants extensions before grading, he thinks that revolutionary fervor can be assessed only as the spark of a longer undertaking.

Perl-Rosenthal's book follows several members of what he calls the first generation of "gentlemen revolutionaries": his cast includes famous political actors such as John Adams; less well-known but influential women such as Maria

Rivadeneyra, a prioress in Peru, and Marie Bunel, a merchant in Haiti; and more run-of-the-mill figures like France's Louis-Augustin Bosc, now best known for the pears that bear his name. Perl-Rosenthal believes that these figures had considerable difficulties "overcoming the hierarchical reflexes of the mid-eighteenth-century Atlantic old regime in which they had grown up." Theirs was a largely closed world of intimate relationships and norms opaque to outsiders. Their social attitudes made it difficult for them to forge alliances beyond their station.

Take Rivadeneyra, who presided over a convent in Cuzco, Peru, in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Her ancestors had come to South America with Francisco Pizarro, and she was raised in luxury as part of the imperial colony's criollo élite. She liked ballads sung from balconies and farces performed in the evenings. Her skirts were inlaid with mother-of-pearl medallions, and she took chocolate for breakfast. In 1780, a member of the native nobility, Túpac Amaru, launched a revolt against the Spanish. At the time, Perl-Rosenthal notes, it was easy to imagine that the interests of the natives and those of the criollos might be united against an extractive empire. Rivadeneyra herself seems to have considered the possibility of such an alliance. In the end, however, she and her family led a defense of Cuzco that turned the war against Amaru, who was executed.

"Let me call you from a different machine."

Cartoon by Rich Sparks

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Rivadeneyra, like the other figures of Perl-Rosenthal's first revolutionary generation, "never lost sight of the interests of her caste." But even if she had given freer rein to her sympathy with the rebellious natives, Perl-Rosenthal argues, the two worlds were simply too far apart for such a political confederation to be realized. He is a careful reader of personal letters, attentive to the codes of polite salutation that marked the worthiness of a correspondent. His principals had sparse experience with the cultivation of cross-class coalitions, and there was no social infrastructure that might have afforded them opportunities to learn. Hereditary inequality was too great. The coalitions that did emerge were held together weakly—by the mere agreement among individuals that what they wanted was "not this"—or they arose by default. The wealthiest people were risk-averse because they had a lot to lose; the poorest people were risk-averse because they couldn't afford to lose the little they had.

Insurrectionary outbreaks were thus almost random. Perl-Rosenthal takes as one example the storming of the Bastille. "The working classes in Paris, conditioned by decades of increasingly separate living, had a remarkable capacity for self-organization," he writes. "Yet the same social realities that had made them effective self-organizers also defined the horizon of their political vision." The dark, crenellated fortress of the Bastille seemed like a reasonable target. It just looked like a place that deserved storming. And it was, if only symbolically, which is why we remember it. As a strategic objective, however, the Bastille—which housed nothing of royal or military importance—left something to be desired. The crowd's unfamiliarity with which sanctum actually mattered, Perl-Rosenthal says, "spurred action against places and people who did not in fact have much power to meet their demands." This miscalculation wasn't the protesters' fault; they had no way to obtain the right information or to develop the proper alliances.

In Perl-Rosenthal's telling, the revolutions on the other side of the Atlantic followed a similar script. The social stratification of the pre-revolutionary era, in each case, provided little room for egalitarianism. The United States Constitution was "the product of a successful revolution from above," he writes. "The

Constitutional Convention itself was a virtual coup by the elite against the existing government." Something comparable happened in Haiti. Toussaint Louverture, the leader of the Haitian Revolution, was born into slavery, but even as a freedman he remained a product of a hierarchical world. Although this revolution had "begun as a revolt from below," Louverture "tried to transform it into a revolution from above," falling into what one recent biographer has described as an "authoritarian spiral." In his attempts to protect the nascent country's independence, he was perfectly willing to send the masses back to their plantations, in a condition of near-bondage. Élites acted this way because they were certain that only they could know what was best for everyone.

But this was a generational limitation, and it eroded with time. If such men as John Adams and Toussaint Louverture could only imagine rearranging the game pieces, Perl-Rosenthal says, they nevertheless enabled their successors to upend the board: "They had managed to irretrievably fracture the old regime. Out of the disarray, new people and new kinds of politics were beginning to emerge." As classes started to mix, movements became broader and more heterogeneous. When the United States' capital moved to Washington, D.C., elected officials and other élites had no choice but to room and drink with men of the lower orders. In the provinces, the seventeen-nineties saw the coalescence of the Republican Party, which took shape as "a mass organization that united elite and working-class voters." Drinking together led to durable institutions that advanced more equitable forms of mobilization, expanding the franchise, and political participation more generally, beyond property owners. In Latin America, solidarity movements succeeded in an extended campaign for independence from the Spanish crown, though, as Perl-Rosenthal notes, the revolutionary results frequently assumed an illiberal cast. In Haiti, the militarized coercion of the Louverture era and its immediate successors coalesced into a pattern of one-man rule, even as the country's development was hamstrung by punitive foreign debts.

As a piece of scholarship, Perl-Rosenthal's book is a persuasive and inspired contribution to perennial historical debates. Was the American Revolution a project of radical egalitarianism, or was it simply a transfer of élite power? Was the French Revolution stymied by external forces of reaction, or was it fundamentally illiberal to begin with? His response is that we should not limit our gaze to "supposedly sharp turning points and dramatic transformations" but instead narrate the past as a series of successive and intertwined campaigns to improve our estate. Perl-Rosenthal's book is written for a general readership, and he makes the further case that the stakes of this enterprise extend beyond those of scholarship: "Buying into this fantasy of instantaneous revolution has significant consequences—most damagingly, a potential loss of faith in the possibilities of change if the transformation fails to arrive as quickly as expected."

It's little wonder that our current political climate—in which the stagnation and senescence at the top can feel disconnected from agitation and ferment below—has called forth treatises on revolutionary ages. Electrifying visions of the future seem in short supply. As the writer and historian Steve Fraser put it in a recent essay for the magazine *Jacobin*, the right and the left have settled on competing calls not for revolution but for restoration. Both Zakaria and Perl-Rosenthal want to shore up our faith in transformative incrementalism, the idea that we might extricate ourselves from this mess by putting one foot in front of the other.

Zakaria's book concludes that revolutions fail when they're visited on societies that are unprepared to adapt to new conditions. He has little to say about what kinds of outcomes might be desirable, but much to say about what we should not do. He is very concerned about the rise of identity politics. Although he opens his book with the Bannon anecdote, he implies that men like Bannon aren't worth worrying about, and are best seen as a reaction engendered by an overreaching left. In a 2022 opinion piece for the Washington *Post*, Zakaria suggested that the problem with the Democratic Party was that it was too concerned with pronouns.

A fixation on contemporary identity politics helps explain his assessment of revolutionary precedents. The Glorious Revolution was good because the conservative and liberal élites of the time agreed to stop harping on religious differences and focus instead on economic commonalities. Their French counterparts a century later failed to heed this lesson: the Reign of Terror, he says, "shows how appeals to exclusive categories of identity can easily get out of control. When everyone is either a patriot or a traitor, heads will roll." Technological lurches, such as the rise of artificial intelligence, are scary, but the social order can be preserved, and the pendular threat of "backlash" staved off, as long as politicians do not use identity to pander to anxious constituencies: "Where politics was once overwhelmingly shaped by economics, politics today is being transformed by identity."

This may be an untenable distinction. Economic interests are not simply waiting to be revealed. They're mediated through social identity, and that's true even of political groups defined overtly through economic relations. (As the historian E. P. Thompson put it, "The working class made itself as much as it was made.") If economics directly shaped politics, people like Maria Rivadeneyra would have allied themselves with the natives against the Spanish. Those common interests had to be constructed, made socially legible, through a process of trial and error.

In this respect, Perl-Rosenthal's book can be taken as a story of how novel forms of solidarity became available to a post-revolutionary generation. This new cohort was no longer in thrall to the old regimes' social structures. What the first generation broke, in his account, the second generation was able to piece back together more deliberately. An abatement of inequality created the occasion to gather and make trade-offs. These trade-offs required sustained personal interactions among heterogeneous groups that scarcely existed in an earlier era, further reducing inequality. This was not a matter of giving up on "identity politics" but a matter of reshuffling, and expanding, the kinds of identities that mattered. Perl-Rosenthal suggests that, in the early decades of the United States, the Republican Party afforded a mechanism for a more capacious national self-

image, one that could encompass both élites and commoners. With the tumult of the American Revolution behind them, the longing for freedom in theory gave way to the administration of particular freedoms in practice.

Those freedoms were, needless to say, unevenly distributed, which is one of the reasons that some critics have written off the American Revolution. At the end of Perl-Rosenthal's introduction, he suggests that his "anti-exceptionalist" story of revolutions might put to rest the notion that the American Revolution was "distinctively tainted by the patriot movement's imbrication with slavery and racism." His primary reference here seems to be the *Times Magazine's* 1619 Project, with its charge that the putative egalitarianism of the Framers was little more than a lie. What this interpretation leaves out, according to Perl-Rosenthal, is that *all* the transatlantic revolutions began to unfold at an accelerating pace as the initial revolutionary vanguard was swept aside. By our lights, it is monstrous that this branching egalitarianism remained racist and exclusionary, and that freedom for some entailed the perpetuation of violent bondage for others. But there was nothing singular about this compromise. After all, Haiti freed the enslaved but maintained a system of plantation agriculture that was virtually indistinguishable from slavery. Contemporary activists on the left like to quote Emma Lazarus and Maya Angelou to the effect that none of us are free until all of us are free. This is lovely as an aspirational ideal and powerful as an exhortation, but it should not be mistaken for an empirical claim. Perl-Rosenthal's book shows in detail how some people achieved a measure of freedom while others remained in chains. The "we" of "We the people" represented an expansion of the circle of moral concern; it took, and will take, a lot more work to expand that circle further.

If we act in good faith to "reckon in this way with the pervasive illiberalism of the revolutionary era," Perl-Rosenthal offers, this discussion might "point to an exit from today's heated debates" about the rot at the core of our nation's founding. It could replace the low hum of mutual suspicion—and the fantasy that a true

revolution can come only at the hands of the morally pure—with a renewed commitment to the unglamorous work of political organization. His emphasis on the logistics of solidarity reminds us that moral advances are neither a salutary by-product of economics or technology, as Zakaria seems to think, nor a matter of progressive inevitability.

Still, the analytic edge of Perl-Rosenthal's account, like Zakaria's, is blunted by its central historical category. The concept of revolution, especially in contrast to mere reform, conveys an exhilaration that's hard to relinquish. Yet it's worrying when an argument places weight, as Zakaria's does, on an honorific that encompasses both the removal of Louis XVI and the widespread adoption of steam power. Perl-Rosenthal does his best to preserve something productive in the idea of a grand event that requires a generational shift to fructify. But this scheme, he seems to concede, makes much more sense in the case of the United States than it ever did in Peru or in Haiti. The halting progress he describes so well could just as easily be portrayed as the result of distinct campaigns, rather than as belated aspects of a dramatic and all-encompassing movement. Perhaps the most revolutionary step we could take would be to relax our grip on "revolution" itself. ♦

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