

FROM AN AGE OF REVOLUTIONS TO A REVOLUTIONARY ELECTION
A CONVERSION WITH FAREED ZAKARIA BY BRUNO CARDOSO REIS

This is transcript of conversation with Fareed Zakaria that took place on the morning of November 1, 2024, but it really had its beginnings in the translation I did, with Noémia Pizarro, of his latest book, Age of Revolutions. From the history of liberalism in 17th century Netherlands to its limitations today and future possibilities. From the fear of Putin's and Xi's regimes of the power of Western political ideas rather than Western military might, to the complex connections between technology, economics, identity and politics, there are many themes from the book discussed here. Naturally, the US presidential elections and their potential revolutionary impact on the country and the rest of the world were one of the main themes. What follows is a transcript of the original conversation with minimal revisions in order to make the text more readable.

BRUNO CARDOSO REIS (BCR): Let me just start with this quote from the Portuguese dictator, Salazar. It is from a May 1938 speech and I am now quoting: "to the souls torn apart by doubt and the negativity of this century, we sought to restore the comfort of great certainties. We do not discuss God and virtue. We do not discuss the Nation and its history" and so on. Do you think this summarizes well the key topic in your new book? What is the key topic and the main conclusion of your book *Age of Revolutions*?

FAREED ZAKARIA (FZ): Yes. That is a that is a very good summary of it. And Salazar was himself very much a kind of character out of the book. I don't mention him, but Salazar represented that kind of reaction to modernity that said the acids of modernity are breaking down the traditional structures of society, are injecting doubt, a lack of certitude, and I am going to restore all that. And he was a professor. He thought about this in intellectually in a way that, for example, Franco did not. Franco might have done many similar things. But everyone who ever met him [Salazar], I remember, I think it was Kissinger telling me when he met Salazar, he was struck by how courtly he was, he seemed like an Old World, European aristocrat who came out of a kind of different era.

BCR: Maybe it was George Kennan and not Kissinger because Kennan was the number two in the American Embassy in Lisbon.

FZ: Yes, I remember in his memoirs, Kennan has a long section about all that. It may have been, it may have been Kennan, but I I can't remember now. Salazar, leaves office in 1970?

BCR: In 1968, because he had a stroke.

FZ: So it wouldn't have been Kissinger. [...] I remember who it was! It was George Ball! He was the Deputy Secretary of State during the Kennedy administration, and he was sent to Portugal to negotiate with Salazar.

BCR

He has this wonderful quote telling Kennedy that Portugal is not governed by one dictator, but by three: Salazar, Prince Henry the Navigator, and Vasco da Gama.

FZ: Exactly. I think the central dynamic of the modern era, and by that, I mean really the 20th century has been the real, the extraordinary forward movement that technology and economics has thrust upon particularly Western societies and the backlash.

You know, if you just think about the story of the industrialization of the 1870s, 1880s, 1890s, the immigration of that period, and then the backlash that comes in the 1920s, 1930s, people often forget there is an enormous amount of Jewish immigration into Germany in the period after World War One.

BCR

From Eastern Europe.

FZ

There were Eastern pogroms in Russia, people started coming in. The Germans feel overwhelmed, and, of course, we know the reaction. So if you think about that, action reaction, progress backlash, progress backlash. As you know the central argument of my book is we are now experiencing the backlash for 30 years of very hectic forward movement, on in economic terms, in in, technological terms, in cultural terms.

And in some sense the reaction we are seeing is more vulgar, is more crass, it sort of lacks a intellectual rubric in a way that in the time of what you were describing, of Salazar, you had a more intellectualized, ideologized response.

I suspect that this might come. The only person who's articulating it particularly well at this point, not that I agree with him, is Viktor Órban. If you listen to Órban, there is a kind of intellectual theory behind what he's doing. The rest of the people are just they can see a political opportunity, and they take it.

BCR: A colleague who works on the far right, including the Alt Right or New Right also in the US. And told me there was a degree of interest for Salazar in some of these quarters, more intellectualized quarters. But moving forward. This is a very ambitious work. It covers a number of centuries. Why do you think it was important to go far back into the past? Why do you think we need this kind of more long-term historical view? Do you think we have maybe too much of a presentist kind of approach to politics?

FZ: Absolutely. And particularly when we look at things like what is going on now, where it does seem as though the whole political world has been upended, has

been thrown into chaos. And we think that this is unique or unusual, and of course in some of its particulars it is. But what I was trying to show people is that this is actually the pattern of western modern history, that you have these big changes. As you know I start with the Dutch in the 1600s, and what I found most fascinating about it was you get the economic and technological revolution which results in the rise of the Dutch, but you also then get almost, at the same time, an identity revolution. Because as the Dutch become richer and more and more skilled, they begin to think of themselves as different. They start to think of themselves as not part of the Habsburg Empire. They start to think that the distinctive quality to the Dutch is not that they are Christians, but that they are protestants. And that identity shift then also helps create the new political culture, and then you get the backlash. And that same process in many ways recurs in the Industrial Revolution, where first you have economics and technology. And then people who always thought of themselves as peasants now begin to think of themselves as workers. And as workers, they have a class identity, and that class identity then begins to make them demand rights. Of course, with the middle class, similarly, you get a merchant class. What I found most interesting is this pattern of economics and technology having created a kind of identity revolution, and that identity revolution in many ways producing the backlash, because that is the world we are in now! We have all these big structural forces that have changed the world, but then it makes people think of themselves as different. Their political identity is now, in the modern world, shaped much more by a sense of: I'm a woman. I'm a man. I'm black. I'm brown. I'm my national origin. I'm gay.

You know, as people have moved up the Maslowian hierarchy of needs, these post-material identities shape a lot of their voting. You can see that in voting patterns. And then comes the backlash to that. I was amazed researching the book by the fact that this process has been so regular and has begun so long ago, and it helped me make sense of it.

I always write books partly to educate myself and partly to educate others!

BCR: You make clear that this is not a revised version of Whig history, and you are clear that it is so because you don't think that progress is inevitable, it takes a lot of effort and can go wrong and generate backlash. I don't know if you read Robert Kagan most recent book, *Rebellion*. It's very much an anti-Whig version of American history centered on its illiberalism, and it is not the only recent book with that approach, you have a number of variants of that re-reading of American history. Do you think that maybe we have overestimated the liberal contribution in American history? Was there always this kind of more illiberal element that can then be mobilized when you have these periods of crisis?

FZ: That's a very good question. It is not just in American history. I think that we forget that there has always been a great contestation that takes place within societies. Maybe it is almost like a market fight phenomenon that every action produces a reaction. Every movement in one direction produces a thermostatic reaction in the in the other direction. And that is intellectually true, that is politically

true. I don't think it is wrong to say – if you look at Steven Pinker ideas – that over time, clearly, we have been making progress. We have been making economic progress. We have been making progress on terms of health, but also political and moral progress. If you think about slavery, and dueling and feudalism, and all those kinds of practices. But I think it would be a mistake not to recognize that the shape of the society we live in is formed not just by the onward march of liberalism, but by the intense contestation that takes place within. And that has very serious effects on shaping the character of society. For example, in the United States, yes we abolish slavery in the in the 1860s. But for a hundred years...

BCR: There was a huge backlash.

FZ: Yes because of that negative reaction it put in place a quasi-version of slavery, called the Jim Crow system. Portugal and Spain go through a very long period of reactionary reaction to what had been happening in Europe. And it is only in the 1970s that they return to democracy and your politics is shaped by that long interruptio.

BCR: Also after a long period of liberal of constitutional monarchy, Salazar presented himself as a reaction not just to the Republic, but also even to the Constitutional Monarchy.

FZ: Exactly. And so, you know, in each of these cases, I think one has to recognize that the forces moving forward and the forces trying to stop it have existed in a kind of Hegelian dialectic. And what emerges is not simply liberalism, but it is the synthesis of that Hegelian dialectic.

BCR: Trump doesn't come as a surprise to those who read your new book. And you even go so far as to use this quote to the effect that if liberals – the left, as we would say in Europe – do not solve, for instance, the disruptive impact of mass migration, of uncontrolled migration, then people will get fascists into power to do it. So how do you see the American presidential campaign and the election in terms of the arguments of your book? Do you have any kind of predictions? Maybe not so much in terms of the result of the election (if you have them, they are welcome!) but in terms of the future of American politics and even of Trumpism, whether Trump wins or loses.

FZ: That's the crucial question. I'm glad you got to that. Look. As far as the election is concerned, it is a statistical tie. Anyone who tells you that they could predict in a situation like that is bullshitting! You know, it is so it is the closest election of my lifetime. It is certainly the closest election in the last 30 years. You have never had, not just the national poll, which is 48%/48% roughly, but in the swing states they are all within 1 or 2 percentage points of each other, which, by the way, I find

slightly suspicious. It is a herd mentality where they are all kind of hugging close to a comfortable place.

But the really serious question is the last one you asked, which is the one I do have a clear answer to. A lot of people believe that Trump built a personality cult and that when he disappears, the Republican Party will return to its senses. I think that profoundly misunderstands the situation! It is a personality cult, even the fact that his family is so prominent makes that clear. But he has tapped into the new Republican coalition, the new right-wing coalition. And while he doesn't ideologize it well, he has understood its core interests and motivation better than anyone else. He understands this instinctively. Trump is not a good businessman, but he is a great salesman! And like every great salesman, he knows his audience. He understands what the audience wants.

BCR

How to make a sales pitch.

FZ: He figured out that, you know, the Reagan formula, free markets, free trade, that was dead. That the Republican Party was now a culturally nationalist protectionist party, somewhat reactionary. Therefore, the idea of make America great... again! It is a politics of nostalgia. It takes you back. This is going to be the future of the right in America. I think that that is the central legacy that Trump is responsible for. He destroyed the old Republican Party. Will somebody come forward and provide a kind of ideology for the new one? It is very interesting that he chose JD Vance as his running mate. Because Vance does have a kind of ideology, which is a very illiberal ideology. I'm sure you know that there are people like Patrick Deneen and these new right philosophers who are anti-free market, anti-free trade, very much pro-traditional family and traditional society in a sense not so different from Salazar, the idea of a restoration of the old order, particularly the old social order.

BCR

A kind of traditional Catholic organic nationalism.

FZ

Exactly. Exactly. It is not an accident that JD Vance converted to Catholicism. I'll give you an example. The genius of Trump was he realized that a lot of black and Hispanic men were uncomfortable in the in the new Democratic party, which, you know, celebrates trans rights and talks about, using pronouns and gender affirming therapies and care. And so what does he do? He gets on the Republican National Convention, Hulk Hogan, to tear off his shirt. Hulk Hogan, for your readers, is a kind of very crass, vulgar, American wrestler who is the epitome of a kind of...

BCR: Old fashioned masculinity.

FZ: Exactly. What the left would call toxic masculinity. But he realized that this would be an amazing symbol, signal. Both a symbol and a signal to young Black men, young Hispanic man: come on in here, this party is open to you! This party is comfortable with this version of masculinity, not the Democratic Party's version of this kind of effete, namby pamby, "the husband has to do the dishes" masculinity. Now it will be left to somebody like Vance to ideologize it, to explain why even in today's modern era you do want to recognize that there are traditional gender roles and how they could be done in an egalitarian way and things like that. Trump can't do all that. The one guy can do the instincts, the other guy can do the ideology. It's actually a powerful combination.

BCR: That is a great point for the follow-up which is the implications for the rest of the World including Europe. You actually make the point in *Age of Revolutions* that it was crucial for this kind of liberal model that it was picked up by England and Britain, which then goes on to become the dominant global power, and then by the US, of course.

What would be the implications of this New Right in terms of American politics, whether it is in government or influencing government for this kind of liberal model in the rest of the world?

FZ: I think it is very important because what is fascinating to me about this new populism of the kind we are talking about is it is not just happening in advanced industrial societies.

Much of Erdogan's appeal in Turkey was that he was anti-elitist. He was anti the city cosmopolitan intellectual class. He was against the technocratic, educated class. His base was more religious, more traditional. They had much more traditional gender roles. It is very much part of this reaction to modernity. A lot of Modi's appeal in India is very similar.

BCR: Or Bolsonaro in Brazil

FZ: Or Bolsonaro in Brazil. I talked to Bolsonaro's first foreign minister [Ernesto Araujo]. And I said, what is the fundamental project for you guys? And he said to me, it is the restoration of the idea of Brazil as a Christian Catholic country. That is our number one agenda. Economics, everything else is secondary. I thought that was so fascinating.

So I think this is actually a global phenomenon because we're living in an age when this technological and economic waves, these revolutions that I talk about, while they affect the West much more strongly because these are advanced industrial countries, they are affecting everyone.

I mean, India is as affected by the information revolution and mobile technology as anybody else's, even though it is a very poor country. And as a result, you're seeing the backlash because you are seeing gender roles changing. And if you've been watching the rulers in these countries, whether the democrats and dictators, all are very aware of just how much change they can have, how fast.

Look at Saudi Arabia where the Crown Prince [Muhammad bin Salman] is probably the most revolutionary leader in 50 years, and he is pushing forward desegregation of women, we are letting them work, we are letting them drive, we are letting them do all.

But at the same time, very conscious that there could be a backlash. So the Saudi Arabian government issued a declaration just a few months ago. All Saudi men who work for government must wear traditional Saudi clothes at work. They have still not liberalized on alcohol. They still have not liberalized on allowing other religions to build places of worship. They are trying to find how much change the society can take without triggering a backlash.

BCR: You also look at a Geopolitical Revolution in the book. The main thing is the rise of China. But what is the impact of that in all of this discussion? We are just seeing, for instance, in Mozambique with these contested elections. China just said FRELIMO, Daniel Chapo won. What are the implications of this change to Western democracies in terms of democracy promotion and conditionality in the Rest of the world?

FZ: I think there is a profound implication because what China and Russia have realized is that they are not just geopolitically balancing against American power or Western power.

They are ideologically balancing against liberal ideas because I think they both realize that the threat was not just western military power. In China I think they realized the truth is the West was never threatening China militarily. But the West is a very lethal threat to China...

BCR

But to the regime.

FZ: To the regime! If you read Kevin Rudd's intellectual biography of Xi Jinping [*On Xi Jinping: How Xi's Marxist Nationalism is Shaping China and the World*], what you realize is that this is a man who was obsessed by the breakup of the Soviet Union. And to him, the most important piece of that was that Gorbachev got infected by liberal ideas from the west. Gorbachev then begins to try to adopt these liberal ideas, meaning that the Soviet Communist Party loses faith in itself and the whole thing collapses.

So to Xi Jinping, the danger is western liberal ideas. It is absolutely clear that Putin has always viewed western liberal ideas as deeply threatening. In that context, they have to contest those ideas. They have to contest them in Mozambique, in Latin America, in Asia. The game has become much more an ideological balancing against Western power than merely a political and military balancing against Western power.

BCR: Two final questions. One of the key trends that you also identify is actually also a recurrent thing, technological energy, economic revolutions. As you point

out, the Industrial Revolution is basically a technological and energy revolution and they are the ones that really count. and we are now in the middle of one with significant potential implications. You mentioned, for instance, the huge potential implications – economically and in terms of security – of the speed and also the kind of the multidimensional changes brought by AI. How do you see that going? And associated with this, is the huge power with what we might call techno robber barons, you know, Musk or Bezos. There was this recent controversy now about the *Washington Post* and in general there is this huge concentration of power in the hands of these techno billionaires.

FZ: Those are two separate things. The power of these new technology companies and the new elite, I think is very worrying because we are returning to a kind of plutocracy. What I worry about is not so much any individual act. What I worry about is the fact that you are building a class of people who are going to be so much more powerful than the old robber barons were, because the truth is the levels of wealth now are sort of unimaginable levels of wealth. If somebody's worth 200 billion dollars, you know, just think about what that means. That means that they probably have in interest income every year of 20 billion dollars, right, if they're making 10% of their money. So spending 200 or 300 millions dollars on an election is nothing. They could spend 2 billions dollars on every election every year. And how can that not have a disrupting effect? I think people don't realize at the top end of the scale, the wealth accumulation is just so profound, particularly in America.

But it's not just in America. In India, there are two people in India – where the per capita GDP is 3,000 dollars – there are two people in India worth over 100 billion dollars. And so you then you get to AI, which just continues on this path of massive information age revolutions, which have profound psychological effects. I think this is the part we're still grappling with the software revolution. Because the software revolution has fundamentally created a world in which if you manipulate words, computer code, images, language, ideas, you make you do very well. That's the world of the service industry. Management consultants, bankers, lawyers, software programmers, graphic designers. If you manipulate physical things with, you know, with your hands, machines, garbage, whatever it is you do, you have no pricing power. Labor has no pricing power.

Now that is likely to be taken one step further or maybe several steps further by the AI revolution. And then you get into the question of what it means to be human in a world in which the computer can outthink you. We've always prized ourselves as thinkers

BCR: Again, the identity dimension comes along.

FZ: Right. You return to this identity thing. AI is so is so revolutionary that I feel like we can't even almost compare comprehend it within the parameters we're talking about because it's the first technology in human history where we don't ultimately control the technology.

The technology controls us. It will control us. And what that means to human identity, I cannot predict to you. But I can tell you it's going to be more revolutionary than all the revolutions I've wrote about.

BCR: Final question: given all of that what is the worst-case scenario and what is the best case scenario? And what can we do to try to move towards the best-case scenario?

FZ: The worst-case scenario is that we just have much more chaos than people realize, and that produces a reaction, which is very, very, how one would describe it, hard line.

The worst case of reaction is the 1930s. History doesn't repeat itself, but it is worth remembering. People forget that Germany was the most civilized country in the world. Germany in 1933 had won more Nobel Prizes in science than Britain and the United States put together. The Weimar Republic was the most advanced liberal democracy in the world in terms of its constitution, in terms of its practices, minority rights.

If you had to choose in 1933 whether to be a Jew in Germany or a Black in America, it was it wasn't even close. I mean, a Jew in Germany could be a judge, he could be a businessman. Bismarck's banker was a Jew, von Bleichroeder. In America, a Black was a, you know, third class citizen, not even a second-class citizen. And yet, all of that collapses because of this profound reaction to the uncertainty, the unmooring, the hyperinflation, the Great Depression. I don't think we should imagine that we have gotten past that kind of fragility in societies. But the best-case scenario is we take the enormous advantages and wealth and forward movement that these technologies provide us with, and we find a way to navigate through by addressing some of the concerns of people who feel left behind. This is why I say, don't treat everybody who worries about immigration as a racist. Don't treat everyone who thinks that transgender rights and, you know gender affirming therapy is dangerous as somehow a misogynist or a or a bigot. These are people trying to navigate a world that has been completely turned upside down. And going slowly, addressing some of those concerns, recognizing that society can only take so much change, these are all important things. The ultimate solution – as you know I write about it at the end of the book – is we have to find a way to be liberals, and I mean that in the broader sense of the world, in a way that doesn't make people feel that they have a hole in their hearts, so that they don't have an emptiness within. Because liberalism does not answer the ultimate questions of the meaning of life and the purpose of life. It is not an ideology designed to create awe and wonder and make you build the greatest cathedrals in the world and write the greatest symphonies in the world. People did that to God. They did that for a nation. They did that because of these abstract intangible ideas. And so we have to recognize that when people live within a liberal world, they have this this emptiness. They have this loneliness.

And if we don't find a way to address that, if we don't find a way to strengthen community life, strengthen the intangibles of life that make people feel that they are

seen, that they are heard, that there is a purpose to their existence, we will always confront this problem, which is that that hole in the heart will be filled by sometimes very dark forces. Because even if they're dark, even if they're about, a certain amount of hate or a certain amount of opposition, they do answer that call. And it turns out that that call is very strong in human beings. To want to believe in something bigger than yourself. To want to believe there is a purpose to life. And to want to be part of a team, a tribe of some kind.

BCR: Thank you very much, Fareed.

FZ: This was a terrific and very, very stimulating, serious conversation. Thank you.

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