

Fareed Zakaria, *Age of Revolutions: Progress and Backlash from 1600 to the Present* (W. W. Norton, 2024)

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Review: Fareed Zakaria, *Age of Revolutions: Progress and Backlash from 1600 to the Present*

(W. W. Norton, 2024).

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The seasoned Indian American journalist, commentator, and author Fareed Zakaria (born in Mumbai in 1964; Ph.D. in government, Harvard University, 1993) has published a timely new 2024 book, *Age of Revolutions: Progress and Backlash from 1600 to the Present*, about the print culture that emerged in Western culture after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s (Zakaria refers to the printing press, pp. 35, 43, and 217-218).

However, when the major cultural developments of the emergence of modern science, the emergence of modern capitalism, the emergence of modern democracy, and the indispensable emergence of more widespread formal education (at first in Latin, the lingua franca of the time, and then in the vernacular languages) were unfolding in Western culture after the emergence of the Gutenberg printing press in Europe in the mid-1450s, many countries in the non-Western world (such as China, India, and Russia as well as countries in the Middle East) continued to be characterized by predominant residual forms of primary oral culture among the masses. However, what is now known as economic globalization may be spreading certain other-than-economic features as well that emerged historically in our Western cultural history under the influence of phonetic alphabetic literacy that the Gutenberg printing press helped spread after it emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s.

Now, on the back cover of Zakaria's new 2024 book, we find the generous advance praise for it by Walter Isaacson. In part, Isaacson says, "This is *the* indispensable book for understanding the world today" (his italics). With all due respect for Walter Isaacson, and for the highly articulate and well-informed Fareed Zakaria, I think that Isaacson's praise for Zakaria's new 2024 book is a wee bit over the top. As I have already indicated in the above two paragraphs, I think that the events that Zakaria surveys in our Western cultural history need to be seen in the larger framework of media ecology theory.

Now, in Zakaria's new 2024 book *Age of Revolutions: Progress and Backlash from 1600 to the Present*, he revisits many themes that he explored in his 2003 book *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy*

at Home and Abroad, in which he also refers to “the new printing presses [that had emerged]” (p. 39). On the back cover of Zakaria’s 2003 book, we find the generous advance praise for it by Samuel P. Huntington, Henry Kissinger, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Richard Holbrooke, and Nicholas Lemann. In the blurb by Samuel P. Huntington, the author of the controversial 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, discussed below, we are told, “‘With elegance and insight, Fareed Zakaria sets forth for our times a fundamental truth previously articulated by Aristotle and [Alexis de] Tocqueville: unregulated democracy undermines liberty and the rule of law. *The Future of Freedom* is one of the most important books on global political trends to appear in the past decade. Its sobering analysis has vital lessons for all of us concerned with freedom’s future in the world.’” Huntington’s carefully circumscribed praise for Zakaria’s 2003 book strikes me as more warranted than Isaacson’s more sweeping praise for Zakaria’s new 2024 book.

Now, the following five books are pioneering studies of the print culture that emerged in Europe after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s:

(1) Ohio State University’s Richard D. Altick’s 1957 book *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*.

(2) Saint Louis University’s Walter J. Ong’s massively researched 1958 book *Ramus [1515-1572], Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason*.

(3) the French historians Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin’s 1958 book *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450-1800*, translated by David Gerard; edited by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and David Wootton (1976).

(4) the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas’ 1962 book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger with assistance of Frederick Lawrence (1989).

(5) the University of Toronto’s Marshall McLuhan’s widely read and widely translated 1962 book *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*.

In Zakaria’s new 2024 book *Age of Revolutions*, he refers to Altick’s 1957 book *The English Common*

Reader (p. 340n.122).

Years after these five pioneering studies of print culture were published. Studies of print culture and book history, in many languages, proliferated to such an extent that today nobody is likely to undertake compiling a bibliography of them.

For a categorized bibliography of studies of manuscript culture, in many languages, see Marco Mostert's 2012 book *A Bibliography of Works on Medieval Communication*.

Now, in the present review of Zakaria's new 2024 book, I plan to emphasize the thought of the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and cultural historian and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955). So I also want to delineate briefly the mid-twentieth-century context in which his work emerged. When Ong was based in Paris (from November 1950 to November 1953), researching the work of the French Renaissance logician and educational reformer and Protestant martyr Peter Ramus (1515-1572), he experienced a life-altering breakthrough insight. Ong's insight in the early 1950s served as the hallmark of his mature work from the early 1950s onward.

At the time that Ong experienced his life-altering breakthrough insight in the early 1950s (when I was in Catholic grade school in Kansas City, Kansas), Dwight D. Eisenhower was serving his first term as the president of the United States. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., helped spearhead the black civil rights movement in the United States. In 1960, Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy was elected president of the United States – the first Catholic ever elected president. From 1962 to 1965, the Second Vatican Council in the Roman Catholic Church was overturning certain Catholic practices such as using Latin in the Mass and fasting from meat on Fridays – as well as enacting certain other reforms in Catholic practice and theology. (My years of undergraduate studies were 1962 to 1966. I took my first course from Father Ong at Saint Louis University in the fall semester of 1964.) In the spring semester of 1964, Ong delivered the Terry Lectures at Yale University – subsequently published in expanded form as his 1967 book *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*. Also in the 1960s, the Vietnam War and anti-war protests were newsworthy in the United States.

Now, in Ong's "Preface" in his 1977 book *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of*

Consciousness and Culture (pp. 9-13), he says that his media ecology thesis “is sweeping, but it is not reductionist, as reviewers and commentators, so far as I know, have all generously recognized: the works do not maintain that the evolution from primary orality through writing and print to an electronic culture, which produces secondary orality, causes or explain everything in human culture and consciousness. Rather, the thesis is relationist: major developments, and very likely even all major developments, in culture and consciousness are related, often in unexpected intimacy, to the evolution of the word from primary orality to its present state. But the relationships are varied and complex, with cause and effect often difficult to distinguish” (pp. 9-10).

Major cultural developments include the rise of modern science, the rise of modern capitalism, the rise of representative democracy, the expansion of formal education (first in Latin, the lingua franca of the time; but later in the vernacular languages), the rise of the Industrial Revolution, and the rise of the Romantic Movement in philosophy, literature, and the arts. I have discussed our contemporary secondary orality in my essay “Secondary Orality and Consciousness Today” in the anthology *Media, Consciousness, and Culture: Explorations of Walter Ong’s Thought*, edited by Bruce E. Gronbeck, Thomas J. Farrell, and Paul A. Soukup (1991).

In effect, Ong implicitly works with this thesis in his massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason*, mentioned above – his major exploration of the influence of the Gutenberg printing press that emerged in the mid-1450s. Taking a hint from Ong’s massively researched 1958 book, Marshall McLuhan worked up some examples of his own in his sweeping 1962 book *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, mentioned above (for specific page references to Ong’s publications about Ramus and Ramism, see the “Bibliographic Index” [pp. 286-287]).

I have discussed Ong’s philosophical thought in his massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* in my *OEN* article “Walter J. Ong’s Philosophical Thought”

(dated September 20, 2020).

But also see Ong's own article "'I See What You Say': Sense Analogues for Intellect" in *Human Inquiries: Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry* (1970). It is reprinted, revised, in Ong's 1977 book *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (pp. 122-144), mentioned above. The revised 1977 version of Ong's essay is reprinted in volume three of Ong's *Faith and Contexts*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (1995, pp. 91-111).

Now, because Ong's media ecology thesis strikes me as extraordinarily comprehensive, I have, over the years, examined an extraordinary range of books to see if they might be related to Ong's media ecology thesis. In most instances, I concluded that they could be.

However, Samuel P. Huntington's article "The Clash of Civilization?" in *Foreign Affairs* (1993) -- subsequently expanded by Huntington in his 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, mentioned above -- prompted me to write my article "The West Versus the Rest: Getting Our Cultural Bearings from Walter J. Ong" in *Explorations in Media Ecology* (2008).

For further information, see the *Wikipedia* entry "Clash of Civilizations."

The following two books are somewhat related to my 2008 article: (1) Ian Morris' *Why the West Rules – For Now: The Patterns of History, and What They Reveal About the Future* (2010); (2) Niall Ferguson's *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (2011).

Now, on the dedication page in Zakaria's new 2024 book *Age of Revolutions*, he lists fifteen of his "teachers and mentors" over the years – including Samuel P. Huntington.

In Zakaria's Chapter 5: "The Real American Revolution: Industrial United States" in his timely new 2024 book *Age of Revolutions* (pp. 142-165), he says, "The political scientist Samuel Huntington argued that the American Revolution in essence extended a preexisting 'Tudor polity,' a weak and decentralized system whose councils, legislatures, and legal formulas the early colonists brought with them from seventeenth-century England. Even today, America's unusual system – which divides powers between different branches of government and different levels of government – bears the hallmarks of that Tudor system" (p. 243).

In Zakaria's "Notes" (pp. 331-364), he references Samuel Huntington, "Tudor Polity and Modernizing Societies" in *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1958, pp. 134-135).

Now, the rise of modern capitalism and the rise of representative democracy are often referred to as economic liberalism and political liberalism, respectively. The self-styled conservative columnist David Brooks refer to them both combined as liberalism in his recent column in the *New York Times* titled "The Great Struggle for Liberalism" (dated March 28, 2024) about Zakaria's new 2024 book *Age of Revolutions*. For Brooks, "The enemies of liberal democracy" include "Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Donald Trump, [and] campus radicals." According to Brooks, "One of the powerful features of this book is that Zakaria doesn't treat liberal democratic capitalism as some set of abstract ideas. He shows how it was created by real people in real communities who wanted richer, fuller, and more dynamic lives.

"His [Zakaria's] story starts in the Dutch Republic in the 16th century. . . .

"The next liberal leap forward occurred in Britain. . . .

"America was next, and the pattern replicated itself[.]"

But Brooks also says, "And yet for all its benefits, liberalism is ailing and in retreat in places like Turkey, India, Brazil, and, if Trump wins in 2024, America itself. Zakaria's book helped me develop a more powerful appreciation for the glories of liberalism, and also a better understanding of what's gone wrong."

Now, drawing on Ong's work, I have indicated that what Brooks refers to as liberalism emerged in our Western cultural history after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s. So let me here also indicated that what Ong refers to as our contemporary secondary oral culture that is promoted by communications media that accentuate sound is also related to what Brooks refers to liberalism ailing and in retreat in the places he mentions.

Ah, but why would the deep resonances of secondary orality in the psyches of people somehow disturb certain people in our secondary oral culture in such ways and to such degrees that what Brooks refers to as liberalism is ailing and in retreat in the places he mentions? The only answer that I have to offer here is that secondary orality is prompting a deep psychological re-constellation of the deep

psychological structures of print culture in our Western cultural history. It does not necessarily follow that all of the deep psychological structures of print culture are somehow going to be jettisoned. But it may mean that a revaluation is underway and may continue for the foreseeable future.

Well, what certain other authors today refer to as authoritarianism is a prominent tendency in what Ong refers to as primary oral cultures. No doubt the resonances of our contemporary secondary oral culture reverberate in our collective unconscious with memories of older tendencies of authoritarianism in our psyches. The implication is that on the level of ego-consciousness we need to renegotiate the achievements of liberalism in print culture.

For further reading about authoritarianism, see the following two books by Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler; (1) *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics* (2009); and (2) *Prius or Pickup? How the Answers to Four Simple Questions Explain America's Great Divide* (2018).

For all practical purposes, what Hetherington and Weiler refer to as authoritarianism involves what Jonathan Haidt refers to as the righteous mind in his 2012 book *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. I have discussed Haidt's 2012 book in my *OEN* article "Jonathan Haidt on the Righteous Mind, and the Catholic Anti-Abortion Crusade" (dated March 22, 2012).

Now, the most efficient way for me to provide you with an overview of Zakaria's new 2024 book *Age of Revolutions* is to describe its parts:

"Introduction: A Multitude of Revolutions" (pp. 1-21).

Part I: "Revolutions Past" (p. 23).

Chapter 1: "The First Liberal Revolution: The Netherlands" (pp. 25-50).

Chapter 2: "The Glorious Revolution: England" (pp. 51-70).

Chapter 3 "The Failed Revolution: France" (pp. 71-106).

Chapter 4: "The Mother of All Revolutions: Industrial Britain" (pp. 107-141).

Chapter 5: "The Real American Revolution: Industrial United States" (pp. 142-165).

Part II: "Revolutions Present" (p. 167).

Chapter 6: "Globalization in Overdrive: Economics" (pp. 169-202).

Chapter 7: "Information Unbound: Technology" (pp. 203-234).

Chapter 8: “Revenge of the Tribes: Identity” (pp. 235-271).

Chapter 9: “The Dual Revolutions: Geopolitics” (pp. 272-308)

“Conclusion: The Infinite Abyss” (pp. 309-325).

“Acknowledgments” (pp. 327-330).

“Notes” (pp. 331-362).

“Credits” (pp. 363-364).

“Index” (pp. 365-383).

In Zakaria’s “Notes,” he says, “I am painting with a broad brush” (p. 332n.38). He paints with a broad brush throughout his new 2024 book. By contrast, Ong does not paint with a broad brush in his massively researched 1958 pioneering study of print culture, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason*, mentioned above.

In Zakaria’s “Acknowledgments,” we learn that he worked on his timely new 2024 book *Age of Revolutions* over a period of ten years, during which time much has happened. As baseline point of departure for his timely new 2024 book, he says, “My 2003 book, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, analyzed emergent populism, the threats to democracy, and the often bumpy road of modernization – though the trend has gotten darker and more complex in the two decades that followed” (p. 327).

Now, in Zakaria’s “Introduction: A Multitude of Revolutions” in his timely new 2024 book *Age of Revolutions*, he says, “I cannot and do not cover *all* revolution” (p. 16; his italics). Fair enough. He also says, “The story I’m telling [in his timely new 2024 book]” . . . “is about the push and pull between the past and the future. . . . Throughout this story, we will see two competing plotlines: liberalism, meaning progress, growth, disruption, *revolution in the sense of advance*, and illiberalism, standing for regressions, 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” (p. 17; Zakaria’s italics).

Zakaria briefly discusses many U.S. presidents, including President Joe Biden (pp. 11, 12, 13, 214,

226, 229, 247, 289, 294, 305, 315-316, and 324).

But Zakaria discusses Donald Trump more extensively than he discusses any other U.S. president (pp. 2-3, 12, 13, 17, 197, 200, 201-202, 210, 255, 261, 263-264, 265, 269, 285, 286, and 294).

In any event, I want to re-frame what Zakaria here says about Trump and his most ardent followers “want[ing] to bring back the world of the 1950s.” As I have already noted, the world of what I have referred to as the print culture that emerged in our Western cultural history with the emergence of the Gutenberg printing press in Europe in the mid-1450s. Basically, print culture was still predominant enough in Western culture in the 1950s. However, what Ong refers to as our secondary oral culture in Western culture was ushered in by the communications media that accentuate sound, including television.

By the 1960s, television sets were commonplace in the United States. Television tipped the balance of power, figuratively speaking, in the human sensorium of communications media that accentuate sound, thereby ushering in the emergence of what Ong came to refer to as secondary orality (to differentiate it from primary orality [= the orality of all pre-literate people]).

Ong perceptively discusses the human sensorium in his 1967 seminal book *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (for specific page references, see the “Index” entry for sensorium [p. 356]), mentioned above. As I mentioned above, I have explored what Ong refers to as our secondary oral culture in Western culture in my 1991 essay “Secondary Orality and Consciousness Today.”

Basically, Trump and his most ardent supporters are experiencing the impact of secondary orality deep in their psyches. But they are holding out for their nostalgic and idealized sense of the supposed glories of print culture.

Let me now re-frame what I am contending here in terms that Ong himself uses in his essay “Voice and the Opening of Closed Systems” in his 1977 book *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (pp. 305-341), mentioned above. In it, Ong uses terminology he draws from systems analysis (e.g., open systems and closed systems). But he introduces a new term of his own: open closure. Briefly, Ong aligns secondary orality today with the opening of closed systems, but the opening involves what he terms open closure. But Trump and his most ardent supporters are clinging to

their sense of closed systems – in short, they are not embracing what Ong terms open closure.

I discussed what Ong refers to as open closure in my short *OEN* article “Pope Francis = ‘Open Closure’; But Catholic Traditionalists – Closed-Systems Thought” (dated August 30, 2019).

What Ong refers to as closed-system thought tends to characterize what Jonathan Haidt refers to as the righteous mind in his 2012 book *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, mentioned above.

In any event, the Catholic columnist Michael Sean Winters discusses Trump and his most ardent supporters in his aptly titled column “The vindictive, unstable Trump should never be given power again” (dated March 27, 2024) at the *National Catholic Reporter*. In it, Winter says, among other things, “There are Trump supporters who, for a variety of reasons, some of them legitimate, fear the future of the country and mistakenly see Trump as an answer to those fears. . . . [But] Those of us who discern in Donald Trump a clear and present danger to American democracy [“including President Biden] must be clear that we do not place that indictment on all Trump supporters.” Amen to that.

But also see the Catholic columnist Daniel Horan’s column “Trump’s pseudo-Christianity is logical outcome of ‘America’s God’” (dated April 4, 2024) at the *National Catholic Reporter*.

Concerning systems analysis, see Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi’s 2014 book *The Systems View of Life: A Unifying Vision*.

Now, Zakaria discusses certain topics extensively, such as (1) illiberalism (for specific page references, see the “Index” entry on illiberalism [p. 373]); (2) the internet (for specific page references, see the “Index” entry on internet [p. 374]); (3) liberalism (for specific page references, see the “Index” entry on liberalism [p. 375]); (4) modernity (for specific page references, see the “Index” entry on modernity [p. 376]); (5) populism and populists (for specific page references, see the “Index” entry on populism and populists [p. 378]); and (6) technology (for specific pages references, see the “Index” entry on technology [p. 380]).

For a detailed but wide-ranging account of modernity in our Western cultural history, see Charles

Taylor's 2007 book *A Secular Age*.

In conclusion, Fareed Zakaria's new 2024 book *Age of Revolutions: Progress and Backlash from 1600 to the Present* provides a timely discussion of liberalism and illiberalism on a sweeping global scale, including his well-informed discussions of China, India, and Russia (for specific pages references to each, see the "Index" entries for each [pp. 366-367, 373, and 379, respectively]). However, I should note that residual forms of primary oral cultures predominated in China, India, and Russia as well as in the Middle East and elsewhere in the non-Western world when literacy and formal education were transforming Western culture after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s and print culture emerged in Western cultural history.

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