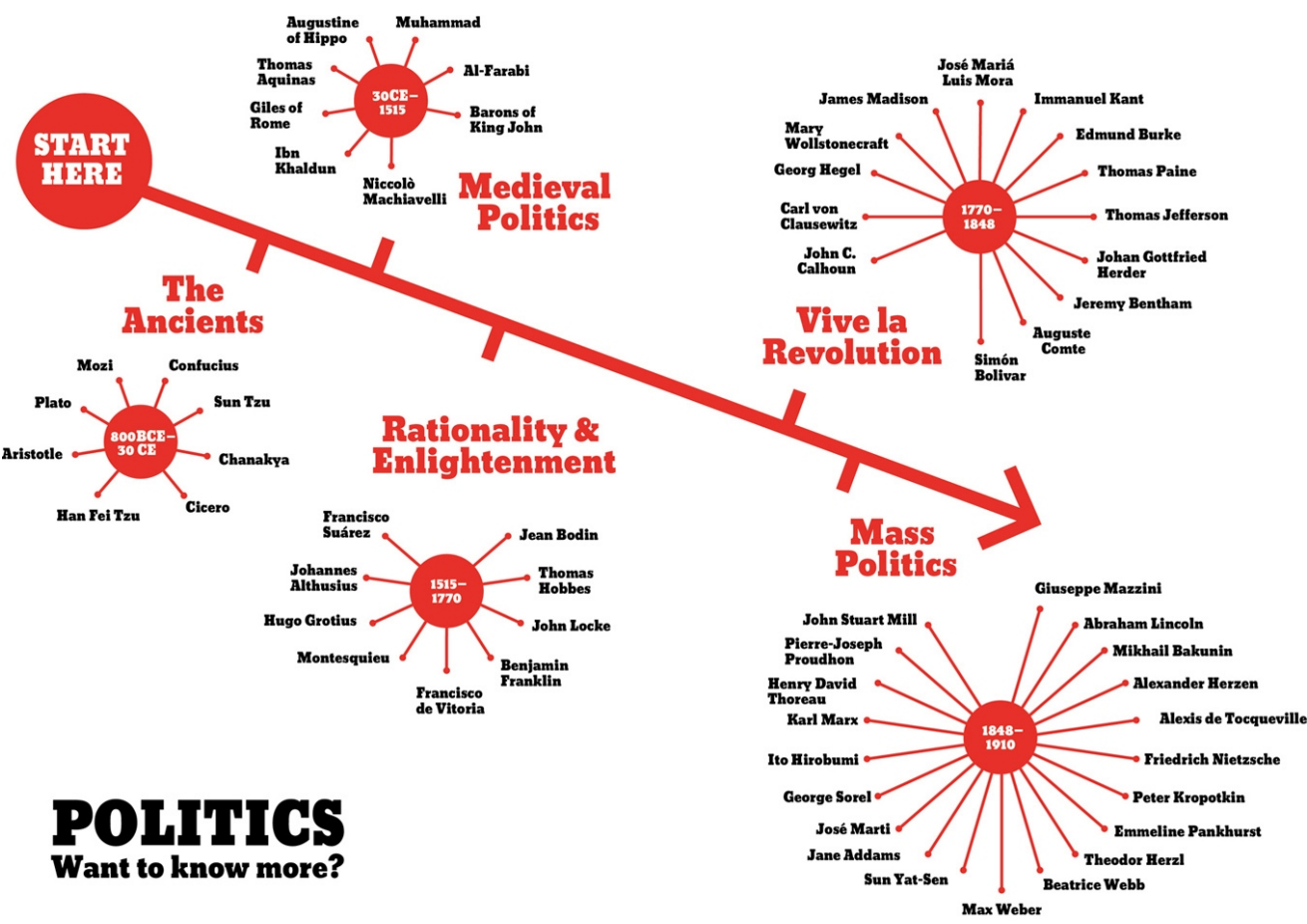


EPILOGUE

CATASTROPHE

Societies that fail to adapt to the challenges they face eventually fall apart. The planet is littered with monuments to political systems that finally ran out of road, leaving only their relics behind. The Parthenon in Athens stands as a testament to the passing glory of ancient Athenian democracy, which flourished for two hundred years and then died at the hands of Philip of Macedon and his son Alexander the Great. The huge monolithic stone heads on Easter Island were produced by a flourishing island community as symbols of the power and purpose of its leading inhabitants; the competition to build bigger and better statues eventually used up the island’s natural resources, resulting in starvation and ruin. Lenin’s tomb in Moscow once stood as the focal point for global communism, honouring the man who had devised a politics that was going to conquer the future; now that the future is here, his mausoleum has become just another tourist trap. Are the liberal democracies that Fukuyama said were the end of history destined to go the same way? Will the Capitol in Washington sooner or later join the list of magnificent ruins?

There are two reasons to think that the fate of democracy may be different. The first is that the most successful states of the present have access to resources that no previous society could match. We are enormously richer, better-educated, better-informed, healthier and longerlived than any human beings have ever been. We can draw on vast and sophisticated networks of communication. We keep inventing new stuff at a prodigious rate. The pace of change is only going to accelerate. It is hard to see how societies like these could get stuck for long.



The second reason is that modern democracy is inherently adaptable. Democracies are good at avoiding the worst political outcomes because democratic citizens are so irritable and impatient,