political. There are other kinds of revolution. The most significant revolution of the twenty-first century so far is not political. It is the information technology revolution. Its transformative effects are everywhere. In many places rapid technological change stands in stark contrast to the lack of political change.

Take the United States. Its political system has hardly changed at all since 1989. Even the moments of apparent transformation – such as the election of Obama in 2008 – have only reinforced how entrenched the established order is: once the excitement died away, Obama was left facing the same constrained political choices. American politics is stuck in a rut. But the lives of American citizens have been revolutionised over the same period. The birth of the web and the development of cheap and efficient devices through which to access it have completely altered the way people connect with each other. Vast amounts of information have become readily accessible to anyone who wants it; the speed of communication has increased exponentially, and physical distance has shrunk accordingly; networks of people with shared interests, tastes, concerns, fetishes, prejudices and fears have sprung up in limitless varieties. The information technology revolution has changed the way human beings befriend each other, how they meet, date, communicate, medicate, investigate, negotiate and decide who they want to be and what they want to do. Many aspects of our online world would be unrecognisable to someone who was transplanted here from any point in the twentieth century. But the infighting and gridlock in Washington would be all too familiar.

This isn't just an American story. China hasn't changed much politically since 1989, when the massacre in Tiananmen Square snuffed out a would-be revolution and secured the hold on power of the current regime. But China itself is a totally altered place since then. Economic growth is a large part of the difference. But so is the revolution in technology. A country of more than a billion people, nearly half of whom still live in the countryside, has been transformed by the mobile phone. There are currently over a billion phones in use in China. Ten years ago fewer than one in ten Chinese had access to one; today there is nearly one per person. Individuals whose horizons were until very recently constrained by physical geography – to live and die within a radius of a few miles from your birthplace was not unusual for Chinese peasants even into this century – now have access to the wider world. For the present, though maybe not for much longer, the spread of new technology has helped to stifle the call for greater political change. Who needs a political revolution when you've got a technological one?

Technology has the power to make politics seem obsolete. The speed of change leaves government looking slow, cumbersome, unwieldy and often irrelevant. It can also make political thinking look tame by comparison with the big ideas coming out of the tech industry. This doesn't just apply to far-out ideas about what will soon be technologically possible: intelligent robots, computer implants in the human brain, virtual reality that is indistinguishable from 'real' reality (all things that Ray Kurzweil, co-founder of the Google-sponsored Singularity University, thinks are coming by 2030). In this