

2

TECHNOLOGY

THE TECHNOLOGY REVOLUTION

Civil wars are always bad. Revolutions can be good (though my revolution might be your civil war). The political transition from insecurity to stability often requires a violent kick-start to get it going. Failed regimes do not usually give up without a fight; power needs to be dragged from them by force. Most of the epochal events that signalled the arrival of modern politics have been revolutions, some of them more violent than others: the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which was not so glorious for the thousands who lost their lives (especially in Ireland); the American Revolution of 1776, which turned out to be a bloody war of attrition; the French Revolution of 1789, which produced real carnage but still retains its appeal as the ultimate symbol of emancipatory politics, and not just for the French. Nothing can match the blood-quickenning drama of a people seizing power from a king, storming his prisons and palaces and, if necessary, cutting off his head.

Subsequent revolutions have complicated this picture. The

revolutions that swept Europe in 1848 promised to usher in a new age of democracy, which they eventually did, but only many decades later. The revolutions themselves petered out into almost nothing, thanks to political infighting and military repression. The great communist revolutions of the twentieth century are increasingly difficult to valorise on any grounds. Russia 1917 and China 1949 were transformative events. But the human cost of the regimes they brought into being is indefensible. All too often, revolutions produce more violence, not less, and create political conditions that are hard to distinguish from civil war. The Arab Spring of 2011 was a profoundly hopeful event. Plenty of comparisons were made at the time to 1776 or 1789 or even 1917 (though more far-sighted commentators compared it to 1848). Two years on, mounting chaos in Syria, Libya and Egypt has dampened the enthusiasm almost everywhere, as hope gives way to fear. There are good reasons to be wary of revolutions.

Despite this, it would be a mistake to think the age of political revolution is over. It is far too soon to tell what the ultimate fate of the Arab Spring will be. In the meantime, who knows what might happen in other parts of the world, including in China. And we should not forget that we are still only a generation away from perhaps the most successful and peaceful revolutions of modern times: the popular uprisings of 1989 that swept away the discredited and bankrupted communist regimes of Eastern Europe. Dramatic political change is still possible.

However, it does not follow that dramatic change is always