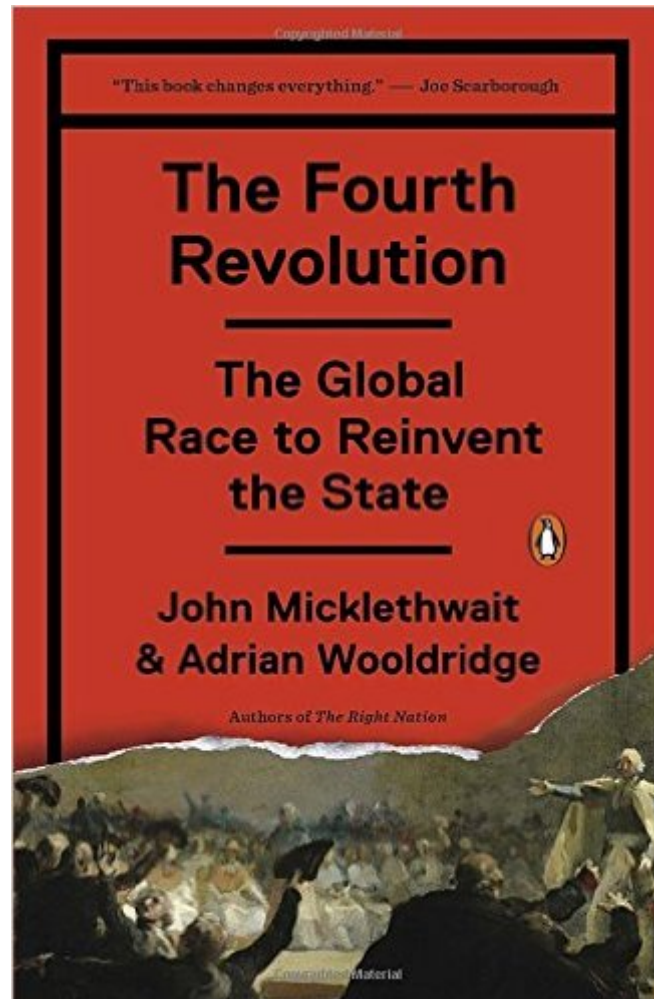


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The Fourth Revolution: The Global Race To Reinvent The State



Synopsis

From the bestselling authors of *The Right Nation*, a visionary argument that our current crisis in government is nothing less than the fourth radical transition in the history of the nation-state. Dysfunctional government: It's become a cliché, and most of us are resigned to the fact that nothing is ever going to change. As John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge show us, that is a seriously limited view of things. In fact, there have been three great revolutions in government in the history of the modern world. The West has led these revolutions, but now we are in the midst of a fourth revolution, and it is Western government that is in danger of being left behind. Now, things really are different. The West's debt load is unsustainable. The developing world has harvested the low-hanging fruits. Industrialization has transformed all the peasant economies it had left to transform, and the toxic side effects of rapid developing world growth are adding to the bill. From Washington to Detroit, from Brasilia to New Delhi, there is a dual crisis of political legitimacy and political effectiveness. The Fourth Revolution crystallizes the scope of the crisis and points forward to our future. The authors enjoy extraordinary access to influential figures and forces the world over, and the book is a global tour of the innovators in how power is to be wielded. The age of big government is over; the age of smart government has begun. Many of the ideas the authors discuss seem outlandish now, but the center of gravity is moving quickly. This tour drives home a powerful argument: that a country's success depends overwhelmingly on its ability to reinvent the state. And that much of the West—and particularly the United States—is failing badly in its task. China is making rapid progress with government reform at the same time as America is falling badly behind. Washington is gridlocked, and America is in danger of squandering its huge advantages from its powerful economy because of failing government. And flailing democracies like India look enviously at China's state-of-the-art airports and expanding universities. The race to get government right is not just a race of efficiency. It is a race to see which political values will triumph in the twenty-first century—the liberal values of democracy and liberty or the authoritarian values of command and control. The stakes could not be higher.

Book Information

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Penguin Books; Reprint edition (July 14, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0143127608

ISBN-13: 978-0143127604

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.7 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviewsÂ (137 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #336,659 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #244 inÂ Books > Law > Legal Theory & Systems > Non-US Legal Systems #258 inÂ Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Political Science > Comparative Politics #521 inÂ Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Ideologies & Doctrines > Democracy

Customer Reviews

This book comes on the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Glenn Tinder's classic work, *The Crisis of Political Imagination*. Tinder's book dealt with mass disintegration and the isolation of the individual, along with the failure of the four main classifications of political thinking (liberalism, democracy, socialism and conservatism) to deal with the alienation of great numbers of people from political life specifically and society in general. Sadly, political imagination continues to be in crisis a half century after it was diagnosed by Tinder. Micklethwait and Wooldridge are editors of the *Economist* ("a global weekly magazine written for those who share an uncommon interest in being well and broadly informed"). They describe what they call three and a half revolutions in the evolution of government and the state: 1. Thomas Hobbes and the Nation-State 2. John Stuart Mill and the Liberal State 3. Beatrice Webb and the Welfare State 4. Milton Friedman's Paradise Lost. Hobbes' contribution was to describe *Leviathan*, in which the first duty of the state is to be powerful enough to provide law and order. The power of the state frees man from misery and makes human civilization possible. Prior to the existence of the state, man was tossed between fear and greed into an existence that was, by its very nature, brief and brutish. By giving up some of his autonomy to the state, man could work and survive without having to defend himself at every turn from his fellow human beings. Mill feared *Leviathan* nearly as much as (or even more than) he feared his fellow man.

'The Fourth Revolution' is a tour de force. Authors John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, both of the *Economist* (London) have written a book that merits a place in the shelves of decision makers in government, the private sector, and the not-for-profit world. Its ideas will, hopefully, make their way to dinner table conversations across America. A few points for your consideration as a prospective reader: 1. 'The Fourth Revolution' is a straight shot against those oft-heard voices who suggest that

the current dysfunction of government is inevitable. Instead, it's suggested that there have been a series of changes since the origination of the modern nation-state. Thus far, each has added value, incorporating needed adaptation to deal with changing circumstances. This is important, because it suggests that we have a greater responsibility than simply throwing up our hands and walking away from the governmental crisis in our midst.² Government dysfunction is endemic worldwide. There are also exemplars--at least partial exemplars--in other nations of replicable improvements. The book points to success stories from Australia to Sweden to Singapore.³ The incapacity of Western governments to come to necessary decisions and take actions in a timely manner poses significant questions for our competitive position vis-a-vis Asian nations. In turn, it may well come to constitute a national security threat.⁴ In the United States, the blessings of longstanding peace and prosperity--and having had no war on American soil since the Civil War--have enabled politics to avoid hard choices. There has been little evident cost to this sloppiness.

This book has been written by two senior editors at The Economist and unsurprisingly reads like an extended Economist article. Whilst this makes it well researched and enjoyable to read I found their argument was ultimately confused. This book covers the three and half revolutions that they defined to have occurred in Western political thought. The first revolution is that of the centralised state that arose in the seventeenth century. The second took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as regal patronage systems were replaced by more meritocratic and accountable governments. The third was the rise of the welfare state that slowly took place over the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They then define a half revolution in political thought taking place in the 1980s with the rise to prominence again of classical liberal thinking. This was only half a revolution in their mind since, whilst the political leaders espoused small government ideals, little was actually in actually shrinking the size of the state. This is where the book excels. Its coverage of the history and development of Western political thought is superb. Unfortunately on the back of this the authors make the case that Western states have become bloated and need to be dramatically reformed. Whilst I am sure many would agree with that I felt their subsequent arguments were confused. They expounded the virtues of the Singapore and Chinese states (whilst admitting some of their flaws) but true to their Economist background then went on to claim the only solution to the West's political anxieties is a return to laissez faire. As the FT put it, in their review a rather unkind description of this approach would be one of policy-based evidence making.

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