If you want to understand the surge of politicized religion, post-communist globalization, and laissez-faire economics that has defined our modern era, forget 1968. Forget even 1989. It’s 1979 that’s the most important year of all. A remarkable chapter in international affairs—and intellectual history—began that year, and it had the strangest group of authors imaginable.

It was in 1979 that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini seized power in Iran and showed once and for all that “Islamic revolution” is not an oxymoron. The Soviet Union made the fateful decision to invade the poor backwater of Afghanistan, sparking a different kind of Islamic uprising that hammered the first nails into the coffin of the communist empire. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher blazed a conservative resurgence in Britain that not only changed the rules of politics in the West but also shaped the subsequent age of market-driven globalization. Pope John Paul II’s first pilgrimage to his Polish homeland in the summer of 1979 emboldened freedom-loving peoples throughout Eastern and Central Europe and set events in motion that would culminate in the nonviolent revolutions of 1989. And throughout 1979, a stoic and unlikely visionary named Deng Xiaoping quietly took the first steps to prepare communist China for its long march toward the age of markets.

Thatcher seems to have nothing in common with the ayatollah and Deng, and even less with the pope. Yet there was something that connected these seemingly disparate people. They all set out to overturn, in their unique ways, the defining spirit of their age—the progressive, secular, materialist order that had, until then, dominated the political landscape of the postwar 20th century. Theirs were not just political movements, but moral rearmaments that passionately rejected what they saw as the decay, malaise, stagnation, and suffocation that resulted from heavy-handed technocrats trying to accelerate humanity’s march toward the end of history. In this way, the transformational events of 1979 were linked by the impulse of counterrevolution, whether against Soviet communism, social democracy, modernizing authoritarianism, or Maoism run amok.

Timeline: A Year to Remember
The counterrevolutionaries of 1979 attacked what had been the era’s most deeply held belief: the faith in a "progressive" vision of an attainable political order that would be perfectly rational, egalitarian, and just. The collapse of the European empires after World War I and the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression, and the triumph of wartime bureaucracy and planning during World War II all gave forward thrust to this vision; postwar decolonization and the rapid spread of Marxist regimes around the world amplified it. By the 1970s, however, disillusionment had begun to set in, with a growing sense in many countries that heartless (and in some cases violent) elites had tried to impose a false, mechanistic vision on their countries, running roughshod over traditional sensibilities, beliefs, and freedoms. As a result of the late 1970s revolt, we live today in a world defined by pragmatic and traditional values rather than utopian ones.

At the time, the success of these counterrevolutions was far from a sure bet. Most observers failed to comprehend their implications in 1979. And those who did just as often condemned them as retrograde forces of mass destruction. Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi’s men accused Khomeini of trying to turn back the clock, while Deng’s enemies vilified the Chinese leader as a “capitalist roader.” To the Soviets, the Afghan mujahideen were representatives of “the old feudal order,” the pope a force of “neocolonialism.” But these were labels that the accused, as often as not, wore with equanimity. On the campaign trail in April 1979, Thatcher proudly told a Conservative Party rally how her opponents had dubbed her a reactionary. “Well,” she declared, “there’s a lot to react against!”

Indeed there was. And perhaps there is again—for 30 years later, the transformations of 1979 have themselves grown into decadent established orders, the excesses of which may now be inspiring new reactionary movements and counterrevolutions.

Imagine how the world looked on January 1, 1979. Soviet Marxism appeared anything but fragile. The Moscow regime, which had dispensed altogether with God, individual freedom, and the spontaneity of markets, was buoyed by sky-high oil prices. CIA analysts deemed it an economic as well as military superpower, and U.S. President Jimmy Carter’s national security staff fretted about Soviet advances in the developing world. From Vietnam to Nicaragua, the dominoes were falling. If you had claimed that the mighty USSR would shuffle quietly off the world stage a few years hence, due in large part to the damage inflicted upon it by a religiously inspired rebellion in Afghanistan and a pope from Poland, you might well have been declared insane. (A few years earlier, a Soviet dissident named Andrei Amalrik had written a book that predicted the imminent demise of the USSR, citing in particular “the extreme isolation in which the regime has placed both society and itself” and arguing that the resulting disconnect from reality would make its collapse “more rapid and decisive” when times grew tough. He was treated, by the very few who took notice, as a crank.)

The Chinese version of communism, by comparison, looked enfeebled. The Maoist fever of the Cultural Revolution was on the wane, but the traumas it had left behind ran deep, and Deng’s announcement, in December 1978, that government policy would henceforth be guided by the principle of “seeking truth from facts” struck many as quixotic. No communist country had successfully reformed itself. In the 1950s, Soviet leader Nikita Krushchev’s fitful attempts at de-Stalinization had failed miserably, and, for that matter, so had tentative efforts to do something similar in China.

But Deng was different. Long an acolyte of Mao Zedong who had gradually parted ways with the Great Helmsman’s utopian yearnings for permanent revolution, Deng was a hardened political survivor. Twice purged from the senior leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, he staged his final comeback in 1977, in the wake of Mao’s death and the arrest of the Gang of Four. His call for a new era of pragmatic problem-solving clearly had a strong emotional resonance for the rapturous crowds that greeted the news of his reinstatement in Beijing. In three 1975 essays—denounced by the Maoists as the “Three Poisonous Weeds”—Deng had taken overtly conservative positions on everything from art to economics. Although he took pains to justify his work as a defense of the true revolution, his supporters understood perfectly well what he meant: a return to tradition, common sense, and efficiency. This amounted to a fairly radical rejection of everything Mao had stood for since 1949.

China was a country that had, among other catastrophes, witnessed repeated waves of state-orchestrated famine over the years. So when the first peasants
forged ahead with the private use of land in 1978, they did their best to keep it a secret, fearing retribution. But in 1979, to their surprise, Deng not only sanctioned their experiment—he approved it on a national scale. He also embraced the idea of establishing Chinese "special economic zones," where foreign investors could set up factories staffed by low-wage mainland workers, and approved the idea of gaining technology and know-how from the West—another dramatic reversal of Maoist dogma. So there was a certain logic to it when the United States, reeling from stagflation and defeat in Vietnam, decided to build on President Richard Nixon's earlier overtures to Beijing as a way of reining in Soviet expansionism. The two countries took up diplomatic relations at the start of 1979.

Deng's genius, it turned out, was to start small and quiet—so much so that the true scale of his counteroffensive against Maoism was largely overlooked in the West. When Deng came to the United States, the Washington Post's correspondent could only shake his head at "the enthusiasm of American businessmen eyeing the China market, an enthusiasm even leading promoters of China trade here think has gone too far." No one would have dared to predict that Chinese GDP would grow tenfold in less than a generation.

The countries of the West had certainly followed a more moderate path than China's since World War II. Yet they, too, had embraced a steadily expanding role for government. Welfare, regulation, and rationality were the watchwords. Europe's social democratic consensus was embodied by the all-encompassing "nanny state" ushered in by the Labour Party in Britain in 1945, with its national health insurance and generous state pension schemes, close cooperation between unions and government, and state ownership of key industries. Markets were some-thing to be tamed and controlled, not unleashed.

Thatcher sought to overturn all that, and did. But you might not have guessed it as her term in office began. Her 1979 election manifesto remains a monument to vagueness, and she was outnumbered within her own first cabinet by Tory moderates. Few at the time would have predicted that she was about to become the defining figure of post-war British politics by breaking with the vision that had ruled for the previous 30 years. Yet within a few years she would be cutting tax rates, selling off the state-owned jewels of the economy to private investors, and stirring down the all-powerful trade unions.

As with Deng, many commentators did not know quite what to make of Thatcher's ambitions. After her first year in office, British journalist Hugh Stephenson wrote: "Her rhetoric is radical, even reckless. But from the start her deeds have shown a politician's instinctive caution." Stephenson was right, but he and other onlookers didn't reckon with the intensity of the sentiment behind that rhetoric, namely Thatcher's deeply held conviction that Britain desperately needed not just economic but also moral renewal. This became clearer during her brutal battle with the coal miners' union and her anything-but-tactical embrace of "privatization" (a once obscure word seized upon as a rallying cry by her think-tanker-in-chief, Keith Joseph). The appeal of Thatcher's counterrevolution became clearer still when Ronald Reagan, who was already campaigning against Jimmy Carter's presidency the year she was elected, won his own mandate in 1980 armed with a similar passion to replace the Great Society with "Morning in America."

Although the United States never quite embraced the mixed-economy consensus that prevailed in Britain, pre-1979 America was a radically different place than it is today. The political cosmos was inhabited by now-extinct species like moderate East Coast Republicans and power-brokering labor leaders. During the 1970s, as David Frum notes in How We Got Here, his provocative take on that decade, the private ownership of gold was a criminal offense, consumers had only one telephone company, and airline travel was largely a perk of the upper class. The tone was set by huge, faceless corporations. With the personal computer still in its nascent state (Bill Gates moved his fledgling firm Microsoft home to Seattle on January 1, 1979), technology of the era promoted uniformity and anonymity. When Republican President Richard Nixon decreed wage and price controls in 1971, it was received as an understandable acknowledgment of the reigning orthodoxy. Not a few thinkers, most memorably the hugely influential economist John Kenneth Galbraith, were able to imagine the "convergence" of Western corporatism and Soviet socialism in some in-determinate future. After all, didn't both depend on bureaucratic elites and the wisdom of planners?

These were compelling visions, and they informed thinking about the developing world too. "Development economics," as propagated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, pre-scribed big infrastructure projects like hydroelectric dams overseen by top-heavy bureaucracies. How this differed from competing Soviet aid projects was not al-ways obvious. The extent to which this conventional wisdom had taken hold came out clearly in both Iran and Afghanistan. The shah was staunchly anticommunist, yet the main planks of his effort to drag his society into the 20th-century mainstream looked strikingly similar to what the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan had started implementing there after seizing power in a 1978 coup: land reform, literacy campaigns, secularization, and women's rights. Tellingly, the shah had dubbed his modernization program the "White Revolution."

Small wonder, then, that experts who tried to interpret events in Iran tended to get it so wrong. It all flew in the face of centuries of revolutions trending against the clerics. As religious scholar Karen Armstrong observes in her book The Battle for God, no less than political philosopher Hannah Arendt had mused that "what we call revolution is precisely that transitory phase which brings about the birth of a new, secular realm." Even the United States' "bourgeois revolution" had established the principle of the separation of church and state, while the more radical versions in France and Russia had aspired to do away with religion altogether.

Yet Khomeini, too, was tapping into this intellectual tradition by embracing the radical thinking, if not the antireligiosity, of the Muslim world's revolutionaries. For decades, powerful secular ideas—pan-Arabism, Baathism, revolutionary Marxism—had dominated the Middle East's politics, and their utopian political rhetoric had become second nature to the region's intellectuals. Nascent Islamists learned a great deal from these ideologies even as they excoriated them for their abject failure to overcome the challenge of Israeli and Western "neocolonialism." One of the Islamic Revolution's great progenitors was Ali Shariati, an Iranian intellectual who strove to meld leftist ideas of revolution with the fundamentalist longing for a return to the Prophet's original
Certainly, the journalists who converged on the Paris suburb of Neauphle-le-Château to find Khomeini in exile didn't really know what to make of him. Modern revolutionaries were supposed to be egghead Marxists of the Lenin-Mao breed or flamboyant young longhairs on the make, like the radicals who had taken to the streets in Paris, Chicago, and Frankfurt a decade earlier. This taciturn Shiite legal scholar with his hooded gaze and long black robes just didn't fit the picture. Yet he had become the de facto leader of Iran’s multifarious opposition movement. Some observers even compared the ayatollah with Mahatma Gandhi. Why not? They were both men of faith who tried to change the world, right?

One of the most remarkable eyewitness accounts of the 1979 Iranian Revolution comes from Desmond Harney, a fluent Farsi speaker and British ex-diplomat who knew more about Iran than just about any other Westerner at the time. Yet, as his diary ruefully records, he was shocked to see Khomeini and the mullahs gain the upper hand; he had assumed that the left-wing National Front would prove to be the decisive force. "Strange to think of the destinies of this country being swayed by a frail, elderly, vengeful priest sitting in a Paris suburban villa, with half the Iranian world paying court to him there!" He had underestimated the traumas that the shah’s modernization program had inflicted upon a deeply traditional society.

Khomeini’s extraordinary bid to graft an Islamic theocracy onto the body of a modern nation-state amplified trends that had been building for years in the Muslim world; 1979 was the year they burst into inarguable reality. In Saudi Arabia, a group of armed Islamist fanatics took over the Grand Mosque in Mecca and held on for two weeks until they were bloodily suppressed. Around the world, mobs of Muslims, blaming this sacrilege on the Americans, took to the streets. In Tripoli, Libya, they burned the U.S. Embassy to the ground; an attack on the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan, left two Americans dead. (After this last fiasco, U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance reassured reporters: "It’s hard to say at this point whether a pattern is developing.")

But none of this compared with the backlash building in Afghanistan, where young intellectuals like Ahmed Shah Massoud had been reading up on Islamist classics such as the writings of Sayyid Qutb. Already in revolt against their own communist government, they would soon throw themselves into battle against the troops of the invading Red Army. Some of them would transform that war against the Soviets into a much broader global jihad—including a group of "Afghan Arab" sympathizers who would eventually form al Qaeda.

And the pope? The office of the Holy See had already been memorably dismissed as a political factor by Joseph Stalin. "The pope?" Stalin supposedly sneered to the French foreign minister. "How many divisions has he got?" When John Paul II made his epic visit to Poland in the summer of 1979, no one was crazy enough to predict that it would inspire the formation of the independent trade union Solidarity the following year, or that it would trigger a revival of civil society throughout Eastern and Central Europe, leading to the collapse of the communist order there less than a decade later. "[W]ithout the Polish Pope, no Solidarity revolution in Poland in 1980," historian Timothy Garton Ash later wrote. "[W]ithout Solidarity, no dramatic change in Soviet policy towards eastern Europe under Gorbachev; without that change, no velvet revolutions in 1989."

The key to the pope's spiritually motivated defiance of the Soviets was its nonviolence. During the nine days of his visit in June 1979, some 13 million Poles turned out on the streets and fields of the country to greet him—in direct defiance of a Soviet-backed government that had always treated the Catholic Church as a minor irritant. "We realized for the first time that 'we' were more numerous than 'them,'" recalls Radoslaw Sikorski in his memoir Full Circle (an anticomunist teen at the time, Sikorski is now the foreign minister of today’s democratic Poland). It was a crucial realization, one duly noted by dissidents elsewhere in the region. As a result, religion remains a large but underappreciated ingredient in the peaceful uprisings of a decade later.

The events of 1979 tell us a great deal about the nature of counterrevolution, which is very important to understand, because we might be living through another one right now. Perhaps the key insight is that though counterrevolutionaries may be reactionaries, they are not mere conservatives. Conservatives aspire to return to the status quo ante. Counterrevolutionaries understand that their revolutionary opponents have changed the rules of the game in fundamental ways and that the reaction must adjust accordingly. Although philosophers Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre rejected the French Revolution as evidence of "progress" run amok, they responded with intellectual programs of such vigor and sophistication that the leaders they claimed to be defending didn’t always find themselves approving.

The shrewdest counterrevolutionaries, moreover, happily exploit revolutionary achievements to their own ends. Deng understood that, by imposing its harsh unity throughout the once fissured mainland, China’s dictatorship of the proletariat had actually created the preconditions for a thoroughly bourgeois, ruthlessly capitalist economy. (Wasn’t it supposed to work the other way around?) The shah's modernization program displaced legions of overeducated, underemployed young men from villages to the margins of big cities—disoriented, angry, and ripe for recruitment by the "traditionalist" Khomeini. As for Thatcher, one of her most eloquent opponents within her own party was writer Ian Gilmour, who reproached her for failing to grasp that "real" conservatism meant above all adherence to the received order: "British Conservatism is not an 'ism.' It is ... not a system of ideas. It is not an ideology or a doctrine." Thatcher, by contrast, embodied a classic counterrevolutionary paradox: She wanted change, radical change, in order to get back to the way things should be.

She changed a lot, of course—just like the other big figures of 1979. Yet today, 30 years down the road, we once again see that even the most compelling ideas have expiration dates. Counterrevolutions, too, eventually burn themselves out, inevitably succumbing to stasis and decline. The regime of the jurists in Iran increasingly resembles the one they aspired to destroy: corrupt, cynical, starkly at odds with popular yearnings for reform, concerned primarily with the maintenance of power. "Socialism with Chinese characteristics," Deng’s great ideological hybrid of liberal economics and political repression, struggles to answer or contain popular demands for clean air and water, justice and the rule of law, and greater freedom and opportunity. The Sunni jihad unleashed in
Afghanistan 30 years ago remains mired in bloody utopianism, with more Muslims among its victims than infidels. The discredit brought down upon no-holds-barred capitalism by today's Great Recession has left the conservative counterrevolution of Thatcher and Reagan showing its age, its followers intellectually parched and politically marginalized.

And so today, in much of the world, ideology has become a somewhat suspicious category in itself, and even the hopeful young new U.S. president, Barack Obama, preaches change while studiously rejecting programmatic labels and touting his "pragmatic" credentials. Yet if there's one thing that the legacy of 1979 teaches us, it's that people are always ready to embrace a compelling vision of the future—particularly when it's cast as a moral crusade against the dark forces conspiring against traditional sources of identity, against the "natural order" of things. Today, just as in 1979, many pundits continue to speak in terms of yesterday's battles ("the return of socialism," "the triumph of Keynes") even though the contours of the future remain hazy at best. The countless predictions of doom or salvation amount to nothing; the one thing you can count on is that we will be surprised. Our modern age owes much to the Great Backlash of 1979. And no one saw it coming.

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