

BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

THE AGE OF THE UNTHINKABLE

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WHY THE NEW WORLD DISORDER
CONSTANTLY SURPRISES US
AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

by

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A conversation with Joshua Cooper Ramo

In this age of immense technological reach—whereby most everyone has at least the potential to access the same information—do you think that there is still a fundamental difference in the way that people think depending on where they're from?

Absolutely. One of the biggest mistakes we make is thinking that technology can sort of wipe away initial conditions. Not only does it not—we shouldn't want it to. Nothing is more important for really thriving than diversity: of ideas, of background, even of motive. Ecosystems that get whittled down to a single strain or two of a plant or animal tend to get wiped out very easily. So it's only natural that there are tremendous differences in how we think—you might even say it is not only historically inevitable (after all, global connection is a pretty new thing) but also a precursor to survival. That's why our goal shouldn't be to homogenize the planet so that everyone looks like us (and who is "us" anyhow?), but rather to encourage as much diversity as possible. That means empowering people from different backgrounds to define success their own way, to disrupt the world for good in whatever way moves them. It also means resisting the forces that might want to homogenize us for silly commercial reasons or dangerous ideological reasons. If we want to raise children who are resilient, the first step should be making sure we encourage them to be different.

Are rapidly developing countries such as China and India better prepared to face the “unthinkable” because they’ve been forced to think creatively for longer? Do you think that the global financial crises could change them into superpowers? If so, how?

Well, it’s dangerous to lump China and India together. They are very different places. I do think that places that are habituated to constant rapid change are a bit better prepared to think out of the box—because they have to in order to survive. China, for instance, is going to urbanize several hundred million people in the next few decades. That can’t be done using any sort of off-the-shelf thinking. The hunt for new ideas is what makes China so exciting now.

You speak often of the importance of “resilience” in society. What exactly do you mean by this and what are some key things that people can do to foster such an attitude? What role do you see technology playing in our ability to maintain resilience?

Resilience is the ability not only to stretch in reaction to stress—instead of snapping—but also to get stronger. That’s one thing that makes it different than, say, resistance. Resistance is about preparing for risks and dangers we do know about. For a nation, that might mean hardening roads against a nuclear attack; for an individual, it might mean saving up money in case you lose your job. But resilience is something else. It’s a kind of learning-on-the-fly crisis reaction in which you emerge stronger. So if you lost your job, say, resilience would mean that you would end up with a better and more suitable one because you had prepared yourself by learning new skills, establishing new networks, and so on. This need to prepare yourself in very basic ways in advance is a crucial part of resilience.

It's a bit worrisome then when you look at nations like the United States that are missing some of the basic infrastructure that would allow us to survive a prolonged economic crisis, say, and not only resist it but change and grow from it: our low savings rate, lack of health care, poor education system. Frankly, the United States is the most resilient nation around for other reasons, mainly the deep psychological optimism of Americans, but there are many things we could do to be an even more resilient society. Technology, of course, is a part of this, but many of the risks we face come from technology, like financial systems or biological engineering that we want and need, so technology in and of itself isn't a tool for resilience.

What are some of the things that the revolutionary age has already fostered? Who are the "virtuosos of the moment"?

The most important thing this age has delivered—and will continue to deliver—is the profound sense individuals have of being able to change their lives in ways that were unimaginable for their parents. This basic act of self-invention is profoundly important and is an unstoppable human trend. It means the ability to think revolutionary thoughts isn't just confined to masses of people, but is more and more handed over to individuals. We are given power to disrupt the patterns of our lives in really wonderful ways. The idea of the American Dream, that you can create a life for yourself that exceeds your dreams, is now becoming possible for more people around the world. Now, many of these people may invent lives that we find abhorrent or align their personal revolutions with ideologies that are very dangerous for us—but that is unavoidable. The core reason our world will be

ever more disruptive is that the spread of this desire to create a new life for yourself is—and should be—unstoppable. What we’ve got to do is not try to stop it but to direct it so that more and more people invent ways of living that are good for all of us.

Do you believe that a total collapse is necessary in order to fully reimagine our place in the global community and grow into it?

No. We can learn a lot from my friend Simon Levin and his studies of ecosystems here. If we get to the point of total collapse, we’re probably too late. What you need instead is energetic regeneration. This should be pretty merciless in some respects, in the sense that we can’t be sentimental about old ideas that are now imperiling us—like the notion that everyone should have a gas car or that unrestrained capitalism is a good idea. But we don’t want to throw out the good, useful parts of our past: personal transportation is great, markets are super mechanisms for setting prices. So what you need to do is poke very hard at systems and find where the rust is. This goes on very intuitively and naturally in nature and in bleeding-edge businesses in technology, where newness and innovation are unstoppable. But we’re pretty bad at applying this sort of thinking to most of our ideas. We often don’t want the hassle of rethinking the world, even if we are wrong.

There are parallels between the most successful, innovative companies and the deadliest, most cunning terrorist groups of the past decade; but, as you say, one doesn’t “dare mention a moral equivalency between Hizb’allah and, say, the innovations of Google” (page 5). In our attempt to master a revolutionary attitude toward the changing

world, is there a line—as individuals and as nation—that we can cross?

The line is sentimentality. I think it's great and important to hold on to traditions (like reading books!), but it's also true that when some traditions outlive their usefulness they are, inevitably, going to be discarded by the world. It's crucial to hold on to old ideas, to our history, so that we can learn from the past. And, of course, one of the great joys of being alive is that sense of being part of a human chain stretching back and forward, so we never want to sever that link. But I do think we have to be willing to say "this is not working" when ideas are clearly failing. Today we end up in these very extreme debates between clinging to old ideas and embracing new ones, a sort of revolutionary versus reactionary view of progress. And we should instead be asking how we can frame these inevitable changes as evolutions and see the excitement about new ideas even as we hold on to the core wisdom of old notions.

We have just survived a decade whose theme seems to be not just that of extraordinary deception but of the mass acceptance of that deception. Do you think that we're heading in the right direction now or are we settling back into old habits?

I think that's a good point and gets again at our unwillingness to ask hard questions, at the habits of intellectual laziness we aren't quite ready to kick yet. I think we are heading in the right direction because the world is shoving us that way. We're starting to see all the evidence we need that our old ways of thinking were delusional and dangerous, that we were mistaking a very unstable world for something that was getting more stable.

But I also think there is a struggle, as there always is at historical moments like this, between people who have a huge interest in holding on to those ideas and the reality of the shifting world around them. It's not fun to give up your old ideas about the world—particularly if those ideas were part of how you justified the way you lived your life or how you did your work. But when those ideas begin to break under the pressure of change, it's best really to give them up, not try to defend them. And that is what you see a lot of today, people trying in a very unreasonable way to defend ideas that the last decade has taught us are not only wrong but dangerous.

Questions and topics for discussion

1. In *The Age of the Unthinkable*, Joshua Cooper Ramo argues that we are in a revolutionary age with a global order that is changing around us exponentially faster than ever before. What does Ramo think has caused the global landscape to shift over the course of the past century, and how large a role do you think technology has played in this transformation? Does Ramo believe that this change was inevitable? Do you agree or disagree?
2. Consider the significance of Louis Halle's observation that "foreign policy is made not in reaction to the world but rather in reaction to an image of the world in the minds of the people making decisions" (page 13). In light of Ramo's argument, what is the fundamental problem with this approach to foreign policy?
3. What does Ramo mean by "We Won the Cold War!" illusions? Discuss some reasons why this mode of thinking could prove detrimental in a revolutionary era.
4. Explain the implications of Friedrich August von Hayek's 1974 acceptance speech, "The Pretence of Knowledge," for the Nobel Prize for Economics.

5. What was radical about Per Bak's theory of a sandpile and its avalanches, and how does Ramo use "the sandpile effect" to further his argument? Can you think of some recent events in our history that exhibit similar patterns?
6. Ramo discusses the excessive provisions that governments often take to protect their countries from every possible danger—even going as far as to say that such small-scale efforts make countries *more* vulnerable to disaster than they had previously been. What, according to Ramo, is the difference between "resistance" and "resilience," and which does he think should be adopted in today's changing world?
7. Does Ramo believe that the chaos of the past decade—terrorism, war, recession—has had any kind of positive influence on our society? If so, what form has it taken?
8. What does Ramo mean by the term *mashup* and how does it relate to luminaries such as Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso, Michael Moritz, and Shigeru Miyamoto, about whom he writes? What do they all have in common?
9. History, both personal and collective, is a subject that necessitates a particularly careful balance in the minds of world leaders and individuals alike. In two instances Ramo writes that "history became data; the future became output" (page 23) and that "there is finally no way to walk away from history or stick it behind glass like some diorama" (page 258). In order to think and act like a revolutionary, to master an "instinct for cataclysm," what role does history play in our

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ability to adapt and move forward? Which aspects of the past must we bring with us, and which must we forsake?

10. What does Ramo think that this revolutionary age demands of each of us? Discuss his ideas about how we can learn to anticipate the unexpected and begin to live more resilient lives.