



**MIMESIS**  
**INTERNATIONAL**

POLITICS  
n. XX







GABRIELE GIACOMINI

# THE ARDUOUS ROAD TO REVOLUTION

Resisting Authoritarian Regimes  
in the Digital Communication Age



**MIMESIS**  
INTERNATIONAL



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www.mimesisinternational.com  
e-mail: info@mimesisinternational.com

Isbn: 978886977xxxx  
Book series: *Politics*, n. XX

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P.I. C.F. 02419370305

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In memory of Giulio Regeni











The right to rebel against an authoritarian power is part of liberal and democratic culture. As early as the late seventeenth century, John Locke theorised that if a state abuses its citizens, they have the right to revolt. Nowadays, information and communication technologies can help the early stages of revolt. However, at the same time they also seem to offer the threatened autocrats powerful tools. Failed revolutions that have unfolded in our digital age in countries such as Myanmar, Ukraine, Iran, Egypt, Hong Kong and Belarus, bring to light the great and often successful efforts of authoritarian regimes to use new technologies for surveillance, oppression, propaganda, censorship, and the suppression of fundamental rights. The risk of a drift towards despotism, from which even long-established democracies are not immune, prompts us to ask what skills, rules and institutions might help citizens to defend their freedom when it is under threat, including in the digital sphere.

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## PREFACE

Classical liberals, such as John Locke, had posited that when public powers violate fundamental freedoms, resistance to oppression is the right and duty of the citizen. This idea has become part of liberal and democratic culture; so much so, indeed, that the right to resistance has been explicitly incorporated into a number of fundamental constitutional documents, such as the English Bill of Rights of 1689 or the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789. Moreover, as Giacomini rightly notes, this right has not only been theorised but also practised recently. The resistance to Nazi-fascism in many European countries was simply an application of the Lockian principle: in the face of authoritarian power, which completely overrides the legal and political mechanisms (separation of powers, guarantee of rights, principle of legality, recognition of minorities) designed to prevent possible abuses of power, citizens inspired by a sense of freedom and justice are called upon to act in the first person.

In other words, the right to revolution is a living right and always a topical concern. In the public debate, and even in the academic community, we traditionally speak of the right to religion, the right to private property, the right to assembly, the right to work or trade union association. More recently, there has been talk of the right to terminate a pregnancy voluntarily or refuse therapeutic treatment, the rights of the LGBT+ community or women (gender equity). All these are obviously relevant issues. However, the

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right to rebellion is more rarely considered, perhaps because it is linked to an inauspicious outcome of the political regime, one that is highly undesirable. And yet, it is a fundamental right (one of the three most important ones, according to Locke), also because, following on from the waves of democratisation identified by Samuel Huntington, liberal democracy now seems to be in retreat in many parts of the world in recent decades, giving way to illiberal regimes (if we limit ourselves merely to the European continent, we may consider Orbán's Hungary, Putin's Russia or Erdoğan's Turkey). The risk of despotic drift is unfortunately always present (perhaps more than we like to admit).

Gabriele Giacomini's book, entitled "The arduous road to revolution. Resisting authoritarian regimes in the digital communication age", is built on a solid theoretical basis and has numerous merits. The first is to take seriously the right to resistance, a fundamental right but one that has been neglected by the academic community in recent decades. This work, therefore, commendably strives to fill a void, illuminating our concerns about the risk of tyrannical drifts. Moreover, the book rigorously, yet creatively, analyses how 'old' Lockian law can be understood in contemporary times. Such a right, according to Giacomini, is today characterised by specific players, motivations and organisational modes. The demonstration of how the right to rebellion can be declined in our time is convincing and well structured. Firstly, this right is not animated solely by prosperous citizens, but registers the uprising of the masses. Secondly, the right to rebellion no longer necessarily has to be founded on transcendental grounds, but can be accommodated in the – typically contemporary – corpus of fundamental human rights. Thirdly, the modes of organisation use digital media. The structure of power, of the ruling class, the social context, the use of communication tools are decisive elements in today transforming a simple rebellion into a victorious resistance.

Yet, analysing recent (digital age) revolutions against despotic regimes in countries such as Myanmar, Ukraine, Iran, Egypt, Hong Kong and Belarus, Giacomini asks important questions: are revolutions still viable? Or are they doomed to failure? Wisely, Giacomini does not go to such an extreme point, but the provocative doubt is that revolutions have become almost

impossible. Information and communication technologies can help the outbreak of a revolt, but they seem to be useful mainly in the first phase. In the later stages, digital media often reinforce governmental counter-revolutions, offering autocrats powerful tools of repression. Authoritarian regimes are very busy using new technologies for surveillance, oppression, information filtering, content spying, classification of protesters (and their arrest), propaganda, censorship, and suppression of political rights. As the events of recent failed revolutions indicate, these despotic efforts are usually successful. The second great merit of “The arduous road to revolution” is, therefore, to sound an alarm about the freedom of peoples in the age of big data and artificial intelligence.

Within a democratic context, digital media can lower the cost of participation for citizens and enhance the autonomy of individuals. But in an authoritarian context, the power of technologies is often at the service of the goals of despotic masters. This problem emerges not only from theoretical knowledge about society and its transformations, but also from a richly detailed empirical review, in which the research dimension is always rigorous and careful. Giacomini, of course, is careful not to deny the positive potential of digital media. Rather, he is aware that every technological revolution, with its characteristics and ‘affordances’, can benefit the ‘attack’ on fundamental rights but also their ‘defence’. Just as the invention of the cannon and gunpowder made harder the defence of medieval walls and benefited the attacking movements of infantry, every new technology introduced since then has changed the playing field. If you are interested in defence, therefore, you have to take countermeasures and adapt your strategy to the changed conditions.

In line with his approach, Giacomini does not stop at analysis and alarm. Recent failed revolutions in the midst of the digital age prompt the question of what skills, rules and institutions might help citizens defend their freedom when it is in danger. In the third and last section of the book, the author proposes the concept of ‘liberal innovation’, which is perhaps the most original contribution and which opens new perspectives of study and research. By ‘liberal innovation’ the author intends “the attempt to update, in the age of digital technologies, the important liberal tradition, which since its

birth has been concerned with the problem of how to limit power, preventing it from becoming absolute. First of all, it is necessary to extend fundamental rights from the physical world to the virtual world, moving from a habeas corpus, i.e. a set of physical freedoms against the arbitrary power of the sovereign, to a habeas mentem, i.e. the possibility of autonomously accessing information, protecting one's own intellectual identity, communicating without conditioning with other subjects, removing one's own data from the availability of government agencies, and ultimately being able to think and converse freely and without fear of retaliation".

Nor does Giacomini limit himself to the goal of deepening our theoretical knowledge: he also analyses social practices with the aim of introducing changes able to improve the situation. The author states that democratic liberalism can be innovated to adapt to the challenges posed by digital media in such a way that the consequences are as desirable as possible, i.e. respectful of citizens' fundamental rights. The imagined strategy is developed on three levels: the international one (supranational institutions should commit themselves to the defence of new digital rights); the national one (independent authorities such as, for example, the Privacy Authority, could not only make recommendations, but issue orders or impose sanctions, including against eventual government abuses); the individual one (in a world increasingly permeated by digital media, it is crucial that the citizen-user acquire an adequate level of knowledge, which allows him to use technologies with a critical spirit).

Thanks to a solid knowledge of both the reflections offered by the classic texts and of the analyses carried out by leading contemporary international authors, Gabriele Giacomini's book tackles a theme of extreme topicality, and arrives at original and significant conclusions. "The arduous road to revolution" is a book that effects a rigorous scientific analysis and, at the same time, has the ability and courage to put forward important proposals. In this sense, it can become a valuable reference for the scientific debate but also a stimulus for those who care about the future of freedom and democracy.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

In 1992, in a book destined to inflame public debate, Francis Fukuyama wondered whether the fall of the Berlin Wall had decreed the definitive victory of liberal democracies. Was the direction of human history irreversible? Or would new dangers threaten freedom and democratic order in the future?

A few years later, Umberto Eco participated in a symposium organised by Columbia University. It was 25 April 1995, the date in which Italy annually celebrates its ‘Liberation from Nazi-Fascism’. On that occasion, Eco (2019) presented a list of fourteen characteristics to the American students of what he would sought to define as ‘Ur-fascism’, or ‘eternal fascism’. Western democracy, globally, seemed to be in one of its most triumphant historical moments, yet only a few days had passed since a terrible bombing in Oklahoma City, which killed 168 people, wounded 672, and revealed the presence of far-right organisations in the USA.

Eco’s thesis was that fascism can always return. Indeed, that fascism is still among us, in apparently unsuspected (and therefore particularly dangerous) forms. Perhaps it will not return in goose-stepping fashion and will not be greeted with the *Hitlergruß*, the Nazi salute. However, Ur-fascism is characterised by a number of constituent elements that we already know: the syncretist cult of tradition, the rejection of Enlightenment modernity, anti-intellectualism, anti-pluralism, the instrumentalisation of people’s hardships, paranoid nationalism, contempt for pacifism and the ‘weak’, machismo, the identification of people with the leader (and intolerance for intermediate bodies), a neo-language that dominates communications. A few of these characteristics are enough to make an authoritarian nebula coagulate.