

After the End of History

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Review article of:

Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, (London; New York; Melbourne; Toronto; Auckland: Penguin, 1992), ISBN 0-14-013455-7, pbk. RRP £12.99; Aust. \$22.95. (Published in the same year by Free Press in the USA and Hamish Hamilton in the UK)

Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, (London; New York; Melbourne; Toronto; Auckland: Penguin, 1996), ISBN 0-14-017801-5, pbk. RRP £8.99; Aust. \$16.95. (Published in 1995 by Free Press in the USA and Hamish Hamilton in the UK)

Francis Fukuyama, *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order*, (London: Profile Books, 1999), ISBN 1 86197 099-4, hbk. £20.00. (Published in the same year by Free Press in the USA)

Francis Fukuyama is a modernist and a liberal *par excellence*. By this I mean that despite some reservations, he adheres to the basic modernist presumption that history is a coherent, rational and progressive entity moving towards a specific goal, and he believes that human reason has the capacity to rise above subjectivity and perception. Yet despite these characteristics – which I see as limitations – he takes the reader in unexpected and, from a liberal perspective, unorthodox directions. Fukuyama is imaginative in his ideas and thorough in his arguments, and he has managed to produce insights that are a credit to his scholarship. Nevertheless, like many ideologues, although he is highly conscious that his system of thought can be disputed at the level of high theory, he seems to be completely unaware of the arbitrariness of the deeper assumptions on which he has based his worldview. It is tempting to say that he could benefit from some insights of postmodernism. If he did, however, then perhaps he would lose the distinctiveness that has allowed him to make an important, if flawed, contribution to humanity's attempt to understand the world in which it lives at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The End of History

The End of History is the book by which Fukuyama is best known, and indications are that this achievement will probably overshadow anything he has done or will do subsequently. If this comes to pass, then Fukuyama will be a victim of his own marketing success, because already his first book is not his best. *The End of History* is a liberal celebration of the West's victory in the Cold War. Written from a consciously Hegelian perspective, it is a tightly constructed argument that political liberalism (by which Fukuyama really means liberal democracy) is the highest form of political life a state can achieve, and economic neoliberalism is a practical, though not theoretically a necessary concomitant to political liberalism. He bases his central arguments on his conviction that there exists a "Universal History" – "history understood as a single, coherent, evolutionary process" (p. xii) – in which mankind is moving progressively towards a destination, and when mankind has achieved that goal that is the end of "History". Since communism – the last major challenger to the supremacy of liberalism – is dead, the operation of liberalism in both the political and economic spheres has brought mankind to that endpoint. This is not to say that things will stop happening, or that liberalism will not be challenged and maybe even suffer setbacks. But he is arguing that there is going to be no further political or economic evolution beyond the modern liberal democratic state.

Fukuyama's confidence in the supremacy of liberalism and the existence of a Universal History seems to reflect a mindset akin to faith, but *The End of History* is not a catechism. Rather, it is a highly sophisticated work of apologetics: defending faith with logic.¹ According to Fukuyama (and Hegel), the progress of mankind has been caused by two "Mechanisms" in social history. The first Mechanism is a person's natural inclination to seek recognition and honour from fellow human beings. Fukuyama argues that humanity's progress from the Stone Age through agrarian society, feudalism, capitalism, etc. was driven primarily by this Mechanism, rather than any more basic need like self-preservation. Indeed Fukuyama argues that the quest for recognition (*thymos*) drives people to defy the instinct for self-preservation: savages, knights and corporate executives have risked life, limb and fortune for something as ephemeral as a coloured ribbon, a title or seat on the board. This Mechanism can easily become destructive if, for instance, the quest for *thymos* degenerates into xenophobic nationalism, but liberalism – especially its economic manifestation as competitive capitalism – provides a myriad of productive and non-

¹ The parallels between Fukuyama's ideology and religion are arguably intrinsic to the liberal worldview. John Stuart Mill, a 'father of liberalism', consciously regarded liberalism as a non-theistic religion: the "Religion of Humanity". See Peter Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 159.

destructive outlets for this *megalothymia* (a variation of megalomania) through politics, business, professional advancement etc. Thus liberalism has solved the problem of war!

The second Mechanism is the intrinsically cumulative character of knowledge of the natural sciences. Since a breakthrough in science cannot, in practice, be forgotten, and inventions cannot be uninvented, progress in the natural sciences anywhere sets a benchmark of progress. Superior technology will give victory in battle and/or economics, creating a mechanism that ensures that no society can remain isolated from human progress after initial contact. Progress in the natural sciences is not necessarily related to political ideology at all, but Fukuyama argues that there is a contingent link between modern natural science and liberalism because modern liberal societies are the best systems for the delivery of the fruits of post-industrial age technology. Since people in all societies aspire to material advancement, and since a society cannot achieve this without imitating liberal societies at least superficially, the globalisation of the world economy will exacerbate the spread of liberal democracy.

Trust

Having dispensed with history, how is the political philosopher to occupy his time? To Fukuyama a shift into economics was “almost inevitable” because “virtually all political questions today revolve around economic ones”. (p. xiii) Despite the fact that he is theoretically concerned with economics, the shift from *The End of History* is far from being a clean break. He is merely extending in a slightly new direction his established preoccupation with social development and the underlying motivations of people as they find achievement or failure in life. He also continues to exhibit his almost-Toynbeeian talent for looking at a panoramic scene, and identifying tiny details that seem to provide the bigger picture with its coherence. Maybe this is a gift associated with spelling history with a capital “H”. Despite the clear lines of continuity, however, we are fortunate that Fukuyama’s second book, *Trust*, can stand apart from the dubious Hegelianism and liberal triumphalism of *The End of History*.

Essentially *Trust* is an attempt to go behind economics to answer two simple questions: what is required for modern capitalism to develop in a society, and what factors inhibit its development. In essence he believes that the most important fuel of successful capitalism is sociability: the ability to establish trust between strangers and cooperate with them in a non-adversarial social environment. This sociability is society’s capital – “social capital” – and it is more important than physical and monetary capital. Hence societies that have high bonds of trust between family

members to the exclusion of strangers – such as Chinese and most Catholic societies – are societies of low trust and low social capital and find it difficult to build businesses beyond the confines of the family. On the other hand, high trust societies – such as the United States, Japan and most Protestant countries – have a lot of social capital, which is why they have successfully fostered major corporations and transnational companies. From this basic argument Fukuyama takes the reader on a tour of modern economic and social life in a wide variety of civilisational settings – a tour that is fascinating and educative even if one does not fully accept the overall theory. Throughout this exercise Fukuyama acknowledges his considerable debts to established scholars of social capital: Alexis de Tocqueville, James Coleman, Robert Putnam, and especially Max Weber.

The Great Disruption

Fukuyama's most recent book was foreshadowed in the last lines of *Trust*:

Social capital is like a ratchet that is more easily turned in one direction than another; it can be dissipated by the actions of governments much more readily than those governments can build it up again. Now that the question of ideology and institutions has been settled, the preservation and accumulation of social capital will occupy center stage. (p. 362.)

Earlier in *Trust*, the direction of his thought was given even more explicit voice:

The balance between individualism and community has shifted dramatically in the United States over the last fifty years. The moral communities that made up American civil society at midcentury, from family to neighbourhoods to churches and workplaces, have been under assault, and a number of indicators suggest that the degree of general sociability has declined.

The most noticeable deterioration in community life is the breakdown of the family, with the steady rise of the rates of divorce and single-parent families since the late 1960s. This trend has had clear-cut economic consequences.... (pp. 308, 309)

These concerns lead Fukuyama down a path that is unusual for a doctrinaire liberal: an explicit consideration of community, family life, morality and virtue. Not that Fukuyama ponders such questions for their own sake. All virtues are considered

for the sake of their utilitarian value: how does this or that help or hinder society or social evolution or economic development? What historical patterns can we see? Nevertheless, this was a courageous book and its existence is a tribute to the openness of his mind.

In writing *The Great Disruption*, Fukuyama presumes that the reader has accepted the conclusions of the first two books, but once again, the argument also stands on its own. Fukuyama identifies the period from the 1960s to the late 1980s as “the great disruption” in the title of the book. In the first half of the book he argues that the 1960s marked the beginning of a breakdown in the sociability and therefore the stability of Western society, and that Western society began reconstituting itself only in the 1990s. Furthermore, he contends that this disruption is part of a recurring and identifiable cycle of social dislocation and reorientation that has been sweeping human societies throughout recorded history. Using murder rates and other indicators of social deviance as his guide, he identifies the thirteenth, seventeenth and late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries as other times of dislocation in English and (for the later dates) American society. He believes that the disruptions mark pivotal turning points in social evolution, and the continual return of societies to some form of regulated family life is the result of basic human nature. His data was collated and analysed by a team of research assistants that would be the envy of many an academic. It provides overwhelming evidence of the contention that a fundamental change took place in Western society in the 1960s and early 1970s and that this resulted in a wide ethical gulf between Western cultures and those of East Asia. The sociological evidence of Fukuyama’s contention takes the form of a wealth of statistical data that may be viewed both as figures in his book and as raw statistical data on his web site at <http://mason.gmu.edu/~ffukuyam/>. Fukuyama argues that the great disruption was caused by a combination of demographic, economic, technological and cultural factors that converged in the West in the 1960s to 1980s and resulted in a depletion of social capital. Such factors include the post-war baby boom, changing work and social patterns, the invention and dissemination of the female contraceptive pill and the personal computer, and the inherent instability of a society premised on individualism. Surprisingly, Fukuyama shows no awareness that in this part of his work he is following loosely in the footsteps of Peter Drucker, another thinker who came to similar conclusions from a background of studying management in corporations.

The second half of the book is devoted to a study of the sources of sociability and it concludes with a defence of capitalism from the charge that it depletes social capital. In this section Fukuyama breaks ranks with classical liberalism by arguing that human beings are not purely, or even primarily creatures of reason; that people

are naturally sociable; and, that arational norms of behaviour – whether based on religion, culture or nature – are an intrinsic, desirable and necessary part of human society. Yet he does not regard himself as an apostate from liberalism. Rather he would say that Hegelian liberalism rather than the more dominant Lockean liberalism inspires him. In his conclusion he returns to the themes of *The End of History* with an argument that liberal democracy is the best vehicle for facilitating the flowering of productive sociability, and “we can therefore expect a long-term progressive evolution of human political institutions in the direction of liberal democracy”. (pp. 280, 281)

Assumptions

At this point it is very tempting to begin a highly critical analysis of each of Fukuyama’s books. This could involve placing his Hegelian view of Universal History, his liberalism, his argument about the historical victory of liberalism, his Weberian economics and his theoretical and historical ideas on social capital under the microscope. Although each of these aspects deserves attention, a review article of all three books requires a broader view: one that focuses on the development of Fukuyama’s ideas; one that picks out threads of continuity and change; one that suggests to the reader some insight into the thinking of the author. Given this brief, it is natural to concentrate on how his ideas have been governed by the underlying assumptions of an ideological worldview with some passing consideration of the extent to which he has broken free of such constraints. The main task seems almost unfair, since Fukuyama has taken such pains to elaborate and defend all of his conscious ideological assumptions. This is indeed the ostensible *raison d’être* of the book version of *The End of History*, since he had already put his basic argument in the article version in 1989.² Yet behind these acknowledged, conscious premises lie a welter of less conscious assumptions and mind-sets, most of which emerge most strongly in *The End of History*, flow strongly through to *Trust*, but begin to slip quietly into the shadows in *The Great Disruption*.

Perseverance of patterns

One of the less spectacular, but more telling of Fukuyama’s unconscious assumptions is seen in his inability to see history in anything other than discernible, purposeful

² Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History”, *The National Interest*, no. 16, (1989), pp. 3–18.

patterns. It is true that he moves from a strictly linear view of history in *The End of History* to an almost-Toynbeeian cyclical view of social history in *The Great Disruption*, but he still insists that any pattern that seems to emerge from his studies must be ‘a pattern of history’. Fukuyama has presented a strong case for a theory that human nature is inherently sociable and requires family life, rules and norms, and that the specific form of sociability is not predetermined, but evolves to meet the demand of each society. He presents an even stronger case that regardless of the general rule and the concept of human nature, a massive social disruption took place in the West between the 1960s and the 1990s. Neither of these arguments is completely new, but Fukuyama has provided a formidable collection of evidence to support his contentions. Yet he places these strong arguments within a weak case for a cyclical pattern of social disruption and reconstruction, operating within a linear concept of social evolution.

It seems that Fukuyama cannot bear to see an account of history without imposing a pattern. I use the word “imposing” deliberately because I believe that it is difficult, if not humanly impossible, for a human being to be sufficiently detached from the world to recognise by senses and logic any pattern of history or living, or morality or anything else without imposing one’s own preconceptions. This is the core of the post-modernist argument, and for all of his scholarship, Fukuyama seems to be blissfully unaware of the extent to which he – and all of us – are trapped by our senses and preconceptions: he went looking for a pattern, and lo and behold he found one! Having made this criticism, however, it should be acknowledged that without the modernist structures of thought under which he is operating, he may not have been motivated to put and justify any of his arguments.

Judging success and progress

Beyond the fact of Fukuyama’s insistence on seeing patterns in history, other criticisms come to mind. One of them harks right back to his Hegelian roots. It strikes me that the first “Mechanism” of Hegel’s Universal History – the urge to risk all for the sake of recognition by fellow human beings – is pointedly gender-biased. Human progress is explained using a “Mechanism” with which men will readily identify (at least up to a point), but which is a doubtful and unprovable historical reality, and which effectively removes women from the Universal History. Some foolish act of bravado by some (presumably male) savage somewhere is even deemed to be the first human action. (pp. 145–52) It is of passing interest that *The Great Disruption*, with its focus on families, marriage, sex and children went some way towards balancing the

gender bias inherent in the earlier work, but as far as I can tell, Fukuyama has never actually shifted from his original Hegelianism. In fact Fukuyama reveals in *The End of History* that his notions of the inherent arational sociability of human beings – which are so inimical to Lockean liberalism and which come to the fore in *The Great Disruption* – are anchored in these same Hegelian arguments of “the first man”. (See especially *The End of History*, p. 147.)

We might also note the arbitrariness of the neoliberal assumptions that dominate *Trust*. It is never stated to the point where it needs to be justified, but it is always presumed that large corporations are superior to small and medium sized family firms, and that the longevity of a business down the generations is the prime indicator of its success. Once this premise is granted it almost predetermines which societies are going to be judged ‘successful’ and which are going to be in need of remedial attention. Just as significant is *Trust*’s slavish adherence to the Weberian thesis on sociability and the development of capitalism – right down to the positive role of Protestantism and the inherently negative roles of Catholicism and Chinese Confucianism. (pp. 44–48, 69–95) Yet, to be fair it should be acknowledged that Fukuyama is completely aware of the principal enigma of this thesis: that he (like Weber) credits Protestantism simultaneously with being a major socialising force that provided the seedbed of capitalism and democracy (pp. 43–46, 293) and a fount of individualism. (pp. 286, 293–94) For what it is worth, Fukuyama thinks Protestantism’s individualism will win out to the point that it will be destroy the sociability it helped create. (pp. 293, 294)

Stereotyping

Of all of Fukuyama’s three books, *Trust* is the one most susceptible to unconscious stereotyping because he draws inspiration from Max Weber whose entire project was based on the drawing of stereotypes. Unfortunately – despite his best efforts – Fukuyama has not been completely immune from such errors. For instance there is, according to Fukuyama, *no* example of a Chinese private business successfully moving outside the confines of family or clan, adopting a truly corporate structure and lasting beyond the lifetime of the founder. He cites the demise of Wang Laboratories as the classic example of the limitations of Chinese corporate success. (pp. 69–95) In fact the story is not quite as straightforward as that. In Southeast Asia Chinese family bonds have much shorter roots than in the Chinese heartland, and the story is somewhat different. Since last century Southeast Asian Chinese have formed non-familial, non-clan business partnerships remarkably similar in structure to the modern

corporate business, and some of Chinese businesses (though admittedly few) even rose to the status of multinationals. It is also doubtful whether all of the present-day Chinese corporations of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia truly fit the stereotype being used by Fukuyama. These instances are hardly a basis for rejecting Fukuyama's work, but they do show the problems of insisting on conceptualising history into grand theories. And that, in essence, is Fukuyama's overriding weakness.

Inevitability

Perhaps *The End of History* demonstrates most graphically the inherent problems with Fukuyama's doctrinaire modernist approach to history and society: the distortions that are inherent in a modernist, unidirectional view of history. A little historical perspective is probably appropriate at this stage. In the period 1989–1993, when the article and book versions of *The End of History* were written and published, the West was enjoying an unprecedented level of confidence in the political and economic spheres. It had just won the Cold War; Europe was a union; and markets were multiplying, growing and becoming increasingly more open thanks to the collapse of communism and the pace of globalisation. The sudden conversion of Eastern Europe to democracy caused Fukuyama and others to note the fact that there had been a wave of democratisation sweeping the world since the 1970s, taking in Southern and Iberian Europe, South America and Latin America, and in more recent times, even parts of Africa and East Asia. (pp. 13–51)

Fukuyama was both reflecting and feeding a sense of triumphalist optimism when he declared the end of history. Just as important, however, he was anointing the supposed victory of liberalism with the halo of inevitability – something that is deceptively easy to do when one is looking backwards, but slightly harder when looking forwards. When an outcome is viewed as having been inevitable, it thrusts history into the role of a subordinate narrative. Like a movie trailer, it becomes a mere appetiser for the inevitable main event, which in this case was the futility of resisting political and economic liberalism. Yet even as we identify the conceit implicit in the notion of inevitability, we have still not grasped the full extent of the blind spot in Fukuyama's vision.

Even if the defeat of communism had been the inevitable product of history, it is still not a victory for liberalism *per se*. East European and Asian dissidents, religious leaders, social democrats, labour leaders and conservatives are all included in the honour roll of the Cold War, but this seems to have been forgotten now that history has come to an end. Fukuyama's assertions notwithstanding, it would not be

difficult to construct an argument that says that post-war social democrats played the most decisive role in winning the victory, and economic liberals merely stepped in during communism's death throes to pick the spoils. The historical role of social democrats in the defeat of communism seems to be a particularly pronounced blind spot for Fukuyama. In *The End of History* he mentioned it in only one paragraph, and then only to argue that social democracy (like European Christian Democracy) was merely a variant of liberalism. (pp. 293–94.) Despite the elements of truth in his assertion, this treatment of social democracy is extraordinarily cavalier, and diminishes the historical, conceptual, and practical differences between the two movements.

On the dubious premise that 'the only form of government that has survived intact to the end of the twentieth century has been liberal democracy', (p. 45) he claims ultimate victory for liberalism: 'What is emerging victorious is not so much liberal practice, as the liberal *idea*.' (p. 45)³ Yet even ignoring the criticisms made above, there is still a fundamental problem with Fukuyama's assertion: he is making the mistake of confusing liberalism and democracy. If Fukuyama had argued that *democracy* was the only rationale of regime legitimacy to survive the twentieth century, he would have been on fairly safe ground since every regime – even the most barbarous dictatorships – claims to represent the democratic will of the people. But as he acknowledges elsewhere, democracy is not liberalism, and each can exist without the other. (pp. 42–44) Yet Fukuyama is claiming the defeat of communism as a victory for liberalism *per se*, so he is on very shaky ground on several counts.

It might be argued that Fukuyama's 'blind spots' are no more than the typical shortcomings of an historian striving for objectivity and falling short of the ideal. There is certainly a lot of validity in this defence, but it does not diminish the point I am making: that Fukuyama's "blind spots" were generated mostly by the tunnel vision created by his modernism. That "halo of inevitability" that he created for the triumph of liberalism made it difficult for him to see outside the path that, in his mind, led inexorably to the final destination. Having said this, however, the fact that his mind set was so trapped by a perception of Universal History makes his later efforts to move outside the tunnel all the more impressive. Who knows where his next book will take us?

³ Italics are in the original.