



Liberal Read

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The End of History and the Last Man

BOOK REVIEW

Francis Fukuyama

The End of History and the Last Man

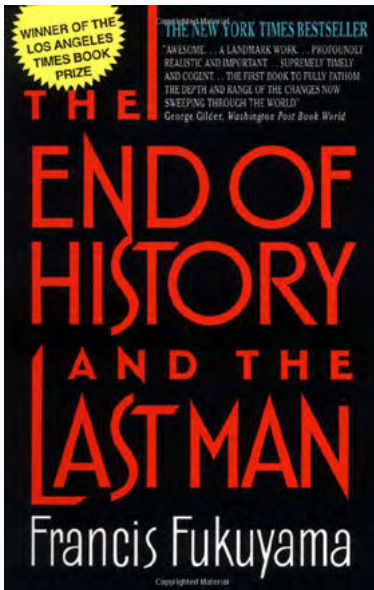
1992

By Luke Hallam

A series of crises has put many liberal ideas under question. Inspired by a popular commercial concept, Liberal Reads are packaged in an easily accessible format that provides key insights in 30 minutes or less. The aim of Liberal Reads is to revisit and rethink classical works that have defined liberalism in the past, but also to introduce more recent books that drive the debate around Europe's oldest political ideology. Liberal Reads may also engage critically with other important political, philosophical and economic books through a liberal lens. Ideological discussions have their objective limits, but they can still improve our understanding of current social and economic conditions and give a much needed sense of direction when looking for policy solutions in real life problems.

Liberal Read

The End of History and the Last Man



Francis Fukuyama's book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) has a well-earned reputation for its discussion of the strengths of liberalism and the underlying claim that liberal democracy represents history's final destination. At the same time, it is also one of the most insightful works about the weaknesses of liberalism, with the less popular idea of the "last man" who emerges at the end of history and kicks the historical process back into gear.

We must understand both strands of the argument to appreciate the book's profound contribution to 21st-century political philosophy. Thirty years after its publication, it remains a gold-standard reference for those seeking to understand our present historical moment.

History with a Capital H

In his public interviews, Francis Fukuyama has often expressed exasperation—admittedly, in good humor—at the messages and e-mails he receives about the idea that liberalism somehow signifies the "end of history." People ask him about 9/11, the global financial crisis, Brexit, Donald Trump, and Putin's invasion of Ukraine: don't these clearly "historic" events suggest that history is far from over?

To understand why this is *not* the case, we must understand Fukuyama's definition of "history"—more specifically, "History" with a capital *H*. It is to this question that he devotes the first part of the book.

For Fukuyama, History does not refer to "things happening," such as wars, famine, or political instability; it cannot be reduced to mere events. Instead, History is the progressive unfolding and evolution of ideas across an extended period and multiple societies.

In the ancient world, for example, Western societies were governed according to a set of hierarchical values based on kinship ties, polytheistic religious rituals, and formal and informal types of bondage. Eventually, these values and practices would be challenged by the Abrahamic religions, which claimed that everyone is equal in the eyes of God. Early classical Rome morphed into a Roman Empire dominated by Christianity—a religion that continued to spread and gain adherents worldwide. This is an instance of History in action—a set of ideas and practices being slowly displaced by another, more powerful set of ideas and practices.

Hence, Fukuyama's conception of History implies that human affairs can be "directional," that is, cumulatively improve over time. Many people deny this, however, arguing that history is cyclical, that civilizations rise and fall, and cultures flourish and then die, which means nothing human beings do or think has any guarantee of lasting in the long run. Extreme relativists will further assert that no period or people can be said to be "superior" to or "more advanced" than another.

In contrast, Fukuyama believes that, in principle, human affairs are directional. To prove this point, he discusses the example of knowledge accumulation in the natural sciences. In premodern times, it was possible for knowledge to be "lost"—as with the fall of the Roman Empire and the Dark Ages that followed. Meanwhile, in the modern era, with information technology and the interconnectedness of all knowledge, it is virtually impossible to imagine a global "forgetting" in which advances in the hard sciences over the past 500 years are lost. Human progress must therefore be, in some sense, cumulative.

The next step involves demonstrating that politics and ideas are also directional and progressive. Fukuyama does this by building upon the work of the 19th-century German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who was the first to argue that History might have an end point. Hegel believed that History "ended" at the battle of Jena in 1806 during the Napoleonic wars. According to this story, Napoleon, the early-19th-century French emperor, waged conquest across Europe on behalf of the ideals of liberty that had stimulated the early stages of the French Revolution 15 years earlier. Napoleon's defeat of the Prussian army at Jena represented a defeat for Europe's Old Regime and a victory for those democratic ideals, which had a profound impact on Hegel. In his book, Fukuyama quotes a lecture delivered by Hegel that year, in which the German declared, "We stand at the gates of an important epoch, a time of ferment, when spirit moves forward in a leap, transcends its previous shape and takes on a new one" (39).

Of course, when one announces "the end of history" and the triumph of liberal ideas, what matters is not any specific date but rather the currency and legitimacy that certain principles have gained over many centuries. This means that we must view ideas as undergoing a process of unfolding and updating instead of reaching perfection in any given year. We can therefore expect that at each stage of its development, liberalism has its dark sides and flaws.

Hegel believed the idea of liberal democracy was set to conquer the world, but not through strength of arms alone. Rather, liberal ideals had proven *superior* to alternatives and were better suited to promoting human prosperity and well-being.

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hope (often borne out by reality) that one day liberalism will live up to its own ideals more fully.

The Triumph of Liberalism

The next piece of the puzzle of History is a precise definition of History having “ended,” which is perhaps the most misunderstood part of Fukuyama’s argument. Put simply, History ends when the “internal contradictions” that fatally undermine the ideas of one dominant system—in this case, liberal democracy—no longer exist. But what is an “internal contradiction”?

Communism is a good example of an ideology wracked by severe internal contradictions. Its most basic meaning holds that human beings’ interests are essentially *material*, which means that the most important social questions pertain to labor and economic production. As such, communism leaves little room for the flourishing of other values such as individualism. Communism also holds that history progresses when certain ways of life supplant others in a process called *dialectics*—in this sense, Karl Marx was also inspired by Hegel. Unlike Hegel and Fukuyama, however, communists believed that the dialectical process would eventually eradicate private property and ultimately cause nation-states to wither away.

It is undoubtedly clear why communist states such as the USSR resorted to extreme oppression to keep these ideas alive. Human needs and wants are far more complicated than what is suggested by the materialist communist narrative. History, meanwhile, is self-evidently not progressing toward utopias in which private property has been abolished. These are the contradictions that primed the downfall of communism: the ideology was no match for reality.

Contrast this with liberal democracy. Liberalism has not experienced communism’s wholesale collapse of confidence but has certainly come under attack in recent years: this is the topic of Fukuyama’s most recent book, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (2022). However, as Fukuyama points out, capitalist liberal democracy satisfies a whole range of human wants and needs, such as political representation, consumption, self-expression, and the freedom to choose one’s occupation. Of course, liberal democracy does all these things imperfectly, but the “end of History” is not supposed to be a utopia. Rather, it is simply the manifestation and proof of Winston Churchill’s observation that “democracy is the worst form of government—except for all the others that have been tried.”

We can illustrate this by citing Vladimir Putin’s recent invasion of Ukraine as an example. Indeed, this was the first attempt by one sovereign state to annex another since the end of the Cold War, with thousands of people dying in battle on European soil. However, this war is not, by itself, an example of “History” restarting. Ukraine has rallied behind the idea of sovereignty on a Western liberal model; the West, in turn, has united to defend Ukraine from Russia’s predation. There is evidence that the abortive war has weakened, rather than strengthened, the appeal of Putinism in Russia. In short, Putin has been unable to meaningfully challenge the *idea* of liberal democracy.

In summary, liberal ideas have evolved and spread over hundreds of years, with no competing system being proven superior so far. This suggests that the idea of liberal

democratic equality is both more internally coherent and more in accordance with human nature than alternative political systems.

Recognition

Fukuyama places great emphasis on one particular driving force of history: the “struggle for recognition” (135). He cites Plato to argue that this is a key fact of human psychology.

Plato divided the human “soul”—which we can take to mean the psyche—into three parts. First is the *desiring* part: that element of ourselves that seeks pleasure and gain be it money, food, sex, or any other basic need. Second is the *reasoning* part: our higher faculties, our ability to avoid satisfying our desires in our pursuit of rational goals. Third is the *spirited* part: this is the part of us that seeks recognition from others, which Plato called *thymos*.

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Fukuyama goes further than Plato and divides *thymos* into two. He coins the term *isothymia* to describe one’s desire to be recognized as *equal* to others. The UN Declaration of Human Rights begins with an acknowledgment of this fundamental need: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” This need is prevalent in all aspects of life. As an everyday example, young siblings will often feel that a situation is unfair if they are denied something that their sibling is given.

Fukuyama also coins the term *megalothymia* to describe one’s desire to be recognized as superior to others. Again, most people are familiar with this. They feel pride when they beat their competitors in a sport, artistic pursuit, or the cut-and-thrust world of industry and finance. Older societies provided far more outlets for megalothymia for the lucky few: kings, noblemen, church authorities, and warriors.

Thymos, Fukuyama believes, helps determine the course of History. Why did democratic ideals take hold of the imagination of so many in the world? Because they satisfy our desire for isothymia. In the 18th century, the ideals embodied in the French

Declaration of the Rights of Man and the U.S. Constitution resonated deeply with this aspect of the human soul. The precise spark that kickstarted the democratic movement in each country was different, of course. Americans wanted self-government without the humiliations of vassalage to Britain (“no taxation without representation”). The French upper classes wanted greater recognition and power relative to an absolute king, which caused the entire society to quickly demand equality before the law (at least for those men who were considered full citizens). In both cases, a set of ideas emerged that was designed to satisfy the human need for recognition to a greater extent than the previous regime.

The Last Man

We now face a problem: are liberally democracies truly *satisfying*? This is Fukuyama's central question. He warns that History will restart if liberal ideas fail to satisfy people's desire for recognition.

First, he notes the extent to which liberal democracy provides outlets for both isothymia and megalothymia. These include work and entrepreneurship, politics, and high-risk sports to satisfy our innate competitiveness and desire for experiences that transcend merely rational or consumptive activities. At the same time, Western democracies allow minority groups to seek collective dignity by bargaining for political rights, launching campaigns, and spreading awareness, as well as enjoying the freedom to practice diverse faiths. Recognition plays a key role in all these practices, and such a tolerance for different forms of life can only be found in liberal democracies.

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Liberal democracy has its drawbacks, however. Citizens of modern democracies are increasingly atomized and isolated. In the past 200 years, the pursuit of *meaningful* goals has become increasingly challenging. Our value systems have become fragmented and our traditional ways of life replaced by urban cosmopolitanism. The past, meanwhile, bears down upon us. We have seen empires and ideologies come and go, and they seem foolish to us now. Nothing truly *moves* us emotionally in the political sphere, not even liberal democracy, which most people in the West accept as a comfortable,

desirable status quo rather than an ideological project to get the blood flowing. Adopting a phrase from the 19th-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, Fukuyama describes the type of people who populate liberal societies at the end of history as "last men."

Fukuyama also thinks that unless liberal democracies perform their function extraordinarily well, people will start rejecting such state of affairs. He makes a series of profound and challenging remarks to highlight this:

To the extent that liberal democracy is successful at purging *megalothymia* from life and substituting for it rational consumption, we will become last men. But human beings will rebel at this thought. That is, they will rebel at the idea of being undifferentiated members of a universal and homogenous state, each the same as the other no matter where on the globe one goes. They will want to be citizens rather than *bourgeois*, finding the life of masterless slavery—the life of rational consumption—in the end, *boring*. They will want to have ideals by which to live and die. (214)

Hence, liberal democracy seems to have an "internal contradiction" after all. One day, deeply illiberal or traditionalist views might gain traction, and expansionist nations could wage serious wars of competition against liberal democracies, challenging them in the international arena in the same manner as Hitler during World War II. Perhaps a future regime will succeed. Like Napoleon in 1806, some antiliberal force may secure military

victory and a new “end of history” declared, one in which the contradictions of liberal democracies have been overcome and a superior form of living has emerged to represent the pinnacle of human development.

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At the same time, the contradictions of liberalism might start dismantling our democracies from *within*. We are arguably witnessing the start of this already. Polarization is on the rise; faith in liberalist tenets is being challenged, mainly from the political right. In addition, the political left’s lamentable preoccupation with identity has arguably failed to guarantee either the equal recognition for all groups that they claim to care about or the megalothymia and meaning that come from participating in a political cause. In both cases, citizens will surely be increasingly dissatisfied with the status quo.

Conclusion

Thirty years on, *The End of History and the Last Man* feels more prescient than ever. Far from being a naively triumphalist book, as many of Fukuyama’s critics argued, it is fruitful to view the book as a warning to people who populate the liberal democratic institutions: politicians, bankers, academics, lawyers, and the press. “Don’t get complacent,” Fukuyama writes. “People don’t only desire comfort and consumption. They want to feel that things matter; they need to feel a part of meaningful communities that have set ideas of right and wrong, and where values like valour and competition are rewarded, not just compassion and equality.”

The extent to which Fukuyama’s fears have been realized is difficult to assess. Despite several years of global “democratic recession,” we have yet to see

the meaningful triumph of an alternative ideological system. Then again, belief in Soviet communism had eroded in people’s hearts and minds long before the USSR fell.

However, we can keep a close eye on certain canaries in the coal mine: parts of the world that provide a good indication of the health of liberalism and a status update on History.

Some countries that only recently transitioned into democracy, such as Hungary, are now backsliding. Does Viktor Orbán’s “illiberal democracy” represent a genuine alternative to liberal ideals? “Orbánism” is hardly spreading around the world. The most we can say is that it is one of several regimes around the world advocating a grab-bag of illiberal and traditionalist policies. If these impulses consolidate into a coherent anti-Western bloc, they could one day pose a significant challenge.

In addition, some places that are currently illiberal might see the emergence of a liberal democratic movement. Iran in 2022 is a good example. At the time of writing, protests against religious orthodoxy and the morality police are threatening to unleash a wave of dissent that the regime cannot control. The women of Iran are fighting for their rights and dignities as individuals. They want isothymia: to be recognized as the equals of men and to make life choices accordingly. The gains made by these grassroots movements in the coming years will—we must hope—vindicate liberal ideals of personhood and respect.

Finally, some places that are currently liberal democracies are witnessing the growth of various antiliberal movements. The United States is the most worrying example because it is seeing the emergence of an intellectual movement opposed to the basic values and assumptions of liberalism. There are the Catholic “integralists,” who believe that the state’s role is to enforce traditionalist Christian morality; the national conservatives, who work within a liberal democratic framework but provide intellectual ammunition to Donald Trump and others who launch concerted attacks on liberal democratic institutions; and the wider sphere of the alt-right, which include ethno-nationalism, secessionism, and even outright monarchism.




In a footnote, Fukuyama mentions that he faced substantial criticism when he first proposed the ideas that would turn into *The End of History and the Last Man*. However, he states that “no one that I am aware of suggested an alternative form of social organization that he or she personally believed was better [than liberal democracy]” (pp.347–8). In the United States, at least, this is no longer true. We might witness the reemergence of History in the West sooner than we expect.



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The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 51 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different EU stakeholders.

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