

Session 1, Reading 1a: *The End of History and the Last Man*, By Fukuyama, Francis, 1992

Liberal Democracy may constitute the “end point of mankind’s ideological evolution” and the “final form of human government...As such, it may constitute the “end of history.” (p. xi) [By this he meant that liberal democracy was the goal or end point of political history. The book was misinterpreted by many reviewers to be a statement of fact rather than the description of a process. Fukuyama has been defending himself ever since: “The word ‘end’ was not meant in the sense of ‘termination’ but ‘target’ or ‘objective,’” he wrote in 2019. The Soviet Union had collapsed; it was clear to him that Marxist collectivism wasn’t the “end” of history in spite of what many had been arguing.]

“While earlier forms of government were characterized by grave defects and irrationalities that led to their eventual collapse, liberal democracy [is] arguably free from such fundamental internal contradictions. This [is] not to say that today’s stable democracies, like the United States France or Switzerland, [are] not without injustice or serious social problems. But these problems [are] ones of incomplete implementation of the twin principles of liberty and equality on which modern [liberal] democracy is founded, rather than of flaws in the principles themselves...” The ideal of liberal democracy [cannot] be improved on.” (xi)

What has ended is “history understood as a single, coherent, evolutionary process, when taking into account the experience of all peoples in all times. This understanding of history [is] most closely associated with the great German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel. It was made part of our daily intellectual atmosphere by Karl Marx, who borrowed this concept of History from Hegel, and is implicit in our use of words like ‘primitive’ or ‘advanced,’ ‘traditional,’ or ‘modern,’ when referred to different types of human societies. For both of these thinkers, there was a coherent development of human societies from simple tribal ones based on slavery and subsistence agriculture, through various theocracies, monarchies, and feudal aristocracies, up through modern liberal democracy and technologically driven capitalism. This evolutionary process was neither random nor unintelligible, even if it did not proceed in a straight line and even if it [is] possible to question whether man was happier or better off as a result of historical ‘progress.’” (xii)

“Both Hegel and Marx believed that the evolution of human societies was not open-ended, but would end when mankind had achieved a form of society that satisfied its deepest and most fundamental longings. Both thinkers thus posited an ‘end of history’: for Hegel this was the liberal state, while for Marx it was a communist society. This did not mean that the natural cycle of birth, life, and death would end, that important events would no longer happen, or that newspapers reporting them would cease to be published. It meant, rather, that there would be no further progress in the development of underlying principles and institutions because all of the really big questions had been settled.” (xii)

Does it still make sense, today, 225 years after Hegel and 175 years after Marx developed their theories, for us “to speak of a coherent and directional History of mankind that will eventually lead the greater part of humanity to liberal democracy? The answer I arrive at is yes, for two

separate reasons. One has to do with economics, and the other has to do with what is termed the ‘struggle for recognition.’” (xii-xiii)

In terms of economics, “All countries undergoing economic modernization must increasingly resemble one another: they must unify nationally on the basis of a centralized state, urbanize, replace traditional forms of societal organization like tribe, sect, and family with economically rational ones based on function and efficiency, and provide for the universal education of their citizens.” (pp. xiv-xv)

“There is no question but that the world’s most developed countries are also its most successful democracies... But economic interpretations of history are incomplete, because man is not simply an economic animal.” (p. xv-xvi) In addition, “There is no economically necessary reason why advanced industrialization should produce political liberty.” (p. xv)

The Anglo-American “understanding that was the theoretical basis of liberalism in countries like Britain and the United States” was founded on “enlightened self-interest—desire combined with reason... While Hobbes, Locke,...Jefferson, and Madison believed that rights to a large extent existed as a means of preserving a private sphere where men can enrich themselves and satisfy the desiring parts of their souls, Hegel saw rights as ends in themselves, because what truly satisfies human beings is not so much material prosperity as recognition of their status and dignity.” (p. xviii)

“Liberal democracy remains the only coherent political aspiration that spans different regions and cultures around the globe.” (xiii)

“Liberal principles in economics—the ‘free market’—have spread, and have succeeded in producing unprecedented levels of material prosperity, both in industrially developed countries and in countries that had been, at the close of World War II part of the impoverished Third World. A liberal revolution in economic thinking has sometimes preceded, sometimes followed, the move toward political freedom around the globe.” (xiii-xiv)

Many people [have] assumed that the possibility of the end of history revolve[s] around the question of whether there [are] viable alternatives to liberal democracy...But the deeper and more profound question concerns the goodness of liberal democracy itself, and not only whether it will succeed against its present-day” and future rivals. (xxi)

“[I]s liberal democracy prey to serious internal contradictions, contradictions so serious that they will eventually undermine it as a political system? There is no doubt that contemporary democracies face any number of serious problems, from drugs, homelessness, and crime to environmental damage and the frivolity of consumerism. But these problems are not obviously insoluble on the basis of liberal principles, nor so serious that they would necessarily lead to the collapse of society as a whole, as communism collapsed in the 1980s.” (xxi)

Can we “construct a coherent and directional Universal History of mankind,” and does it end with liberal democracy? (xxiii) I believe the answer is yes.

[Note: These are just selected extracts. The page on which each extract appears is provided in parentheses.)