

Searching for Recognition at the 'End of History': If Democracy is the End of History, Why is Democracy Losing Ground?

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Thirty years ago, Francis Fukuyama famously argued that the end of the Cold War was “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”¹ I recently argued that Fukuyama was basically correct: Nothing in the past three decades has cast doubt on the verdict that liberal democracy is the most successful form of government by virtually every conceivable measure, and that is not a terribly hard call.²

Yet we seem discontent with democracy. Within democratic societies, public opinion polls show declining support for key liberal values such as freedom of expression.³ Nationalist and populist movements in democratic societies across the world in recent years have, in their most benign form, taken shape as protest movements against the perceived shortcomings of democratic politics that seem rigged in favor of elites, such as the Brexit movement in the United Kingdom and the election of President Donald Trump in the United States.

In their more aggressive forms, nationalist movements have taken on an explicitly illiberal shape, as in Victor Orban’s Hungary and Jair Bolsonaro’s Brazil. Authoritarian regimes led by Russia and China have grown bolder in proclaiming the legitimacy and the goodness of nondemocratic forms of government: dictators feel less need to ape the rituals of democracy or cloak themselves in its rhetoric to bolster their credibility. And

¹ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest* 16 (1989): 3-18.

² Paul D. Miller, “Fukuyama Was Right (Mostly),” *The American Interest*, 14 January 2019.

³ Jacob Poushter, “40% of Millennials OK with limiting speech offensive to minorities,” Pew Research Center, 20 November 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/20/40-of-millennials-ok-with-limiting-speech-offensive-to-minorities/>.

political scientists have catalogued an increasingly worrying pile of data showing the decline in the number and quality of democracies across the world dating from around 2005.⁴

Why are human beings turning our backs on the most successful political and economic system we have ever devised? Fukuyama suggests an answer in his most recent book, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*.⁵ The answer, in his telling, lies in certain perennial features of human psychology and spirituality—the “demand for dignity” of his subtitle. These demands have been refracted through irrevocable historical experience, including the Reformation, the Romantic era, and the rise of identity politics, which collectively have bequeathed to us a certain way of viewing selfhood, statehood, and the relationship between the two. This relationship, Fukuyama worries, has burdened our democratic systems with increasingly unsustainable expectations, leading to the crisis of democracy in our day.

I.

“Demand for recognition of one’s identity is a master concept that unifies much of what is going on in world politics today,” Fukuyama proclaims (116). He traces our identity quest to three sources. First, we have a perennial psychological or spiritual yearning for others to know and affirm us. It is not enough that I have a sense of my own worth if other people do not publicly acknowledge it or, worse yet if they denigrate me or do not acknowledge my existence. Self-esteem arises out of esteem by others.

But this is a perennial feature of human nature. Certain social and cultural circumstances changed the way our unchanging spiritual nature expressed itself. The second source Fukuyama identifies was the Protestant Reformation, which helped create a notion of an “inner” self, opposed to an “outer” self (237), and that the inner self was the locus of our true being. Martin Luther helped elevate the conscience and spoke movingly of his inward struggles to fight sin.

Third, the Romantic Movement argued that the inner self was naturally good and authentic, while the outer self was a shell forced on us by the artifices of society. Where Luther fought his inner being, Rousseau sought to set it free: “Identity grows, in the first place, out of a distinction between one’s true inner self and an outer world of social rules and norms that does not adequately recognize that inner self’s worth or dignity” (237).

As Fukuyama says, “The modern concept of identity places a supreme value on authenticity, on the validation of that inner being that is not being allowed to express itself,” (440). Friedrich Nietzsche, similarly, spoke powerfully about our need, in an era in which God is dead, to fashion ourselves and our identities like a work of art, to create something new and beautiful for the world to esteem.

⁴ Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, and Condoleezza Rice. *Democracy in Decline?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015). Anna Lührmann, and Staffan I. Lindberg. “A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here: What is New About It?” *Democratization* (2019): 1-19.

⁵ Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018). Citations in this article are to Kindle locations.

We deserve recognition and dignity; we have an inner self; it is naturally good and the source of our authentic being; it is suppressed by society; and thus we have to fight to unearth and express our identities and—here is the main point—demand social and political recognition for our identities.

II.

Fukuyama argues these are the psychological and historical roots behind identity politics, nationalism, Islamism, and more. How does this work?

When we delve inward in search of our identities, we usually find things that we hold in common with others: our gender, our ethnicity or race, our religion, our language and culture. When we seek to express these things, we find solidarity with others expressing similar identities. That is why identity movements are movements of the group, not the individual. Very few of us are truly, completely unique.

Put another way, our drive for recognition is not limited to relationships among the family or tribe. We take it into the public square. “It is not enough that I have a sense of my own worth if other people do not acknowledge it,” Fukuyama says, “Because human beings naturally crave recognition, the modern sense of identity evolves quickly into identity politics, in which individuals demand public recognition of their worth” (245).

We express identity and look for recognition and validation in the public square. In this way, Fukuyama interprets identity politics and nationalism as flowing from the same underlying psychology. When minority groups demand recognition, we call it identity politics. When majority groups do the same thing, we call it nationalism. Nationalism is the identity politics of the majority tribe. Identity politics is the nationalism of small groups. In each case, groups of people defined by some shared identity trait look to the public square for validation and affirmation.

Nationalism and identity politics feed off of one another. As identities splinter and minority groups demand recognition, majorities feel threatened that their polity is disintegrating. That makes majorities keener to reaffirm their sense of identity as an antidote to the perceived fragmentation around them. As Fukuyama says, “This crisis of identity leads...to the search for a common identity that will rebind the individual to a social group and reestablish a clear moral horizon. This psychological fact lays the groundwork for nationalism” (848). Nationalism is “based on an intense nostalgia for an imagined past of strong community in which the division and confusions of a pluralist modern society did not exist” (968).

But as majorities advance nationalism based on their identity, small groups will feel left out and feel the need to double down on their demand for recognition for their group. In this way, the more each group advances their identity claims, the more the other feels threatened and responds in kind. Rival identity claims take the form of an arms race or a spiraling conflict. Identity politics lead to the balkanization of the public square, which is why Fukuyama is wary of them. “The rise of identity politics is one of the chief threats that they face,” he writes, “and unless we can work our way back to more universal understandings of human dignity, we will doom ourselves to continuing conflict” (123).

But Fukuyama is just as concerned about nationalism, which makes sense if nationalism and identity politics are essentially the same underlying phenomenon. Identity politics at least originates in a justified demand for equal recognition. But the demand for equality often elides into a demand for superiority “This is a large part

of the story of nationalism and national identity, as well as certain forms of extremist religious politics today” (407). When majority groups, nations, or religious movements express this demand for recognition, it is often a demand for supremacy, in which case it takes the form of militaristic, sectarian, xenophobic, or totalitarian movements.

In short, Fukuyama claims that the demand for recognition is at the root of everything from identity politics in the United States to the rise of Donald Trump, Brexit, the Islamic State, the rise of populism and nationalism around the world, the growing influence of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping, and the decline of democracy over the past 15 years.

III.

While it may seem like Fukuyama is contradicting himself or going back on his declaration of the ‘End of History,’ in fact he first raised these themes in the original essay and expanded on them in the book-length treatment, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992).⁶

“The end of history will be a very sad time,” he concluded in the 1989 essay. He lamented the passing of the heroic age of mankind: “The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one’s life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by...the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands.”⁷ History had ended in the prefabricated, conformist lanes of suburbia. He noted that “In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history.”⁸

Fukuyama warned of “a powerful nostalgia for the time when history existed,” the third challenge to the ‘End of History.’ It may be that humanity is incapable of existing without struggle. “Such nostalgia, in fact, will continue to fuel competition and conflict even in the post-historical world for some time to come.” Most presciently, Fukuyama suggested that “this very prospect of centuries of boredom at the end of history will serve to get history going again.”

Later, in the book-length treatment, Fukuyama explored the psychology of post-historical ennui further. He speculated that humanity under the conditions of the ‘End of History’ might become what Nietzsche called the “last man,” a creature so enervated by comfort, so satiated in all his wants, that he would barely be recognizable as human. Fukuyama feared that some people—usually men—will reject the unchallenging comfort at the ‘End of History.’ They will demand challenge and conflict, something to strive for, some to achieve. Instead of settling for the comforts of being a ‘last man,’ they will demand to be the ‘over-man,’ or *Übermensch*.⁹

⁶ Fukuyama, Francis. *The end of history and the last man*. Simon and Schuster, 2006.

⁷ Fukuyama, “The End of History?” 18.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Chapters 27-31.

For those who are skeptical about deep psychological or philosophical explanations, it is useful to consider for a moment how well this describes both Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Dylan Roof, the terrorist leader of the Islamic State and the white supremacist who murdered nine African Americans at a church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015. Driven by a prerational, atavistic contempt for what life in liberal modernity *feels like*, these men drag us back into History. Such men invoke some political or religious ideology or other to justify their careening assault on the ‘End of History’—but the specific ideology is essentially incidental, even if sincerely held. The real meaning of their movements is a simple rejection of a world they believe does not give them opportunities to strive and win the recognition they feel they deserve. There is both a nihilism and a narcissism at root of all rejections of liberal modernity, a selfish, violent, senseless demand that the world reorganize itself to accommodate their dreams of heroism.

IV.

Scholars are trained to distrust metanarratives, grand theories that purport to explain everything. Graduate school is essentially a long tutorial in how to critique other people’s work, usually by pointing out something to do with methodology, or scope conditions, case selection, research design, replicability, dataset integrity, cognitive bias, or any other of the easy missiles we lob at each other’s scholarship.

Yet there has to be a place for the big theory or there would be no progress in knowledge. Big theories are the paradigms that organize knowledge, without which we lack any framing for our own theories, our research, or our discoveries. Our work in turn builds to show how the reigning paradigms either work or require revision or rejection. Without the paradigm, we have no horizon, no orienting frame of reference; scholarship is stuck in a cul-de-sac and has no direction. Those who propose paradigms are proposing a direction for scholarship and posing a challenge: *prove me wrong*.

Fukuyama’s first foray into grand theorizing proposed the ‘End of History’ as an orienting framework for political science, drawing on political theory, comparative politics, and international relations. It was widely misunderstood and not widely adopted, perhaps because the emphasis lay too much on the ‘End of History,’ not enough on the ‘Last Man,’ and thus seemed to uncritical readers too triumphalist and determinist. In truth, “The End of History?” was neither, but the nuance was lost in the heat of debate.

In 1992, the same year Fukuyama published the book-length version of the *End of History*, Benjamin Barber wrote “Jihad vs. McWorld,” an *Atlantic* article about the conflict between the forces of tribalism and atavism on the one hand, and globalization and capitalism on the other.¹⁰ Barber’s vision was, more or less, a synthesis of Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations”¹¹ and a caricatured version of Fukuyama’s “End of History.” Both were simultaneously true, Barber seemed to be saying: the world was being torn apart by centripetal and centrifugal forces at the same time. The tribal forces Huntington identified and the globalizing force of Fukuyama’s ‘End of History’ were both real forces, and, to Barber’s mind, both destructive. Barber’s thesis

¹⁰ Benjamin Barber, “Jihad vs. McWorld,” *The Atlantic* (March 1992), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1992/03/jihad-vs-mcworld/303882/>.

¹¹ Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/1993-06-01/clash-civilizations>.

was and remains one of the best pictures of the post-Cold War era and might have served as the metanarrative of the era, but it was also undertheorized.

Now, with the union of the *End of History* and *Identity: The Demand for Dignity*,

Fukuyama gives us that theoretical underpinning. He completes—he does not repudiate—his grand metanarrative and offers the most impressive intellectual synthesis of the post-Cold War era. The ‘End of History’ and the ‘Rise of Identity’ go together. “Our present world is simultaneously moving toward the opposing dystopias of hypercentralization and endless fragmentation,” Fukuyama concludes in the new book (2544). History has indeed delivered its verdict: liberal democracy and capitalism are still irrefutably the best systems of human political and economic organization, and their continuing success explains the resilience of the free world despite endless internal and external challengers. But their superiority is true despite the “spiritual vacuity” that, as Fukuyama recognizes, lies at the heart of the liberal vision.¹² Liberalism, by design, offers no vision of the good and no central purpose to human life, which is both the source of its greatest strength and the basis of perennial critiques against it.

Because of that spiritual poverty, liberalism is only partially satisfying for those who demand equal recognition of their identities; it insists that we look elsewhere for deeper meaning and fulfillment. Worse, liberalism is not satisfying at all to those small number of people whose struggle for identity and recognition leads them to demand, not equality, but supremacy; or, put another way, who look to political and social recognition for their *ultimate* meaning and satisfaction. These people create the movements—tribalist, nationalist, fascist, communist, jihadist, and more—and that we continue to grapple with and that would drag us back into History.

V.

Fukuyama’s metanarrative is an extraordinary synthesis of political theory, psychology, comparative politics, international relations, and more. Fukuyama gives us an explanation of our political and social realities that is partly constructivist, insofar as it depends on the importance of ideas, beliefs, and identities that shape our reality, yet also party realist (at least classical or neo-classical realist) insofar as it depends on fixed, unchanging, and unchangeable features of human nature. It is also rooted in his global survey of political development, which was exhaustively catalogued in his two-volume work on the subject (*The Origins of Political Order* in 2011 and *Political Order and Political Decay* in 2014).¹³ It is hard to overstate both the breadth and depth of Fukuyama’s work.

And so it seems out of character that Fukuyama underutilizes a key resource that would give his theory even more explanatory power and prescriptive strength: religion. Fukuyama is working with essentially religious themes when he writes about human nature, our innate desire for recognition, how that desire is malformed in some people and turns into a desire for supremacy, and how it takes political forms. This seems to me a

¹² Fukuyama, “The End of History?” 14.

¹³ Francis Fukuyama, *The origins of political order: From prehuman times to the French Revolution*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011). Francis Fukuyama, *Political order and political decay: From the industrial revolution to the globalization of democracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014).

classic case of social scientists rediscovering intuitive, traditional beliefs and translating them into a scholarly idiom to enhance the ideas' intellectual authority. Christians and Greeks said much the same thing with words like 'sin,' 'hubris,' 'idolatry,' and 'tyranny.'

Fukuyama does, of course, recognize the Greek roots of his understanding of human nature with an extended riff on Plato in his early chapters. But when he turns, briefly, to Christianity, he mischaracterizes some of the most important ideas. For example, he describes the Augustinian monk turned Protestant theologian Martin Luther as believing that the inner man was sinful, "but could yet be saved through an inner act of belief," (479). That is not quite right: Luther, along with most Protestants, would say what believers are saved by is Jesus' death on the cross, and that so long as they trust in him through an inner act of belief. This seemingly small distinction carries the whole point: believers are saved through an act of God's initiative, not of their inner being.

Similarly, Fukuyama writes that "the Christian concept of dignity has revolved around this capacity for moral choice," (608) and, later, that Christians believed that dignity "rested on the ability of an individual believer to comply with a host of moral rules," (1333). Again, that is not quite right. Most Christians would locate the foundation of human dignity in humans having been made in the "image of God," (Genesis 1:27), which Christians have interpreted to mean a wide variety of things, including but not limited to humans' moral agency. As for the dignity of humanity resting on compliance with rules, Protestantism is nothing if not a sustained rejection of that view. These are small, and probably widely shared, misconceptions—but, importantly, they exacerbate the very problems with an inflated sense of identity and self-importance about which Fukuyama is so concerned.

And there is another way Fukuyama seems to miss, or underappreciate, the religious aspect or religious implications of his work. Religion can offer a deeper diagnosis of, and answer to, some of the major problems he identifies. For example, he argues that many jihadists are not motivated so much by "genuine religiosity," as much as by "the need for a clear identity, meaning, and sense of pride," (1056). But it is unclear why he would view religion, on the one hand, and a search for identity and meaning, on the other, as opposites. Religion is about the search for God, which, for those who take it seriously, *is* a search for meaning and, in community with other searchers, becomes one's source of identity. The jihadist search for God and for meaning ends in repugnant acts, but to deny that it is a search is to misdiagnose the movement and prescribe the wrong remedy.

The great political religions of the twenty-first century are a working out in political and institutional forms of a fundamentally religious impulse. Some policymakers and political scientists are uncomfortable with facing the religious nature of the tumultuous social and political currents around the world. But the right policy response is neither to ignore nor to crush the search for meaning. That would be counterproductive, proving the radicals' point that their governments are actively obstructing a meaningful life.

Fukuyama takes a few steps in the right direction in his concluding chapter of policy prescriptions. He calls, rightly enough, for governments to "promote creedal national identities," resist identity politics and nationalism, welcome and assimilate immigrants, impose a requirement for national service, and promote the culture of liberal democracy (2321ff). These are all fine ideas. But compared to his penetrating psychological and spiritual diagnosis of our current situation, Fukuyama's solutions seem only a beginning. In the face of a religious movement demanding meaning and purpose, tweaking immigration policy and increasing the

budget for government propaganda seems inadequate. They are little more than throwing sand on an eroding tidal barrier as the tsunami of political fragmentation approaches.

The solution is to recognize that the religious impulse is inevitable, to make room for it in legitimate democratic politics, and to promote avenues of religious expression in civil society. If the problem is a religious problem, the solution must be a religious solution. Government must not provide or dictate the solution lest it become yet another political religion. But, as importantly, neither should the state sideline, exclude, or denigrate religious expression within democratic politics. This requires that we reject the Rawlsian notion that we are only allowed to use publicly accessible reason in the public square.¹⁴ Rawlsian liberalism is itself a kind of political religion of secularism that did more to harm than help the health of American democracy.

Humans are religious; their governments should not pretend otherwise, even as they guard against the known dangers of politics and religion. The solution is to revive institutions of religious civil society—churches and mosques, school and hospitals, charities and missionaries. Though these institutions may bear a surface similarity to the movements that threaten liberal modernity, they are in fact its best protection. Such institutions offer meaning, purpose, community, and identity, and they channel the religious impulse into worship, family, and service, from which we can give and receive the recognition we crave without the dangers Fukuyama so insightfully warns against.

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¹⁴ John Rawls, *Political liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).