

# The Darkness at the End of History

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The fate of sophisticated arguments that become best-selling books seems to be a descent into caricature and cliché. Not simply the nuances, but even the substance and significance of the argument are overwhelmed by its reduction to catch-phrases and soundbites that circulate widely yet convey little of the author's ideas. This is probably an inevitable consequence of the interaction between intellectual and public culture, but it is nonetheless a rather depressing reality.

Few books demonstrate this dynamic as graphically as *The End of History and the Last Man*. The book has been portrayed as an uncritical paean to liberal democracy; a piece of post-Cold War triumphalism; an ethnocentric condescension, and much more. Most commonly of all, it has been cast as a deeply ideological piece of naivete: "who, at the close of the twentieth century could seriously believe that history has ended? Look, everywhere it is back!" has become a throwaway line for innumerable commentators congratulating themselves at putting so misconceived a piece of hubris firmly in its place. And yet in the face of all this, one is tempted to ask, "who indeed?" Certainly not the author of *The End of History and the Last Man*. In fact, despite the sunny optimism of which it is often accused, perhaps the most interesting aspect of the book is its darkness. It is this sense of pessimism and foreboding, I would like to suggest, that is particularly relevant today and that gives the book continuing and disturbing relevance.

Although *The End of History* is famous, its core argument is so frequently misconstrued that it bears restating. Following Alexandre Kojève's interpretation of Hegel, Fukuyama presents history as a meaningful process driven by the struggle for recognition. The willingness to overcome the natural fear of death in a quintessentially human quest and desire for recognition marks the start of truly "human" history. In its progressive, optimistic mode, history then becomes the story of a

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gradual (albeit often bloody and unintended) process where the limited recognition provided by the Master's domination of the Slave (who chooses a life of servitude in the face of the risk of death) gives way to ever-widening structures of recognition—a dialectical process culminating in the universal mutual recognition of each human being. Reinforced in Fukuyama's telling by the universality of scientific knowledge and the power of technical reason (and capitalism), this process results in the emergence and triumph of the liberal-democratic state and the end of history in the sense of a meaningful struggle for recognition.<sup>1</sup>

Much of *The End of History* is concerned with making this case and the lion's share of the engagement with it has done likewise. Yet there is much more to Fukuyama's argument than this. In its latter stages in particular, the book is suffused with a sense of foreboding. Fukuyama often reminds his readers that the end of history is provisional.<sup>2</sup> As a human creation, the liberal-democratic state is capable of being undone by the very forms of recognition that drove its ascendance. From the Left, he sees this taking the form of over-bearing governments that in the name of equality become a threat to liberty rather than expressions of it. But his greatest concerns involve the threat from the Right,<sup>3</sup> and it is this analysis, its insights and its limitations, that I want to focus on here.

Fukuyama's reading of the threat from the Right is fairly traditional, but incisive nonetheless. As the title of the book indicates, the central figure is Nietzsche, whose attacks on liberal democracy as the soulless, individualistic materialism of the Last Man and levelling forms of domination by "the Herd" have inspired generations of thinkers on the Right. For Fukuyama, the Last Man—the comfortable, bovine bourgeois whose inability to seek excellence, generate existential meaning, take risks, or commit heroically to the defense and collective interests of the political order—encapsulates a core dilemma for those who inhabit the world at the end of history: that liberalism reduces individuality to the lowest common denominator and political commitment to subjective desires and physical security. Lacking commitment to the wider values of the polity, liberal individuals risk becoming incapable of defending liberal institutions and culture against those who reject that culture and its institutions in the name of more fundamental religious, national, or other existential and collective values. That this critique has a long lineage from

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1. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Free Press, 2006 [1992]), xiv–xviii.

2. *Ibid.*, 334.

3. *Ibid.*, xxii–xxiii.

Nietzsche, through Max Weber, to Carl Schmitt does not make it any less important, for it continues to influence many nationalists, Identitarians, illiberal democrats, and others on the radical Right today. Indeed, through the efforts of New Right intellectuals and the activities of right-wing publishers like Arktos, interest in these and other thinkers of the “conservative revolution” has reached heights that few could have foreseen when *The End of History* hit the best-seller lists.

However, this conservative lineage alone is insufficient to grasp the dilemmas confronting the liberal-democratic order that Fukuyama wants to preserve, and contemporary developments on the Right reveal two perhaps even more pressing challenges. Although Fukuyama is aware of many of these issues, they raise dilemmas more radical than he allows, and cast the legacy of the book in a quite different light. The first concerns globalization and the universal value of technical expertise, capitalist expansion, and bourgeois values and virtues that Fukuyama sees as the core and mutually reinforcing components of the liberal-democratic order. For many of liberalism’s challengers on today’s Right, the problem is that this equation increasingly fails to add up. Globalization and expertise, they argue, are central problems of our time, not the solution to the riddle of history. The inspiration for these movements does not come from primarily the Nietzschean Right. Instead, at the very time that Fukuyama was developing the themes of *The End of History*, a radically different vision of liberal globalization was developing in Europe and the United States. These thinkers and movements present bureaucratic, legal, and scientific experts (not to mention dominant capitalist and cultural power holders) not as representatives of concrete universality, but as members of a global managerial elite who use their technocratic skills and knowledge as forms of power and domination. In France, these themes were influentially developed by the *Nouvelle Droite*. As two of its most prominent thinkers put the case:

In the process of globalization, Western civilization is promoting the worldwide domination of a ruling class whose only claim to legitimacy resides in its abstract manipulations (logico-symbolic) of the signs and values of the system already in place. Aspiring to uninterrupted growth of capital and to the permanent reign of social engineering, this New Class provides the manpower for the media, large national and multinational firms, and international organizations. This New Class produces and reproduces everywhere the same type of person: cold-blooded specialists, rationality detached from day-to-day realities. It also engenders abstract individualism, utilitarian beliefs, a superficial humanitarianism, indifference to history, an obvious

lack of culture, isolation from the real world, the sacrifice of the real to the virtual, an inclination to corruption, nepotism and to buying votes.<sup>4</sup>

In the United States, similar ideas took the form of a “paleoconservative” reaction led by figures such as Samuel Francis, who linked the depredations of abstract expertise and transnational capital to the decline of middle-American bourgeois values, prosperity, and political power. Once again, technocratic globalization is in this view not an abstract force of historical progress. It is the social and political project, and form of power, of a particular class—the managerial elite that is accused of dominating not only the economy and the state, but also the cultural institutions and elite educational establishments that govern the distribution of “esteem” and socially recognized forms of prestige, recognition, and advancement. Acting in its own interests while claiming to represent humanity as a whole, these liberal elites and institutions undermine the social and ideological foundations of bourgeois, national states. As Francis put it, “the expansionist force in managerial globalism is not the nation from which the managerial elite derives nor any political-cultural identity, as in historic imperialism, but the elite itself, which increasingly becomes an autonomous global force, transnational and cosmopolitan in its ideology and interests and, even in the developed managerial societies, increasingly alienated from the historic institutions and values of pre-managerial society.”<sup>5</sup>

In the eyes of the New Right, economic globalization, technical reason, and their associated elites have eroded the stability of the working- and middle-class bourgeois social strata rather than exemplifying its triumph, as Fukuyama claimed. Similarly, the globalizing liberal-democratic state does not represent the universal values he admires: it actually advances the particular values and interests of the new elites. It is the conservative James Burnham, not the neo-Marxist Milovan Djilas,<sup>6</sup> whose theory of the “New Class” animates these New Right opponents of liberalism—and their targets are the liberal and technocratic individuals, social strata, and institutions that Fukuyama saw as central to bringing about the end of history.

In the American context that Francis was addressing, the ideological goal of these arguments is to destroy the idea of America as an abstract “philosophical proposition about the equality of all mankind (and which therefore includes all

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4. Alain de Benoist and Charles Champetier, *Manifesto for a European Renaissance* (London: Arktos, 2012 [2000]), 141.

5. Samuel T. Francis, *Leviathan and its Enemies* (Washington, DC: Washington Summit Publisher, 2016), 473.

6. Fukuyama, *The End of History*, 293.

mankind),” and replace it with a hegemonic myth of the United States as a particular historical community of fate that excludes those who cannot or will not assimilate into it:

This is the real meaning of ‘America First.’ America must be first not only among other nations but first also among the other (individual or class or sectional) interests of its people. Unless a Middle-American nationalism (or any other sociopolitical movement) can achieve such cultural hegemony through the formulation of an accepted public myth, its political power and economic resources will remain dependent on the cultural power of its adversaries and eventually will succumb to their manipulation as it takes its cues on goals and tactics from its opponents.<sup>7</sup>

At the time that Francis wrote these words, he was as obscure as Fukuyama was famous, and the ascent of the neoconservative movement that the author of *The End of History* is often associated with seemed likely to ensure that would remain the case. Recent history, of course, reveals a rather different picture. The forces of nationalism and resentment that Fukuyama thought (or perhaps hoped)<sup>8</sup> would be tamed by market liberalism and “tolerant” nationalism<sup>9</sup> have gained force from liberalism’s very successes and evolution—something we might even see as an alternative dialectic directly subverting his guardedly optimistic liberalism. This self-generating crisis is quite different from the fears of the Nietzschean Right that, following C. S. Lewis, Fukuyama called a world of soporific or self-interested “men without chests.”<sup>10</sup> The subjects of New Right mobilization are classes, sometimes racialized classes, not “heroic” individuals. In the American case, the reaction often draws on a “middle American radicalism” that is exhorted (and claims) to defend its traditional bourgeois and national values and lifestyles from the threats posed by globalization, liberalism, and the “progressive” elites that dominate liberal-democratic institutions. Across the West (and elsewhere), religion, ethnos, gender, and nation are combined in powerful movements standing explicitly in opposition to “liberalism,” and these movements are given even greater force through the leadership of what Fukuyama presciently identified as the deleterious potential of “megalothymatic” individuals who relentlessly seek personal glory. One individual

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7. Samuel T. Francis, “Nationalism, Old and New,” *Chronicles* (June 1992): 18–22, at 22.

8. Fukuyama, *The End of History*, 201–07.

9. *Ibid.*, 271–72.

10. *Ibid.*, 300–12

whom Fukuyama presciently saw exemplifying this possibility (though at the time limited to the realm of commerce) was Donald Trump.<sup>11</sup>

As this shows, Fukuyama was well aware of the possibility of reactions against the end of history.<sup>12</sup> However, the book's individualistic orientation and the relatively harmonious view of the relationship between nationalism and universal liberal-democracy lead it to underestimate how that opposition could seek to mobilize classes and nations in ways that draw power directly from the impact of global liberalism, and indeed how liberal attempts to counter this opposition can actually further energize that opposition. As a result, liberal globalization is under attack from forces quite different and arguably much more socially and politically powerful than those of the Last Men. These forces are connected to the rise of "illiberal," "Christian," "Hindu," or other forms of Identitarian nationalist ideas and movements that take inspiration and draw energy from their opposition to liberal-democratic and globalizing institutions and elites. In one of his more pessimistic passages, Fukuyama claims that "modern thought raises no barriers to a future nihilistic war against liberal democracy on the part of those brought up in its bosom."<sup>13</sup> If he is correct, then this challenge is much more substantial and immediate than *The End of History* envisages—and the lack of barriers that he proclaims even more worrying.

These questions point to a second, even larger, potentially darker, and too often overlooked aspect of *The End of History*: Fukuyama's claim that in the final analysis political communities, orders, and institutions must be underpinned by an existential, perhaps even irrational, commitment. With typical clarity, he does not skirt this issue. Modern, liberal democratic recognition depends on particular, local, or national forms of community, allegiance, and recognition that are not universal. Modern recognition, he argues, "must rely on 'pre-modern,' non-universal forms of recognition to function properly. Stable democracy requires a sometimes irrational democratic culture, and a spontaneous civil society growing out of pre-liberal traditions."<sup>14</sup> The potential resonances of this argument with Francis's stress on the need for "myth" and "the historic institutions and values of pre-managerial society" are not hard to see. The key question, of course, concerns the nature of this "sometimes irrational" culture. Fukuyama's preference, both in *The End of History* and since, is for an irrational commitment to the institutions of liberal democracy

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11. *Ibid.*, 328.

12. *Ibid.*, 235–44.

13. *Ibid.*, 332.

14. *Ibid.*, 335–36.

itself, and there are clearly good reasons for this choice. But as he well knows, this is not the only answer that can be given. In articulations that go back at least to Carl Schmitt, this liberal or “parliamentary” response has been castigated as evasive and insufficient, and needing to be supplanted or overthrown by the anti-liberal politics of myth and enmity. Often bearing recognizably Schmittian themes, the contemporary radical Right carries on this alternative. As the followers of the *Nouvelle Droite*, those inspired by paleoconservative ideas, or the proponents of various forms of “National Conservatism” show, these are not ideas that have been banished by the teleology of History and the efforts of its representative elites and institutions. On the contrary, for these political movements the answer lies not in the pale institutions of liberalism, but in their rejection and replacement by more affectively powerful, supposedly existentially more fulfilling, and even “carnal” forms of nationalism, identification, and commitment that can oppose liberal domination and sweep it away where necessary.

These dynamics and dilemmas show that the philosophical issues and arguments central to *The End of History* are far from obsolete, and they are far from purely theoretical. Ironically, through the efforts and successes of the varied philosophical and political projects of the New Right, their significance has become all too clear in the decades since the publication of Fukuyama’s famous work. And they pose the obvious question of whether the order that he saw as the end of history may now itself be consigned to history. How, then, might one respond to these challenges? Since it underestimated key aspects of these reactions, *The End of History* provides little direct help in this regard. However, it continues to provide challenging insights about the limits of liberalism’s ability to do so.

The most obvious possible response is to turn to what Fukuyama insightfully identifies as the liberal legacy of Hobbes and Locke: a focus on individualism, scepticism, calculation, and moderation in the name of security, stability, and order. This is a powerful move, and one of liberalism’s most enduring lineages. But he also argues that it is insufficient, leading at best to the Last Man, and ultimately leaving liberal democracy unstable and vulnerable because it cannot provide the existential commitment to the political order that it ultimately depends on. Yet if the tolerant nationalism and “irrational” democratic culture that Fukuyama appeals to turn out to be insufficient, the future can look particularly bleak. Here, despite his partial disavowals, Fukuyama’s thinking may well be following a trajectory found in some forms of post-war political realism that sought to craft visions of a “realistic” or even “conservative” liberalism capable of meeting these challenges. Thinkers as diverse as Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans Morgenthau, and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., agreed that liberalism suffered from the potentially debilitating weaknesses Fukuyama

identifies and distanced themselves from the crude realpolitik that he also rejects. Their realism sought, however partially and unsuccessfully, to address these weaknesses and build political coalitions in support of liberal and democratic principles and institutions. One striking lacunae in *The End of History* is that it ignores the legacy and lessons of this Cold War liberalism. Playing closer attention to this history is particularly important today since its ideas, dilemmas, limitations, and fate resonate so powerfully as confidence in the end of history in the Hegelian sense seems ever more misplaced and mainstream conservatism confronts significant challenges from the radical Right.

*The End of History and the Last Man* is often said to have defined an era of unbounded liberal optimism. Yet history is often a realm of irony, and one suitably ironic possibility is that it is the oft-ignored pessimism and darkness of *The End of History*, not its much-trumpeted optimism and triumphalism, that are its most enduring insights. If this is so, then the book stands not just as an optimistic or naïve relic from the past, but as a pessimistic and frequently prescient diagnosis of our present and the challenges we face.

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