

Notes on Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?”

As the end of the century [in this case the end of the 80s] approaches, the triumph of Western liberal democracy again seems the inevitability that it did at the turn of the previous century. This is an absolute triumph of the Western *idea*. It is seen in the failure of all viable alternative ideas, and also in the spread of consumer culture around the world. This may signal the end of history in the sense of humanity’s ideological evolution, and the universalization of Western culture.

Note: all summary of Hegel’s philosophy is taken straight from Fukuyama. If you don’t like the interpretation, blame Frank, not me.

The end of history is a concept most often associated with Marx, but appearing earlier in his predecessor Hegel. Hegel was (according to Fukuyama) the first philosopher who saw man as a product of his historical and social environment. But unlike later historicists, Hegel did not turn to complete relativism. Rather he saw history as moving towards a point at which a final, rational form of society and state would become victorious. This victory, in Hegel’s view, was achieved in 1806 when Napoleon defeated the Prussian monarchy at the Battle of Jena. This was the victory of the ideals of the French Revolution, liberty and equality, over those of the old order. During the middle of the century, at some of the most turbulent times, Alexandre Kojève, a Russian emigre in France, was teaching that the flabby, weak-willed, prosperous states of Western Europe were forming the “universal homogeneous state” predicted by Hegel with the coming of the end of history.

Hegel saw history as driven by contradictions that existed first and foremost on the level of ideas. Human behavior is rooted in prior state of consciousness. In other words, ideas, mores, habits, religion and ideology, etc. begin as ideas, which can develop autonomously of the material world. Ultimately, however, these ideas determine human behavior (albeit perhaps with a lag time while the idea is spread and internalized). This is the absolute reverse of materialist thought (Marxist and otherwise) which holds that ideas are absolutely caused by material factors. Fukuyama uses examples from Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, as well as other anecdotes of different cultures behaving very differently (Spartan and Athenian, capitalist entrepreneur and aristocrat) to highlight the importance of ideas. Turning to the recent past, Hegel notes that the success of the NICs in Asia that are often used to prove materialism, actually may reflect cultural factors. He also notes that the reform movements in China and the Soviet Union could not be traced simply to material factors, which would have called for a change long before it occurred. Hegel, it should be noted, saw the victory at Jena as the victory of the idea. It would not be implemented fully for some time, but the truth had been reached ideologically, and it could not be improved upon. Fukuyama closes this section by noting that ideas clearly are affected by material factors. He separates himself from the teleological claims of Hegel, claiming that the absolute validity of Hegel’s argument is not important. What is important is what it suggests about the importance of ideas. Finally, he notes that he does not say that liberal economics causes liberal politics, but rather that both have their roots in the same liberal ideas. Finally, he summarizes the “content of the universal homogeneous state as liberal democracy in the political sphere combined with easy access to VCRs and stereos in the

economic” (8)

Next, in assessing if we are indeed at the end of history, Fukuyama looks to see if any fundamental contradictions remain which cannot be solved in the context of liberalism, that would be resolvable in some other context. In the 20th century there were two major challenges to liberalism: fascism and communism. When World War II destroyed the main fascist nations, the idea of fascism appeared ultimately self-destructive, and therefore was destroyed for the world. Communism proved more problematic. It raised the direct challenge of an issue (class conflict) that it claimed could not be solved in a liberal system. But, according to Fukuyama, the class issue has been solved in the West. There are still inequalities, but the system as a whole is fundamentally egalitarian. The remain issues are based on legacies (e.g. slavery and racism) which have persisted, but are fundamentally antithetical to the idea of liberalism. This is reflected in the decline of the appeal of communism and the left in general in the West.

More impressive than the failure of communism in the West is the success of Western values in the East. Most of Asia has accepted economic liberalism, and an increasing number of states are moving toward or have reached political liberalism as well. What is more, these nations (especially Japan) are helping fuel the spread of consumerism, the precursor of economic liberalism and the bane of other societies, to the broader world. Most importantly, China has (even in 1989) already abandoned the ideas of Marxism for economic liberalism in all but name, and ceased to support Maoists abroad. The abandonment of communism in China is far less important, however, than the abandonment of Leninism in the Soviet Union. By all accounts, the Soviet leaders and people had, by 1989, lost their faith in Marx. Communism still had defenders, but they were self-interested or cautious, not ideologically committed. Fukuyama goes on to detail the decline of Marxism in the Soviet Union, but I will not go into this.

There are a few other, less threatening alternatives to liberalism that remain. One is the growing fundamentalism seen in Christianity, Judaism and Islam. This arises in large part by the spiritual emptiness of liberal consumerist society. Still, liberalism rose in part, according to Fukuyama, out of the failure of religious oriented society to satisfy people. But only in the Islamic world has this taken on broad political form, and the appeal of radical Islam is strictly limited to the Muslim world. The others have largely been satisfied within liberal societies.

Nationalism might form another possible challenge, but it is generally limited, and often the result of failure to institute liberal society. [While this was before the wars in Yugoslavia, even a quest for a greater Serbia would hardly be a universalist threat to liberalism].

It is impossible to rule out the emergence of a new challenge to liberalism or a previously unrecognized contradictions, it seems that there is no real challenge on the horizon, and that in fact there has been little development since 1806.

At this point, Fukuyama looks at the effects of the end of history on international relations. He notes that the standard view of international relations holds that there will be little change [this was, of course, before the actual fall of the Soviet Union and emergence of a unipolar world could be predicted]. He notes, however that in fact much past expansionism occurred in the name of illiberal ideologies like fascism, Marxism, and imperialism. In a paragraph that goes a bit too far, but also predicts the Mearshimer article assigned for this week, he notes that the “neo-

realist” position would call for us to believe that if China and the USSR were to disappear, we should (among crazier things) expect West Germany and France to arm against each other again. This section basically describes a democratic peace argument, with the additional note that China and the USSR should be expected to be less belligerent (and support fewer belligerent people) as they become gradually more liberal. Still, he could not predict the fall of the Soviet Union, and saw the one possible major threat as a rise of slaphophilic fascism in the USSR.

Conflict will continue for some time. There will be ethnic and interstate conflict among the still historical nations. But with no great powers motivated to fight, great wars will disappear. Fukuyama ends on a somewhat sad note. The passing of history means the passing of causes that were worth dying for, daring, courage, and idealism. It signals the end of art and philosophy. In the end, boredom itself may become the contradiction that begins history again.