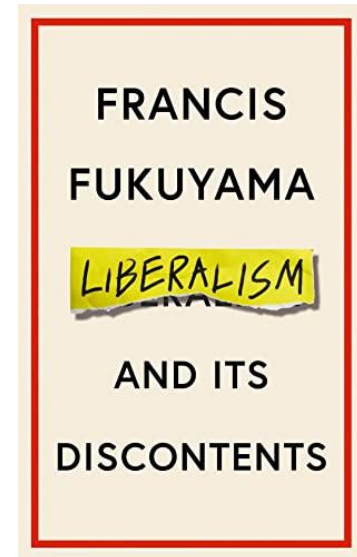


**“Enlightenment Principles Sure Beat Identity Politics  
But We Need Global Principles To Survive”**

A Review (March 2023) by Dick Burkhardt of

## **“Liberalism and its Discontents”**

By Francis Fukuyama (2022)



Fukuyama adopts a welcome centrist approach to classical liberalism: “Liberalism has been challenged in recent years not just by populists of the right, but from a renewed progressive left as well” (p viii). Radicals on the Left oppose universal human rights because they see these as having been co-opted by elites to protect their own power and privilege (as in neoliberal economics), becoming “obstacles to the march toward social justice for excluded groups” (p ix). Those on the Right see insidious encroachments on traditional religion and culture and are fighting back with political hardball, such as voter suppression and anti-woke edicts in red states.

What Fukuyama fails to emphasize is the last 40 years of escalating inequality, which has bred legitimate grievances on both the Left and the Right. Sometimes the cultural wars need to be seen as more of a symptom than a cause. Moral crusades and the like are very effective at mobilizing self-righteous anger, especially given the powerful but chaotic social media scene. Yet time and again societies that turn toward more authoritarian doctrines and regimes misjudge the collateral damage - to their own peril.

In this context, Fukuyama's conclusion is, I think, correct: "The answer to these discontents is not to abandon liberalism as such, but to moderate it" (p xi). To put this another way, Enlightenment values promise far more than they can deliver in the short run. They need staying power – to be reinvigorated in new and productive ways from one historical epoch to the next.

What are these Enlightenment values? Fukuyama and others characterize them as "individualistic" (vs class, identity, or other grouping), "egalitarian" (moral and legal equality), "universalist" (cutting across nations, cultures, etc), and "meliorist" (a word meaning that we can improve social and political conditions – the opposite of fatalism). A key value is "autonomy" – "the ability of individuals to make choices with regard to speech, association, belief, and ultimately political life" (p 2) and economic life. "Liberal societies embed rights in formal law, and a result tend to be highly procedural" (p 2) in contrast to the more informal and often biased and corrupt mechanisms of identity-based politics that hark back to tribal conflict and warfare.

Fukuyama regards "democracy" as referring to governance by electoral systems. This is theoretically distinct from liberalism, but in practice people normally seek "liberal democracy" since it's difficult to sustain one without the other. Liberalism itself, he says, has had three essential justifications: (1) It promotes peaceful resolution of conflicts, (2) It protects human dignity and autonomy, and (3) economic liberalism promotes economic growth. However he fails to note that economic growth depends fundamentally on cheap energy; that is, resources and technology. When present, liberalism may permit more rapid exploitation of those resources but often at the expense of equity and sustainability, undermining the first two justifications.

In fact, Fukuyama recognizes that the “freedom, reason, and tolerance” that are at the heart of liberalism are often overrun by powerful forces that are beyond the reach of liberalism. Right now this means not just the severe societal and economic dislocations caused by rapid neoliberal globalization but also the revival of big power politics and violence. To Fukuyama the problem is that “liberalism has seen its core principles pushed to extremes by advocates on both its right and left wings, to the point where those principles themselves were undermined” (p 17), one such extreme being neoliberalism. True, but this would seem to be because both Marxism and Capitalism arose to address the underlying economic drivers of society which are ignored by classical liberalism. Meanwhile even the most modern versions of Marxism and Capitalism have proved to be inadequate for a world facing existential crises, not just of geopolitics but of global resources and ecology.

As to neoliberalism, he points out that “Even as it promoted two decades of rapid economic growth, neoliberalism succeeded in destabilizing the global economy” (p 23). In addition, “inequality within countries has grown enormously” (p 29). And contrary to the views of many conservatives “Liberalism properly understood is compatible with a wide range of social protections” (p 27). He also points out that “there is no reason economic efficiency needs to trump all other social values” (p 36), citing how France and Japan protect small producers.

Then he really takes on the “utility maximization” theories of neoclassical economics – the mythological “economic man”, consumed by self-interest. In the real world “people constantly make choices between material self-interest and intangible goods like respect, pride, principle, and solidarity” (p 43). Then Fukuyama nails a fundamental contradiction of humanity: “While individuals have forever resented the strictures placed on them by ‘society’, they have at the same time craved the bonds

of community and social solidarity, and felt lonely and alienated in their individualism” (p 45).

As to the left end of political spectrum, Fukuyama says that freedom goes too far when “Freedom to choose extends not just to freedom to act within established moral frameworks but to choose the framework itself” (p 62). He explains that “liberalism that seeks to be relentlessly neutral with regard to “values” eventually turns on itself by questioning the value of liberalism itself, and becomes something that is not liberal” (p 63). This certainly describes the faction of the radical Left today fixated on critical theory and its racial and gender offshoots. Thus he sees identity politics as the key obstacle to liberalism on the Left, noting that “Contemporary avatars of critical theory are more popularizers and political advocates than they are serious intellectuals” (p 68).

In fact, Fukuyama goes through the major criticisms of liberalism and finds them all wanting – they “all amount to a charge of guilt by association”, failing to show “how the doctrine is wrong in essence” (p 76) only that it was not yet strong or mature enough in particular instances. Neither do the proffered more authoritarian or communitarian alternatives have a better track record in the modern world, often leading to much conflict, persecution, or corruption, descending into totalitarianism and fascism in the worst cases. But he could have been more specific by elaborating on influential philosophers, from Marxists on the left to Heidegger on the right, who mistakenly blamed WW I on liberal values. At least he does get into their later counterparts such as Marcuse, Foucault, and Derrida.

Diving in, he says that “Postmodernism, however, has moved us further from moral to epistemic or cognitive relativism, in which even factual observation is regarded as subjective” (p 86). Modern critical theory even

attacks reason, logic, and the scientific method, replacing them by power struggles as encoded in the identity politics of competing “lived experiences”. And “the right-wing argument went much further than this, seeking to erode trust in the credibility of scientists generally, and in institutions making use of science” (p 95).

Swinging his critique back to the left, “this understanding of identity, in time, merges cleanly with a historical nationalism more commonly associated with the right” (p 98). Note that this “dismantling” of any moral common ground, opens the doors, not just to ideological extremism, but to its real world consequences – cancel culture, cultural warfare, and political polarization.

To reinvigorate liberalism, Fukuyama first presents a critique from diverse religious traditions that liberalism “leaves liberal orders with a spiritual vacuum”, allowing “individuals to go their own way”, with “only a thin sense of community”, and that “liberal societies have often fostered the aimless pursuit of material self-gratification”. The fact is that “liberal orders do require shared values like tolerance and openness to compromise and deliberation” (p 116) yet these are viewed as insufficient by conservatives. Meanwhile the radical left is stomping its feet with impatience: “liberal incrementalism has thus been a complete failure in coming up with solutions that rise to the level of the challenges that society faces”(p 125).

An important point, not made by Fukuyama, is that the new radical left reveals its elitist roots by obsessing with issues of identity, especially from a narrow US-centric point of view, far more than with our existential global issues of climate, ecosystems, resources, and governance. They even promote illiberal biases and doctrines of identity, employing slander

instead of words of healing, scapegoating identity instead of tackling the escalating economic inequalities that are toxic to so many working people.

Fukuyama also reveals his own pessimistic point of view on the global situation, accepting great power politics as inevitable, rather than as a stage in the evolution of civilization that must be overcome if humanity is to survive rather than be drawn into apocalyptic scenarios: “Ultimate power, in other words, continues to be the province of national states” (p 131). He is fearful of delegating power to “new supranational bodies” forgetting that the visionary founders of the United States decided to abandon the dysfunctional Article of Confederation to establish an entirely new structure, untested in world history.

The European Union, though not as dysfunctional as the Article of Confederation, is in need of similar visionary leadership, not pessimism, to overcome demonstrated deficiencies, both of democratic engagement and of authority, such as more budgetary authority and fewer requirements of unanimity but with economic rules that are more locally than corporate driven. Meanwhile the US, though still the dominant political, economic, and cultural hegemon, has been declining in influence due to its internal failures, especially the turn toward more self-centered, narrow-minded bigotry on both political extremes. A resurgent center, including Fukuyama, is gathering steam but still struggling against the siren songs of the extremes.

Fukuyama notes that “both the nationalist-populist right and the progressive left have problems accepting the actual diversity that exists in their society” (p 142) and he also laments the “elite capture” of many institutions and that “both sides tend to dismiss government as incompetent, corrupt, and illegitimate” (p 146). Also that “group recognition threatens not to remediate but to harden group differences”

that we “need to focus on the rights of individuals rather than those of groups”. He asserts that “individualism is not fixed cultural characteristic of Western culture, as alleged by certain versions of critical theory. It is a byproduct of socioeconomic modernization that gradually takes place across different societies” (p 151).

On another liberal note, he notes that “autonomy was meant to manage and moderate the competition of deeply held beliefs, and not to displace those beliefs in their entirety” (p 152). This is precisely why many of us who deviate from traditional Christianity nevertheless object to militant atheism, not just to Christian dogma, crusades, and persecution, just as many Jews object to militant Zionism and many Muslims object to jihadism, while still honoring the goodness in those religions.

In fact this is Fukuyama’s final note: “Sometimes fulfillment comes from acceptance of limits. Recovering a sense of moderation, both individual and communal, is therefore the key to the revival – indeed to the survival – of liberalism itself” (p 154).

Still, it seems to me, that liberalism may be necessary, but not sufficient. That we need a more expansive vision of citizenship, of cultural and economic life, of governance and survivability on planet earth. This would include responsibility to future generations globally, and to the evolving earth itself as a living being – Gaia. That is, if we organize ourselves to take care of Gaia, Gaia will take care of us. Some already know this, especially scientists and activist youth. While the extremes are bogged down in scapegoating, we need people in the middle, like Fukuyama, to not lose hope – to broaden their vision: How do we organize society on a global scale to take care of Gaia?

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