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[Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis has been the subject of continuous debate and criticism since the publication of his original essay in The National Interest in the summer of 1989. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of its publication, H-Diplo/ISSF is delighted to publish the following assessment of the Fukuyama thesis by John Mueller, which is adapted from his recent essay in Political Science Quarterly (see details below in footnote 1). Mueller’s position that Fukuyama’s argument appears to be “fundamentally right” in light of the events of the last quarter century will certainly spark renewed debate over the nature of international relations, democracy, and capitalism in the twenty-first century.]

Fukuyama’s thesis will also be the focus of two panels at the Cato Institute in Washington, DC on Friday June 6, beginning at 1pm. The panelists will include Francis Fukuyama of Stanford University, Michael Mandelbaum of Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies,

¹ This essay is adapted from a longer and fully footnoted version published in *Political Science Quarterly*, Volume 129, Number 1 (Spring 2014), 35-54.

<http://politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/warsawPSQfin.pdf>

Marian Tupy of Cato, Adam Garfinkle, editor of American Interest, Paul Pillar of Georgetown University and the Brookings Institution, and John Mueller of the Ohio State University and Cato. Information on the panels can be found at <http://www.cato.org/events/francis-fukuyamas-end-history-25-years-later>. The panels can also be viewed free of charge at www.cato.org/live.]

--James McAllister, Williams College

Twenty-five years ago, Francis Fukuyama advanced the notion that, with the death of Communism, history had come to an end.² This somewhat fanciful, and presumably intentionally provocative, formulation was derived from Hegel, and it has generally been misinterpreted. He did not mean that things would stop happening— an obviously preposterous proposal.

Rather, he contended that there had been a profound ideological development. With the demise of Communism, liberalism (democracy and market capitalism), its chief remaining challenger after the extinguishment earlier in the century of monarchy and fascism, had triumphed over all other governmental and economic systems or sets of ordering principles. Looking for future challenges to this triumph, Fukuyama examined the potential rise of destructive forms of nationalism and of fundamentalist religion, but found them unlikely to prevail. Thus, he argued that the triumph of liberalism was likely to be permanent.

Evaluating developments in the quarter century since the essay appeared, it appears that Fukuyama had it fundamentally right.

Democracy continued its sometimes-halting progress after 1989 as it replaced Communism in much of eastern Europe and the splintered USSR. In Africa, there has also been notable democratic progress in quite a few places, most spectacularly, of course, in South Africa. Also impressive is the way the world's most populous Muslim country, Indonesia, successfully navigated its way to democracy after 1997. Though far freer than in their Communist past, both China and to a lesser extent Russia remain substantially recalcitrant, however.

Democracy has yet to penetrate deeply into the Islamic countries in the Middle East. However, where leaders have allowed elections, as in Algeria and Iran in 1997 (and then again in Iran in 2001 and 2013), voters displayed considerable ability to differentiate and express their interest even though the choice of candidates and freedom of speech was limited. And some Muslim states in the area, such as Turkey, Pakistan, and Qatar, have certainly been able to move substantially, if sometimes erratically, toward democracy. The popular revolutions waged throughout the Middle East beginning in 2011 suggest further progress may be in the offing, although things have been very rough so far.

Capitalism has been counted out quite a few times. For example, in 1950 Joseph Schumpeter famously and repeatedly declared "centralist socialism" to be the "heir

² Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *National Interest*, Summer 1989, 3-18.

apparent” to capitalism.³ Things have changed markedly since then. As economist Robert Heilbroner, who is not usually known as an ardent free-marketeer, noted in 1993:

There is today widespread agreement, including among most socialist economists, that whatever form advanced societies may take in the twenty-first century, a market system of some kind will constitute their principal means of coordination. That is a remarkable turnabout from the situation only a generation ago, when the majority of economists believed that the future of economic coordination lay in a diminution of the scope of the market, and an increase in some form of centralized planning.⁴

In many respects the economic consensus Heilbroner notes burgeoned only recently, particularly after the abject and pathetic collapse of command and heavily planned economies in the late 1980s and early 1990s that seems to have substantially triggered Fukuyama’s essay.

In practice, all capitalist, or market capitalist, states, may not end up looking a great deal like each other—any more than all democracies do. But, substantially and increasingly, the debate is likely to be more nearly a matter of degree than of fundamental principles.

Thus, when the world plunged into widespread economic crisis in the late 1990s and then again after 2007, proposed remedies variously recommended tinkering with the system, and not, as in the 1930s, abandoning it. Notably, international trade was not substantially cut back, and there were no widespread calls for trade protectionism, for the imposition of wage and price controls, or for confiscatory taxes on the rich. And when some enterprises were deemed too big to fail, there were sometimes efforts to subsidize their recovery and to increase regulation, but not to nationalize them or to permanently take them over.

In the 1990s, particularly after civil warfare broke out in Yugoslavia, many held nationalism, or ultra-nationalism, to be a potential rival to liberalism and therefore a vital challenge to the Fukuyama thesis—or even a devastating refutation of it. The “breakdown of restraints” in Yugoslavia was widely held to be part of “a global trend.”⁵ At times, this approach was extravagantly expanded to suggest that whole civilizations were clashing.⁶

³ Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1950), 417.

⁴ Robert Heilbroner, *21st Century Capitalism* (New York: Norton, 1993), 97.

⁵ Cvijeto Job, “Yugoslavia’s Ethnic Furies,” *Foreign Policy* (Fall 1993): 71. See also Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Pandaemonium: Ethnicity in International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); David A. Hamburg, *Preventing Contemporary Intergroup Violence* (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1993); Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Out of Control: Global Turmoil on the Eve of the 21st Century* (New York: Scribner’s, 1993).

⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

However, this perspective proved to be unfounded. In Yugoslavia, 'nationalist' and 'ethnic' conflicts were spawned not so much by the convulsive surging of ancient hatreds or by frenzies whipped up by demagogic politicians and the media as by the vicious ministrations of small—sometimes *very* small—bands of opportunistic predators. These were either recruited for the purpose from prisons and elsewhere by political leaders and operating under their general guidance, or else they were formed from what were essentially criminal and bandit gangs. In other places, particularly in Africa, groups, their members often addicted to alcohol, drugs, and Rambo movies, engaged in criminal predation in a permissive atmosphere in which the central government had essentially failed.

On balance, far from destroying what might be called the 'Fukuyama process,' nationalism has proved to be a constructive force in many places. It aided the difficult and painful process of unification in Germany for example, and it probably helped strengthen Poland's remarkable political and economic development of the 1990s. At any rate, far from providing an ideological challenge to democracy and capitalism, nationalism has more commonly embraced them. Whether Russian President Vladimir Putin's nationalist-oriented foray into Ukraine in 2014 changes this in any important way remains to be seen.

Just as the apparent rise of violent nationalism and ethnic conflict had been taken to be a refutation of Fukuyama's thesis in the last decade of the twentieth century, the apparent rise of violent religious fundamentalism, which was brought into focused consideration by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, was taken to be a refutation in the first decade of the twenty-first. However, with the September 11 attacks and subsequent activity, such extremists, far from igniting a global surge of violent religious fundamentalism, mainly succeeded in uniting the world, including its huge Muslim population, against their violent jihad. For example, in polls conducted in thirty-five predominantly Muslim countries by 2008, more than 90 percent condemned bin Laden's terrorism on religious grounds.⁷ Al-Qaeda activities have also turned many radical Islamists, including some of the most prominent and respected, against it.

Robert Grenier, a former top CIA counterterrorism official, notes that "al-Qaeda is its own worst enemy. Where they have succeeded initially, they very quickly discredit themselves."⁸ Grenier's improbable company in this observation is Osama bin Laden, who was so concerned about al-Qaeda's alienation of most Muslims that he argued from his hideout that the organization should take on a new name.

Terrorist groups variously connected to al-Qaeda may be able to do intermittent mischief in war zones in the Middle East and in Africa, but likely nothing that is very sustained or focused. Moreover, the groups seem, at least for now, to be overwhelmingly focused on local issues, not on international projection or on civilizational challenge.

⁷ Fawaz Gerges, "Word on the Street," *Democracyjournal.org*, Summer 2008, 75.

⁸ Quoted in Joby Warrick, "U.S. Cites Big Gains Against Al-Qaeda," *Washington Post*, 30 May 2008.

Fukuyama also predicts that the end of history would be characterized by boredom, bemoaning the fact that “the willingness to risk one’s life for a purely abstract goal,” an enterprise that called for “daring, courage, imagination, and idealism,” would be replaced by “economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands.” There will be no art, no philosophy, and “centuries of boredom at the end of history.”⁹

There may a few people out there who can contain their enthusiasm for dying for abstractions and who would not mind becoming the butt of a process devoted to fulfilling their every “sophisticated” demand. And for most, boredom would be considerably preferable to having to pay attention to such dramatic disasters as genocide in Rwanda, terrorist destruction in New York, tsunamis in Japan, and chemical warfare in Syria.

Nonetheless, Fukuyama’s somewhat bizarre comment should be evaluated. Liberal ideology may have won out in the sense that it is the only one left standing. And it does not seem to have an ideological challenger on, or even over, the horizon: postmodernism? Deep environmentalism? The China half-way model? Rule by Mullahs? But its triumph, if that is what it is, does not seem to have been accompanied by any sense of exhilaration or even much satisfaction.

Fukuyama notes that democracy and capitalism both have a kind of “emptiness at the core.”¹⁰ It can be difficult to get excited about a political or economic system whose chief, and perhaps only, rallying cry is that it is at least marginally superior to other alternatives that have been tried from time to time.

In both systems, compromise is far more common than glorious victory, messiness than crisp decisiveness, and perpetual squabbling than edifying clarity. And both also inevitably cause—indeed, exacerbate—an inequality of result: while both leave people (equally) free to speak their minds and to come up with products others may happen to find worth buying, some people will do better with the opportunity than others due to what Fukuyama calls “natural differences in talent and character”¹¹ as well, it must be added, to luck.

In addition, even when capitalism and democracy do deliver, their accomplishments generally go unappreciated. When things get better, we quickly come to take the improvements for granted after a brief period of often-wary assimilation. Moreover, many improvements of the human condition are quite gradual and therefore difficult to notice at the time.

⁹ Fukuyama, “The End of History?” 18.

¹⁰ Fukuyama, “The End of History?” 14.

¹¹ Francis Fukuyama, “The Future of History,” *Foreign Affairs* 91 (January/February 2012): 58.

In his article, Fukuyama argues that there is a great deal to the “autonomous power of ideas,”¹² suggesting that it is important, as political scientist Robert Dahl has put it, to treat “beliefs and ideas” as “a major independent variable.”¹³ After the fact it is sometimes possible to come up with explanations for why an idea came to be accepted, but these explanations often appear to be ad hoc as well as essentially arbitrary in their willful efforts to ignore luck and consumer caprice. At bottom, the process may be as mysterious as that attending the acceptance of new commercial products. Something like 90 percent of all new products fail despite dedicated marketing efforts by their hopeful hawkers. The acceptance rate for ideas is likely far worse.

Fukuyama seems to have been right about the essential appeal and the (perhaps modest) superiority of democracy and capitalism to the known alternatives, and there does seem to be a general, perhaps even natural, migration toward them. However, even if they are superior, there is no physical reason, since they are merely ideas, why they can’t capriciously be rejected for an alternative that suddenly gains, or returns to, favor. For millennia, people found appeal in authoritarian orderliness and in price controls, and they could again. On the other hand, some ideas do seem to die out completely: formal slavery, a major human institution that was, like formal dueling, summarily hounded out of existence in the nineteenth century, shows little sign of making a comeback.

The central policy implication of the experience with the remarkable rise of democracy and capitalism is to suggest that, if trends are on one’s side, it may well be best not to work too strenuously to move them along. Seeking to improve the workings of democracy and market capitalism in the West makes sense for many reasons. However, efforts to impose them are likely to be unnecessary and can be costly and even counterproductive.

The West may have helped nudge the Fukuyama trends along in some ways over the last quarter century—particularly with its cooperative work with local forces to deal with terrorism and with its efforts to stabilize shaky peace when civil war combatants have become exhausted. Its most important contribution, however, has been to provide an attractive role, or fashion, model, something that proved especially notable for the transition in eastern Europe. People do not seem to need a lot of persuasion to find appeal in shining cities on hills that are stable, productive, and open even if some of the luster wears off as they get closer.

John Mueller is a political scientist at Ohio State University and a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington, DC. Among his books are *War and Ideas*, *Atomic Obsession*, *Overblown*, *The Remnants of War*, *Retreat from Doomsday*, *Astaire Dancing*, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion*, and, with Mark G. Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money*. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, has been a John Simon Guggenheim Fellow,

¹² Fukuyama, “The End of History?” 6.

¹³ Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971), 188.

and has received the International Studies Association's Susan Strange Award and Ohio State University's Distinguished Scholar Award. He has been a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC, the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, and the Norwegian Nobel Institute in Oslo.

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