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REVIEW ARTICLE

The Road to Denmark – and Beyond . . .

After the End of History: Conversations with Francis Fukuyama, edited by Mathilde Fasting, Washington, DC, Georgetown University Press, 2021, ix + 214 pp., $25.26 (cloth)

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In a series of widely read publications, Professor Francis Fukuyama has explored the question concerning the potentially efficacious pathways that societies might take to transition from conditions of limited political freedom to those of comprehensive individual political freedom. This question of modernization has long challenged political scientists. He regards political freedom in the form of liberal democracy as far superior to other competing forms of government.

For some nations, the despotic order of society and politics has acquired the aura of historical inevitability. In a conversation between a Russian magnate and a German diplomat in the nineteenth century, either Ernst Friedrich Herbert zu Münster or his father, George Herbert zu Münster, the Russian nobleman said: "*Le despotisme tempéré par l'assassinat, c'est notre Magna Charta*" ("Despotism tempered by assassination, that is our Magna Carta") (*Quote/Counterquote*, http://www.quotecounterquote.com. 2011/03/despotism-tempered-by-assassination.html). Nations such as Denmark, on the other hand, are considered the benchmark of freedom.

In her conversations with Professor Francis Fukuyama, intellectual historian Mathilde Fasting, a fellow at Civita, one of Norway's most important think tanks, canvasses many of the theoretical and practical reasons that pertain to nations travelling the long road from despotism "to Denmark," to liberal democracy, at least in Fukuyama's opinion. She also canvasses the many challenges, endogenous and exogenous, that contemporary liberal democracies face. These interviews were held in 2018, 2019, and 2020 in Oslo and at Stanford University, where Fukuyama is director at the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law.

Fasting observes that "after meeting and talking to Fukuyama in 2018, the idea of a dialog emerged as the best way to express Fukuyama's important insights in a way that could also highlight the scope and variety of his work over more than three decades" (viii–ix). The title of each chapter is framed as a question which introduces both the topic of that chapter and the subsequent questions asked within that chapter. The effect is less a literary dialog or a conversation than an interview.

Fasting's questions embrace the spectrum of Fukuyama's life and thought. Not all her questions are simple forehand lobs—she is aware of the many controversies that his

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opinions have engendered, and she is quite happy to hit a hard top spinning forehand return shot to him to elucidate a definitive response. The reader is introduced to the many topics that Fukuyama has reflected upon, such as the causes of the historical rise of liberal democracy, the role of the state in modern liberal democracy, and its future in terms of the role of human biotechnology. In addition, the reader is introduced to his reflections on the rise to prominence of social media in contemporary political discourse, the rise of identity politics in the light of his long-standing commentary on the role of recognition in politics, as well as the global rise of national populist movements. In so doing, Fasting presents an illuminating picture of Fukuyama's evolution from a politically detached student to the neoconservative for which he was well-known, to his subsequent apostasy, and then to his present-day position as a classical liberal, albeit as a card-carrying Democrat, an interesting indicator of America's ebb to the Right (9–10, 33, 62, 68–69).

The reader discovers much about Fukuyama's family heritage—their early struggles and their eventual success in their adoptive country (51–58). The reader also learns about Fukuyama's early literary interests and his encounters with postmodernist thought, his early interest in political theory, and his eventual focusing on political development studies (59–62).

With this new focus he was able to find an immediate outlet for his formidable gifts of research and analysis, and later, for writing. Roles at the RAND Corporation and the State Department soon followed. A short speculative essay in an obscure conservative magazine in 1989 caught the mood of the post-Cold War *Zeitgeist* which formed the basis of an enlarged study, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press, 1992). Freed from the hazards of academic tenure track considerations, Fukuyama followed up this study with subsequent reflections on the less formal institutions of liberal democracy such as trust. His enduring success as a public intellectual inevitably led to his return to academia (63–69).

In these interviews, Fukuyama reminisces about the heady days of the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of the Warsaw Pact. While employed at the State Department and the RAND Corporation he quickly realized the momentousness of the passage of events. His work took him to the Soviet Union where he experienced firsthand the phoniness of their formal research. He duly communicated his opinions to his superiors and proposed an essay for publication (63–64, 72–73).

Fukuyama's celebrated essay "The End of History?" was published in the summer of 1989 issue of *The National Interest*. Its effect "was a sensation" (64–65). Fukuyama would later argue that he had not intended it to be taken so literally, that he had been misunderstood. As he now explains:

> A contemporary synonym for history in this sense would be "development" or "modernization." The question of the end of history was not the stopping of time. It was the question of where modernization was leading. (72)

Fasting reinforces his point by quoting from his later essay in which he comments that his point was essentially a normative and not empirical one (73). Fukuyama argues further that contemporary right-wing critics are "slowly developing a view that the problem really is with liberalism, that you don't want an open and completely tolerant society" (74). He believes that much of the hostility to his thesis "was related to American foreign and economic policies" (75), concluding that "Right from the beginning I saw that the

European Union would represent more of the true end of history than the United States," that regimes as they modernize "strive to become—like Denmark" (75, 76).

Fukuyama's rejection of methodological individualism and his preference for a sociobiological understanding of human behaviour point to his general conservatism. Human beings are naturally inclined to help their relatives and friends, and to refuse help to strangers. Political corruption is a pathological example of this (2–3). He draws on the thought of Plato and Aristotle, because "[t]hat's the beginning of this natural rights tradition in Western thought, which says that rights are grounded in human nature" (134). It follows for Fukuyama that "[i]f you believe that rights are grounded in human nature, and if you can actually change human nature, then you have thrown human rights out of the window, in a certain sense, because the two are related" (134). Fukuyama also rejects the rational individualism of the economists, as well as Kant's deontological conception of the individual which removes individuals from their natural and social contexts (17–19, 104–6, 134–35, 140–41).

However, Fukuyama also argues that "[t]o the extent that they [human rights] are universal, you would have to argue that this is true in a historically contingent way. That is to say, all societies cross-culturally tend to evolve in similar ways and produce similar values over time as they modernize" (136). He notes their relatively recent development in the West and "the issues around the enforcement of universal rights," as well as the issues associated with biotechnological changes to human nature (136–37).

Comparison forms the basis of Fukuyama's methodology. He rejects both large-N statistical analysis and the single-N approach of the historian and the anthropologist. He avers that:

> We try to combine some of the richness of the single-N studies and the scale of the large-N ones. You also do a comparative analysis so that you can draw some generalizations. You can recognize patterns of political order. I suppose at this point you would have to say that there is a fourth approach, which is to do experiments in which you compare one community that has undergone some kind of change or intervention with a control community that is evenly matched but did not receive the intervention. (100)

For Fukuyama, understanding a society's institutions is crucial to understanding how societies function, as well as their capacity to modernize. Rigidity and changes to mission purpose are common problems with institutions (100–103).

The sequence in which the institutions of a liberal democracy developed historically significantly shapes the structure of its contemporary form. He notes that the early demise of extended kin groups facilitated the rise of [western] European liberal democracy. In [western] Europe, the rule of law developed before the state and democratic institutions. In the United States, democracy was established before the state. The prior development of a strong state might compromise the development of the rule of law and democracy. He is skeptical regarding the application of this sequencing of institutional development in the contemporary world. On the other hand, Fukuyama believes that

> [t]he one advantage that any contemporary developing country has is that they don't have to reinvent the wheel. They do have practices from other countries that they can import, and although you cannot just import Denmark into any given country, at least it helps knowing that certain institutions have worked in other places. (94)

In Fukuyama's opinion, contemporary liberal democracies face six interrelated problems: identity-related conflicts; right-wing populism; the erosion of trust in institutions; the abuse of social media platforms; economic inequalities and rapidly advancing biotechnology (15–19, 41–49). The last he rates as quite serious (46), although he gives most attention to the first. Fukuyama correlates identity struggles with his long-term reflections on the human need for recognition, or in Platonic terms, *thymos* (12–15, 109–23). Presciently, he considers right-wing identity movements to be "a threat to democracy" (114).

Identity politics, he claims, has replaced economic ideology as "the global axis of world politics" (12). This development is clearly related to the decline of trust in society and to the rise of right-wing populism, partly as the poor turn away from the Left (13–14), and partly due to the fear of the middle-class of facing poverty and loss of status (22–23). The enemies of democracy know how to use social media to effectively polarize these identity cleavages (41–49). One consequence concerns the tendency of right-wing populists "to undermine the rule of law institutions" (12, 23–22, 45). Fukuyama has little to say about the rise of economic inequality other than to observe that when combined with identity politics, the result is the election of right-wing populist governments (113–14, 118–19, 129). He argues that trust, a fundamental attribute of capitalism, has been declining in the United States because of "changes in technology and the nature of work," as well as "globalization and the elevated levels of inequality that it created" (129). Fukuyama does not link this directly with the rise of identity politics and populism, although it is perhaps implied (123–32). Lastly, he argues that biotech changes to human nature pose a different order of threat to our conception of equality (137–39).

Fukuyama and Fasting's references to contemporary geopolitics strike a pessimistic note. The rise of right-wing populism and of illiberal forms of identity politics is, in Fukuyama's opinion, symptomatic of political decay. His scorn for former President Trump and the failures of his administration is unrelenting. This new cleavage will endure, he believes (21–40). Fukuyama expects that China's economic and political strength will continue to grow, although he argues that "I don't think China has a readily exportable model" (144). He doubts whether the export-driven growth model can now be replicated due to the existing global overproduction. While China's rise will continue, he does not "think that China will ever occupy the kind of hegemonic position that the United States has had" (150).

Fasting and Fukuyama conclude their conversations on a mixed note. Fukuyama tends to reject Samuel Huntington's thesis of the "clash of civilizations" because by interpreting world history purely in terms of religious movements it misses many important details. Culture is but one influence. For Fukuyama "[t]o the extent that there's a kind of universal history, it has to be based on a historical assertion that countries modernize and that they go through certain familiar stages that do not depend on culture" (154).

The nation-state remains a key political institution, and the goal should be to form a benign rather than an aggressive non-rational national identity for the state. What he has in mind for a modern liberal democracy are political principles that are "nonracial, nonreligious, nonethnic" (168). He acknowledges the difficulty involved in establishing a modern state, yet he believes that a country like Ukraine has made tremendous strides toward the establishment of a modern liberal democracy (181–82) (this collection was published before the Russian invasion).

Mathilde Fasting's collection of interviews with Fukuyama provides a thoughtful, well-informed, and comprehensive propaedeutic to Fukuyama's many and varied studies, whether one agrees with him, or whether, like this reviewer, one believes that his ideas have many shortcomings. While clearly questions of limitations of space and time shaped the direction of the questions, some of the topics explored invite further exploration. One questions whether Fukuyama's sociobiological conception of human nature is in fact any more heuristically useful than its historical alternatives such as Kantian individualism, social contract theory, or the many-chambered house of Utilitarianism. Fukuyama's advocacy of strong states raises Juvenal's question of "*quis custodiet ipsos custodies*," "who guards the guardians." There remains the problem that contemporary public policies or decisions invariably have quite unexpected and even contrary consequences, whether they are based upon some sociobiological conception of human nature and human rights or on some deontological or utilitarian conception of the good. Hegel's notion of "*die List der Vernunft*," "the cunning of reason" remains a relevant insight.

Fukuyama acknowledges that radical inequalities of wealth and income in the advanced countries are a problem, though no recommendations are given as to possible solutions. Whether elite-driven and elite-benefiting liberal democracies are the *summa* of human history naturally remains contestable. Curiously, both Copenhagen and Moscow lie on the 55th parallel north, and both were founded in the eleventh century AD. And yet Denmark and Russia could not have taken more divergent paths of political development.

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