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Francis Fukuyama & the end of history *by Roger Kimball*

[T]he whig historian can draw lines through certain events, ... and if he is not careful he begins to forget that this line is merely a mental trick of his; he comes to imagine that it represents something like a line of causation. The total result of this method is to impose a certain form upon the whole historical story, and to produce a scheme of general history which is bound to converge beautifully upon the present—all demonstrating throughout the ages the workings of an obvious principle of progress.

—Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*

“If this is the best of all possible worlds,” he said to himself, “what can the rest be like?”

—Voltaire, *Candide*

It is difficult to remember an article in an intellectual political quarterly that made as big a splash as did Francis Fukuyama’s “The End of History?” when it appeared in the Summer 1989 issue of *The National Interest*. While the response was far from unanimously favorable, it was extraordinarily large and passionate. Such prominent figures as Allan Bloom, Irving Kristol, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Samuel P. Huntington, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote in the pages of *The National Interest* to comment on the fifteen-page piece. The article became something of a cause célèbre, attracting heated commentary across the U.S. as well as in Europe, Asia, and South America. Its millenarian title, sans question mark, soon became a slogan to be bruted about in Washington think tanks, the press, and the academy. The young Fukuyama, then a deputy director of the U.S. State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, quickly emerged as a minor celebrity, replete with a position at the RAND corporation and a generous book contract allowing him to expand on his ideas. Even those who took issue with the article—“I don’t believe a word of it,” was Irving Kristol’s rejoinder to its main thesis—were careful to praise the author’s intellectual sophistication. Rarely has the word “brilliant” been used with such cheery abandon: perhaps here, in the response to “The End of History?”, were those

“thousand points of light” we had been hearing so much about at the time.

Why the fuss? Writing at a moment when Communism was everywhere in retreat, it was hardly surprising that Fukuyama should have proclaimed the end of the Cold War and “unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism.” Such proclamations were already legion. What commanded attention was something far more radical. Claiming to distinguish between “what is essential and what is contingent or accidental in world history,” Fukuyama wrote that

What we are witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or a passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.

“The end of history as such,” “the evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government”: these were the sorts of statements—along with Fukuyama’s professed conviction that “the ideal will govern the material world *in the long run*”—that rang the alarm.

Some of the negative responses to Fukuyama’s article, as he was quick to point out, were based on a simplistic misreading of his thesis. For in proclaiming that the end of history had arrived in the form of triumphant liberal democracy, Fukuyama did not mean that the world would henceforth be free from tumult, political contention, or intractable social problems. Moreover, he was careful to note that “the victory of liberalism has occurred primarily in the realm of ideas or consciousness and is as yet incomplete in the real or material world.”

What he did maintain, however, was that liberal democracy was the best conceivable social-political system for fostering freedom; and therefore—because “the ideal will govern the material world *in the long run*”—he also claimed that liberal democracy would not be superseded by a better or “higher” form of government. According to Fukuyama, other forms of government, from monarchy to communism to fascism, had failed because they were imperfect vehicles for freedom; liberal democracy, allowing mankind the greatest freedom possible, had triumphed because it best instantiated the ideal. In this sense, what Mr. Fukuyama envisaged was not the end of history—understood as the lower-case realm of daily occasions and events—but the end of History: an evolutionary process that represented freedom’s self-realization in the world. The “end” he had in mind was in the nature of a *telos*: more “fulfillment” than “completion” or “finish.”

True, one might still ask whether the career of History so understood is anything more than a speculative fancy—whether, indeed, the ambition to distinguish between “what is essential and what is contingent or accidental in world history” is not bootless, given man’s limited vision and imperfect knowledge. In any event, the idea of the end of History is hardly novel. In one form or another, it is a component of many myths and religions—including Christianity, with its vision of the Second Coming. And anyone familiar with the interstices of nineteenth-century German philosophy will remember that the end of History also figures prominently in the philosophies of G. W. F. Hegel and his disgruntled follower Karl Marx. It is perhaps worth noting, too, that one important difference between most religious speculation about the end of History and versions propagated by philosophers is hubris: orthodox Christianity, for example, is gratifyingly indefinite about the date of this eventuality. Hegel harbored no such doubts or hesitations. What he called “*the last stage of History, our world, our own time*” was ushered in by Napoleon’s armies at the Battle of Jena in October 1806. “As early as this,” Fukuyama writes, “Hegel saw ... the victory of the ideals of the French revolution, and the imminent universalization of the state incorporating the principles of liberal democracy.” It is Fukuyama’s view that “the present world seems to confirm that the fundamental principles of socio-political organization have not advanced terribly far since 1806.”

As Fukuyama acknowledges, the philosophy of Hegel, especially as interpreted by the Russian-born Marxist philosopher and French bureaucrat Alexandre Kojève, was the chief theoretical inspiration for “The End of History?” Whatever else can be said of Hegel’s philosophy, or its interpretation by Kojève, there can be no doubt that it demands an extraordinarily cerebral view of the world. In the famous lectures that he gave in the 1930s on Hegel’s first book, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Kojève tells us that History “cannot be *truly* understood without the *Phenomenology*,” and, moreover, that “there is History *because* there is philosophy and *in order that* there may be Philosophy.” For those less persuaded of philosophy’s determinative importance in human affairs, such statements may help explain why Hegel, in the preface to the *Phenomenology*, should have defined “the true” as *der bacchantische Taumel, an dem kein Glied nicht trunken ist*: “the Bacchanalian whirl in which no member is not drunk.” Inebriation of some sort, at any rate, would seem desirable when entering such heady waters.

Curiously, Fukuyama’s attitude toward the end of History is deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, faithful Hegelian that he is, he regards it as the final triumph of freedom. He speaks of nations or parts of the world that are still “stuck in history” or

“mired in history,” as if residence in the realm of history were something it behooved us to change. On the other hand, he foresees that “the end of history will be a very sad time,” partly because he believes that the things that once called forth “daring, courage, imagination, and idealism will be replaced by economic calculation,” and partly because “in the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history.” Thus he acknowledges “a powerful nostalgia for the time when history existed” and even suggests that the prospect of perpetual ennui that awaits mankind “after” History may “serve to get history started once again.”

When we turn to Fukuyama’s new book on this subject, [\[1\]](#) we find that he has collected a number of careful hedges and qualifications to place around the ideas he put forward in “The End of History?” For example, he continues to insist that there has been “a common evolutionary pattern for *all* human societies—in short, something like a Universal History of mankind in the direction of liberal democracy.” But instead of presenting this Universal History as the record of an ineluctable dialectic, he now admits that it is “simply an intellectual tool.” Early on in *The End of History and the Last Man*, Fukuyama repeats his claim that

We cannot picture to ourselves a world that is *essentially* different from the present one, and at the same time better. Other, less reflective ages also thought of themselves as the best, but we arrive at this conclusion exhausted, as it were, from the pursuit of alternatives we felt *had* to be better than liberal democracy.

But at the very end of his book he hesitates, suggesting that the evidence for necessary progress—evidence that the “wagon train” of history is moving in the right direction, that the lead wagons have in fact reached their destination—is “provisionally inconclusive.” The generous response to such tensions is that they render Fukuyama’s discussion richer and more nuanced; the skeptical response is that, in an effort to answer his critics, he has opened himself to the charge of inconsistency on fundamental issues.

Fukuyama claims at the outset that *The End of History* is not simply a restatement of his famous article. Perhaps, then, we should call it a re-presentation and expansion of the ideas he articulated in “The End of History?” Divided into four parts and some thirty chapters, the book painstakingly presents the case that history possesses a structure and direction, that the direction is up, and that we in the liberal West occupy the final summit of the historical edifice. What’s new is a lot of detailed philosophical discussion. Fukuyama provides a summary of Plato’s speculations about the origin of our sense of honor and shame as well as a long discussion of the famous

master/slave dialectic in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. Following Hegel, he presents the "struggle for recognition" as the "longing" that drives history, and concludes that liberal democracy offers the most complete and "rational" satisfaction of that longing possible. The last part of the book is essentially a meditation on his claim that the end of history will be "a very sad time." Fukuyama is particularly worried that the satisfactions of living at the end of history will leave mankind so dull and complacent that his spiritual life will atrophy and he will find himself transformed into that flaccid creature, Nietzsche's "last man," described in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as "the most despicable man" who is "no longer able to despise himself."

Like the article that occasioned it, *The End of History* also provides two quite disparate views of the world. On one side we have Fukuyama the conservative political analyst, commenting in lithe, well-informed prose on the state of the world. This gentleman is hardheaded, wry, and full of quietly witty obiter dicta. "In America today," he writes, "we feel entitled to criticize another person's smoking habits, but not his or her religious beliefs or moral behavior." Moreover, this Fukuyama recognizes that, whether or not we are at the end of History, nothing has happened to cancel a nation's need for vigilance: "no state that values its independence," he insists, "can ignore the need for defense modernization." Indeed, one imagines that he would accede wholeheartedly to the wise observation of the Roman military commentator Flavius Vegetius: *si vis pacem, para bellum* ("If you want peace, prepare for war"). One is not surprised to find endorsements on the book jacket from such well-known figures as Charles Krauthammer, George F. Will, and Eduard Shevardnadze.

On the other side we have Fukuyama the philosopher, impressively erudite, deeply committed to a neo-Hegelian view of the historical process. This Fukuyama seems to put greater stock in ideas than facts (indeed, one suspects that he would scorn the distinction between ideas and facts as an artificial construct). He speaks often about "the motor" or "directionality" of history, "internal contradictions" that must be overcome, and "the complete absence of coherent *theoretical* alternatives to liberal democracy." He even suggests that "the present form of social and political organization is *completely satisfying* to human beings in their most essential characteristics." It is not quite clear what the Messrs. Fukuyama have to say to each other, though their co-habitation clearly makes for sensational copy.

We have nothing but good wishes for Fukuyama 1; about Fukuyama 2, however, we have grave reservations, not least because of the threat his ideas pose to his more commonsensical twin.

Like most world-explaining constructions invented by

humanity, Hegel's dialectic acts as catnip on susceptible souls. Once one is seduced, everything seems marvelously clear and, above all, *necessary*: all important questions have been answered beforehand and the only real task is to apply the method to clean up the untoward messiness of reality. It is very exciting. "All of the really big questions," as Fukuyama puts it in his preface, "had been settled." But the problem with such constructs is that they insulate their adherents from empirical reality: since everything unfolds "necessarily" according to a preordained plan, nothing that merely *happens* in the world can alter the itinerary. As the philosopher Leszek Kolakowski observed in his book *Religion*,

Monistic reductions in general anthropology or "historiosophy" are always successful and convincing; a Hegelian, a Freudian, a Marxist, and an Adlerian are, each of them, safe from refutation as long as he is consistently immured in his dogma and does not try to soften it or make concessions to common sense; his explanatory device will work forever.

What one gains is an explanation; what one loses is the truth. There are good reasons—from the rise of multiculturalism to the state once known as Yugoslavia—to believe that what we are witnessing today is not the final consolidation of liberal democracy but the birth of a new tribalism. For those committed to the end of History, however, it's simply that "the victory of liberalism has occurred primarily in the realm of ideas or consciousness and is as yet incomplete in the real or material world."

Among the unpleasant side effects of adherence to such doctrines is the habit of intellectual arrogance. Hegel offers the supreme case in point. About his "firm and invincible faith that there is Reason in history," for example, the philosopher assures us that his faith "is not a presupposition of study; it is a *result* which happens to be known to myself because I already know the whole." It is cheering to possess knowledge of "the whole," of course, but a bit daunting for the rest of us. Not surprisingly, such arrogance also expresses itself about competing doctrines. Thus we find Fukuyama, supplementing Hegel with Nietzsche, explaining that "the problem with Christianity ... is that it remains just another slave ideology, that is, it is untrue in certain crucial respects." How gratifying to be able to docket the whole of Christianity and file it away as an example of mankind's spiritual immaturity!

Perhaps the most obvious problem with Hegel's philosophy of history is that the "necessary" freedom which his system mandates can look a lot like unfreedom to anyone who happens to disagree with its dictates. As the contemporary German philosopher Hans Blumenberg observes, "If there

were an immanent final goal of history, then those who believe they know it and claim to promote its attainment would be legitimized in using all the others who do not know it ... as a mere means." The twentieth century has acquainted us in terrifyingly exquisite detail with what happens when people are treated as "moments" in an impersonal dialectic. We find ourselves in a situation where "real freedom," as Hegel puts it, demands the "subjugation of mere contingent will." It is hardly surprising that Leszek Kolakowski, writing about Hegel in *Main Currents of Marxism*, should conclude that "in the Hegelian system humanity becomes what it is, or achieves unity with itself, only by ceasing to be humanity." Once again, the contrast with Christianity is illuminating. For while the good Christian, too, believes that freedom consists in the "subjugation of mere contingent will," he endeavors to act not in accordance with "the Idea" as formulated by a nineteenth-century German philosopher but with God's will. Moreover, while Hegel insists that with the formulation of his philosophy "the antithesis between the universal and the individual will has been removed," Christianity has had the good manners to attribute a large dollop of inscrutability to God's will. By refusing to saddle mankind with "necessary freedom," Christianity preserves a large domain for the exercise of individual freedom in everyday life.

Mr. Fukuyama's commitment to the Hegelian dialectic leads him to some strange inversions. Early on in his book, he remarks that "it is possible to speak of historical progress only if one knows where mankind is going." But is this so? Is it not rather that what one needs in order to discern progress is knowledge of where mankind has *been*, not where it is going? And in any case, whom should we trust to furnish us with accurate reports about where mankind is going? Is G. W. F. Hegel, for all his genius, really a reliable guide? Is Fukuyama? No: history, a humble account of how man has lived and suffered, is what we require to declare progress, not prophecy.

It is important to stress that the issue is not whether mankind has made progress over the millennia. Surely it has. The exact nature and extent of the progress can be measured in any number of ways. The material progress of mankind has been staggering, especially in the last two hundred years. Ditto for mankind's political progress, despite the tyrannies and despotisms that remain. As Fukuyama points out, in 1790 there were only three liberal democracies in the world: the United States, France, and Switzerland. Today, there are sixty-one. That is remarkable progress. But it is also *contingent* progress, reversible by the same means that accomplished it in the first place: the efforts of individual men and women.

Indeed, one of the great casualties of Hegel's system is the whole realm of individual initiative. Fukuyama has told us

that “in the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy,” precisely because at the end of History nothing remains for those disciplines to accomplish. But how often, even before Hegel, has that end been proclaimed. Gilbert Murray, in *The Classical Tradition in Poetry*, recalled being told that “one of the very earliest poems unearthed in Babylonia contains a lament that all reasonable subjects for literature are already exhausted.” And just about the time Hegel was proclaiming the end of History, we find the French painter Eugène Delacroix observing that “Those very ones who believe that everything has been said and done, will greet you as new and yet will close the door behind you. And then they will say again that everything has been done and said.”

One of the most serious moral problems with the idea of the end of History is that it implacably transforms everything outside the purview of the theory into a historical “accident” or exception, draining it of moral significance. Hegel’s system tells us what has to happen; what actually does happen turns out not to matter much. Fukuyama admits that “we have no guarantees” that the future will not produce more Hitlers or Pol Pots. But in his view, evil, e.g. the evil which produced the Holocaust, “can slow down but not derail the locomotive of History.” More: “At the end of the twentieth century,” he writes, “Hitler and Stalin appear to be bypaths of history that led to dead ends, rather than real alternatives for human social organization.” But what can this mean? The Lisbon earthquake of 1755 was the tragedy that sparked *Candide*, Voltaire’s attack on Leibniz’s dictum that ours was necessarily “the best of all possible worlds.” What philosophical empyrean need one inhabit in order to regard the course of history since 1806 as the reprise of a completed symphony? How far shall we trust a “Universal History” that relegates the conflagrations of two world wars and the unspeakable tyranny of Hitler and Stalin to epiphenomenal “bypaths”? I submit that any theory which regards World War II as a momentary wrinkle on the path of freedom is in need of serious rethinking.

If Fukuyama’s commitment to Hegel is itself problematic, so at times is his interpretation of Hegel’s teaching. For it is not at all clear that Hegel himself was a champion of anything like what we call liberal democracy. Fukuyama complains that people have labeled Hegel “a reactionary apologist for the Prussian monarchy, a forerunner of twentieth-century totalitarianism, and ... a difficult-to-read metaphysician.” Let’s grant that the bit about totalitarianism is moot. What about the rest? No one is going to give Hegel a prize for limpid prose. Perhaps, as Fukuyama says, Hegel was par excellence the “philosopher of freedom.” Perhaps. Certainly he talked about freedom a great deal. He was fond, for example, of claiming that “the History of the World is nothing other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom.” We must of course hope that that notion is a consolation to the

multitudes whom the dialectic has consigned to the uncomfortable (but, alas, necessary) role of unfreedom in the lower-case day-to-day history we all merely live through.

But liberal democracy? No doubt it was just one of those lucky strokes of fortune, an example of life imitating art: still, it is remarkable that “*the Germanic world*” of the nineteenth century should emerge as the political zenith of Hegel’s system, *primus inter impares* of “those nations on which the world spirit has conferred its true principle.” *Mirabile visu*, convenience once again jibes seamlessly with necessity. But question: was Hegel’s Prussia, at the time of Metternich, of Frederick William III, et al., a “liberal democracy”? Did Hegel believe that it was? Fukuyama is surely correct that to have a liberal democracy, the people must be sovereign. But in *The Philosophy of Right* Hegel seems to think that the sovereign should be sovereign. “The monarch,” he tells us, is “the absolute apex of an organically developed state,” “the ungrounded self-determination in which finality of decision is rooted,” etc. He says, further, that constitutional monarchy such as we see in . . . oh, well, in nineteenth-century Prussia, for example, is “the achievement of the modern world, a world in which the substantial Idea has won the infinite form.” In other words, he likes it.

Or at least he *appears* to like it. In a footnote, Fukuyama acknowledges that Hegel overtly supported the Prussian monarchy. He nevertheless maintains that, “far from justifying the Prussian monarchy of his day,” Hegel’s discussion in *The Philosophy of Right* “can be read as an esoteric critique of actual practice.” Presumably, it is by virtue of some such “esoteric critique” that Hegel, champion of the Prussian state, turns out—*truly, essentially*—to be an enthusiast for Kojève’s “universal homogenous state,” a.k.a. liberal democracy. It is nice work if you can get it.

It may also be worth pointing out a curious inconsistency in Fukuyama’s account of the end of History. If, as Hegel’s famous slogan has it, “the real is the rational and the rational is the real,” how are we to understand Fukuyama’s “provisional inconclusiveness”? Indeed, how are we to understand his suggestion that nostalgia, or boredom, or evil might “re-start” history? What, is mere nostalgia a match for the imperatives of History? Can boredom contravene “God’s walk through the world,” as Hegel once described the process of history? If the end of History is a logical and metaphysical necessity, how are we to understand Fukuyama’s hesitations? In fact, his ambivalence contributes greatly to his book’s vividness, for it provides a little space for reality to enter. But considered on his own—i.e. Hegel’s—terms, Fukuyama would seem to be a disappointing dialectician.

It should go without saying that none of these criticisms is meant to deny that the Hegelian system possesses tremendous

aesthetic appeal. The panoramic drama of absolute being struggling to achieve perfect self-knowledge in history: it is an imposing tale of a thousand and one nights for the philosophically inclined. The inconvenient question is only whether the story it tells is true. Perhaps, as Kierkegaard suggested, Hegel was a man who had built a palace but lived in the guard house.

Fukuyama's own addiction to palace building shows itself in a response to critics that he published in the Winter 1989/90 issue of *The National Interest*. "In order to refute my hypothesis," he writes "it is not sufficient to suggest that the future holds in store large and momentous events. One would have to show that these events were driven by a systematic idea of political and social justice that claimed to supersede liberalism." But this would be the case only if one grants Fukuyama's premise—that we are in possession of a "systematic idea of political and social justice." In fact, it may be that what we need is not a better theory but less theory.

In this respect, as possibly in others, a good antidote to the Hegelian juggernaut is the mild doctrine of the Spanish-born American philosopher George Santayana. In *Character and Opinion in the United States* (1920), Santayana distinguishes between "English liberty," which is "vague," "reticent," and involves "perpetual compromise," and "absolute liberty," which he describes as "a foolish challenge thrown by a new-born insect buzzing against the universe." "In the end," Santayana suggests, "adaptation to the world at large, where so much is hidden and unintelligible, is only possible piecemeal, by groping with a genuine indetermination in one's aims"—that is, by rejecting the inflated promises of absolute liberty for the more modest satisfactions of local freedom. To the partisan of the Hegelian dialectic or any other "fixed programme or, as he perhaps calls it, an ideal," this capitulation to uncertainty will doubtless seem strange. But the Danish Prince was right: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Notes

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1. *The End of History and the Last Man*, by Francis Fukuyama; Free Press, 418 pages, \$24.95. [Go back to the text.](#)

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