

## HISTORY ISN'T ENDING AFTER ALL

WILLIAM OPHULS

Francis Fukuyama famously argued in 1989 that history was about to end in “the ineluctable spread of Western consumerist culture” and the “unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism” leading to “the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”

As a result, “international life for the part of the world that has reached the end of history is far more preoccupied with economics than with politics or strategy.” To be sure, Fukuyama did acknowledge that some states and regions, in particular an ultranationalist Slavophile Russia, might remain “stuck in history” for some time to come. There could also still be “a high and perhaps rising level of ethnic and nationalist violence” in some backward parts of the world. But major conflicts involving “large states still caught in the grip of history” would “appear to be passing from the scene.” Unfortunately, Russia and China don’t seem to have gotten the message, and nothing in their history, culture, or recent behavior suggests that they will become unstuck from history anytime soon, unless it is history on their own terms. To echo Trotsky on war, you may be more interested in economics than politics or strategy, but the latter are definitely interested in you.

However, geopolitics is not the only or deepest contradiction in Fukuyama's thesis. The most blatant is that "the ineluctable spread of Western consumerist culture" has taken humankind far down the path to ecological perdition. Despite the increasingly urgent and dire warnings of the scientific community, societies (especially the most allegedly post-historical among them) are trapped, because their way of life and daily bread are totally predicted upon and beholden to fossil fuels. Thus not just fossil-fuel companies, but every man, woman, and child in "developed" economies has an existential vested interest in the prevailing anti-ecological way of life. It is therefore hardly surprising that these societies are slow-walking half-hearted reforms that will be too little and too late to avert devastating, possibly catastrophic ecological outcomes—and as we shall see, once ecological breakdown arrives we can expect history to resume with a vengeance.

The ecological contradiction reveals an even deeper contradiction within the liberal-democratic political paradigm, namely that both its practical politics and its philosophical foundation depend on economic growth. As a practical matter, liberal-democratic politics only works as long as a rising economic tide lifts all boats. For once the tide stops rising, those who are not yet rich lose their hopes for a better future. And once the tide begins to ebb, the vast majority face the prospect of being forever

marooned in poverty. Thus the end of economic growth is political poison: instead of working cooperatively to expand the pie to the benefit of all, individuals must now fight to get a slice—and if they can't, then they will do their best to see that those with slices cannot enjoy them, a phenomenon already evident in contemporary American politics. Thus Fukuyama's assertion that "the class issue has actually been successfully resolved in the West" because "the root causes of economic inequality do not have to do with the underlying legal and social structure of our society" is far from the whole story: the relative absence of class conflict in America is due not so much to the unique virtues of liberal democracy, which places no intrinsic limits on the accumulation of wealth or the spread of inequality, but far more to the ecological abundance that has blessed the country from its origins.

This economic contradiction has its roots in the philosophical basis of liberal democracy. Reacting to the horrors of the Thirty Years' War, Thomas Hobbes made the radical move of secularizing politics, separating religion from politics by making religious faith and practice a private affair. He also became the author of political *economy* by making the sovereign responsible not just for keeping the peace but also for promoting "commodious living"—that is, economic development.

Following Hobbes's lead, John Locke made the acquisition and possession of property the basis of liberal politics, and what is noteworthy is that he did so on the basis of a cornucopian premise: "Thus in the beginning all the world was *America*." In other words, limitless: there is so much "free" property up for grabs (at the price of exterminating a few "savages") that anyone who chooses to become propertied can do so and should thereafter be left largely unmolested by the government. Leaving aside the manifest immorality of Locke's position—to the extent that "America" was largely empty of its prior inhabitants, it was due to the diseases imported by Europe invaders—there is no more "America" left. The world is now overfull. Thus one of the main philosophical and practical pillars on which the alleged "victory of economic and political liberalism" rests has been removed.

In this connection, we need to acknowledge that our all-modern-conveniences existence owes everything to expropriation and exploitation. First, Europeans conquered the peoples and expropriated the riches of the New World. Then they developed their new territories and further enriched themselves by exploiting slaves. And it was this pulse of wealth and energy that served to launch the Industrial Revolution, creating a political economy founded on the accelerated exploitation of natural resources in general and of fossil fuels in particular, so much so that the modern way of

life is often said to be founded on energy slavery. The forced end of this exploitation will bring the return of ecological scarcity and therefore an end to both capitalist business-as-usual and liberal politics-as-usual.

There is a still deeper contradiction of Hobbesian politics. Secularization removes conflict between irreconcilable creeds from the political arena by relegating organized religion to the political sidelines, but it also leaves behind a spiritual void. Hobbes did not intend to create a society of amoral atheists. To the contrary, he and those who followed him, including Locke, tacitly assumed religion's continued existence and strength. It might no longer be established, but it would remain as a source of morality and an indispensable foundation of the social order. In effect, liberal societies have relied on the lode of fossil virtue accumulated by a Christian civilization over centuries. Now that lode would not be maintained or replenished, only consumed, leaving man to live by bread alone in an amoral, acquisitive society. Moral decay is, of course, a universal phenomenon, but by making morality a private affair, Hobbesian polity accelerates the process by which individuals drift away from community norms and become parasites slowly consuming their host.

Locke saw the problem and attempted to supply a remedy by making a strong and unified civil society the linchpin of the liberal political order: it was the indispensable basis upon which both individual and

property rights rested. However, once individuals retreat from religion and become purely secular, civil society is bound to unravel. For the inevitable tendency of a profane value system is to become ever more secular, diverse, materialistic, and hedonic. Hence all sense of proportion, moderation, and self-restraint erodes away, leaving only ego's will and appetite. Witness the increasing incivility, coarseness, anomie, violence, and sheer lawlessness of American life today. In addition, when putative citizens no longer participate or cooperate for the greater good or observe community norms, but instead assert rights while shirking responsibilities, liberty becomes license: freedom exercised for nefarious or self-destructive ends. To put it in Confucian terms, because liberal society lacks the Mandate of Heaven, it does not have an intrinsic source of legitimacy. Hence when the gravy train of economic growth stops rolling, it will tend to disintegrate.

Although Fukuyama notes the presence of "a broad unhappiness with the impersonality and spiritual vacuity of liberal consumerist societies" and says even that "the end of history will be a very sad time," he nevertheless sees that state as both stable and enduring. Thus only the "prospect of centuries of boredom at the end of history will serve to get history started once again."

I suspect that Fukuyama may not have that long to wait. Even leaving aside the Russian war on Ukraine or the increasingly menacing posture of China with regard to Taiwan, industrial civilization faces a multitude of external challenges to business and politics as usual—for example, a vast, unstoppable flood of climate refugees fleeing intolerable temperatures and impossible conditions. Yet these many challenges, which have now been given the collective title “polycrisis,” are not the essential problem, for it is the internal failure of liberal democracy that we have to fear.

Despite the reservations quoted above, Fukuyama presents “the victory of economic and political liberalism” as a kind of triumph. Yet the liberal-democratic societies of today are hardly paradises that will satisfy humankind for centuries to come. In fact, what is astonishing and frightening is the extent to which modern industrial societies have increasingly come to resemble Hobbes’s famous characterization of the pre-civilized state of nature:

—SOLITARY: Isolated individuals are increasingly divided and disconnected, psychologically if not physically. And as Hannah Arendt argued, this loneliness makes them vulnerable to the politics of rancor and eventual totalitarian domination.

—POOR: Our prosperity is really a kind of poverty, because it is based on robbing nature and creates as many bads as goods. It is also more and more monopolized by a tiny minority who own and run almost everything, while the wage and debt slaves who make up the majority cannot afford housing.

—NASTY: Among the many meanings of this adjective are squalid, mean, tawdry, disagreeable, and trying, all of which readily apply to many aspects of modern life—John Kenneth Galbraith's public squalor, growing coarseness and incivility, the shoddiness of many goods, stress, angst, time famine, the rat race, homeless encampments, traffic jams, and more.

—BRUTISH: Merriam-Webster defines this word as both "strongly and grossly sensual" and "showing little intelligence or sensibility." Industrial civilization certainly matches the first definition, for its purpose is to glut human appetite. And while it is supremely skilled in achieving that end, its very cleverness reveals a striking lack of intelligence, not to speak of wisdom, because the quest for sensual satisfaction has precipitated a spiral of ecological self-destruction. It also fails to produce genuine felicity: there can be no end to acquisition and consumption, for desire is insatiable.



—SHORT: One of the signal achievements of industrial civilization has been to lengthen the average human life span, primarily by instituting relatively simple public health measures and environmental improvements. However, these gains are now being compromised by poverty, pollution, addiction, suicide, violence, pandemics, emerging autoimmune diseases, antibiotic resistance, toxification, and even iatrogenic illness and deaths, all of which threaten to shorten lives. (Whereas declining sperm counts threaten to prevent new lives from coming into being.) In addition, deaths due to a worsening climate, both directly and indirectly, seem almost certain to increase in the future.

Thus instead of transcending the Hobbesian state of nature, an industrial civilization founded on his principles has created one. so it seems unlikely that boredom will be the main problem confronting post-historical societies.

Nor has industrial civilization succeeded in abolishing what Hobbes feared most: the war of all against all. What would he make of today's world, in which multiple nations and even groups possess or will soon possess an array of nuclear, biological, chemical, and digital weapons capable of terminating complex civilization virtually overnight?

Taken together, all these developments point toward a grim future. Far from history ending, we seem bound for a time of troubles—an

anarchy of chaos, breakdown, and violence—as industrial civilization is undone by external threats and internal contradictions. And when history returns, it will play by the rules articulated by Thucydides: “The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”