

It's Still Not the End of History

Twenty-five years after Francis Fukuyama's landmark essay, liberal democracy is increasingly beset. Its defenders need to go back to the basics.



A boy touches the east side of the former Berlin Wall. Markus Schreiber/AP

- [Timothy Stanley](#) and [Alexander Lee](#) in the Atlantic
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Most of us in the West are liberals, whether we admit it or not. We want equal rights for all, reject racial differences, cherish the freedom of worship while preserving the freedom to disagree, and seek an economic order that suits the ambitions of the individual. But there's a growing sense that liberalism isn't delivering at home and that it's not as popular as we think it ought to be in the developing world. The problem is that hubris has blinded its defenders to the crisis consuming liberalism's identity, leaving them unable or unwilling, to respond to pressing challenges around the world.

Twenty-five years ago this summer, Francis Fukuyama announced the “end of history” and the inevitable triumph of liberal capitalist democracy. His argument was simple: Democracy would win out over all other forms of government because the natural desire for peace and well-being set nations on a path to progress from which it was impossible to divert. If a state—even a Communist state—wished to enjoy the greatest prosperity possible, it would

have to embrace some measure of capitalism. Since wealth-creation depends on the protection of private property, the “capitalist creep” would invariably demand greater legal protection for individual rights.

As many critics pointed out, Fukuyama’s logic was a bit too reminiscent of the pseudo-Hegelian historical determinism that Marxists and Fascists deployed to disastrous effect earlier in the 20th century, but when his article appeared in *The National Interest*, it was hard to disagree with him. The Berlin Wall was about to fall, the Soviet Union was collapsing, and the world was clamoring for the consumerist boom in an orgy of free-market excitement. Everything seemed to suggest that only liberal capitalist democracy allowed people to thrive in an increasingly globalized world, and that only the steady advance of laissez-faire economics would guarantee a future of free, democratic states, untroubled by want and oppression and living in peace and contentment.

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Today, it’s hard to imagine Fukuyama being more wrong. History isn’t over and neither liberalism nor democracy is ascendant. The comfy Western consensus he inspired is under threat in ways he never predicted. A new Cold War has broken out. China’s “Marxist capitalism” suggests you can have wealth without freedom. And the advance of ISIS may herald a new, state-oriented Islamic fundamentalism.

But most disturbingly, the connection between capitalism, democracy, and liberalism upon which Fukuyama’s argument depended has itself been broken. In the wake of the credit crunch and the global economic downturn, it has become increasingly clear that prosperity is not, in fact, best served either by the pursuit of laissez-faire economics or by the inexorable extension of economic freedoms. Indeed, quite the opposite. As Thomas Piketty argues in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, free markets have not only enlarged the gap between rich and poor, but have also reduced average incomes across the developed and developing worlds. In the countries hardest hit by the recession—such as Greece and Hungary—voters have turned away from precisely that conception of liberalism that Fukuyama believed they would embrace with open arms. Across Europe, economic interventionism, nationalism, and [even open racism](#) have exerted a greater attraction for those casting their democratic votes than the causes of freedom, deregulation, and equality before the law. Liberal capitalist democracy hasn’t triumphed. Instead, the failures of capitalism have turned democracy against liberalism. In turn, liberalism’s intellectual self-identity has been left in tatters.

Sensing that Fukuyama’s titanic argument has hit something of an iceberg, liberal theorists have desperately been trying to keep the ship afloat. A raft of books have hit the shelves trying to breathe new life into liberalism, amongst which Larry Siedentop’s *Inventing the Individual* and Edmund Fawcett’s *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* stand out. Both accept that Fukuyama’s hubris has been exposed by recent events, and are under no illusions about the challenges that liberalism faces. But instead of addressing those challenges head-on they have turned to the past for solace and validation. By labeling an arbitrary set of ideals “liberal” and trying to demonstrate how they have supposedly triumphed over all challengers down the centuries, they seek to craft a new historical narrative capable of “proving” the inherent righteousness of liberalism. Since “liberal” ideas have always triumphed, Siedentop and Fawcett argue, they are manifestly right, and while things might not be working out so well now, the logic of history shows that they will prevail in the end.

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Leaders across the political spectrum have been quick to adopt this form of historical determinism. In Britain, David Cameron's center-right government is proudly liberal, and has not been afraid to use history to mold the next generation of voters into an appropriately liberal form. Earlier this year, his former education minister, Michael Gove, tried to recast the First World War as an example of liberal values triumphing over Germany's proto-fascism, and as "proof" of the undoubted righteousness of the sort of militant liberalism that neoconservatives adore. Closer to home, Hillary Clinton—now in the first stages of a barely denied run for the White House—has adapted a similar outlook in the realm of foreign policy. Looking back at the great ideal of America as established by the Founding Fathers through rose-tinted spectacles, she has subtly distanced herself from Barack Obama's cautious realism abroad and instead used discrete references to the past to justify aggressively exporting liberal values across the globe as often as possible. Given that history has "proved" how great liberalism was in previous battles against tyranny, the argument goes, liberalism will inevitably win out if we pick enough fights and put enough muscle behind it.

But while this new liberal historicism may have a certain rhetorical appeal, it fails to convince. Instead of recognizing the weakness of Fukuyama's original approach, Siedentop, Fawcett, Cameron, and Clinton have simply dusted down the same old historical determinism, just without the economics. It isn't any more convincing than when Fukuyama tried it.

It was the great liberal philosopher Karl Popper who first exposed the weaknesses of historicism as a mode of political justification in his devastating critique of Marxist and fascist determinism. It is ironic that his arguments now apply to the liberalism he sought to defend. Following Popper's argument, it's easy to see at least two fundamental logical problems with the historicist approach to liberalism. First is the claim that anyone in the past who expressed any degree of egalitarianism or concern for individual conscience is a liberal. The idea that there is a straight line of human progress that leads from Saint Paul through Luther, the Philosophes, and Lloyd George to Jack Kennedy is patently absurd: They all had different definitions of freedom and what it ought to accomplish. Second, the idea that there is a "historical law" guiding the development of societies is fanciful. Even if there were some weird sort of pattern which suggested that "liberal" ideas did indeed "win out" in the past, it wouldn't be anything more than a mere curiosity. It wouldn't prove anything about liberalism in itself, nor would it say anything about the future. It would just tell us what happened before. To read meaning or predictive power into any pattern in the past is, in fact, about as intellectually respectable as reading tea leaves.

As the weaknesses of the new liberal historicists' arguments show, liberalism is struggling to recover from its post-Fukuyama malaise because its defenders are just being too lazy. Siedentop, Fawcett, Cameron, and Clinton seem to assume that everyone with an ounce of sanity *must* be a liberal, and that there is hence no need to defend liberalism against its shortcomings. But no amount of retrospective back-patting will convince those who simply don't think the same way. It's no wonder, given their intellectual arrogance, that so many liberals are surprised when large parts of the world rejects them—or that people spurn their wise counsel when markets collapse and life savings are threatened by the accidents of free-market capitalism.

If liberalism is to survive and flourish, it has to be rescued from Fukuyama's grasp and from the perils of historical determinism. It has to be defined and defended all over again. This of course raises the question of what liberalism actually is—and it's notable that so many liberals skip this step in debate as though it was unimportant. In a recent issue of *Foreign Policy* dedicated exclusively to reevaluating Fukuyama's legacy, the unresolved problem of "the liberal identity" was conspicuous by its absence. Article after article foundered in their attempts to defend liberal alternatives to populism or socialism precisely because they offered no satisfactory post-Fukuyama understanding of liberalism. But it is impossible to defend liberalism against its critics without making it clear precisely what it stands for. Skeptics can hardly be won over if liberals can't tell them what they are being won over to or how it differs from the uninspiring mess created by Fukuyama and his continuators.

Surrounded by the confused, jargon-ridden babble of political commentators today, it is perhaps easy to forget that liberalism is defined by a commitment to liberty. At root, liberty is a concept grounded in the individual. It is the freedom to be all that one is, to actualize the fullness of one's potential as a human being endowed with the capacity for creativity and the ability to make autonomous value judgments for ourselves.

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It is, of course, true that liberty can be read many ways. As Isaiah Berlin observed, there is positive liberty, the freedom to do something; and there is negative liberty, the freedom from something; and depending on circumstances, one or the other can appear to be of greater importance. But while this distinction has tended to dominate debates in political philosophy since the Second World War, it is perhaps more useful to think back to the writings of Voltaire and the earliest *Encyclopédistes* and to remind ourselves that liberty in its purest form—both positive and negative—can be thought of as the realization of man's inherent dignity as a human being.

This is more than just a matter of high-flown words. The concept of human dignity has two important implications, both of which were recognized by Cicero as far back as the first century B.C. but seem to have been forgotten today. The first is that we all share the same degree of dignity: No one has any less potential than any other, and no one's humanity is any less pronounced than anyone else's. The second is that our humanity imposes upon us the same basic needs. By virtue of our nature, we all require food, shelter, clothing, security, and a range of other basic goods necessary for sufficiency and survival. Though deceptively simple, these implications have profound meaning when we consider how individual liberty is to be translated into a social and political construct. If the liberty of each person is to be maintained and maximized, the principles of equity and the common good must be embedded in the structure of society. And since society is structured above all by law, the law must reflect these precepts. To have liberty is hence to live according to laws grounded on equity and the common good; and where law deviates to even the smallest degree from either, it necessarily becomes the instrument of private or factional interests, and liberty is lost.

Such liberty is, however, dependent upon the morality of the citizenry, especially those in office. While law may structure society, it is only the will of governors and people that gives it its character and force. It is only if everyone recognizes the dignity of the human person that they will recognize the inherent value of equity and the common good, and strive to defend and preserve not only their own liberty, but also that of all others in their society using law. As soon as the commitment to human dignity breaks down, society becomes a jungle in which

it is everyone for himself; self-interest dominates, law becomes partial, and tyranny supplants liberty.

In short, a liberal politics must be a moral politics. Liberalism will not work if too much emphasis is placed on total human autonomy at the expense of all others, nor if it is obsessed with materialism and consumerism. In contrast to the Fukuyama model of yoking liberal values to economic self-interest—a combination that, when given free rein, has often damaged society at large in recent years—a model that emphasizes human dignity allows for a more positive, relevant kind of politics that constantly struggles to assert itself. Instead of encouraging us to rest easy in the assurance that liberalism will certainly triumph, a conception of liberty based on human dignity recognizes that there is nothing inevitable about its success. While each of us may wish to be free as an individual, it shows that individual freedom is dependent on us all being free; and that means that we all have to cling to our shared humanity, our shared dignity.

If liberalism has a future, therefore, it lies not in Fukuyama's shattered determinism or the more recent liberal historicism of Siedentop, Fawcett, and Clinton, but in each of us. It lies not in economics, or the tides of history. It lies in the recognition of the worthiness of humanity itself.