

Getting to Denmark

by THOMAS MEANEY

Francis Fukuyama became a headline in the summer of 1989 when he informed the world that he had discovered the end of history. The essay in which he made his brazen claim, published in *The National Interest*, excited journalists and transformed him overnight into a favorite soothsayer of the foreign policy establishment. In the past two decades, Fukuyama has consolidated his position with a variety of professional gambits. As a political analyst, he continues to broaden his portfolio, whether he is filing a World Bank report on state-building in the Solomon Islands, duly noting the need for a national university and an intertribal police force, or co-chairing a panel on “competitive Eurasia” with strongmen like Vladimir Putin and Nursultan Nazarbayev. As a public intellectual, Fukuyama oversees his own magazine, *The American Interest*, which he co-founded in 2005 after leading a revolt against the publication where he had first gained notoriety. And as the author of bestsellers on big subjects—social trust, biotechnology, state-building—Fukuyama so far exceeds his peers in his uncanny sense of timeliness that his critics dismiss him as a happy hostage to the present. Fukuyama does not help his case by trading in one label—neoconservative, Wilsonian realist, liberal statist—just in time for the debut of a new one. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to call him an ideological opportunist.

“The End of History?” remains the albatross around Fukuyama’s neck. In one way or another, everything he writes circles back to it. The thesis of that essay is stark and simple. To American readers in the twilight of the cold war, Fukuyama explained that the triumph of the West owed less to the collapse of the Soviet Union, or to the genius of the free market, than to a revolution in world consciousness. Humanity had finally recognized the form of its ideological destiny: liberal capitalism. For those who thought they’d heard something like this before, Fukuyama made no excuse about cribbing his argument from untimely sources. A Kremlinologist for the RAND Corporation by day, he burned the midnight oil reading Hegel and Alexandre Kojève, and he gleaned from their writings what he believed to be the operating principle

The Origins of Political Order

From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution.

By Francis Fukuyama.

Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 483 pp. \$35.

of History—that the human desire to live in a modern society generated the demand among people worldwide to be recognized as individual personalities. This universal need for recognition in turn demanded a new political reality. By Fukuyama’s reckoning, the train of History had reached this territory one station early, not at socialism or communism, as so many had once anticipated, but at American-style liberal democracy. His point was not that liberal democracy was the best possible regime, or that the world would henceforth be free of conflicts, but that there were no longer any other viable political alternatives. In 1992, when he elaborated his essay into a book, Fukuyama dropped the question mark from its title and awaited the alignment of the provinces.

As it turns out, the provinces proved to be remarkably stubborn. The “third wave” of democratization that began in the 1970s with the collapse of the Portuguese and Greek dictatorships appeared to be receding by the early twenty-first century. Democracy started experiencing severe reversals, sometimes in the places, such as Ukraine, where it had savored its sweetest victories. New democracies failed to coalesce in Belarus, Cambodia, Haiti and the Central Asian states, while Russia slinked toward soft authoritarianism. The praise showered on nominally successful democratic transitions in Turkey, Indonesia and the Philippines only obscured how much those countries resisted creditable levels of cultural pluralism. Meanwhile, China not only balked at liberal reforms but, in its increasingly bold outreach to countries in Africa and Latin America, proffered authoritarian capitalism as an example, if not yet a model, of alternative development. Most worrying of all, the vanguard nation of liberal democracy stumbled badly while trying to whip two Middle Eastern countries into democratic shape in a bid to speed up history in the region.

Fukuyama’s response to this democratic downturn has been two steps backward, one step forward. In *America at the Crossroads* (2006) he retreated from the view of the United States as the handmaiden of history

and glossed over his initial encouragement of the Bush administration’s foreign adventures. In *Crossroads* Fukuyama signaled his defection from neoconservatism, and attributed the movement’s hubris to its exaggeration of American military and economic might at the end of the cold war and to its commitment, on an international scale, to the sort of social engineering projects it once criticized so effectively on the domestic front. In a sharp reversal, he shifted his allegiance to the soft power camp of liberal internationalists Joseph Nye and John Ikenberry, putting his faith in America’s ability to shape international institutions to its own advantage. More recently, in a second, less well-publicized recalibration, Fukuyama has dialed down his free-market enthusiasm—never strong to begin with—and found some kind words for the regulatory state. In articles in *The American Interest* and *Foreign Affairs* earlier this year, he expressed regret about the grip of laissez-faire ideology on America’s middle class, and in the wake of the financial crisis he looked as far afield as Brazil for lessons in sound monetary policy.

But there is one point on which the author of *The End of History and the Last Man* refuses to cede ground. In opposition to critics who have taken liberal democracy’s recent stumbles as evidence of its limited appeal, Fukuyama has launched a new offensive. His latest book, *The Origins of Political Order*, is an exhaustive attempt to show how different civilizations discovered the building blocks of liberal democracy independently of one another over the course of 4,000 years. If England and Denmark were the nations in which the pieces first clicked together, Fukuyama argues, it was not because of any special foresight on their part but because of a series of lucky breaks. Now that the West has mastered the recipe for liberal democracy—start with a strong state, add a dash of the rule of law, wait for political accountability to rise—other countries can rummage through their own past to find the ingredients for reproducing it. If they don’t know where to look, Fukuyama is on hand to help conduct the search.

There is plenty of drama in *The Origins of Political Order*, but not where you would expect to find it, in the book’s narrative of political development. The drama comes instead from the way the book pits the old Fukuyama against the new. On the one hand, we get Fukuyama the brushed-up scholar

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of state formation, brilliantly alive to the contingencies of political development in the Han Dynasty, the Ottoman Empire and feudal Denmark; on the other hand, the old Fukuyama stubbornly hammers these twists and turns into a familiar pattern. Despite the new Fukuyama's willingness to entertain a variety of explanations for historical change—he deftly interchanges religious, economic and political variables—the old Fukuyama persists in seeing human nature, in the form of the Hegelian quest for recognition, driving all the while toward the liberal democratic state. Never in the course of an argument that spans ages and oceans does Fukuyama consider that the vagaries of world history may tell another, less glamorous story: the achievements of liberal democracy are by their nature unstable, having come about through centuries of backdoor compromises that barely survived the twentieth century, and that it is the false comforts provided by his providential history that impair our ability to confront liberal democracy's unresolved problems in good faith. In *Crossroads* Fukuyama inflated the significance of neoconservatism by suggesting that it alone was responsible for the Iraq debacle, when in reality the invasion of Iraq had enablers across the political spectrum; now, in *The Origins*, a similar tunnel vision leads Fukuyama to attribute the rise of the liberal state to a few original chess moves deep in the fog of history. But to tell the civilizations of the world that they have, unbeknownst to themselves, stumbled up against some of the features of the liberal state is a strange form of flattery. The most valuable political lesson they may hold for us is that they did not.

What has possessed Fukuyama to try his hand at the moribund genre of total world history? The first reason is that he has supplemented his old thinking about human nature with the latest scientific research. In *The End of History and the Last Man*, Fukuyama's major achievement was to meld Plato's idea of *thymotic* man, always thirsting for supremacy, with Hegel's view of humans as driven by the struggle for mutual recognition. The result was a theory of history that has humans unconsciously creating the material conditions for a state of "absolute self-consciousness" in which we recognize once and for all the free nature of our fellows and enshrine it in a liberal state. This historical picture, Fukuyama argued, was a

more convincing model than the predominant Lockean understanding of humankind as driven by rational self-interest, which signally failed to account for "the desire that lay behind the desire of Economic Man."

Now Fukuyama aims to ground his original philosophical speculation in a strong appeal to scientism. *The Origins* opens with a chapter on the social life of chimpanzees, which Fukuyama uses as a guide to the state of nature of humans. Having pored over the recent literature on primates, he tells us that alpha-male chimps experience higher serotonin levels in the brain when they succeed in the struggle for status. To encounter this newfound reverence for sociobiology



Francis Fukuyama

at the onset of the book is disappointing. When Fukuyama relies on neuroscience or evolutionary biology to explain how political institutions develop, he confuses the answer to a second-order natural question (why do people build political institutions?) with the answer to a first-order normative question (what sort of institutions should people build?). One gets the sense that he is willing to enlist just about any explanation of human behavior to combat the economic-centric historical theories of Locke's laissez-faire descendants such as Friedrich Hayek and Mancur Olson. In particular, Fukuyama blames these social scientists for their "fantasies of statelessness" and for taking for granted the role of strong states in institutionalizing the very features of modernity that made markets possible. Already at this early point in the

book, we know that the burden of any civilization's progress will be how well it accommodates and balances Fukuyama's updated view of human nature.

The second, more intriguing reason Fukuyama has taken the plunge into world history is to settle a debt with his mentor, Samuel Huntington. Fukuyama came to study with Huntington after passing through the two opposite ends of American higher education in the 1970s, first as an undergraduate at Cornell, where he studied with Allan Bloom and lived in Telluride House, a designated breeding ground for conservative intellectuals in their larval state, and then as a graduate student doing work with Paul de Man at Yale and Jacques Derrida in Paris. His flirtation with deconstruction fizzled after about a year: "I developed such an aversion to that whole over-intellectual approach that I turned to nuclear weapons instead," he later remarked. When Fukuyama took refuge in the government department at Harvard in 1975, Huntington was still a dominant figure in American political science, not yet the culture warrior of *The Clash of Civilizations*. After writing the preface for the reissue of Huntington's 1968 classic *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Fukuyama assigned himself the challenge of rewriting the book on his own terms. Huntington makes for a clarifying counterpoint to his former student. Instead of seeing the modernization process as containing the seeds of liberal democracy, Huntington argued that developing countries could not cope with rapid modernization without occasionally resorting to authoritarian control. "Modernity breeds stability," runs the thesis of *Political Order*, "but modernization breeds instability"—poverty, unemployment, class violence. For Huntington, the management of the economy in modernizing societies needed to be directed by an unchecked executive that would not succumb to destabilizing social forces. Labeling himself a Leninist Burkean, Huntington was notoriously agnostic about what political form these strong states should ultimately assume, so long as they achieved "overwhelming consensus among the people on the legitimacy of the political system."

Political Order in Changing Societies was written from firsthand experience. As an adviser to the State Department at the height of the Vietnam War, Huntington had toured the country and advocated the notorious "forced-draft urbanization" program in the Mekong Delta, which herded thousands of peasants

into the cities, bringing them under the control of Nguyen Van Thieu's brutal regime. Whereas "modernization theorists" like Walt Rostow treated urbanization and rural development as part of an integrated program for economic growth and education reform—the idea was to transform the Mekong Delta into the Tennessee Valley Authority—Huntington championed the exodus into the cities on purely strategic grounds. His purpose was to deprive the Vietcong of their "Maoist-inspired rural revolution" by promoting an "American-sponsored urban revolution" that would dramatically increase Thieu's concentration of power. "Authority has to exist before it can be limited," Huntington wrote in *Political Order*, "and it is authority that is in scarce supply in those modernizing countries where government is at the mercy of alienated intellectuals, rambunctious colonels, and rioting students." It's not hard to see how this style of theorizing—the defense of "stability" at all costs—lent intellectual respectability to the US policy of backing dictators in the expectation of democratization later down the road. Its legacy shaped the State Department for decades during the cold war, and was still palpable in the confused US response to the early days of the Arab Awakening.

Huntington's faith in authoritarian transitions proved to be as misplaced as the modernization theory it was meant to revise. His theory worked well in cases such as Taiwan and South Korea—but only for those who were comfortable with "alienated intellectuals" and "rioting students" being beaten and gunned down by security thugs. As has lately become all too apparent, the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and the Maghreb were remarkably complacent about transition. Dictators such as Hosni Mubarak and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali were quite content to live off the fat of US aid without making the necessary reforms to grow their economies and loosen their grip on power. In the past decade, it has therefore become more customary to follow the anti-Huntingtonian line of economist and philosopher Amartya Sen in thinking that democracy is a means for economic growth as well as the goal of development. Fukuyama binds both views together in *The Origins of Political Order*. He follows Huntington in seeing an important disjuncture between economic and political development, but like Sen he believes democracy is the common denominator on which all countries and cultures can agree. Fukuyama's compulsion to retell all of human history in *The Origins* stems from his wish to show how this democratic convergence can still be secured if we understand what

prevented its emergence at earlier periods around the world.

The *Origins of Political Order* unfolds like a 3,000-year game of blind man's buff, as different civilizations press up against various institutional features of liberal democracy until one finally reveals its full contours. Fukuyama takes as his starting point China under the State of Qin (778–207 BCE), which he argues was the first centralized state. He attributes its early success to the centuries of unremitting warfare on the mainland that pressured the Qin emperors to institutionalize some of the defining features of the modern state. Reforms such as societywide conscription and the prefectural exam system broke down tribal kinship networks and redirected local allegiances to the emperor. But Fukuyama thinks that the Qin state ultimately became too strong, crushing the hope of any civil society that might have made political accountability possible. By never developing anything equivalent to the "rule of law," Fukuyama contends, the Chinese state gradually lost its legitimacy as nepotism and corruption grew rampant in the imperial court. He gives, as a foil to China, the example of ancient India, where less constant warfare apparently permitted fewer opportunities for state rationalization. The Mauryan Empire (321–185 BCE), Fukuyama argues, suffered not from a lack of rule of law but from too much of it: the strictures inherited from Vedic religion constrained Mauryan leaders from making the necessary reforms, such as conscription beyond the traditional military caste, to build a powerful state.

One of the unavoidable crudities of comparative history on the scale Fukuyama attempts is that he looks for concepts like "rule of law" in such a variety of places that he cannot always be talking about the same thing. Are Brahmanic injunctions about political restraint really a distant cousin of English common law? Despite Fukuyama's assurances to the contrary, these sorts of forced comparisons create the impression that *The Origins of Political Order* is gamed from the beginning, with the book—and history—reaching its foregone climax in the Western European states that avoided Chinese and Indian excesses. Christian Europe, Fukuyama argues, was uniquely positioned to build accountable governments. The Catholic Church fractured kinship networks with its policies against adoption and interfamily marriage, conditioning people for allegiance to relatively strong states; but at the same time, rulers and commoners were, at least in theory, bound by the same

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religious tenets. In the case of England, this division, however tenuous, between religious right and earthly might was the basis for the “rule of law” that later generations of local lords gradually developed in parliamentary checks on the king.

To his credit, the story Fukuyama tells is never neatly causal. His history may have a design, but as in the case of Hegel, that does not keep it from being shot through with contingency. Many apparent disadvantages in English development paid unexpected dividends. Britain’s long experience with feudalism, for instance, familiarized the population with contracts in a way that later proved vital for its market economy. In the end, Fukuyama attributes the power of the English

of *The End of History* clashes with the humbler historian of *The Origins*. In the final few pages of his new book Fukuyama scrambles to have it both ways: liberal democracy as completely contingent and also rooted in humankind’s deepest needs.

Another question remains: why should we think that liberal democracy in its capitalist variant is any more stable than the authoritarian capitalism of present-day China or, for that matter, the great empires of antiquity that enjoyed much longer periods of stability? Fukuyama’s answer amounts to the least ambitious defense of liberal democracy imaginable. Liberal democracies, he contends, are better suited to institutional adaptation than their authoritarian competitors because they have a built-in mechanism for voting governments out of office. By contrast, regimes such as present-day China are subject to the “bad emperor” problem—if China gets a bad leader, the lack of accountability forces

the people to depend on the whim of the central government to get rid of him. Fukuyama’s argument here seems hardly enough of a rallying point for liberal democrats: voting in a new government to deal with systemic problems such as climate change or public debt or increasing income inequality is not a workable solution in many Western nations, where politicians in power have incentives not to address these problems.

On some level, Fukuyama seems to acknowledge this predicament. A pessimistic undertow tugs at *The Origins*: Fukuyama is far from sanguine about the health of American democracy. “The United States is not in nearly as serious a moral and fiscal crisis as ancien regime France,” he writes. “The danger, however, is that its situation will continue to worsen over time in the absence of some powerful force that will knock the system off its current dysfunctional institutional equilibrium.” What exactly Fukuyama means by “some powerful force” is unclear, but in an article he wrote for *The American Interest* earlier this year he was more forthcoming. Looking back on the 2008 financial crisis, Fukuyama asked, “Why have there been so few demands for a rethinking of the basic American social contract, when the present one has been revealed to be so flawed?” The answer, he argues, lies in the powerful market ideology that binds rich and poor Americans together against the state. Whereas American elites see themselves primarily as “value creators,” Americans on the lower economic rungs aspire to be admitted to the ranks of those

elites, and hence see themselves as having an interest in protecting the elites’ privileges. The question faced by any liberal democracy, as Fukuyama aptly points out, is at what point these conditions undermine “the fundamental moral justification for material inequality in a politically egalitarian society.”

But Fukuyama curiously glides over the major historical problem in *The Origins*, which is, quite simply, that liberalism, capitalism and democracy have always been uneasy bedfellows. In its raw form, the principle of democracy—rule by and for the people—sits awkwardly with the defining principle of capitalist organization, which necessitates political arrangements that encourage unequal concentrations of wealth. Democracy has prospered in the West largely because its capitalist economies have redefined what democracy means. The architects of international capitalism long ago recognized that people could better serve the interests of the market as limited stakeholders rather than as disenfranchised masses. The great liberal reforms of the nineteenth century (which Fukuyama will have to address in the second volume of his book) were not undertaken by revolutionary parties but by conservative statesmen—Bismarck in Prussia, Disraeli in Britain, Cavour in Italy—who ingeniously enlisted working people on the side of the propertied classes before they got different ideas. With the virtual disappearance of powerful people’s parties in the past fifty years, Fukuyama is right to see fewer alternatives to liberal capitalist democracy on the horizon. But this is hardly because as a form of government it somehow fits human nature, or allows for the fuller flourishing of mutual recognition. The success of liberal capitalist democracy stems from its astonishing track record in improving the material conditions of vast numbers of people around the globe, while continuing to restrict access to the political, cultural and financial capital amassed by its elites. Yet even the security of those elites is threatened when democratically elected governments become feeble instruments for holding political power accountable.

The greatest instance of hubris in *The End of History* was Fukuyama’s mistaking the triumph of liberal capitalist democracy for its moral justification. He coolly assumed that the dominance of America meant that the rest of the world would be remiss not to replicate its institutions. The book’s greatest surprise was that Fukuyama—who clearly had major reservations about elements of liberal capitalism and cared little for academic theorizing about

In *The Origins* Fukuyama is far from sanguine about the health of American democracy.

state to its fortuitous mix of religious ideas, powerful local representation and, after the Glorious Revolution, a consistently strong executive. As a counterexample he offers medieval Hungary, where seven years after the Magna Carta the nobility achieved a similar democratic agreement—the Golden Bull of 1222—that imposed legal limits on the arbitrary power of the monarch. But the Hungarian nobles weakened the king to the point of impotence in order to enrich themselves, in effect cutting off their chance of following an English-style path to constitutional government.

In a grandly optimistic aside in *The Origins*, Fukuyama assures us that “there are a number of different routes for ‘getting to Denmark,’” by which he means that each region in the world can achieve liberal democracy in its own way. But if his book proves anything, it is closer to the opposite. Far from making liberal democracy appear more imitable, the contingencies he untangles, often with great finesse, illustrate just how difficult England’s or Denmark’s experience is to replicate. Fukuyama himself seems to be confused about this. “Any developing country is today free to adopt whatever development model it wishes,” he writes, “regardless of its indigenous traditions or culture.” But a few pages later he tells us, “Modern institutions cannot simply be transferred to other societies without reference to existing rules and the political forces supporting them.” Here the ardent universalist

“deliberative” or “participatory” democracy—refused to think seriously about possible transformations of the liberal capitalist world order. But if *The End of History* was at least compelling in its forecast of total liberal-capitalist convergence, *The Origins* reads more like homework dutifully submitted after the final exam. Fukuyama, the most imaginative Beltway seer of his generation, seems to have lost his sustaining inspiration.

This exhaustion is nowhere more apparent than in his dispiriting side venture, *The American Interest*. When Fukuyama left *The National Interest* to start the new magazine, he alleged that his former home had become compromised by its owner, the Nixon Center, into becoming a pulpit for strict Kissingerian realism. But there is little reason to believe this was the case. Under the direction of Robert Merry, and until very recently Justine Rosenthal, *The National Interest* continues to publish writers (Geoffrey Wheatcroft, Ramachandra Guha, John Dunn) from beyond the circle of *The American Interest*, which draws its primary contributions from Fukuyama and friends. The articles in *The American Interest* are characterized by their uniform wholesomeness, compulsive edifi-

cation and stultifying centrism. Josef Joffe and Mario Vargas Llosa have been brought aboard to lend the operation a transatlantic, *Encounter*-like feel, but no genuine dissenting foreign voices can be found in its pages. *The National Interest* once published a meditation by Saul Bellow. *The American Interest* metes out its cultural servings in neat little strips of text: one issue might randomly include an extract of Martha Gellhorn gushing about *West Side Story* or a nugget of wisdom from the last issue of *The Weekly Standard*. For a magazine that aspires to do nothing less than “explain America to the world and the world to America,” *The American Interest* is too provincial and policy oriented to explain the world and too placidly mainstream to tell us much new about America. For worse, not better, the magazine lacks the intellectual fecundity of the sort that could produce an article like “The End of History?”

Fukuyama takes justifiable pride in writing books that look “across time and space” to capture larger trends missed by narrower studies. Academic specialists working on subjects from Mongol genealogy to the Habsburg military will find themselves rubbing shoulders in the bibliography of *The*

Origins. The work has already drawn the inevitable comparisons with its nineteenth- and twentieth-century predecessors—Henry Maine’s *Ancient Law* (1861) and Arnold Toynbee’s *A Study of History* (1934–61). Like Maine, Fukuyama locates the germ of liberal democracy in English village communities, though he is ultimately more optimistic about its prospects for a worldwide sweep. But the more apt comparison may be with Toynbee. In 1947 Toynbee graced the cover of *Time* for his unexpected bestseller, much as Fukuyama would make headlines half a century later. Like *The Origins*, *A Study of History* surveyed various forms of civilizational decay and detailed the requirements for stability. In his early volumes, Toynbee placed his hope for civilization in the League of Nations. In the middle volumes he transferred it to Catholicism, and in the final chapters sank it into the United States. This is the torch Fukuyama has chosen to carry. Whether the second installment of *The Origins* will redeem the effort remains to be seen. But the present volume will be more useful to future scholars seeking a textbook example of the American desire to manage world history than to readers who want to understand it. ■

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FAREWELL TO PALESTINE

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Memoir of a Palestinian refugee told in compelling straightforward prose. Relying on history, current affairs, and firsthand knowledge of regional and cultural differences, Bendeck Sariolu examines the root of the problems that continue to devastate the Middle East and how they could possibly be solved without bloodshed. This is a vital resource for anyone who wants to understand the issues that are holding back the two Semitic people, the Jewish and the Arab living in the Middle East, from working together and taking on a leadership role in the world. Bendeck Sariolu seeks to bridge gaps that keep people apart. He clarifies the obscure, exposes false beliefs, and builds an argument against Nationalism, Zionism, and Western hegemony in *Farewell to Palestine*.

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