Francis Fukuyama. *Liberalism and Its Discontents*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2023. 192 pp. $26.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780374606718) $17 USD (Paperback ISBN9781250867223).

Much time has passed since the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. opened up the chance for a new, possibly better world order. The hopes for an 'end of history,' in the sense of a final triumph of liberalism, were short-lived, and in the last fifteen years, political rights and civil liberties have even decreased worldwide (cf. viii). While Francis Fukuyama has, notwithstanding a brief liaison with neoconservatism, remained a proponent of liberalism throughout the decades, the altered circumstances have changed his role from the herald of the triumph of liberalism to its warning defender.

In his new book *Liberalism and its Discontents* Fukuyama defends liberalism against its critics by arguing that its apparent vices are, in fact, distortions brought about by exaggerations of some of liberalism's genuine virtues: 'Populists on the right and progressives on the left are unhappy with liberalism not, I would argue, because of a fundamental weakness of the doctrine. Rather they are unhappy with the way liberalism has evolved over the last couple of generations' (ix). Fukuyama sees a repetitive pattern, where a praiseworthy element of liberalism is absolutized and driven to extremes, turning from a virtue into a vice. Thus, for example, liberalism's insistence on the benefits of free markets is generally correct: 'countries that lower trade barriers with one another will see markets and efficiency expand, leading to higher aggregate incomes for all parties concerned' (24). However, it is also true that free markets are dependent on 'legal systems that have the capacity to enforce rules concerning transparency, contracts, ownership, and the like' (23). Something, Fukuyama argues, neoliberals, hostile to states as such, have missed.

What gives the argument its elegant symmetrical shape is Fukuyama's thesis that it is the political protagonists of the right who are responsible for those exaggerations – like excessive economic deregulation – now bemoaned on the left. On the other hand, past political impulses of the left are responsible for developments in liberalism which are the focus of right-wing criticism today, e.g., specific versions of identity politics.

Fukuyama's strategy, thus, is not to defend liberalism on two fronts by proving the arguments of right- and left-wing critics wrong. Quite the opposite, he takes what he sees as valid points in the criticism from both sides of the political spectrum and uses them to point to undesirable developments in liberal doctrine and practice. By insisting that those developments are historically contingent and not inherent to liberalism, Fukuyama is thus able to defend what he sees as the good core of liberalism while blaming its degenerations on excesses brought about by the left and the right, respectively.

Fukuyama not only maintains that liberalism contains a core worth preserving, but he is also convinced that there is no viable alternative to liberalism in our modern times. Given the unprecedented degrees of diversity in today's societies, liberalism – with its advocation of a private sphere where people can realize their respective ideas of a good life, its guaranteed individual rights, and its belief in political compromise – appears as the most suitable political system. Focusing on America in particular, Fukuyama calls on conservatives and progressives alike to drop some of their more extreme claims and to see that they can pursue versions of their respective political ideologies

within a liberal framework. Rather than fighting a potentially self-defeating (and democracy-endangering) battle by manipulating or denying the results of democratic elections, 'conservatives could instead […] embrace demographic change, recognizing that many voters could be enticed not by right-wing identity politics, but by conservative policies' (145). Progressives, on the other hand, Fukuyama suggests, must understand that diversity does not only exist with regard to groups defined by features such as ethnicity or gender but also concerning religious and political views. They 'will have to accept the fact that roughly half the country does not agree with either their goals or their methods, and that they are very unlikely to simply overpower them at the ballot box any time soon' (146). Finally, liberals themselves need to learn if they want to preserve their favored political system. While excesses like neoliberalism are the result of absolutizing some of liberalism's good ideas, there are also problems that genuine liberalism (as opposed to its degenerated versions) has tended to struggle with. Since liberalism, notwithstanding its obvious strengths, has a hard time inspiring people emotionally and creating a strong sense of togetherness, liberals need to figure out how to reconcile its inherent universalism with a sense of national identity needed for social cohesion. Although Fukuyama probably has a point here, it is unclear how many liberals (not speaking of progressives) will be convinced by his concrete suggestions, which include restricting the right to vote to people who possess citizenship. (There might be, for instance, good arguments for granting people living and working for long periods in a city of a foreign country the right to participate in state elections, even if they have not been given full citizenship.)

People say that a generation growing up without the direct experience of war is more likely to take peace for granted and will thus do less to help maintain it. Likewise, those who have grown up with what are essentially the fruits of liberalism – from freedom of speech over civil rights to unprecedented prosperity – are now more likely to take its achievements for granted. At a time when liberalism (and not, as Fukuyama rightly points out, democracy as such) is under threat worldwide, such passivity or even contempt on the part of liberalism's profiteers is highly dangerous. That seems to be why some older, committed liberals have recently set out to restate the strengths and merits of liberalism – not least for a younger readership.

Less polemical than *The Once and the Future Liberal* (Harper 2017) by Mark Lilla, with whom Fukuyama shares the critique of some forms of identity politics, and less lively in its writing than *A Thousand Small Sanities* (Basic Books 2019) by Adam Gopnik, with whom Fukuyama shares the urge to defend liberalism against attacks from the left and the right, *Liberalism and its Discontents* stands out when it comes to summarizing long-term political developments and explaining complex concepts in a clear and accessible manner. Relatively sober in tone, adhering to scholarly standards, and engaging with a wide range of academic debates, *Liberalism and its Discontents* nonetheless is intended as a political intervention rather than a contribution to scholarly discourse.

Fukuyama unequivocally campaigns for liberalism – as a doctrine and a way of organizing politics. However, he does so in the spirit of the doctrine he defends: open-mindedly engaging with critical arguments from all political quarters, making concessions where he finds arguments convincing, and urging moderation wherever he deems it necessary.

Notwithstanding its fairhanded treatment of arguments from both sides of the political spectrum,

some readers will undoubtedly take issue with some of the book's generalizations, as when 'identity politics' is used as a term supposed to describe political programs ranging from the 'white identity politics' of the Ku Klux Klan (66, fn.), to identity politics in the Balkans, to the struggle for equal rights by women and African Americans. To be fair, Fukuyama does ascribe a positive role to identity politics wherever it works in a liberal framework (97) and helps 'to fulfill the promise of liberalism' of effective equal rights for all citizens (65). Likewise, many readers will be unconvinced when Fukuyama dismisses the problematic effects that certain words can have on people by claiming that anyone who has ever experienced 'real violence,' such as a 'punch in the face,' will know that words cannot have comparable effects (90).

These qualifications aside, one has to hope that liberals, conservatives, and progressives alike will read the book and that they all will engage with its arguments in the same thoughtful and constructive way Fukuyama has engaged with the views of all those discontent with liberalism's current manifestations.

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