

Discussion Papers.

***Opinion Pieces on Nationalism and
Identity in Cross-national Perspective***

DID HISTORY END? DEMOCRACY, CAPITALISM, NATIONALISM, RELIGION, WAR, AND BOREDOM SINCE 1989

JOHN MUELLER¹

ABSTRACT². In a 1989 essay, Francis Fukuyama suggested that, with the death of Communism, history had come to an end. This formulation has generally been misinterpreted. He did not mean that things would stop happening, but that there had been a profound ideological development: Democracy and market capitalism had triumphed over all other governmental and economic systems or sets of ordering principles, and the potential challenges of destructive forms of nationalism and of fundamentalist religion were unlikely to prevail. Developments over the subsequent quarter century suggest that Fukuyama had it fundamentally right.

Keywords: democracy, capitalism, liberalism

In a 1989 essay, Francis Fukuyama suggested that, with the death of Communism, history had come to an end. This somewhat fanciful, and presumably intentionally provocative, formulation has generally been misinterpreted. He did not mean that things would stop happening, but that there had been a profound ideological development. With the demise of Communism, liberalism—democracy and market capitalism—had triumphed over all other governmental and economic systems or sets of ordering principles. Looking for future challenges to this triumph, he examined the potential rise of destructive forms of nationalism and of fundamentalist religion, but found them unlikely to prevail. Thus, the triumph of liberalism was likely to be permanent.

Developments over the subsequent quarter century suggest that Fukuyama had it fundamentally right.

¹ Mershon Center for International Security Studies, Ohio State University, bbb@osu.edu.

² From a paper presented at the conference, "Nationalism and Conflict: Interdisciplinary Methodological Approaches" at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Poland, December 10-12, 2012.

Beginning with the countries of Eastern Europe, democracy continued its progress throughout the world after 1989 with remarkably few setbacks, and old-fashioned forms of tyranny have almost completely vanished. There has been democratic progress in Africa—most spectacularly, of course, in South Africa, and equally impressive is the way the world’s most populous Muslim country, Indonesia, successfully navigated its way to democracy after 1997. Popular revolutions waged throughout the Middle East beginning in 2011 suggest further progress—though not without pain.

In addition, capitalism increasingly came to be accepted after the abject and pathetic collapse of command and heavily planned economies in 1989. In practice, all capitalist, or market capitalist, states, may not end up looking a great deal like each other, any more than all democracies do. But, substantially and increasingly, the debate is likely to be more nearly a matter of degree than of fundamental principles. Thus, when the world plunged into widespread economic crisis in the late 1990s and then again after 2007, proposed remedies variously recommended tinkering with the system—not, as in the 1930s, abandoning it. There were no widespread calls for trade protectionism, for the imposition of wage and price controls, or for confiscatory taxes on the rich. And when some enterprises were deemed too big to fail, there were sometimes efforts to subsidize their recovery and to increase regulation, but not to nationalize them.

Experience suggests that democracy as a form of government and capitalism as an economic form are really quite simple, even natural. Unless obstructed by thugs with guns, they can form quite easily and quickly and do not require any special development, prerequisites, or preparation.

In the meantime, violent forms of nationalism that surged in some places in the last decade of the old century scarcely proved, as Fukuyama predicted, to be much of a challenge to these trends, and the same seems likely to hold for violent forms of fundamentalist religion that surged in some places in the first decade of the new one. In fact, the significance of both of these illiberal developments seems to have been much exaggerated.

In the 1990s, many held a rise in nationalism, or ultra-nationalism, to be potential rival to liberalism and therefore a vital challenge to the Fukuyama thesis—or even a devastating refutation of it. However, it appears that the “nationalist” and “ethnic” conflicts of the 1990s were spawned not so much by the convulsive surging of ancient hatreds as by the vicious ministrations of small bands of opportunistic predators either recruited for the purpose by political leaders or else formed from essentially criminal and bandit gangs. It is less a clash of civilizations than a clash of thugs in which ethnicity or nationalism becomes something of an ordering or sorting device that allows people to determine which thugs are more or less on their side and which ones are out to get them. Despite such distortions, however, nationalism could well prove, on balance, to be a

constructive force. It has aided the difficult and painful process of unification in Germany for example, and it probably helped strengthen Poland's remarkable political and economic development of the 1990s.

In the new century, the isolated, if dramatic, success of a few violent religious terrorists was taken to suggest another major challenge to liberalism and to Fukuyama's thesis. However, in the years since the September 11, 2001, attacks, terrorists have inflicted little violence in the West, and it is unclear that al-Qaeda central has done much of anything except issue videos filled with empty, self-infatuated, and essentially delusional threats. Indeed, extremist Islamist terrorism—whether associated with al-Qaeda or not—has claimed 200 to 400 lives yearly worldwide outside war zones. That is 200 to 400 too many, of course, but it is about the same number as bathtub drownings every year in the United States. Moreover, far from igniting a global surge of violent religious fundamentalism, al-Qaeda has mainly succeeded in uniting the world, including its huge Muslim population, against its violent jihad, and cooperative efforts by governments have led to important breakthroughs against the group.

Civil war, by far the most common type of war since World War II, reached something of a peak around 1989. However, there has been a notable decline in their number since then. Indeed, following the pattern found with international war in the developed world, civil war may be going out of style. One key may have been in the rise of competent governments which have increasingly been able to police domestic conflicts rather than exacerbating them as frequently happened in previous decades.

Fukuyama's prediction, however, that the end of history would be characterized by "boredom" has, perhaps unfortunately, proven to be savagely mistaken. Indeed, there may be benefits to the endless and endlessly-successful quest to raise standards and to fabricate new desires to satisfy and new issues to worry about. It keeps the mind active and boredom at bay, and it probably importantly drives economic development as well.

Finally, Fukuyama's celebration of the "autonomous power of ideas" seems justified. The remarkable rise of liberalism and of war aversion over the last two centuries appears to be substantially the result of efforts by idea entrepreneurs who have actively promoted—or marketed—the concepts around the world. In general, it seems best to see each idea movement as an independent phenomenon rather than contingent on something else or on another idea stream.