Moderation to the Barricades

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Liberalism is the political theory that animates the liberal democratic republic by affirming the autonomy of individuals and their rights to property, to freedom of thought and speech, and to participate in government.

Although seldom explicitly invoked by scientists, liberalism also underpins what British chemist Michael Polanyi named the "republic of science," in which "scientists, freely making their own choice of problems and pursuing them in the light of their own personal judgment, are in fact cooperating as members of a closely knit organization." It was the theory embedded implicitly in *Science, the Endless Frontier*, the 1945 report from science administrator Vannevar Bush that influenced the structure of the postwar American research enterprise: "Scientific progress on a broad front results from the free play of free intellects, working on subjects of their own choice, in the manner dictated by their curiosity for exploration of the unknown." Liberalism remains the unstated ideal of many scientists and engineers, for both their own professional communities and the larger societies in which they live.

But today liberalism, and liberal democracy as a form of government, appears beset by problems both internal and external. In this atmosphere, Francis Fukuyama's *Liberalism and Its Discontents* aims to defend and rehabilitate liberalism against its critics and competitors. China's emergence as a global power presents a distinct challenge to the post-Cold War idea of liberalism as the default ideology behind any legitimate government—an idea Fukuyama famously championed in his first book, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). Thirty years later, authoritarian leaders appear to be rising around the world, including in liberal democracies themselves. Within the internal dynamics of the liberal order, the emphasis on free markets and individual agency has brought about new problems, which are the focus of this latest book. Founded on these liberal principals and ideals, the republic of science is facing similar challenges.

Fukuyama begins by defining "classical liberalism" as individualist, egalitarian, universalist, and meliorist (i.e., progressive, or making the world better through human effort). For some reason he leaves out liberty or freedom as the unifying ideal of these four characteristics. As the very term implies—and as Enlightenment political philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke originally imagined before the American founders put it into practice—liberalism makes liberty the supreme value in an individualist social ontology in which people freely establish governments.

With Hobbes the ideal was a negative freedom: to escape the evils of a "state of nature" dominated by unremitting conflict that vitiates the peaceful cognitive and material productivity envisioned by Hobbes's mentor, the philosopher Francis Bacon. For Locke, the positive goal was to protect private property in order to "promote the general welfare," in the words of the US Constitution (on which Locke's philosophy was an important influence).

Liberalism further affirms, from Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, that humans have the freedom to self-legislate, to make rational moral choices. And finally, liberalism (at least in its British and American iterations) argues for the gradual advancement of freedom throughout out the world in a process similar to advances in the sciences: "In a free marketplace of

ideas," Fukuyama writes, "good ideas will in the end drive out bad ones through deliberation and evidence." In his formulation, social progress rides on the back of scientific progress:

> The liberal Enlightenment understood itself as the victory of human reason over superstition and obscurantism…. Modern science was able to defeat these alternative approaches ultimately because it could produce repeatable results. The manipulation of nature produced the modern economic world, where continuing growth though technological advance could be taken for granted. Scientific approaches to health led to huge increases in longevity; and technology conferred on states huge military advantages that could be used to defend or to conquer.

Although Fukuyama has been portrayed as a cheerleader for liberalism, he has always been a more complex—and critically restless—thinker. Even in his first book, he recognized that the global triumph of liberalism was full of complications and contradictions, as the second part of his title suggested. The "last man" is nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's metaphor for the bourgeois degeneration of heroism and great deeds into lives of commerce and entertainment: "little pleasures by day and little pleasures by night," in Nietzsche's words.

After 9/11, Fukuyama's end-of-history argument was contested by thinkers who often referenced some version of political scientist Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis—that cultural and religious identities, rather than national political systems such as liberalism or communism, are the "central lines of conflict in global politics." Fukuyama's new book revisits what he still contends properly anchors any political discourse for the foreseeable future (which is what he meant by "end" in "the end of history"): "To paraphrase what Winston Churchill once said about democracy, liberalism is the worst form of government, except for all the rest" (p. 128). For Fukuyama, defending liberalism can constitute a Churchill-like heroism appropriate for our time.

Fukuyama argues that liberal theory must be defended against distortions in how freedom and free agency are conceived. There are two primary forms of distorting excess: economic individualism (free markets) and radical interpretations of psychosocial autonomy (identity politics). These challenges are echoed in efforts to defend and reform a scientific enterprise that is founded on similar liberal principles.

LIBERALISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

FRANCIS FUKUYAMA

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Liberalism and Its Discontents
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Excessive economic individualism manifests as neoliberalism. Neoliberal market fundamentalism, Fukuyama writes, "allied to what Americans label libertarianism, whose single underlying theme is hostility to an overreaching state and belief in the sanctity of individual freedom," pushed liberalism "to a counterproductive extreme." Through deregulation and the offloading of many public social programs into the private sector, it "promoted two decades of rapid economic growth [while] destabilizing the global economy and undermining its own success." Contrary to this libertarian ethos, the need for at least some government regulation is clearly demonstrated by, among other problems, the contemporary worsening gaps in income inequality and the hazards posed by a changing climate.

In science, neoliberalism can distort research by enabling it to be captured by commercial interests. The sociologist Robert Merton identified a scientific ethos characterized by communalism, universalism, disinterestedness, and organized skepticism. But, as the organizational theorist Ian Mitroff pointed out in the 1970s, these characteristics skew toward secrecy, particularism, interestedness, and dogmatism under neoliberal conditions. Entrepreneurial pressures to translate scientific results into market success, for instance, promote extreme intellectual property protectionism and promotional hype.

From neoliberal excess, Fukuyama shifts to more philosophically fraught issues of psychosocial autonomy and identity politics. "Individual autonomy was carried to an extreme by liberals on the right who thought primarily about economic freedom" and property rights, he notes. "But it was also carried to extremes by liberals on the left, who valued a different type of autonomy centered around individual self-actualization." The

pursuit of personal autonomy replaces the utility maximizers of economic models with sovereign self-creators. In the first moment, self-creating autonomy, independent of reference to any substantive good, turns the process of choosing or deciding itself into the primary good. The assertion of the primacy of the "I" makes it hard to recognize the authority of any "we"—except a "we" that "I" choose to assert. Extreme individualists don't like to join any group that they don't create.

Sovereign-self individuals seek the liberty to act, not just within a given social and moral context, but to create their own contexts. In line with this notion, sovereign-self scientists seek liberation from social responsibilities; the ideal is often Albert Einstein or Stephen Hawking leading the scientific life as an end in itself, with Bush's "free play of free intellects" as the model.

In a second moment, however, the "me" of the sovereign self inevitably discovers itself externally classified as a member of some "we" at intersectional odds with one or more other sociocultural groupings. For those who find imposed identities psychosocially constraining, material security becomes insufficient for unencumbered self-actualization. Even in the nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill's great manifesto for liberalism, *On Liberty*, argued that the mass cultivating of truly "experimental lives" required the weakening of social norms regarding family and religion. At some point, Fukuyama argues, liberalism "turns on itself" and demands freedom not only for individuals but for all sociocultural identities—and rights to identify as such, to make sociocultural identity an element in self-actualization.

From the perspective of this new demand, liberalism itself is just another historically contingent identity, one that has in fact promoted a false social ontology, overly rationalist social contract theories, and empty legal processes while hypocritically oppressing other identities and cultures. To this view, individualism, egalitarianism, universalism, and meliorism are just Western concepts that can't be dissociated from their exploitative, colonialist histories.

Fukuyama argues back. "While individualism may be the historically contingent by-product of Western civilization, it has proven to be highly attractive to people of varied cultures once they are exposed to the freedom it brings." Although "there are types of cultural autonomy that are not consistent with liberal principles," he continues, no political order is more inclusive and broadly beneficial. Liberalism's rationalism has been "strongly associated with the project of mastering nature through science and technology, and using the latter to bend the given world to suit human purposes."

Against a suite of discontents with liberal societies—that "they are self-indulgently consumerist; that don't provide a strong sense of community or common purpose; they are too permissive and disrespect deeply held religious values; they are too diverse; they are not diverse enough; they are too lackadaisical about achieving genuine social justice; they tolerate too much inequality; they are dominated by manipulative elites and don't respond to the wishes of ordinary people"—Fukuyama argues that neither religious conservatives, nationalist conservatives, authoritarians, nor radical left progressives offer any realistic alternatives.

What is needed instead, he says, is moderation of right and left liberal excesses. Right-wing economic liberals should recognize the legitimate role for some measure of government regulation and the provisioning of some level of social welfare. Left wing self-actualization liberals must accept limits to radical autonomy—an achievable goal since, as Fukuyama notes, many people "are happy to limit their freedom of choice by accepting religious and moral frameworks that connect them with other people."

Fukuyama also devotes a chapter to the difficulties of bringing moderating liberal principles to bear in the digital environment. Founded explicitly on neoliberal principles, digital communication technologies often embody the excesses and distortions that plague liberal societies. Digital platforms allow rapid and widespread dissemination of misinformation, lies, and conspiracy theories while at the same time posing challenges to the effective sharing of scientific knowledge. Under these mutating political circumstances, Fukuyama calls on liberalism to refine and reapply its basic principles. "The unanswered question for the future," he writes, "is whether liberal societies can overcome the internal divisions that they themselves have created."

One doesn't have to look hard to see many entries from Fukuyama's list of discontents in contemporary discussions about science and science policy. Scientists and scientific institutions too have been accused of greed (focusing on research that makes themselves or their corporate patrons money), undermining social cohesion (through the disruptive churn of discovery and innovation), subordinating religious values (in stem cell research, for instance), being slow to promote social justice (in lacking diversity), and overall elitism. In response, the scientific community sticks with some version of Fukuyama's defense: there is still no better useful knowledge production institution than that of modern science, even though it needs some reforms. But in the research community, too, whether science can overcome the discontents to which it has contributed is an unanswered question.

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