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Liberalism in the Age of AI

Revisiting Fukuyama

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Abstract: This talk revisits Fukuyama's account of liberalism in the context of the rise of artificial intelligence. It critically discusses Fukuyama's reflections on the direction of human history and raises the question of whether classical liberalism is contingent on aspects of human cognition and nature that AI may fundamentally alter or challenge. The talk considers both the threats posed by AI, e.g., technological totalitarianism and increased economic and power inequalities, and its promises of improving knowledge and democratic institutions. It assesses the resilience of liberalism amid transformative technological change and questions how its principles can withstand the challenges posed by AI.

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In this talk, I address a critical danger to liberalism that Francis Fukuyama does not fully consider – namely, that the rapid pace of technological progress may outstrip our collective wisdom. I will argue that, although the rise of AI might intensify this threat, it could ultimately serve to strengthen liberal democracy.

To give you a taste of the nature of this danger, let me begin with a poignant observation made by Carl Sagan three years after Fukuyama published *The End of History and the Last Man*. Here is the now-famous quote:

I have a foreboding of an America...when awesome technological powers are in the hands of a very few, and no one representing the public interest can even grasp the issues; when the people have lost the ability to knowledgeably question those in authority; when, unable to distinguish between what feels good and what's true, we slide, almost without noticing, back into superstition and darkness... We might get away with it for a while, but sooner or later this combustible mixture of ignorance and power is going to blow up in our faces.

Personally, I consider myself a liberal in the sense that Fukuyama does in his latest book, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, where he defends classical liberalism against contemporary criticisms and distortions from both the right and the left. Moreover, I appreciate his historical, interdisciplinary, and big-picture approach to political philosophy.

However, I am less enthusiastic about Fukuyama's earlier work, *The End of History and the Last Man*. While I admire its theoretical boldness and originality, I find the Hegelian notion of the "end of history" to be catchy but ultimately misleading. History, in my view, cannot be reduced to mere political or ideological transformations. More importantly, Fukuyama's early account of history rests on a speculative philosophical anthropology, which portrays human beings as primarily driven by material and social needs best fulfilled through a combination of market economy and liberal democracy. Thus, history is framed as teleological, culminating in liberal societies. Fukuyama did not dismiss the possibility of illiberal developments even after the so-called "end of history," as the struggle for recognition could lead to irrational actions by the "last man." His thesis, fundamentally, is normative: given human nature, liberal democracy is the best political order in principle. Therefore, the recent rise of illiberal movements and regimes does not really refute his argument.

Two decades later, Fukuyama recognized that the theoretical foundations of his account of political order were unsatisfactory. He set out to rethink his earlier work, resulting in an impressive two-volume investigation into the origins and decline of political order. He

significantly changed his approach, modified some of his main theses, and developed new arguments.

To begin with, the mature Fukuyama places his theory of political development on a more scientific footing, drawing on insights from fields such as evolutionary biology, sociology, complexity science, and game theory. Furthermore, he questions the teleological view of history and the idea of the inevitable triumph of liberal democracy, now viewing the latter as a moral rather than historical necessity. However, he has maintained his big-picture approach to history and has developed new arguments supporting the view that general tendencies in history favor liberalism in the long run. What are these arguments?

Fukuyama views history as a gradual, non-deterministic process characterized by increasingly complex, large-scale forms of cooperation. This process is driven by competition between groups and, in particular, the ever-present phenomena of violence and war. It is shaped by numerous contingent and specific factors, giving rise to diverse cultures, political orders, and societies. Yet, as Fukuyama argues, the history of transitions from less to more complex forms of cooperation also exhibits general, law-like features. For instance, every complex society requires a state: without centralized institutions of authority and power, it would quickly descend into chaos and brutal violence. Large-scale cooperation would be practically impossible without various institutions.

Over time, humans have created diverse social, religious, economic, legal, political, and knowledge institutions. According to Fukuyama, the institutions that work efficiently – such as the modern state, the rule of law, and democratic accountability – are likely to be preserved and further developed. In Fukuyama's account, only liberal societies combine these three institutions, making the liberal political order the best. While liberalism can also be defended on moral and economic grounds, its superiority over alternatives is primarily pragmatic. It enables the peaceful coexistence of diverse groups and grants individuals the freedom to make choices and flourish. In contrast, other forms of political order can ensure stability only through autocratic means. Echoing Fukuyama, Jonathan Rauch calls liberalism the greatest social technology ever invented, as its success in reducing violence and poverty while upholding individual freedom and dignity is unparalleled.

Does this make liberal democracy the best political order in principle, rather than merely the best in the West? Unlike his early pronouncements, Fukuyama takes a more cautious stance in his later works. He now argues that the liberal political order may not be inevitable.

If countries like China and Singapore continue to thrive economically and technologically without embracing liberalism, then liberal democracy might remain largely a Western phenomenon. Even this, however, is uncertain given the recent rise of illiberal movements in Europe and the United States. How, then, can we explain the resurgence of illiberalism in the West?

Fukuyama offers a two-pronged explanation for the recent democratic recession. First, he argues that even the best liberal democratic institutions are not immune to political decay. On one hand, these institutions may lack the flexibility to adapt to technological and social changes. On the other, elites can capture institutions and engage in zero-sum games at the expense of poor and middle-class citizens. According to Fukuyama, both factors have played significant roles in the decline of democracy in the United States and other countries.

The second prong of his explanation addresses cognitive and psychological aspects of the human condition. People in peaceful societies often take liberal institutions for granted, focusing primarily on perceived problems and failures. Moreover, many find life in a peaceful, free society somewhat boring and seek struggle for its own sake. If they cannot fight for liberal democracy, they may instead fight against it. This need for struggle as a source of meaning can become an irrational and destructive force. Here, Fukuyama revisits his earlier views on human nature as presented in *The End of History*.

By my lights, there is much truth in Fukuyama's observations on the decline of political institutions and some truth in his psychological reflections. However, it seems to me that liberalism faces deeper challenges than those he identifies.

A political order is effective to the extent that it can strike a productive balance between opposing aspects of human life: stability and change, security and freedom, cooperation and competition, individual rights and the common good, technological progress and spiritual meaning, political equality and economic inequality, and so on. Liberalism has proven to be a powerful social technology, fostering freedom, scientific advancement, and large-scale cooperation, particularly in terms of economic development, new technologies, and modern political and social institutions. In Fukuyama's words, it has enabled the transition from a Malthusian to a post-Malthusian stage of development, significantly reducing poverty and extending the human lifespan.

At the same time, however, liberalism seems predisposed to disrupt the balance in favour of innovation and change over tradition and stability, of freedom over security, of

individual rights over the common good, of scientific and technological progress over spiritually oriented life, of economic inequality over political equality. And this may make liberalism less attractive in the age of powerful technologies, particularly AI, synthetic biology, and quantum computing. Let me explain.

There are several dangers facing the future of liberalism. The first is that emerging super-technologies can reshape bodies, brains, and minds. This might not be inherently negative, as becoming more resilient to diseases and enhancing cognitive capacities could aid our survival. However, the critical question is: who will have access to such advancements – ordinary citizens or only a select elite? The latter scenario now seems more likely, which could spell the end of liberal democracy. If dramatic cognitive and power disparities emerge between elites and ordinary citizens, the latter may no longer be able to exert control over the former.

Yet even if all citizens were to have equal access to technologies that alter bodies, brains, and minds, many – particularly those with religious convictions – might choose to preserve their traditional human selves. This also could have profound political consequences.

The second danger arises from the ever-increasing pace of technological transformation and disruption. Large-scale cooperation requires a background of shared beliefs and stable cultural and social institutions. However, the rapid rise of new communication and intelligence technologies has put everything in flux. The pace of change now outstrips the ability of many people to adapt to new realities and make sense of them. One key reason populist and illiberal movements have gained significant support in the West is that many people no longer feel at home in this rapidly changing world.

To illustrate, consider the conclusion of a research paper on the attitudes of Brexiteers: “They tended to value things like order, stability, and safety over openness, modernity, and other social-liberal values... Often, it is about harking back to the past – sometimes driven by a feeling that they no longer belong to the present.” Such sentiments are likely to become even more widespread with the advent of brain- and mind-altering super-technologies. Many will feel left behind and long for strong, autocratic leaders who promise order, stability, and traditional values. For them, liberalism will represent a pathway to disorder and an uncertain future.

Even more critically, the pace of change may surpass our collective wisdom – our ability to understand and control the consequences of new technologies. By my lights, one of liberalism’s best-selling points is its resemblance to the scientific method of trial and error and

its capacity for self-correction. It is hardly coincidental that the rise of liberalism in Europe aligned with philosophical reflections on the limits of human understanding in the works of Locke, Hume, Kant, and Mill. The topic of our cognitive limitations is – or should be – central to political science.

Our beliefs about reality, including social reality, are simplified representations of complex phenomena and their causal structures. These limitations in our beliefs are themselves significant causal factors that shape the ontology of social, cultural, and political institutions. Liberalism is a powerful social technology not only because it satisfies needs for peace, freedom, recognition, and human dignity, but also because it acknowledges our cognitive capacities and limitations in two essential ways.

First, it fosters the creation and development of institutions that champion freedom of thought, speech, and scientific inquiry. The free competition of ideas and theories helps us recognize the limitations of our beliefs, correct them, and find better solutions to various problems. Given our limited knowledge, we cooperate by endorsing simplified views and explanations of reality. Thus, the consensus that allows us to act collectively and solve problems often has irrational aspects, such as the exclusion of certain groups. Over time, the free market of ideas makes it possible to challenge and overcome, to some extent, irrational views about women, children, people of colour, and so on. Liberalism enables a gradual process of refining our mental models and addressing irrational aspects of communal life.

Second, liberalism acknowledges that it is extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, to achieve certainty and consensus on the big questions – such as the fundamental nature of reality, the meaning of life, and the ultimate origins of good and evil. Consequently, it embraces tolerance for diverse, substantive conceptions of the good life and fosters the relatively peaceful coexistence of diverse groups and cultures.

But here's the kicker: given our inherent limitations, our capacity to tolerate diversity – whether of bodies, brains, or minds – is also limited. Many will inevitably feel overwhelmed by diversity and will long for a return to the past. As the transformation of bodies, brains, and minds accelerates, this tendency will likely intensify, leading to a significant backlash against liberalism – if it is not already underway.

The method of trial and error is less promising in the age of super-technologies, as the consequences of mistakes can be too costly – for example, errors related to nuclear weapons, biotechnologies, or AI. The more advanced the technologies we develop, the greater their

potential dangers, thereby increasing the need for political and social stability to use them safely. The margin for social and political experimentation is shrinking. While we rely on super-technologies to gain better control over our lives and our future, they simultaneously render social reality more complex, opaque and difficult to predict, particularly in conditions of individual freedom.

This highlights a related threat to liberalism. A liberal democracy can avoid catastrophic outcomes, such as electing fascists, if most citizens are able to form true beliefs about political reality and the consequences of their political decisions. Otherwise, they may readily accept simplistic, populist explanations for social problems that scapegoat certain elites or groups as inherently evil. The challenge is that, as societies become more complex, the causal factors behind social issues grow increasingly opaque – not only for the poorly educated but even for professionals with specialized expertise. This opacity can undermine the foundations of democratic accountability.

In other words, the danger is that the rapid pace of change and increasing complexity of modern societies outstrips our collective intelligence, thereby weakening the institutions of liberal democracy. This threat is further amplified by the rise of AI.

The perils of AI are widely discussed. AI-powered agents can undermine the information ecosystem essential for the functioning of liberal institutions. Furthermore, AI may be weaponized by tech oligarchs to capture these institutions, stripping them of democratic meaning. This may, in fact, already be happening. Critics of liberalism might argue that only powerful oligarchs or autocratic regimes can ensure order, stability, and safety in a world dominated by super-technologies.

However, AI also holds the potential to support liberal democracy by enhancing our collective intelligence. It is a technology that can be harnessed not only to weaken information and knowledge institutions but also to strengthen and make them more resilient. For proponents of liberal democracy, this is an urgent priority. Individual freedom in high-tech societies increasingly depends on collective wisdom, and AI may be crucial for enhancing it.