

VOLUME XIX, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2019

CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship



Michael Anton:
In Praise of Tucker Carlson

William Voegeli:
Socialism for Dummies

Christopher Caldwell:
Hungary vs. Liberalism

Larry P. Arnn:
Andrew Roberts's Churchill

Joseph Epstein:
The P.C. Menace

Martha Bayles:
Cold War Movies

John Fonte:
Reihan Salam's Melting Pot

Mark Helprin:
Memo from Harvard Admissions

David Gelernter:
Up from Darwinism

A Publication of the Claremont Institute

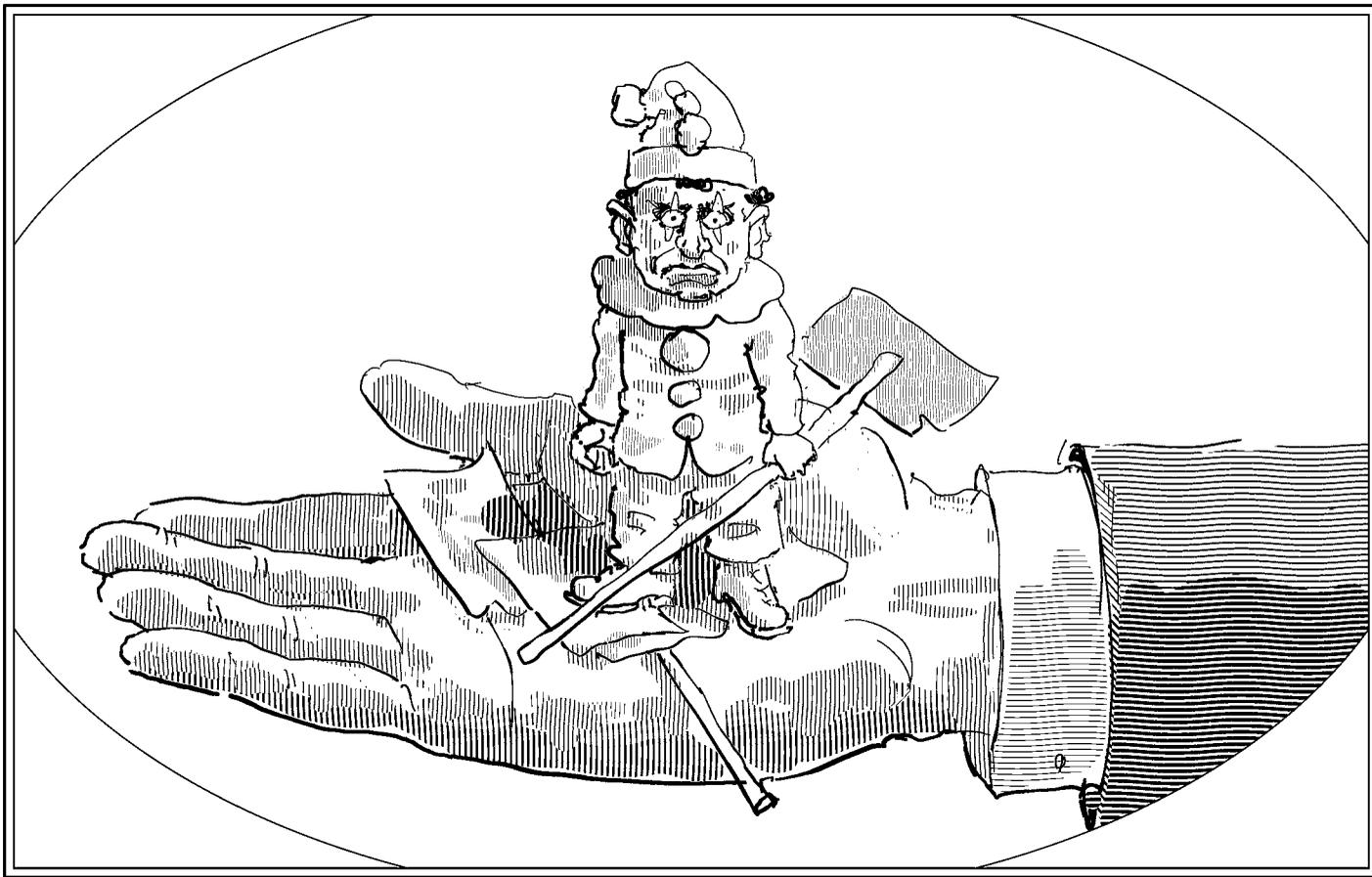
PRICE: \$6.95
IN CANADA: \$8.95



9 2 >

THE LAST MAN AND THE CLASH OF IDENTITIES

Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment, by Francis Fukuyama.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 240 pages, \$26



IN THE BEGINNING OF *IDENTITY: THE Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, Francis Fukuyama asserts that identity politics is “a master concept that unifies much of what is going on in world politics today.” As this overly ambitious, muddled little book unfolds, it turns out to be *the* master concept that explains almost every major global political development not just today but for the past two centuries.

In Fukuyama’s brisk retelling, identity politics demands the recognition of one’s dignity or identity (he can’t quite decide) and accounts for, among other things: the American and French revolutions, 19th-century European nationalism, the May 1968 upheaval in France, both the American civil rights movement and Black Lives Matter, the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi and the ensuing so-called Arab Spring, the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, political polarization in Thailand, Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orbán (who is

casually compared to Hitler), Donald Trump (who is casually linked to white nationalism), Xi Jinping, Brexit, #MeToo, campus politics, populism, liberal democracy, and—wait for it—Islamism.

OF THE MANY FAR-FETCHED CLAIMS made on behalf of this confused definition of identity politics, this last one is undoubtedly the most unbelievable. What the Islamists really want, Fukuyama would have us believe, is not a caliphate on earth and 72 virgins in heaven, but “public recognition” of their “hidden or suppressed group identity.” The Houthis, whose flag reads “God is the Greatest, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam,” find their identity in jihad. American teenagers, Fukuyama observes, find theirs in “the specific subgenre of music that they and their friends listen to.” Ultimately, they all just want to be recognized.

In his haste to see everything from al-Qaeda to Zydeco as manifestations of identity politics, Fukuyama, a senior fellow at Stanford University’s Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, not only misinterprets political phenomena, he never clearly defines his master concept. Nowhere in his book does he explain or defend the nature and basis of this dignity we are all supposedly so keen to have recognized.

Modern science, after all, robs us of any illusions we may have about our dignified place in the cosmos. Physics teaches that everything is matter in motion. And biology teaches that human beings, like all living organisms, are the result of an arbitrary evolutionary process. As the French Nobel Laureate in Medicine Jacques Monod once observed: “Man knows at last that he is alone in the universe’s unfeeling immensity, out of which he emerged only by chance.”

It may be possible for those who espouse such a worldview to behave in a dignified

way. It is not, however, possible to defend innate human dignity on such a foundation. There is nothing dignified about random genetic mutations producing a featherless biped, even if this biped so happens to have developed reason and the capacity for moral deliberation. What evolution giveth, it may taketh away.

AT ITS CORE, UNIVERSAL, UNALIENABLE human dignity is a religious concept. It grows out of the belief in a creator God who sets human beings apart from the brutes by fashioning them in his image and likeness, and endowing them with a soul. It can be harmonized with evolution—so long as one believes in a providential God guiding evolution.

Fukuyama is aware of the theistic argument for dignity, but he prefers the evolutionary worldview. He compares humans to chimpanzees on three occasions and once invokes the “presumed chimplike progenitor of modern humans.”

Still, he clings to his dignitarian demands, pointing to the “inner self”—whatever that may be—as the “basis of human dignity,” while admitting that “the nature of that dignity is variable and has changed over time.” As a result, “scarcely a politician in the Western world if pressed could explain its theoretical basis.” Neither can Fukuyama, it turns out.

At times, he writes as if dignity is not innate and inalienable, but merely bestowed by others. He speaks of a “humiliated group seeking restitution of its dignity,” thereby implying it can be lost. In his peculiar interpretation of Plato’s *Republic*, the warriors demand dignity, thereby implying they do not possess it. He thus collapses dignity into the desire to have one’s dignity recognized by others. Dignity becomes a synonym for “esteem,” “honor,” “respect,” “status,” and ultimately, mere “vanity” and “self-esteem.” If so, it is hard to see what’s so dignified about *amour-propre*.

To add to the confusion, Fukuyama often uses the terms “identity” and “dignity” interchangeably. Identity politics is defined as a struggle for the recognition of one’s dignity, but also of one’s identity. These, in fact, are two very different political projects. Justice demands that we affirm the inherent dignity of man before those who would deny it. It does not compel us to celebrate and publicly affirm whatever self-chosen identity certain people so happen to embrace and discard at will. All men are created equal, but not all ways of life are equally dignified. Some are in fact quite undignified—if not downright

reprehensible. No one, as such, has a right to be honored.

FUKUYAMA’S CONFUSION ABOUT DIGNITY extends to the phenomenon of identity politics, which the book is ostensibly meant to elucidate. Although he never clearly says so, Fukuyama seems to think that all politics is identity politics. Human beings, he claims, naturally crave recognition. As we already knew from the book that made him famous, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), Fukuyama agrees with his teacher Alexandre Kojève’s interpretation of G.W.F. Hegel that “the struggle for recognition” is “the ultimate driver of human history.” In *Identity*, he has decided, for reasons that remain unclear, to rename this struggle “identity politics,” a term which did not appear in *The End of History*.

Fukuyama thus sees identity politics everywhere and takes a rather benign view of it. “So there is nothing wrong with identity politics as such,” he writes, “it is a natural and inevitable response to injustice.” Identity politics may in fact even extend to the subhuman: “we know that feelings of pride and self-esteem—which we aim to obtain via recognition—are related to levels of the neurotransmitter serotonin in the brain, and that chimpanzees exhibit elevated levels of serotonin when they achieve alpha male status.”

At the human level, identity politics takes on two forms. The first, which Fukuyama endorses, calls for the recognition of the dignity of the individual and finds its ultimate fulfillment in liberal democracy at home and support for human rights abroad. In its demand for the equal recognition of all citizens, it is in fact the very antithesis of identity politics which demands preferential treatment for recognized identity groups. Still, it must be forced into the Fukuyaman framework, lest the master concept not explain everything it needs to explain.

The second form of identity politics demands the recognition of collective identities centered on nations, religions, or races. Its adherents demand recognition “not for all human beings, but for members of [their] particular national or religious group.” It is this intolerant form of identity politics which worries Fukuyama. He finds it “deeply problematic because it returns to understandings of identity based on fixed characteristics such as race, ethnicity, and religion, which had earlier been defeated at great cost.” (The inclusion of religion in a list of fixed characteristics is another example of Fukuyama’s sloppy argumentation throughout the book.)

Perhaps because he sees identity politics everywhere, Fukuyama fails to see that it is

the left-wing variety which looms largest in America today. The Left’s obsession with the victimization of women, minorities, and the LGBT at the hands of the white patriarchy almost constitutes an unofficial state religion. It has not yet fully conquered the public’s mind, but it does reign unchallenged among the elites, all of whom worship at the altar of diversity. The universities are ground zero for this divisive ideology. Many have become grievance-mongering seminaries dedicated to fostering hatred of America in general, and straight white men in particular.

AND YET, FOR ALL HIS DENUNCIATIONS of the dangers of identity politics in the abstract, Fukuyama puts on kid gloves when discussing its dominant incarnation. “On the left, identity politics has sought to undermine the legitimacy of the American national story by emphasizing victimization,” he writes, “insinuating in some cases that racism, gender discrimination, and other forms of systematic exclusion are somehow intrinsic to the country’s DNA.” Ah yes, those subtle emphases and rare insinuations of the identitarian Left! We must be attentive to Ta-Nehisi Coates’s every word lest we miss one of his veiled allusions to black victimization.

Fukuyama, in short, refuses to confront the problem of identity politics as it exists today. And so he has nothing to say about reforming higher education in his last chapter on “What Is to Be Done?” He also has nothing to say about the controversial policies of affirmative action and racial preferences. Most tellingly, he has nothing to say about the growing chorus of identitarian voices on the Left who, with the help of Silicon Valley, silence those accused of hate speech. Fukuyama does admit that political correctness may have gone a little too far, but he is much more concerned with how it has been exaggerated by the Right in order to fuel the rise of Donald Trump.

Here he does not mince words. Trump has awakened “an ugly form of populist nationalism that would reassert an ethnic or religious understanding of the country.” Although the president himself “has been careful not to articulate overtly racist views,” he has subtly promoted white nationalism. As a result, it “has moved from a fringe movement to something much more mainstream in American politics.” There are now “plenty of white nationalist voices” (emphasis added).

Fukuyama doesn’t name any. Nor does he offer any compelling evidence to prove that Donald Trump, who hails from the greatest cosmopolitan city the world has ever known



and whose daughter Ivanka is Jewish, is a white nationalist. Fukuyama misrepresents Trump in order to confirm his own prejudices, conveniently ignoring the president's numerous affirmations of civic unity. As Trump said after his election:

For too long, Washington has tried to put us in boxes. They separate us by race, by age, by income, by place of birth, and by geography. They spend too much time focusing on what divides us. Now is the time to embrace the one thing that truly unites us. You know what that is? America.

THAT, IN FACT, IS PRECISELY WHAT Fukuyama is trying to do. To counter the mounting tides of tribal identitarianism on the Left and the Right, he wants to revive civic nationalism. He wants to rechannel the longing for identity into "larger and more integrative national identities that take account of the de facto diversity of existing liberal democratic societies." In so doing, he confronts one of the most challenging questions of our times, namely, how much diversity can a nation accommodate before it loses coherence? Which in turns raises a more fundamental question: what binds a nation together?

For Fukuyama, there are only two answers. In one camp are the ethno-nationalists who define the nation in narrow ethnic and religious terms. Fukuyama rejects this approach because it has been used to justify violence against minorities. The atrocities committed in its name are well-known and undeniably cast it in a bad light. Fukuyama does not, however, evince any interest in considering whether ethno-nationalism is necessarily intolerant and violent. Sweden, for example, prospered as an ethno-state for Swedes. And Israel today is both a Jewish state and liberal democracy (it is also, one should note, the only developed nation in the world whose fertility rate is above replacement).

In the other camp are the creedal nationalists who define the nation in broad, abstract, and universal terms. Fukuyama has obvious strong sympathies for this approach. He thinks that national identity should be defined first and foremost by a shared commitment to "equality and democratic values." In other words, nations should be defined by what they all agree upon. But if so, why have distinct nations?

Fukuyama does admit that this "minimal creedal understanding of identity" rings a bit hollow. So he supplements it with "an understanding of positive virtues, not bound to par-

ticular groups, that are needed to make the democracy work." He does not describe these virtues beyond quoting Alexis de Tocqueville and adding his own plea for citizens to be "open-minded, tolerant of other viewpoints, and ready to compromise." In any case, even these rudimentary virtues of citizenship are not specific to any one country, but to democracy itself.

And so, Fukuyama's grand defense of the nation-state culminates in a call for the European Union to "create a single citizenship whose requirements would be based on adherence to basic liberal democratic principles, one that would supersede national citizenship laws." He is in effect defending nationalism without nations.

Francis Fukuyama's half-hearted and uninspiring attempt to reground the nation in Rawlsian platitudes may perhaps satisfy Friedrich Nietzsche's decadent "last man." It will not, however, persuade those who despise him, nor those who want to sink even lower than him. Above all, it will not sustain spiritually-exhausted Western nations and revive their will to live.

David Azerrad is the director of the B. Kenneth Simon Center for Principles and Politics, and the AWC Family Foundation Fellow, at The Heritage Foundation.

Politics
at
SAINT VINCENT COLLEGE
Latrobe, Pennsylvania

GREAT BOOKS | GREAT FRIENDS | GREAT LOCATION

- Nationally renowned faculty
- Politics curriculum firmly rooted in the Great Books of Western civilization and the great writings of the American political tradition
- Saint Vincent's Center for Political and Economic Thought hosts some of the most active and esteemed speaker and conference programs in the United States—all dedicated to the scholarly exposition of freedom, Western civilization, and the American experience


 Nestled in the rolling hills of Pennsylvania, Saint Vincent is an easy drive from most locations in the Northeast and Midwest.

www.stvincent.edu/academics/politics
 724-537-4597 | politics@stvincent.edu

The CLAREMONT REVIEW OF BOOKS is a publication of the CLAREMONT INSTITUTE
FOR THE STUDY OF STATESMANSHIP AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY.

Subscribe to
the *Claremont Review of Books*

*“Issue after issue, the *Claremont Review*
brings intellectual clarity, philosophical
wisdom, and a deep commitment to
the ideals of the American Founding
to bear on our most important public
challenges. It is indispensable.”*

—Yuval Levin

Subscribe to the *CRB* today and save 25%
off the newsstand price. A one-year
subscription is only \$19.95.

To begin receiving America's premier
conservative book review, visit
www.claremont.org/crb
or call (909) 981-2200.

CLAREMONT
REVIEW OF BOOKS
1317, W. FOOTHILL
BLVD, SUITE 120,
UPLAND, CA
91786

NON PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
PERMIT NO. 504
UPLAND, CA