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Book Review by Christopher Caldwell

TWILIGHT OF DEMOCRACY

Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy, by Francis Fukuyama.
Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 672 pages, \$35



A SENIOR FELLOW AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY'S Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Francis Fukuyama has lately been speaking ill of democracy to readers unused to hearing it spoken ill of. Fukuyama's gift is a mix of radicalism and common sense. He has always been early to spot the logic behind big social and political transformations. Even before the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, he wrote a widely cited essay, "The End of History?" that cast the difficulties of the Soviet empire as portending an international triumph of liberal democracy. Although others had described the West's exit from industrial-age culture, it was Fukuyama who gave the first convincing description, in *The Great Disruption* (1999) and *Our Posthuman Future* (2002), of the information-age culture we were migrating into.

Fukuyama has been modest about his latest project, a two-volume survey of political regimes, which opened with *The Origins of Political Order* (reviewed by Stanley Kurtz in the Fall 2011 CRB) and now concludes with

Political Order and Political Decay. It began as a mere update of his mentor Samuel Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968), but it has grown into something more ambitious and original. Fukuyama's first volume opened with China's mandarin bureaucracy rather than the democracy of ancient Athens, shifting the methods of political science away from specifically Western intellectual genealogies and towards anthropology. Nepotism and favor-swapping are man's basic political motivations, as Fukuyama sees it. Disciplining those impulses leads to effective government, but "repatrimonialization"—the capture of government by private interests—threatens whenever vigilance is relaxed. Fukuyama's new volume, which describes political order since the French Revolution, extends his thinking on repatrimonialization, from the undermining of meritocratic bureaucracy in Han China through the sale of offices under France's Henri IV to the looting of foreign aid in post-colonial Zaire. Fukuyama is convinced that the Unit-

ed States is on a similar path of institutional decay.

HE ASKS THE READER TO REVIEW the arguments against democracy commonly made in the 19th century, "since a number of them remain salient even if few people are willing to articulate them openly today." That goes for Fukuyama himself. His argument runs through the borderlands separating political philosophy from political science. Political philosophy asks which government is best for man. Political science asks which government is best for government. It is sometimes difficult to tell which discipline Fukuyama is practicing. His criticisms of democracy can sound mumbled and esoteric.

Political decline, Fukuyama insists, is not the same thing as civilizational collapse. As a political philosopher, he is attached to democracy, acknowledging that "[t]he right to participate politically grants recognition to the moral personhood of the citizen." But as

a political scientist, he sees “an inherent tension between democracy and what we now call ‘good governance.’” Where a political philosopher might deplore bureaucracy insofar as it is “unaccountable,” Fukuyama the political scientist reveres it to the extent it is “autonomous.” He notes the consistently high standards of Germany’s officials since Otto von Bismarck’s chancellorship, regardless of whether the government they served was peaceful or belligerent. (Even the Nazis had a progressive side, passing in 1933 a Law for the Reestablishment of a Career Civil Service.) Fukuyama is not the first to remark that wars can spur government efficiency—even if front-line soldiers are the last to benefit from it. China’s “Warring States” period in the 5th century B.C. provided the impetus for its bureaucratic achievements. The munificent welfare states of postwar Europe rest, Fukuyama believes, on the continent’s “extraordinarily high level of violence” between the French Revolution and World War II.

Relative to the smooth-running systems of northwestern Europe, American bureaucracy has been a dud, riddled with corruption from the start and resistant to reform. Patronage—favors for individual cronies and supporters—has thrived. In the late 19th century, up to seven eighths of junior postmaster jobs changed hands with every new administration. Even today, the number of positions staffed on political rather than professional grounds (including most of our most important ambassadorships) vastly exceeds that in Europe. Under President Andrew Jackson, the U.S. pioneered modern clientelism, which Fukuyama distinguishes from patronage by its mass character and its tight link to vote-soliciting. Clientelism is an ambiguous phenomenon: it is bread and circuses, it is race politics, it is doing favors for special classes of people. Fukuyama notes, for instance, that since the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wound down, “half of all new entrants to the federal workforce have been veterans.” Clientelism is both more democratic and more systemically corrupting than the occasional nepotistic appointment.

FUKUYAMA HAS AN EXPLANATION FOR why modern mass liberal democracy has developed on clientelistic lines in the U.S. and meritocratic ones in Europe. The United States was born as a democratic country. Its institutions grew out of horse-trading. In Europe, democracy, when it came, had to adapt itself to longstanding pre-democratic institutions, and to governing elites that insisted on established codes and habits. Where strong states precede democracy (as in Germany), bureaucracies are efficient and un-

corrupt. Where democracy precedes strong states (as in the United States but also Greece and Italy), government can be viewed by the public as a piñata.

This is an elegant argument, but it relies on stereotypes and Fukuyama rides his evidence hard. Italy’s state and political culture are much stronger and more efficient than the national *sprezzatura* (nonchalance) would make them appear. Greece has indeed been corrupt throughout its modern history. As Fukuyama notes, in the 1870s it had seven times as many civil servants per capita as Britain. But the main source of its present-day corruption is the common European currency, the euro, membership in which gave Greece access to Germany’s credit line. This was a policy designed in Paris, Berlin, and Brussels, not in Athens. Fukuyama is right that Britain’s 19th-century Whigs had an easier time reforming the state than America’s 20th-century progressives, noting that “reform of the British public sector took place before expansion of the franchise.” But what was reformed before

Fukuyama is an optimist about what a unified country can do, but a realist about the sacrifice it requires.

the great Reform bills was more Britain’s colonial administration than its metropolitan core.

Given America’s relative failure at building competent political institutions at home, it would be foolish to expect more success abroad. Fukuyama contrasts the painstaking Japanese development of Taiwan a century ago with the mess that the U.S. Congress, “eager to impose American models of government on a society they only dimly understood,” was then making of the Philippines. It is not surprising that Fukuyama was one of the most eloquent conservative critics of the U.S. invasion of Iraq from the very beginning. This led him into public arguments with several of his former Cold War allies. He won them handily.

POLITICAL ORDER AND POLITICAL Decay is a bold argument disguised as a boring taxonomy of political forms. For much of the book, alas, the disguise is effective. Between Fukuyama’s opening discussion of post-Enlightenment governments and his concluding arguments about whether they are undergoing decadence and collapse

is a 200-page section on “foreign institutions,” sketching the colonial and post-colonial fates of Nigeria, Tanganyika, Indonesia, and other places. Among American political scientists, Fukuyama is unusually free of political correctness. But there is something pro forma about his focus on these marginal political cultures. Though skeptical that the “legacy of colonialism” is an excuse for Third World ills, he winds up falling back on it nonetheless.

Fukuyama attributes Latin America’s difficulty in building solid institutions to a “‘birth defect’ of inequality” inherited from Spain. You would almost forget that Spain was sophisticated, energetic, and inventive enough to impose its language and culture on a quarter of the known world. In discussing Latin America, Fukuyama makes some characteristically bold arguments: the collapse of Central American and Andean Indian cultures on the eve of the Spaniards’ arrival, as well as the ease with which explorer Hernán Cortés enlisted local allies willing to make him master of Mexico, suggest that “neither [Indian] civilization was nearly as institutionalized as it appeared.” He also points to the rarity of inter-state warfare in Latin America as a cultural achievement, albeit one that may have rendered the region’s governments complacent and slack. In general, Spain’s culture is blamed for having eradicated “virtually any institutional trace of the dense pre-Columbian state structures that preceded them.”

Fukuyama also faults the colonizers of Africa, but for the opposite misdeed—an insufficient imposition of their own culture. “[S]overeignty was handed to the Nigerians on a platter by the British,” he writes. That would have been fine if there had been any British institutions left to build on, but there were not, and democracy was inadequate to the task of building them. Fukuyama notes that Nigerian corruption blossomed and Congolese mining output withered even though Africa overall was “more democratic than East Asia in the period between 1960 and 2000.”

WHAT DISTINGUISHES ONCE-COLONIZED Vietnam and China and uncolonized Japan and Korea from these Third World basket cases is that the East Asian lands “all possess competent, high-capacity states,” in contrast to sub-Saharan Africa, which “did not possess strong state-level institutions.” One suspects that this discussion of states is a euphemistic way of discussing societies. Either way, it is strength and competence, not any ethical or ideological orientation, that Fukuyama



deems most important. He points out on many occasions, as he did in his first volume, that China—whether ancient, Maoist, or contemporary—has always lacked the “rule of law,” by which he means a law that is binding on rulers. Fukuyama leaves unclear where the strength of the state is supposed to come from, if not from law, but cultural failure and backward government are fatefully bound together: “While it may in some theoretical sense be possible for a country like Sierra Leone or Afghanistan to turn itself into an industrial powerhouse like South Korea through appropriate investment,” Fukuyama writes, “these countries’ lack of strong institutions forecloses this option for all practical purposes.”

By focusing in his first volume on ancient Chinese and Indian (and, later, Ottoman) institutions, Fukuyama provided a foil for the line of descent that led from ancient Greece and Rome to modern Europe and America, highlighting magnificently what is universal about our institutions and what contingent. This new volume’s forays into non-Western societies are less enlightening—partly because these societies are not altogether non-Western. The governing systems of most post-colonial states are knock-offs from the West, not alternatives to it. The chapters come in arbitrary order and are of exactly the wrong

length—long enough to befuddle you with statistics, dates, and fun facts about dozens of different Third World regimes but not long enough to leave you feeling you’ve tapped into any profound insight about their governments. Too often in these sections, the author’s clear prose is at the service of vague subject matter. Abstractions beget abstractions, as in: “Part of the story of the Third Wave of democratizations in Europe and Latin America has to do with the reinterpretation of Catholic doctrine after Vatican II.” (Which part? “Has to do” how?) He writes sentences that manage to unsay themselves: “If anyone needs further convincing that geography, climate, and population influence but do not finally determine contemporary development outcomes, consider Argentina.”

And yet Fukuyama’s detour into the developing world allows him to make a commonsensical point that has been shrouded in taboos for a generation: politics is a matter of shared purpose. To this extent, while “diversity” *can* be a source of strength, it is more often a source of dissension and weakness. The tribal cast that U.S. clientelism has taken on in the age of affirmative action is a subject few academic political scientists will touch with a stick. This includes the generally bold Fukuyama, who will say only that “ethnicity serves as a credible indication that a particular

political boss will deliver the goods to a targeted audience.” But Kenya, for instance, is far enough away to permit him to be much more specific: “Today, one of the main functions of ethnic identity is to act as a signaling device in the clientelistic division of state resources,” he writes. “[I]f you are a Kikuyu and can elect a Kikuyu president, you are much more likely to be favored with government jobs, public works projects, and the like.”

FUKUYAMA DOES NOT THINK ETHNIC homogeneity is a prerequisite for successful politics, although he notes that it “enhanced” the prospects for state-building in China, Japan, Vietnam, and Korea, and had something to do with the development of certain non-Asian countries such as Costa Rica and Argentina. What he does insist on is that strong states need a cultural and political consensus if they are not to descend into the graft and pilfering that characterize such tribalized societies as Nigeria and Kenya. His shining example is the project of nation-building that Sukarno undertook in mid-20th-century Indonesia, uniting a vast, ethnically diverse archipelago behind Bahasa Indonesia as a lingua franca and anti-Communism as a state ideology. He sees a similar pattern in the Tanzania of Julius Nyerere after the mid-1960s, united linguistically by

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Swahili and ideologically by Ujamaa socialism. Fukuyama is an optimist about what a unified country can do, but a realist about the sacrifice it requires. “Any idea of a nation inevitably implies the conversion or exclusion of individuals deemed to be outside its boundaries,” he writes, “and if they don’t want to do this peacefully, they have to be coerced.”

Four hundred pages into the book, Fukuyama returns to the Western tradition, to its evolution in the past generation, and to the question of whether democracy has a future in it. In his view the United States “suffers from the problem of political decay in a more acute form than other democratic political systems.” It has kept the peace in a stagnant economy only by dragooning women into the workplace and showering the working and middle classes with credit. (He uses milder language.)

HIS EXPLANATION OF WHAT WENT wrong is that of a late 20th-century conservative who, perhaps chastened by lost wars and financial crises, has begun the best kind of root-and-branch reexamination of his principles. He believes that public-sector unions have colluded with the Democratic Party to make government employment more rewarding for those who do it and less responsive to the public at large. In this sense, government is too big. But he also believes that cutting taxes on the rich in hopes of spurring economic growth has been a fool’s errand, and that the beneficiaries of deregulation, financial and otherwise, have grown to the point where they have escaped bureaucratic control altogether. In this sense, government is not big enough.

Washington, as Fukuyama sees it, is a patchwork of impotence and omnipotence—effective where it insists on its prerogatives, ineffective where it has been bought out. He sees the Federal Reserve, Centers for Disease Control, and National Security Agency as parts of the government that are streamlined and potent. By contrast, he cites the Dodd-Frank financial act of 2010 as a regulation designed to be ineffective, in collusion with those it purported to regulate. In our time, government is—as people used to say of the Germans—either at your feet or at your throat.

The unpredictable results of democratic oversight have led Americans to seek guidance in exactly the wrong place: the courts, which have both exceeded and misinterpreted their constitutional responsibilities. “The courts, instead of being constraints on government, have become alternative instruments for the expansion of government,” Fukuyama writes. He worries about the logic Americans think

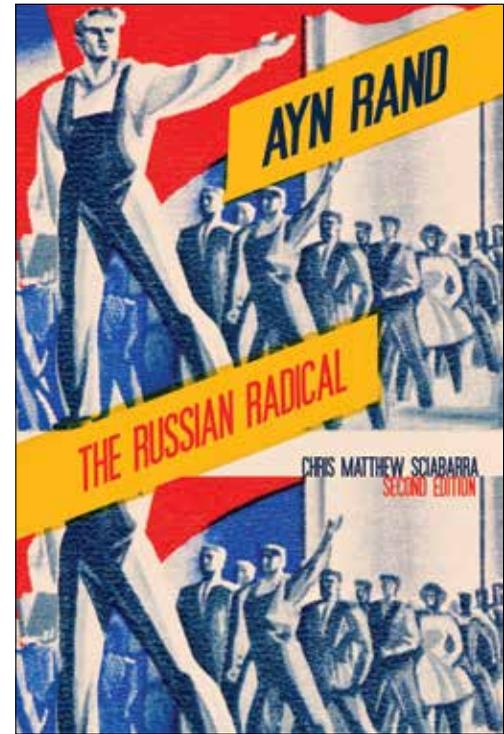
they see behind the anti-democratic idea, introduced with *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), that a crusading Supreme Court can be an instrument of governmental reform. “So familiar is this heroic narrative to Americans,” he writes, “that they are seldom aware of how peculiar their approach to social change is.” Readers who remember the Cold War are bound to agree: the almost daily insistence of courts that they are liberating people by removing discretion from them gives American society a Soviet cast.

“[T]he two components of liberal democracy—liberal rule of law and mass political participation—are separable political goals,” Fukuyama writes. In the end, whether you have a streamlined European bureaucracy of the sort he admires or a clientelistic U.S.-style welfare state depends on whether you think it more important that liberal democracies be liberal or democratic. Until late in the 20th century, the American priority was unambiguously democracy. Fukuyama notes how, during the Cold War, U.S. foreign policymakers “would support a corrupt and clientelistic conservative party [abroad] over a cleaner left-wing one.” The same priorities prevailed at home. That changed with the emergence, in the middle of the 20th century, of legal and regulatory elites.

FUKUYAMA’S SYMPATHIES LIE MORE THAN they used to with those who back the liberal part of liberal democracy, not the democratic part. “Effective modern states,” he writes, “are built around technical expertise, competence, and autonomy.” But he has some sympathy for the Tea Party and those European anti-immigration parties that lay the stress on the democratic part of liberal democracy. “[I]n many ways they are correct,” he writes, at least in their claim to have been locked out of policy-making by a conniving elite. Populist demands for democratic control of bureaucracies can look like “repatrimonialization,” but they are just as often self-defense.

High-handed bureaucrats and rabble-rousing populists are not separable threats to a political order. They are in a dialectical relationship. In the old days, roughly speaking, the Right was thought to stand for liberty and the Left for leveling. In the mind of today’s public, perhaps the Right stands for populism and the Left for administration. Each side wrongly thinks it can do without the other. Francis Fukuyama’s view is subtler, truer, and more depressing: the failing democracy in which we live is the system that, over the years, our thriving democracy chose.

Christopher Caldwell is a senior editor at the Weekly Standard.



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