

Recalibrating Fukuyama's Remedy for Liberalism's Discontents

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor

Despite their manifest differences and mutual aversions, the woke left – encompassing a large swath of progressive elites in the academy, media, entertainment, business, and government – and the new right, which for the most part is confined to a small band of conservative intellectuals, converge in their disdain for what they call “liberalism.” Both presume to have transcended conventional political pieties, but their telltale immoderation reveals both to be creatures of these fractious times.

For woke-left elites and new-right intellectuals, liberalism does not refer to the left wing of the Democratic Party. Nor do they conceive of it as the contemporary opponent of conservatism. Rather, for them liberalism denotes classical liberalism, another name for the modern tradition of freedom, to which both much of the right and left in America are beholden.

This tradition is marked by several once-familiar and long-taken-for-granted tenets: Human beings are free and equal; government's main task is to secure individual rights rather than supervise citizens' moral lives and guide them to happiness; government derives its legitimate power from the consent of the governed; and, to facilitate its mission, government must be limited and must uphold the rule of law.

Both woke-left elites and new-right intellectuals go far beyond criticizing this or that policy to blaming classical liberalism for producing fundamental structural weaknesses in the nation and

spawning destructive moral and political imperatives. Woke-left elites blame liberalism's commitment to property rights and free trade for unleashing an unfettered capitalism and an unrestrained globalism that generate gross economic and political inequalities and ravage the environment. Woke-left elites also charge that systemic racism and sexism pervade the nation's legal system and suffuse its culture and unwritten norms. Meanwhile, the new right accuses liberalism of espousing a radical conception of personal autonomy that receives authentic expression in an individualism that transforms custom, tradition, and duty into forms of oppression and humiliation, and in an identity politics that divides the country based on race, sex, and gender orientation. Sometimes the two sets of indictments overlap.

Both woke-left elites and new-right intellectuals envisage a major role for the state in averting the crisis that they believe increasingly engulfs the country. The woke left rallies around equality. The new right champions the traditional virtues. In the name of their divergent priorities, both want government to implement happiness as they understand it.

Little could be more anathema to classical liberalism than the woke-left elites' and the new-right intellectuals' kindred ambitions to use government to impose their competing conceptions of the good life. Their rejection of classical liberalism, which is a crucial source of America's founding principles and constitutional order, is tantamount to renouncing America's roots and re-founding the nation.

In "Liberalism and Its Discontents," Francis Fukuyama exposes the recklessness of the demand that the United States dispense with classical liberalism. While acknowledging the partial justice in many of the partisans' complaints about the serious problems that face the nation, he wisely observes that "[t]he answer to these discontents is not to abandon liberalism as such, but to moderate it."

A senior fellow at Stanford University's Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies and the author of many important books on political ideas and institutions, Fukuyama has long studied and defended liberalism. However, his understanding has changed dramatically over the decades.

In the summer of 1989, a few months before the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, Fukuyama published "[The End of History?](#)", which equated history's end with liberalism's worldwide triumph. Apparently anticipating the disintegration of communism in Eastern Europe, the essay sparked a worldwide sensation. Fukuyama argued that the individual freedom and equality under law that liberal democracy accords citizens and the prosperity that free markets deliver represent defining features of a form of government and social and economic organization that could be fine-tuned but could not be fundamentally improved.

Moreover, he insisted, there was no viable alternative to liberal democracy for organizing nation-states. Not even the Soviets and the Chinese took communism seriously, Fukuyama contended, and, in the modern and modernizing post-World War II world, he maintained, religion and nationalism provided unappealing and inadequate foundations of government.

Fukuyama casually acknowledged certain internal deficiencies in liberal democracy only to dismiss them as the costs of the new globe-spanning dispensation. He recognized "a broad unhappiness with the impersonality and spiritual vacuity of liberal consumerist societies." He even went so far as to state that "the emptiness at the core of liberalism is most certainly a defect in the ideology."

However, the search for salvation, he indicated, would have to be addressed outside of politics – as if that were a bug of liberal democracy rather than a feature. Yet the original arguments for classical liberalism emphasized the moral and religious obligations to remove government's responsibility for religion and stressed the political advantages of protecting the freedom of individuals and their families and communities to cultivate the virtues.

In 1989, Fukuyama's main concern was that the inevitable spread of freedom, democracy, and capitalism around the globe would generate sadness and boredom among great-souled men because the reduction of politics to technical administration would eliminate inspiring challenges. Older and wiser in 2022, he has acquired a keener appreciation of the "blessings of liberty" and a more acute understanding of the destabilizing discontents produced by liberal democracy, not least impatience with limited government and the hunger to employ state power to dictate true beliefs and righteous action. Having emerged in the 17th and 18th century in no small measure to provide workable political arrangements among warring Christian denominations and sects, "Classical liberalism is needed more than ever today," argues Fukuyama, "because the United States (as well as other liberal democracies) are more diverse than they ever were."

To manage our diversity – not just between right and left but within right and left, and not just between the religious and the secular but among the religious and the secular – Fukuyama espouses several sound principles and imperatives: limited government that competently regulates a free-market economy and provides for basic social welfare; federalism that encourages the exercise of power as close to the people as possible; free speech; the priority of individual rights over group rights; respect for elements of the moral life such as family and community that go beyond autonomy, or making one's own choices; and, finally, moderation, which Fukuyama suggests, is "the key to the revival – indeed, to the survival – of liberalism itself."

But Fukuyama's account of the dangers posed by conservatives – ripped, it seems, from New York Times headlines rather than gleaned from patient scholarly analysis – betrays an immoderation of his own. "These threats to liberalism are not symmetrical," he writes. "The one coming from the right is more immediate and political; the one on the left is primarily cultural and therefore slower acting." According to Fukuyama, conservatives in America today represent "an existential threat to American liberal democracy."

The opposite is closer to the truth. Whereas the demonization of classical liberalism among conservatives stems for the most part from scattered professors and publicists, the demonization of classical liberalism on the left springs from immense concentrations of power within American society: the universities, the mainstream media, huge corporations, Hollywood, Silicon Valley, and massive federal bureaucracies. It should be recalled that President Donald Trump increased Republican support among Black and Hispanic voters in 2020 not due to forays into the war of ideas but because of his appeal to voters who saw in Washington's governing class a distant and arrogant elite out of touch with ordinary Americans' concerns for fairer trade deals, better jobs and greater opportunity, and securer borders and lawful immigration – all of which are consistent with the principles of classical liberalism.

The new right is an immoderate response to immoderation-stoking institutions in education, media, entertainment, commerce, and governmental that are dominated by woke-left elites. Reforming, and where necessary replacing, these institutions is the key to preserving America's classical liberal heritage.

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