

## Book review

*Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition* by Francis Fukuyama. London: Profile Books Ltd, 2018, pp. 240.

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### Keywords

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The demand for recognition of the individual's identity is a key concept that consolidates many of the political discontents in the state of the world today. This is the premise of *Identity*, the latest work by Francis Fukuyama, who almost three decades ago contended with his 'End of History' thesis that the triumph of liberal democracy globally would be the endgame. Yet a lot has changed since then, and the book addresses this head on in its first pages, with Fukuyama taking on the critiques against his controversial theory and framing his latest work as an addendum. Generally aimed at a popular audience, the book's simple style gets the message across but lacks depth in providing substantial solutions to the issues at hand.

*Identity* acknowledges the difficulties of developing a fair and modern state in an era where the inevitable erosion of liberal democracy is not a far-fetched notion, and that the chief cause for this is the failure of such a system to fully solve the problem of people's inherent craving for the recognition of their selfhood. Because of this, identity quickly manifests into identity politics in which this aspiration for recognition evolves into a desire to be respected on an equal footing with other members of society (p. 10). This in turn has the detrimental potential of advancing into a demand for recognition of one's superiority over others, which is embodied, for instance, by ethnonationalist and religious fundamentalist forces dominating political discourse in societies and fueling a politics of resentment (p. 22). Fukuyama emphasizes these aspirations and demands as inherent in human nature, something that he borrows from Greek philosophers such as Plato.

The book further contends that the current understanding of identity had emerged as societies began to modernize, citing the Age of Enlightenment as well as a few historical Eurocentric events as the starting point of modernization. This effectively affirms the book's weakness, namely its emphasis on the developments in the Global North, as if identity politics and populist authoritarianism are exclusive to that part of the world. Fukuyama draws on this limited history to make an appeal that unless societies forge a 'universal' understanding of human dignity based on liberal democratic values, enduring conflict is to be expected. It is a legitimate warning to make but with an equivocal output considering that it is based on a moralizing and sanitized narrative of Western accounts of the past. This consequently reproduces a rose-colored image of Enlightenment values as being impeccable, even though they were also used as a justification for colonial and capitalist expansions that continue to affect North-South relations today (Dhawan 2017).

As critical theorists and postcolonial scholars have noted, despite the commitment to values of equality, freedom and human dignity, the proponents and defenders of the Enlightenment concurrently flirted with anti-democratic forces and condoned tyrannical projects that have devastated large parts of the globe (Ibid., Mishra 2016). This whitewashed legacy is apparent in the pages of the book. And this blatant omission of perspectives from the Global South insinuates a position that effectively ignores genuine struggles of those at the margins – of those who have historically been forgotten, silenced and repressed. Indeed, *Identity's* failure to emphasize liberalism's historical complicity in institutionalizing discriminatory hierarchies that privileged propertied white men as well as imperialist enterprises is a huge gap in the book. This is a missed opportunity to offer an alternative insight into how marginalized peoples and their identities were initially subjugated by domineering groups.

The latter point is worth noting because Fukuyama compares the identity-driven populism of both the Left and Right in their narrative of identity as being fixated on the same understanding and regards them as equally worth discrediting (pp. 158-159), when in fact huge differences exist. This impulse to shift the blame to both sides of the political spectrum while hiding behind a facade of centrist individualism effectively disparages and diminishes the value of the demands of those at the margins. *Identity* misinterprets the Left's strategy by failing to adequately consider the empowering potential of how the subjugation of certain marginal sectors of society has finally led to the instrumentalization of their selfhood to rebel and seek progressive transformative policies that reflect on the multiplex nature of such identities (pp. 117-118). Moreover, Fukuyama discounts the broad-based

solidarities of other marginalized groups that highlight the intersectionality of their struggles and demands for dignity, describing their appeals as a “cheap substitute for serious thinking” about how to solve ongoing crises (pp. 114-116), yet he himself fails to offer something consequential. The book is therefore amiss in its assessment that the demands for recognition should be viewed as polarizing or hostile to democracy, when instead they could be seen as something empowering that may result in its enhancement.

A rather inauspicious feature in Fukuyama’s thesis are the proposed solutions, which are mere symptomatic treatments and do not address the structural roots of the problem. A case-in-point is his tendency to hold on to the Westphalian concept of the nation-state. The endorsement of a refined nationalism is questionable as he makes the case further that this needs to be sustained and enhanced as to ensure that national identity be based on normative values embedded in contemporary liberalism (pp. 138-139). Some measures he proposes to make this a reality is citizenship law reform based on birthright (p. 167), education reform and the implementation of conscription or a compulsory national service, with the latter being invoked as an incentive for the young generation to engage in nation-building (p. 174). But this is a dangerously contentious – if not anachronistic – policy in a lot of countries, especially in developing ones with fractured societies struggling against governments and militaries that have a history of oppressing dissent and minorities.

When it comes to immigration and citizenship, the idea of a more inclusive and uniform law on naturalization (something that would apply to the European Union) and the endorsement of the *jus soli* principle come across as relatively progressive, but the remedies are cut short and do not go beyond the policy level (pp. 163-183). Though he talks about the strengthening of the welfare state to mitigate economic inequality (pp. 128-131), a clear analysis on how is not provided; not to mention the fact that there is a disdain in considering a class perspective and a lack of highlighting structural aspects of heightening social disparities. It is therefore not surprising that the book does not see any contradictions in endorsing the idea of upholding liberal democratic values with an amplified version of national identity at its core – a version that focuses on the shared acceptance of the country’s political system (p. 126). The premise thus falls short as it does not thoroughly scrutinize the neoliberal framework that has enabled the rise of regressive nativist forces that install the likes of Bolsonaro, Duterte, Erdoğan, Kurz, Modi, Trump and other illiberal leaders and demagogues into power.

Fukuyama’s latest work is purposed to provide a primer on contemporary political developments that include the rise of populism in which the politics of identity plays a huge

role, yet the output is simply a recognition of liberal democracy's flaws and fragility and the forces bringing it down. A criticism of the system itself is absent, and thus it effectively becomes an unconvincing defense of liberal democratic principles. The problems of identity politics are laid out but the proposed remedies for them seem fail to address the socioeconomic imbalances that continue to fuel societal grievances and generate conflict.

Nevertheless, Fukuyama is right in saying that the notion of identity is neither fixed nor given to us at birth (pp. 182-183), and that it is in fact manifold, but it is ill-informed to simply dismiss those who seek to emphasize their lived experiences and insist on the acknowledgment of their inherent worth. Indeed, the demands of identity are part of a climactic shift that define modern world affairs. And viewing the pursuit of identity politics as an emancipatory tool to revolt against existing injustices and rising inequalities is to perceive its capability to improve democracy by radically fighting for more inclusion and political participation that dare to go beyond the boundaries of the liberal order.

## References

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