

BOOK  
REVIEWFrancis Fukuyama:  
Identity

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“Identity politics” is an increasingly popular term used to describe numerous modern political movements. From South Africa’s student protests to the resurgence of white supremacy in the United States, from Black Lives Matter to Brexit, it appears to some that expressed identities have come to dominate how political action is coordinated and discussed. Francis Fukuyama’s *Identity* is an attempt to trace the historical origins of this phenomenon.

Fukuyama is best known for majestic treatises on political economy in which he takes deep historical views on subjects such as the origins and prospects of the modern liberal democratic consensus (such as it is) or the origins of the modern state. In *Identity* he studies at once the intellectual history and the political history of a type of politics that has become seemingly pervasive in the modern world. The book is certainly worth reading: it is well written, accessible, and provides an insightful lens through which to understand the role that identity has played in human history. At the same time, I would urge readers to maintain a healthy skepticism about the central contextual, theoretical, and empirical claims that interweave to make up the book’s central argumentative thread.

By way of intellectual context, *Identity* is the latest in a series of books written in the last three years that attempt to diagnose a current malaise in Western liberal democracies. Though Fukuyama’s interests are geographically broader, he himself notes that the impetus for the book comes from Donald Trump’s election in 2016. *Identity*, like these other books, begs the question of whether such a malaise exists in the first place. It strikes me that more work needs to be done by both Fukuyama and others to establish that the liberal democratic consensus truly faces a crisis, let alone that this crisis is intimately tied to a rise in the role of identity. To be sure, there are warning signs that should make us wary of present and coming challenges to liberal democracy. Yet human prosperity, on every metric available, is at an all time high for both the haves and the have-nots; democratic elections continue to happen peacefully and regularly across the world; and fundamental human freedoms are likely enjoyed by a larger share of people than at any point in human history.

Theoretically, Fukuyama offers us a satisfying definition of identity: The understanding of an “inner self” distinct from an “outer self-in-society.” He extends this to a definition of identity politics: The belief that society is failing to recognise the inner self, and that this disjuncture between the inner and the outer self implies a lack of dignity that requires political remedy. This is the concept that Fukuyama returns to throughout *Identity*, and it is perhaps best labeled “dignity”: whether a person perceives that they are treated as a full human being. What is somewhat missing here, of course, is a close reflection on the conditions under which this becomes truly political: the existence of enterprising leaders, means of coordination, and a political setting in which collective expression can occur. For people to desire dignity is not inherently political unless that belief is multiplied and transformed into the realm of political action.

It is in altering the satisfying definition of “identity” into a definition of “identity politics” that the argument loses its way somewhat. How can we meaningfully distinguish

## IDENTITY

THE DEMAND FOR  
DIGNITY AND  
THE POLITICS OF  
RESENTMENT

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"identity-as-dignity" from a range of other political processes that have no doubt shaped modern history: political representation, class status, economic satisfaction, or any number of other forces? Throughout the book it is taken as self-evident that it is "dignity" – the disjuncture between the inner and outer self – that has been a driving force in political change over time, yet almost every example leveraged by Fukuyama could be equally well explained with some nexus of the above – representation, class status, and economic satisfaction. Of course, identity or dignity may play its part, but conceptually, what is identity if it is not distinguishable from a range of other political phenomena? Identity is a political tool and operates in concert with these other forces, but it does not supplant or contradict them, as Fukuyama supposes.

Empirically, as is ever the case with Fukuyama, we are offered an impressive synthesis of intellectual and political history. The book traces the origins of identity-as-an-idea from Plato and Luther through the modern era, demonstrating a considerable and admirable breadth of knowledge. Yet this intellectual history is peculiar in that it is essentially the history of an idea, rather than a reckoning with human psychology. The idea that identity – this notion of the internal self and the outer self-in-society – did not truly exist prior to Europe's Reformation and Renaissance periods seems trivially untrue. Intellectual reflection on the concept may not have existed, but unless human psychology has changed very fundamentally in a very short space of time, identity was always there and in operation. What has changed, perhaps, is the ability for people to express those identities and coordinate around those identities, and for institutional systems that allow identities to become political.

One of my chief frustrations in reading *Identity* is the presence of factual generalisations and assertions. This is of course the nature of such a book, in which the author tends toward breadth rather than depth, but it bears dwelling on. For example, Fukuyama leads off in Chapter 1 by declaring that '[t]he left has focused less on broad economic equality and more on promoting the interests of a wide variety of groups perceived as being marginalized – blacks, immigrants, Hispanics, the LGBT community [...] the right, meanwhile, is redefining itself as patriots who seek to protect traditional national identity[.]' There certainly is some truth to this essay, and yet it sits deeply at odds with the policy politics of the last two decades. The single defining issue of American politics for nearly a decade (from 2008 through 2018) was healthcare policy. Fukuyama returns to this issue later in the book, suggesting that Obama's focus on social policy was an aberration. But this dismissal of the most important political moment of early 21st century US politics is deeply unsatisfying. Likewise, the major issue in British politics for the past 30 years has been welfare reform, yet for some reason Fukuyama glosses over this to declare that class and economic interests have been supplanted by identity. It seems to me that Fukuyama's brief summary of modern "identity politics" is more strongly reflective of a strategic pivot on the right.

In general, this is the core problem at the heart of *Identity*: can we meaningfully distinguish a politics focused on "marginalised groups" from a politics focused on "broad economic equality?" Inequality in the United States, South Africa, Latin America, and both Western and Eastern Europe is deeply rooted in ethno-racial cleavages. Fukuyama's analysis of the South African anti-apartheid movement drives this problem home. He sees the anti-apartheid movement as an example of a politics of dignity spurring the masses to action. Dignity and identity were no doubt central to the movement, but surely no more central than economic deprivation, the denial of political rights, or a slew of other things. It was the nexus of all these things – systematic organised oppression along racial lines manifested in terms of physical freedom, economic prosperity, and dignity – that gave grist to the movement. Indeed, a broad literature in political science and economics argues that it is economic prosperity (and equality) that is often the catalyst for political revolutions.

Fukuyama has written a useful book on an important topic, but in the end, it is a case of too much breadth and too little depth, and it leaves this reader wanting more.