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# It's Human Nature, Stupid

**The Origins of Political Order:  
From Prehuman Times to the  
French Revolution**

by Francis Fukuyama

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011,

608 pages.

Reviewed by Marshall Poe

Some two decades ago, I conducted an experiment in institutional mechanics at Harvard University. Now, I didn't know that's what I was doing at the time. I thought I was just trying to get some "good run"—slang for a competitive game of pick-up basketball—at Malkin Athletic Center, known as "the MAC." But now that I've read Francis Fukuyama's ambitious *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*, I see that I was in fact testing a theory—or rather, *his* theory—of institutional change. And thanks to that theory, I now understand what happened, which was the following.

One spring—I can't remember the year exactly—there were too many players for the MAC's noon game.

This meant that many players didn't get to play more than once, and some didn't get to play at all. Several of us, graduate students and faculty members every one, sat on the sidelines and considered what might be done. We arrived at an obvious solution: Instead of playing only on the center—read: premier—court, we would play on both the center and the smaller side court, thus allowing more people to take part. We presented our plan to the regulars. They grudgingly agreed to try it. After only a run or two, however, there was mass defection. Almost everyone preferred to play on the center court, even if it meant he might not get to play at all.

Why had our plan, despite its obvious rationality, failed so utterly? At the time, I thought it was due to the pigheadedness and idiocy of the other players. I was wrong: People at Harvard are many things, some of them distinctly unsavory, but they are generally not pigheaded idiots (with a few possible exceptions who shall go unnamed). In the light of Fukuyama's new book, I now see why our reform not only collapsed, but was doomed

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from the very start. The reason has to do with two things: human nature and tradition.

First, let us examine human nature, or rather four elements thereof. Element number 1: People naturally favor their friends. If players see their buddies playing on the center court, they will want to play there as well. Element number 2: People naturally get intellectually invested in traditions. If players have played at the MAC for any length of time, they will have many arguments “proving” that the status quo is “right.” Element number 3: People naturally get *emotionally* invested in traditions. If players have played for any length of time at the MAC, they will feel—and I mean *feel*—attached to its conventions, whether they make sense or not. Element number 4: People naturally seek the approbation of their peers, or what we call “status.” Most players will want to play with the best players on the best court so as to demonstrate that they, too, are the best. This brings us to traditions, or rather two of them. From the perspective of the players, the noon game has “always” been played on the center court, and only the center court. Similarly, from the perspective of the players, the center court has “always” been the one on which the best players play, while the side courts are reserved for people “without game.”

Put all this together, and you have a good explanation for why our really good idea came to nothing. Most players didn’t want to lose face by playing on the side court. They wanted to be seen as “having game,” and that required playing on the center court. Those who didn’t care about status just wanted to play with their friends, many of whom were, again, on the center court. And nearly everyone thought and felt it was somehow “wrong” to violate the MAC’s ancient pick-up conventions. Of course, sticking with the old conventions in this case made no sense. But—and here’s the lesson I learned, thanks to Fukuyama—institutions are not only about rationality. They are also, and even predominately, about the interplay between human nature and the historical accidents that give birth to traditions.

This, I think, is the primary message of Francis Fukuyama’s new book. In it, he is trying to figure out why some states “get to Denmark”—that is, become stable, prosperous, liberal republics—while others do not. “For people in developed countries,” he writes, “‘Denmark’ is a mythical place that is known to have good political and economic institutions: It is stable, democratic, peaceful, prosperous, inclusive and has extremely low levels of political corruption.” I personally have never had any fantasies about

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Denmark, though I'm told it now has the best restaurant in the world. Truth be told, I haven't thought much about Denmark at all. I'm not sure that, as Fukuyama puts it, "Everyone would like to figure out how to transform Somalia, Haiti, Nigeria, Iraq, or Afghanistan into 'Denmark.'" Everyone he talks to, maybe. Nonetheless I see his point: Most of us would like to know why there are so few winners and so many losers in the game of political development. The issue has personal significance for Fukuyama. In his most famous (and widely misunderstood) book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Fukuyama argued that with the fall of communism, the last great alternative to universal liberal democracy had collapsed. In the future, he said, we would all live in someplace like Denmark. The rub is that much of the world is Denmarkizing very slowly, and still other parts are experiencing de-Denmarkization (which may even be true of Denmark, given the current fiscal crisis in the European Union). If you've bet the farm that liberal democracy is in all our futures, as Fukuyama has, these facts are certainly irksome. Fukuyama wants to find out what's holding things up. The American political elite should want to know as well, as recent attempts to plant liberal democratic institutions in virgin soil have gone

less than swimmingly. True, in Japan and Germany, the seeds took. But in painful instances such as Afghanistan and Iraq, the crop has failed completely. Indeed, these cases call into question the idea, beloved not only by neocons, but by much of the Western policy establishment, that liberal democracy can be planted at all.

So what is Fukuyama's answer to the Denmark riddle? Basically, it's that human institutions—be they pick-up basketball games or entire nations—get stuck in ruts for reasons having to do with (you guessed it) human nature and historical accidents. And once we sort these obstacles out, the road to Denmark will be, if not wide open, then at least not impassible.

Fukuyama opens *The Origins of Political Order* by proposing, quite sensibly, that it is impossible to understand political institutions without some grasp of human evolution and the distinctive human nature it produced. I was so happy to read this that I nearly jumped out of my chair. For too long, scholars have either denied that human nature exists or contrived parodies of it, useful for axe-grinding and little else. To my mind, historians are the worst deniers (human nature is "historically constructed," you know), while classical economists are the worst parodists (human nature is "utility maximizing,"

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except when it isn't). Fukuyama, however, prefers to lambaste political theorists on this score. Hobbes said people are all scared to death of death, and therefore created political institutions to protect them from one another. "Wrong!" says Fukuyama. Rousseau said that people are naturally innocent, and that political institutions are imposed upon them by bad people who apparently aren't innocent. "Wrong!" says Fukuyama. As it concerns political institutions, Fukuyama explains, human nature consists of four traits: 1) an ingrained bias toward kith and kin; 2) a searching mind that, not finding a satisfactory answer, spontaneously invents the idea of God; 3) a set of emotions that are pre-programmed to make us follow rules, even bad ones; and 4) a thoroughly non-utility-maximizing desire for respect, both for your person and for the things you like. For Fukuyama (and, one should add, nearly the entire scientific community), these traits evolved, and are therefore hard-wired. They provide "the building blocks of political development." They can never be eradicated. They have always been in play and they always will be in play. Forget that, Fukuyama cautions, and you will never understand anything about the evolution of political institutions—or, more importantly, how to get to Denmark.

It's refreshing that by "evolution" Fukuyama *really* means evolution—that is, Darwin's "descent with modification." "Darwinian evolution" he writes, "is built around the two principles of variance and selection: Organisms experience random genetic mutation, and those best adapted to their environments survive and multiply. So too in political development: There is variation in political institutions, and those best suited to the physical and social environment survive and proliferate." Biological evolution created human nature; political evolution created the variety of polities we see around the globe today. It follows that the only way to comprehend political evolution is to investigate how, within the firm constraints of human nature, institutions were born, selected for (or against), and passed on (or not) to subsequent eras. That means, says Fukuyama, that you have to study *history*. Once again, I was so pleased to read this that I nearly jumped out of my chair. Though their influence has waned in recent decades, many "ahistorical model builders" still haunt the faculty lounges of many fine institutions of higher learning. They think like physicists and, therefore, search everywhere for timeless order. The trouble is that there is no timeless order to anything that evolves, whether it be a carbon-based life form or a

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political institution. Evolution is a sorting mechanism that never, ever stops until there is nothing left to sort. This means that an evolving thing is the very opposite of timeless; it is decidedly time-bound. A species or institution is always the way it *is* because of the way it *was*. *Post hoc, ergo propter hoc* is not an error in evolution, it's a truism.

Which brings us to the most salutary part of this book: It's full of history. Fukuyama read a lot before he took pen in hand, and it shows. We are treated to satisfying and pertinent sketches of human evolution, early human migrations, the emergence of the first non-kin-based political structures, and the differentiation of political institutions in various parts of the globe and over vast stretches of time. *The Origins of Political Order* is not, however, a history of the world. Fukuyama carefully selects cases that illustrate certain themes. Thus he discusses China, India, the Middle East, and Europe, but not the more traditional Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Specialist historians (a somewhat redundant title in this day and age) will say that much of this history is potted. They can, by virtue of their narrow training and vision, say nothing else. But judging by the section on Russian history, which I read as a longtime student of the subject, Fukuyama's histories are more

than adequate given the scope and purpose of the book. And even if he gets some facts wrong, he had no other way to proceed. If you are going to do comparative history (and we must do comparative history), you have to compare *something*. He did the best he could with what historians made available to him. "Obviously in a work of this scope," he writes apologetically, "I have had to rely almost exclusively on secondary sources for the research." True enough. It is hardly his fault that the academy couldn't provide him with "secondary sources" in the form of convenient, brief, authoritative sketches of the histories of major cultural traditions.

Fukuyama uses his understanding of human nature and his reading of history to construct what is essentially a Goldilocks theory of how polities get or do not get to Denmark. He says that the essential institutional ingredients for a stable liberal democracy are three: a state, the rule of law, and accountability. Countries with all of them in just the right mix get to Denmark. "A successful modern liberal democracy," he proposes, "combines all three sets of institutions in a stable balance." Polities that fail to get to Denmark either a) get stuck in an equilibrium that rests on some subset of these three institutions, or b) find themselves dealing with either too much or not enough of one of them.

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The entire book is devoted to demonstrating the validity of this theory by analyzing polities that get stuck, and those that don't.

The first stop on Fukuyama's wide-ranging historical survey begins with hunter-gatherer bands. These were not, Fukuyama explains, really a political order, because they rested on kinship. Nonetheless, the band is important for his theory both because it is the sodality out of which political order first emerged and because, according to his argument, kinship is in fact "the default form of [human] social organization." He is saying, in effect, "This is where we began, and this is where we will always return when things go wrong." We did the hunter-gatherer thing for an awfully long time, nearly 200,000 years. We might never have broken out of the mold were it not for two developments: migration and agriculture.

Unlike other primates, humans proved astoundingly mobile and adaptable. In a very short time (100,000 years) we covered much of the globe and learned to live in a great variety of environments. This rapid dispersion engaged a common evolutionary process: speciation. As Darwin's finches spread over and adapted to the varied ecologies of the Galápagos Archipelago, isolated

populations evolved into separate biological species. Similarly, as humans spread over and adapted to the varied ecologies of the world, isolated populations evolved into *cultural* species. Happily, Fukuyama does not attempt to tell us just what a cultural species is; the whole issue, he knows, is complicated, and would only sidetrack his presentation. So he moves on.

Fukuyama tells us, however, that one of the cultural species that evolved during this process was food-making culture. Paleolithic hunter-gatherers *found* what they ate; their Neolithic descendants essentially *made* what they ate. Plant and animal domestication—the key elements in food-making culture—evolved independently in several parts of the world over a short period of time, and so were probably the result of some worldwide event, of which global climate change is the most likely candidate. In any case, the evolution of food-making culture is crucial for Fukuyama's story, because it led to the emergence of his main protagonist, the state. For him, the state is the first true political order. It breaks the hold of kinship and replaces it with impersonal, hierarchical relationships like those found in nearly all contemporary polities. In the band, whom you were related to mattered most; in the state, what you had done and could do for your superiors was

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what counted. Just how proto-states (tribes, chiefdoms, etc.) and states emerged out of food-making culture is a bit of a mystery, and Fukuyama knows it. So he reviews the several and contradictory theories, and again felicitously moves forward.

He is more certain—as is the evidence—about the reason states rapidly became larger and more powerful after they did emerge: “the problem of war.” In pre-modern times (“modern” being roughly after 1789), the primary business of most states was fighting. Here again, we see an evolutionary process. States fought one another over found or constructed niches; the fittest states, as Herbert Spencer would have said, survived, while the less fit vanished; the overall level of fitness, here measured by military prowess, rose quickly as states became fewer, larger, and more sophisticated. This selective process produced a species of state that we know as the “empire.” Thus, in a relatively small temporal window—approximately 3,000 B.C.E. to 1 B.C.E.—we see empires and imperial traditions emerge in the Near East, North Africa, Europe, India, China, and Central America.

Fukuyama describes the political evolution of only two of these ancient imperial traditions, the Chinese and Indian, for they illustrate cases of incomplete and/or unbalanced poli-

ties. The Qing dynasty had too much state and not enough (and perhaps no) rule of law or accountability. It was, in other words, a despotism. The Mauryan Empire, by contrast, had too much rule of law and not enough state and accountability, making it a sort of theocracy. In both cases, the road to Denmark was blocked by the establishment of unbalanced polities that were merely good enough. The story of how they got stuck in these predicaments, Fukuyama shows, is full of unforeseeable twists and turns. There are no “laws of history” at work here, there is only history—accidental, chaotic, messy, cluttered, and confused. And yet, lawless as history may be, it does manifest regularities. One of the most important for Fukuyama is continuity. The longer polities remain stuck, the more difficult it is to unstick them. This is because their incomplete or unbalanced institutional mixes come to be viewed as *tradition*, which in turn engages the human tendency toward mindless norm-following, no matter the norm. In this way, what was in fact the product of a thoroughly contingent process comes to be viewed as a necessary, eternal, and even sacred part of the universe itself. “We have always done it this way” comes to imply, “We should always do it this way.” For Fukuyama, the reason modern China and India are a

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long way from Denmark can in part be found in sticky traditions that are centuries old.

Fukuyama then turns to another case of institutional imbalance, the sundry Muslim polities of the early modern period. He chooses them because they well illustrate his theory of political decline. That theory is simple: States deteriorate when they allow nepotism and cronyism—the default modes of human social order—to reassert themselves as organizing principles. The case of the Ottomans is particularly instructive. They used a peculiar and extreme method to fight nepotism and cronyism: They put people without families and friends into administrative and military offices. Of course, people without families and friends are hard to find. Realistically speaking, you have to make them. And that is precisely what the Ottomans did. They enslaved boys from Christian lands, raised them, trained them, appointed them to offices, and forbade them from marrying. Voilà! A class of officials free from the entanglements of kinship and friendship. It worked for a while, but could not be sustained in the long term because, well, people naturally like to have families and friends. Eventually the sultan granted his military slaves the right to marry under the proviso that they not pass their offices on to their children. In

time, this restriction fell away as well. Nepotism and cronyism reappeared, and the game was up. The Ottoman Empire took another step toward extinction.

Having thus established what *doesn't* get a polity to Denmark, Fukuyama then addresses what does, or rather what did at first. What follows is a long and somewhat familiar exercise in comparative European political development. The stage is set by the medieval Catholic Church, which, he claims, both reduced the power of families by finding ways to expropriate their property and asserted the superiority of canon law by forcing Emperor Henry IV to go down on his knees at Canossa. The first of these actions bolstered the state—families being its enemies, in Fukuyama's estimation—while the second laid the foundation for the rule of law. He then juxtaposes the histories of early modern England, France, Hungary, and Russia, applying the Goldilocks principle as he goes. Only England had just the right combination of state power, legal authority, and government accountability. That's fortunate, because England was the first Denmark, and therefore set the standard to which Fukuyama wants us all to aspire. But it's also problematic, because he argues—and must argue, to be consistent—that the emergence of liberal democracy

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in northwestern Europe was largely the result of historical accidents that cannot be reproduced by any earthly power. Liberal democracy, it turns out, is a fluke.

As a historian, I concede that what Fukuyama says about pre-modern political development sounds quite sensible. As a citizen worried about the failure of so much of the world to get to Denmark, however, I have to say that it's all a bit unsatisfying. This is because what Fukuyama has constructed, and constructed quite solidly, is only a *theory* of pre-modern political development. In the last section of the book, he as much as admits this by arguing that "the conditions for political development have changed dramatically since the eighteenth century." The reason is, paradoxically, the emergence of liberal democracy and its handmaiden, robust industrial capitalism. The pre-modern rules do not apply in the modern context, so Fukuyama's pre-modern theory of political development is of little aid to those contemporary nations plodding toward Denmark. He promises a second volume covering the period from the French Revolution to the present that will, presumably, adjust his theory to modern conditions. I wish him luck.

Yet policymakers should find at least one element of this book useful, and that is what it has to say about historical continuity. There is no doubt that the road to Denmark is blocked in many parts of the world by ancient, entrenched, and thoroughly imperfect political traditions. I made this case for Russia a number of years ago, and I imagine my colleagues in Chinese, Indian, African, and Latin American studies could make similar cases for their respective areas of interest. Political leaders should not underestimate the intractability of human nature or the weight of tradition. I learned this lesson two decades ago playing pick-up basketball. It may be that I wasn't the only one: Barack Obama was playing then and there as well. I doubt very much he remembers our attempt to rationalize the noon game at the MAC. But it doesn't matter, for all he needs to do to learn the lesson thereof is to read Francis Fukuyama's fine *The Origins of Political Order*.

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