A dangerous text: Francis Fukuyama’s mischaracterisation of identity, recognition and right-wing nationalism


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Abstract
Francis Fukuyama’s work on contemporary problems of identity and recognition portrays liberalism as under threat from the global rise of a reactionary and exclusionary identity politics. For Fukuyama, contemporary identity politics, taking place as struggles for recognition and manifestations of resentment, are dangerous, illiberal forms of right-wing populist nationalism. I demonstrate how he appropriates the concepts of ‘identity’ and ‘recognition’ and puts these to use to sustain a version of neoliberal rationality and neoliberal politics. Such an appropriation denies the transformative and radical potential of intersubjective recognition and depoliticises and delegitimises any non-liberal claims and struggles of identity politics that might threaten to disrupt neoliberal political order, security and capitalist accumulation. Fukuyama’s account of identity is dangerous in the way that it legitimates a right-wing nationalist discourse of blame targeted at the mischaracterisation of minority and left-wing ‘identity’ politics, and in the way he detaches a contemporary extremist and right-wing nationalist discourse from the history of a less extreme, but similar, neoliberal nationalist discourse which, since the 1980s, has mobilised the language of identity politics as a political strategy and weapon against progressive political movements and against the welfare state.

Keywords: Fukuyama, recognition, identity politics, neoliberalism, conservativism.
Introduction

Francis Fukuyama achieved widespread academic and popular intellectual fame and notoriety with his post-Cold War book The End of History and the Last Man (Fukuyama 1992), in which he optimistically argued that a globalised system of liberal capitalism formed the sole legitimate direction of human development and modernisation. Almost 30 years later his most recent work Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition (Fukuyama 2018),1 revises this position and portrays national and international liberalism as now under significant threat by the global rise of a reactionary and exclusionary identity politics. For Fukuyama contemporary identity politics, taking place as struggles for recognition and manifestations of resentment, are emerging as dangerous, illiberal forms of right-wing populist nationalism, typified, in the USA by the Presidency of Donald Trump.

In what follows I engage with a number of ideas and questions raised by Fukuyama in relation to identity and intersubjective recognition within liberal and neoliberal political, economic and legal structures. Principally I argue that Fukuyama’s account of identity and recognition is dangerous. While his text is critical of far-right politics and right-wing nationalism, Fukuyama is quick to place much of the blame for the current malaise upon minority and left-wing ‘identity politics’ and upon the failure of the left and centre-left over the last 30 years to address issues of social and economic inequality. For Fukuyama such groups should never have abandoned the principles of a ‘neutral’, universal ‘creedal liberalism’ and are now mimicked by many across the far-right who demand that their own supremacist identities be recognised, acknowledged and affirmed.
Through such an argument Fukuyama performs a sleight of hand, he glosses over the manner in which rising global inequality has been caused by the dominance of post-Cold War neoliberal economic and political policies across the Global North and Global South and hence he conceals the causal effect this has had upon the emergence of right-wing nationalism. Furthermore, Fukuyama legitimises an increasingly popular discourse of right-wing nationalism and offers a subtle neoliberal defence of a form of nationalism. His account of identity is dangerous because it attempts to completely detach a contemporary extremist and right-wing nationalist discourse from the history of a less extreme, though very similar, neoliberal nationalist discourse which, since the 1980s, has mobilised the language of identity politics as a political strategy and weapon against progressive political movements and against the welfare state.

In what follows I will offer an outline of Fukuyama’s account in relation to identity and struggles for recognition and will then analyse and critique his position. I draw upon a theory of recognition which emphasises social transformation and draw also on accounts of the critique of neoliberal political economy and rationality, and a theory of societal antagonism. I demonstrate how Fukuyama appropriates the concepts of ‘identity’ and ‘recognition’ and puts these to use to sustain a version of neoliberal rationality and neoliberal politics. Such an appropriation denies the transformative and radical potential of intersubjective recognition and depoliticises and delegitimises any non-liberal claims and struggles of identity politics that threaten to disrupt neoliberal political order, security, and capitalist accumulation.

Broadly, I take the position that while some might simply dismiss the musings of a figure like Fukuyama out of hand, it remains relevant to engage with and critique the work of ‘public intellectuals’ such as Fukuyama who portray themselves as champions and defenders of liberal consensus. I feel it is important to contest the narratives of blame, silence, and blamelessness which Fukuyama constructs in relation to the contemporary rise of far right and right-wing nationalism. Further it remains important to draw attention to the connections between extremist right-wing nationalism and the destructive heritage created by the proponents of neoliberalism. In this respect it remains crucial therefore to challenge the ways in which scholars like Fukuyama
normalise right-wing nationalist discourses and hide the ongoing legacy of neoliberalism by clothing it in a language of ‘Enlightenment’ liberal constitutionalism.

Recognition as Liberal Politics

Fukuyama’s early and controversial work, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Fukuyama 1992), has in the time since its publication been widely criticised by both liberal and critical theorists for its many historical and theoretical oversimplifications, and its neoliberal and neoconservative celebration of the ‘triumph’ of a particular historical form of liberal capitalism (Halliday 1992; Peet 1993; Burns 1994). While his latest work *Identity* (Fukuyama 2018) shares many of the limitations of *The End of History and the Last Man*, it does engage with and attempt to answer a serious question faced by contemporary political and constitutional institutions, that of: How does the modern liberal, democratic state understand and then respond to the challenge faced by rising far-right politics and a politics of populist nationalism whose claim to legitimacy is based upon a language of identity politics that is often highly exclusionary?

In attempting to answer this question and offer a defence of a liberal, capitalist social and constitutional order Fukuyama argues that we need to understand the development and operation of identity politics through the theoretical lens of the ‘struggle for recognition’ as outlined by his interpretation of the works of the early 19th century German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel and the mid-20th century French philosopher Alexandre Kojève. For Fukuyama ‘the demand for recognition of one’s identity is a master concept that unifies much of what is going on in world politics today’ (Fukuyama 2018, p. xv). In this vein his attempt to think through the question of contemporary identity politics, and offer a defence of liberalism against right-wing nationalism, draws upon a particular account of recognition theory that endeavours to explain the limitations of what he terms ‘partial’ identity claims based upon nation, religion, race and gender, and to propound against this a version of liberal ‘universal recognition’ in which the ‘dignity’ of every human being is recognised (Fukuyama 2018, p. xv-xvi).

Returning to and expanding upon his earlier Hegelian-Kojèvian account of the struggle for recognition (Fukuyama 1992, p. 144), Fukuyama locates an early
articulation of an element of this idea within the Platonic concept of the human soul and the notion of ‘thymos’. This being for Fukuyama the idea that human individuals desire positive judgements about their worth or dignity, which may come from within, but which are also heavily dependent upon the recognition and acknowledgement of others (Fukuyama 2018, p. 16-18). As an ancient form of aristocratic virtue this desire for recognition, as ‘megalothymia’, involved the desire to be acknowledged as superior. Such a position could be contrasted to a democratic and egalitarian sentiment towards ‘isothymia’, which in modern democracies involves the inherent recognition of everyone as inherently equal in dignity and human rights. Hence, Fukuyama argues that ‘The rise of modern democracy is the story of the displacement of megalothymia by isothymia’ (Fukuyama 2018, p. 22).

For Fukuyama the emergence of a modern concept of identity takes place also on the back of conceptual innovations within the understanding of the human self developed through the Protestant Reformation and transformed through social changes across early modernity (Fukuyama 2018, pp. 26-28). Drawing upon the work of Charles Taylor, Fukuyama argues that the 18th century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau helped to develop and articulate a sense of identity which has come to be heavily influential across modernity. This involves a perception of a disjunction between one’s inward view of their self, and the outward perception and acknowledgement by others of one’s self in terms of status, role and respect (Fukuyama 2018, pp. 29-35). In this sense Fukuyama argues:

> Individuals come to believe that they have a true or authentic identity hiding within themselves that is somehow at odds with the role they are assigned by their surrounding society. The modern concept of identity places supreme value on authenticity, on the validation of that inner being that is not being allowed to express itself. (Fukuyama 2018, p. 26)

From such a position Fukuyama sees the modern development of identity run off in a number of different and conflicting directions. The first is for him the legitimate end point and morally preferable direction of human social development, as a form of liberalism, outlined by ‘Enlightenment’ thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and Hegel. For Fukuyama, Kant built upon the insights of the Protestant Reformation and the work of Rousseau and elevated to the centre of
the idea of modern identity the notion of an inherent human dignity, individual rights and capacity for moral autonomy. Kant saw this as ‘universal’ for humans and thought that it should be affirmed and acted upon as the basis of ‘rational’ moral action (Fukuyama 2018, pp. 37-8). For Fukuyama, Hegel took this idea and showed how it operated in a modern tension between the desires of 

megalothymia and isothymia, as a ‘struggle for recognition’ that underpinned social life, politics and individual and collective self-identity. In this, Fukuyama, drawing upon an interpretation of Kojève, argues that Hegelian ‘mutual recognition’ represents the culmination of the Kantian, liberal moral ideal in which individuals desire to be recognised as autonomous, equal and authentic beings whose dignity and freedom is respected by others. Opposed to this is the denial of mutual recognition stemming from the desire for superiority, mastery and empowerment. ‘Struggle’ in this sense involves both the coercive and violent imposition of mastery and superiority of groups and individuals over others, and involves group and individual struggles to assert an otherwise denied equality, dignity or freedom against subordination and domination (Fukuyama 2018, pp. 39-41; Fukuyama 1992, pp. 144-85).

For Fukuyama the historical path of human development, or ‘end of history’ involves then the moral and social goal or telos in which liberal democratic societies, in the wake of the late 18th century American and French revolutions, have enacted political, legal, economic and social systems in which individual identity is suffused with a culture and practice of mutual recognition of freedom, formal equality and dignity. Such a goal runs counter to what Fukuyama views as largely illiberal forms of modern identity suffused with megalothymia, in which conceptions of nationality, race, religion and ethnicity claim a degree of supremacy for particular groups and individuals based upon exclusion, mastery and violence (Fukuyama 2018, pp. 53-55; Fukuyama 1992, pp. 185-201).

Fukuyama’s Problem with Identity Politics

For Fukuyama the 19th and then 20th centuries were marked by a tension in the understanding of human identity and dignity split between a liberal democratic form which was universalist, and, a collective nationalist spirit (alongside also a Marxist-socialist account of dignity which was collective-
universalist) (Fukuyama 2018, pp. 61). Drawing upon Ernest Gellner, Fukuyama argues that late 19th and 20th century forms of nationalism and national identity emerged partly in response to political projects of nation-formation, bureaucratisation, colonialism and anticolonialism. National identity emerged also in response to the social effects of industrialisation and market societies in which the traditional familial and cultural bonds of the village and region were replaced by the anxieties of atomisation, alienation, labour insecurity and migration that characterised the modern great transformation from semi-feudal, agrarian to urban, industrial life (Fukuyama 2018, pp. 63-65).

Fukuyama argues then that against the values of liberal cosmopolitanism and universal individual human rights, emerged a discourse of identity in which nationalist ideology deplored the perversions of liberal society and cultivated an intense nostalgia for a strong community, often ethnically based, in which the dislocations of industrial modernity would no longer exist (Fukuyama 2018, p. 65). On this view nationalist (as well as religious) political claims occurred as demands for recognition by those who felt their dignity and their authentic ethnic (or religious) group identity had been marginalised or disrespected both actively by the liberal state, and more subversively by a range of shadowy political and economic forces (Fukuyama 2018, p. 59).

In the early 21st century prominent examples of such reactionary demands for identity-recognition by groups who feel disrespected and under threat by the forces of modernisation, liberalism and globalisation, and who offer an alternative future vision of community, strength and dignity, are for Fukuyama right-wing nationalist movements in countries like the USA, Russia, Turkey, Hungary, France and the UK, and, a global phenomenon of ‘Fundamentalist Islam’ (Fukuyama 2018, pp. 74, 68-73). Broadly concentrating upon the cases of the USA and Europe, Fukuyama’s account of the causes of the increasing prominence of right-wing nationalism links together discourses and political practices of identity politics, economic impoverishment and rising inequality as a result of 21st century globalisation. Key to his argument is the claim that right-wing nationalist political movements and parties have capitalised upon rising discontent among working class and lower middle class populations within developed countries who have felt the negative effects of a rise of uneven
income distribution and inequality occurring under three decades of globalisation and as a result of the 2008 financial crisis (Fukuyama 2018, pp. 77-80).

Fukuyama argues that in the USA, as opposed to left-wing political parties, right-wing nationalist parties and political movements have successfully capitalised on the feelings of invisibility, disrespect, loss of status and dignity experienced by white formerly middle class and impoverished working class voters. In this case feelings of resentment, political demands for recognition, and expressions of nationalist identity are linked to the experience of economic distress, impoverishment and the sense that others are benefiting illegitimately (Fukuyama 2018, pp. 86-88). In this respect Fukuyama claims:

Economic distress is often perceived by individuals not as resource deprivation, but as a loss of identity. Hard work should confer dignity on an individual, but that dignity is not recognised – indeed, it is condemned, and other people who are not willing to play by the rules are given undue advantages. This link between income and status helps to explain why nationalist or religious conservative groups have been more appealing to many people than traditional left-wing ones based on economic class. The nationalist can translate loss of economic position into loss of identity and status: you have always been a core member of our great nation, but foreigners, immigrants, and your own elite compatriots have been conspiring to hold you down; your country is no longer your own, and you are not respected in your own land. (Fukuyama 2018, p. 89)

Fukuyama argues further, and more controversially, that a key cause of the rise of right-wing nationalism, and, a reason for the failure of the ‘left’ to stem this emergence, is a strategy of ‘identity politics’ that has been carried out by progressive, left-wing and disadvantaged and disenfranchised minority groups in the USA and across liberal democracies since the 1960s. For Fukuyama there is a legitimate, albeit somewhat restricted place for identity politics within liberal democracies, and he notes the examples of social movements that had emerged from the 1960s onwards such as the African American civil rights movement, and the women’s rights movement. On his reading such movements take place as a response to injustice and as a form of struggle for recognition in which disadvantaged identities demand the full realisation of the principles
of freedom and formal equality under modern liberalism (Fukuyama 2018, pp. 105-6). Moreover he notes that such progressive identity politics have helped societies to pay attention to the specific ‘lived experience’ of disadvantaged groups and individuals and that this can help changes in public policy and cultural shifts which benefit the groups in question (Fukuyama 2018, pp. 110, 114).

However, for Fukuyama when identity politics are interpreted and mobilised in a particular ways they become highly problematic and destructive to liberal democracies. One example is the rise of policies of ‘multiculturalism’ across liberal democracies. For Fukuyama while multiculturalism has a positive role to play in terms of celebrating the positive elements of diverse societies and reducing discrimination, one negative result is a move away from the core values of liberalism in which the cultural values and identities of particular religious and ethnic groups are given equal respect even if these cultures infringe upon the autonomy of their members. In this sense he argues that multiculturalism takes the individualistic idea of lived experience developed in a tradition running from Rousseau to feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, and translates this to cultural, group identities. Such a movement transforms political life into an interaction of differing cultural, group lived experiences which cannot be fully accessed by others, and are then argued over emotionally and antagonistically in terms of a zero-sum game that blocks both ‘rational’ deliberation and collective action (Fukuyama 2018, pp. 111-2, 117). He argues:

Liberal democracies have good reasons not to organise themselves around a series of ever-proliferating identity groups inaccessible to outsiders. The dynamic of identity politics is to stimulate more of the same, as identity groups begin to see one another as threats. Unlike fights over economic resources, identity claims are usually non-negotiable: rights to social recognition based on race, ethnicity or gender are based on fixed biological characteristics and cannot be traded for other goods or abridged in any way. (Fukuyama 2018, p. 122)

Further, Fukuyama claims that the focus of progressives and the broad left upon the issues faced by marginalised groups and the promotion of identity politics has led to a widespread failure to address issues of economic inequality and a failure to craft ambitious social programs (Fukuyama 2018, pp. 115, 122,
Identity politics for some progressives has become a cheap substitute for serious thinking about how to reverse the thirty-year trend in most liberal democracies toward greater socio-economic inequality. It is easier to argue over cultural issues within the confines of elite institutions than to appropriate money or convince sceptical legislators to change policies. (Fukuyama 2018, p. 115)

Tied to this charge is the claim that the ‘left’ has failed to build large coalitions around the economically exploited and has instead focussed upon ‘ever smaller groups being marginalised in specific ways’ (Fukuyama 2018, p. 90). Principally, he argues that a progressive and left-wing agendas of identity politics, largely focussed upon the disadvantages faced by women, and racial, ethnic and religious minorities, have largely ignored and rendered invisible the suffering faced by parts of an American (and European) white working class who in terms of declining wealth and status have been dragged into the position of an underclass (Fukuyama 2018, p. 115).

For Fukuyama the left’s obsession with identity politics, such as that manifested in a culture of ‘political correctness’, has resulted in the resentment by many poor white working class citizens who feel their identity and values (white, Christian, rural or urban post-industrial), have been ignored and undervalued by national elites, the mainstream media, entertainment industries, universities and cultural institutions. He argues that the political success and popularity of President Donald Trump in the USA is based upon his ability to openly transgress the norms of political correctness, and to express, in the eyes of his supporters a politics and ethics of ‘authenticity’ (Fukuyama 2018, p. 118-9). Fukuyama argues that Trump has thus been incredibly important in moving the focus of identity politics from the left to the right. In doing so Trump’s presidency has been crucial in helping to politically normalise the identity politics of right-wing nationalists whose claims about race and ‘white’ identity have now moved from fringe politics into the mainstream (Fukuyama 2018, pp. 120-121).

Fukuyama’s proposed solution to the threats posed to liberal democracy by right-wing nationalism and by the decay of liberal politics into a non-deliberative and antagonistic conflict between the mutually exclusive and competing claims of identity is to attempt to reframe liberalism and liberal belief
as a form of ‘identity’. His argument is for the development of a ‘creedal liberalism’ built upon the constitutional principles set out by Abraham Lincoln as a form of non-racial national identity based on the principles of constitutionalism, the rule of law and formal equality (Fukuyama 2018, p. 154-9). Such an identity involves also a sense of positive civic virtues tied to ideas of patriotism, and an active, informed public-spirited, participatory citizenry, as well as, crucially, a hard work ethic (Fukuyama 2018, pp. 160-1). In this sense, Fukuyama’s argument is the attempt to rescue the idea of ‘national identity’, as a broader form of identity which should stand higher than what he sees as narrow, partial identities of race, ethnicity, religion or gender. Such an idea of national identity is then to be rescued also from an aggressive, racial and exclusionary identity typified by populist white and right-wing nationalism and to insist instead upon the building of national identities on the basis of liberal and democratic political values (Fukuyama 2018, p. 128). In making such an argument Fukuyama is counselling a certain kind of liberal, democratic patriotism. He points to the cultural and emotional ties between the individual and the polity and claims that a form of liberal republican group self-identity is necessary to the functioning and flourishing of democratic institutions (Fukuyama 2018, p. 128). He argues:

[D]emocracies will not survive if citizens are not in some measure irrationally attached to the ideas of constitutional government and human equality through feelings of pride and patriotism. These attachments will see societies through their low points, when reason alone may counsel despair at the working of institutions. (Fukuyama 2018, p. 131)

**Blame and Neoliberal Creative Destruction**

Fukuyama’s defence of ‘liberal values’ and liberal nationalism against right-wing populist nationalism was, he claims, prompted in part by the emergence of US President Trump (Fukuyama 2018, p. ix). Yet, many of the arguments which Fukuyama deploys – such as critiques of multiculturalism, minority and progressive identity politics and ‘political correctness’ – sometimes stand awkwardly quite close to positions articulated by many right-wing nationalists. The cumulative outcome of Fukuyama’s position is the production of a problematic and dangerous text, one which develops a theoretical justification
of many right-wing arguments based upon a discourse of blame, a silence with respect to the destructive legacy of neoliberalism, and a caricature of the idea of identity and identity politics.

Drawing upon the work of contemporary economists such as Thomas Piketty Fukuyama is correct to draw attention to the problem of increasing economic and social equality within Western democracies. He is correct also to highlight the links between increasing levels of inequality, social dislocation, loss of status and the rise in popularity of right-wing nationalist political movements. However, Fukuyama offers little to no analysis of the causes of the rise of inequality across the Global North and Global South over the past 30 years. What is presented instead is a quick and vague gloss in relation to unequal income distribution under ‘globalisation’ and the 2008 financial crisis, as well as a brief reference to inequality levels being greatest within the UK and USA, as states which led the introduction of the neoliberal free market revolution of the 1980s (Fukuyama 2018, pp. 7, 77-78). In contrast what is given greater emphasis by Fukuyama is his lambasting of progressive and left-wing politics for ‘failing’ to creatively produce any social and economic policies which would lead to greater levels of equality (Fukuyama 2018, pp. 112-7, 123, 179).

Situated behind Fukuyama’s discourse of blame heaped upon social democratic and left-wing political parties and movements is a thorough and austere silence in relation to the historical and political context underlying the causes of rising levels inequality since the 1980s across large sections of the Global North and Global South. Crucially, Fukuyama has nothing to say about the causal role played by neoliberal economic, political and social policies, initially implemented in the USA and UK and then later in other Western democracies. He is largely silent in relation to the role neoliberal ideology has played within global governance institutions of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation and the detrimental impact many of the policies promoted by these institutions have had upon underdevelopment and equality levels across the Global South. In this respect, Fukuyama’s account of the rise of right-wing nationalism is detached from the ongoing legacy of the dominant political and economic ideology which has helped to shape much of the globe over the last quarter century.
Such a silence ignores a wealth of contemporary social democratic (Stiglitz 2012; Krugman 2012; Piketty 2014) and critical scholarship (Harvey 2003, 2005, 2011; Brenner 2006; Supiot 2012; Mirowski 2013; Robinson 2014; Streeck 2014; Brown 2015;) which has drawn attention to the central role decades of neoliberal policies have played in mobilising free market capital at the expense of economic redistribution and social protection. These and multiple other accounts have drawn clear links between the socially destructive effect of policies of privatisation, marketisation, austerity, the weakening of labour power, increase in corporate power and erosion of democratic accountability, with the consequent rise in levels of inequality and surge in popularity of right-wing nationalist groups who attempt to mobilise support from socially disenfranchised members of the middle classes and working classes. Similarly Fukuyama’s account remains silent in relation the role played by US foreign policy in helping to construct a global system of ‘informal empire’ (Hardt and Negri 2001; Mann 2013) or ‘hegemony’ (Gill 2003; Arrighi 1994) and the manner in which this has helped to set and enforce many of the rules underpinning a post-Cold War neoliberal settlement and the direction of global governance and development across the Global South (Cutler 2003; Wallerstein 2007; Peet 2009; Amin 2014).

In relation to US foreign policy, as an account of identity formation Fukuyama’s position fails to engage seriously with the question of how multiple and conflicting identities are co-constituted and produced in relation to one another. One such notable lack is of any account of the central role played by post-Cold War US foreign military policy leading up to and an including the ‘war on terror’ and the manner in which various ‘moderate’ and ‘fundamentalist’ Islamist identities have been formed in reaction to US military violence carried out in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria (Mamdani 2005). Equally little is said in relation to how the construction of ‘threatening’ Islamic identities of the ‘terrorist’ within political, security, media and cultural discourses in Western liberal states have contributed to the construction of xenophobic, racist and exclusionary conceptions of right-wing national identity (Assad 2007; Butler 2016). Not only are these formations of identity are interlinked, they are intimately connected to neoliberal political and economic projects of ‘securing’ flows of capital within the USA and across the globe (Barkarwi 2005; Dillon
As noted by Wendy Brown, contemporary forms of right-wing populist nationalism draw upon and perpetuate the legacy of neoliberal rationality with its emphasis upon individualism and legitimate inequality based upon a fictional ethic of ‘work’. What can be witnessed in the politics articulated by right-wing ‘populist’ figures like Trump is an anti-cosmopolitan, increasingly authoritarian, nationalist articulation of neoliberal reason, and in this respect both a continuation and modification of a neoliberal political form earlier deployed by the administrations of Reagan and Thatcher (Brown 2019). When viewing Fukuyama’s account in this light then Fukuyama stands much closer to the right-wing nationalists he deplores, and, through his rhetorical strategies of silence and blame he participates in the construction and perpetuation of a neoliberal identity of homo economicus, albeit an identity whose outlook is nationalistic rather than cosmopolitan.

**Recognition and Identity as Transformative Struggles for Justice**

To see how problematic the theoretical foundations of Fukuyama’s argument are it is important to turn to a discussion of identity and the theory of recognition and to sketch out an alternative, critical perspective. There are moments within Fukuyama’s account of recognition in which he does make a number of important points in relation to thinking about identity. One moment is the manner in which he emphasises the importance of feelings of disrespect and affronts to dignity, and links these to self-perceptions of loss of status in relation to economic hardship. Here, against neoclassical economics and rational choice theory Fukuyama makes an important case for seeing questions of identity formation and status as tied to socio-economic relations (Fukuyama 2018, p. 81). In another moment Fukuyama draws attention to the way in which the social and political recognition of an individual’s ‘lived experience’ forms an important role in the way liberal democracies can and should respond to social harms (Fukuyama 2018, p. 106). Such positions echo a more substantive body of work (uncited by Fukuyama) on questions of recognition, disrespect and moral harm developed by Axel Honneth. Yet, unlike Honneth who draws upon recognition theory to harness and point to its radical potential for enabling emancipation and solidarity within both social democracy and
socialism (Honneth 1995, 2014), Fukuyama’s use of recognition theory does not transcend the fundamental principles of political and economic liberalism. Fukuyama’s contribution to our understanding of identity is hamstrung by a theoretical framework which reads the theory of recognition as developed by Hegel, and interpreted by Kojève, as a normative project centred upon the recognition of liberal autonomous subjects who affirm the key elements of 17th and 18th century liberalism as developed by thinkers like Hugo Grotius, John Locke and Kant. In this respect the normative ideal of recognition described by Fukuyama is closer to that of Gottlieb Fichte than that of Hegel; whereby for Hegel the idea of recognition was far more complex and contradictory and contained a variety of differing registers which Fukuyama generally ignores. Most problematically, aside from the reoccurrence of exclusionary group relations of exclusion and domination, for Fukuyama the end point of all relations of recognition across time and space has already been normatively determined: that of the mutual recognition of autonomous liberal individuals. Yet, such a position ignores the radically socially transformative potential of recognition theory which is important to helping us to understand questions of individual and group identity formation in the present.

A radical aspect of recognition theory can be found in Hegel’s works linked to his inheritance of Spinoza’s cosmological sense of a shared intersubjective human identity (Küng 1987) and Rousseau’s collective sense of republican identity (Taylor 1992). Hegel’s notion of the ‘I that is We’ and ‘We that is I’ (Hegel 1977, pp. 109-10) when read in relation to his concept of ‘Wirklichkeit’, as the actualisation or realisation of the rational potential of human, social identity and existence (Hegel 1991a, p. 20; Hegel 1991b, pp. 213), forms the basis of an idea of a shared notion of intersubjective identity which is radically socially transformative (Theunissen 1991; Williams 1997; Kochi 2009; Kochi 2012). From this view Hegel’s theoretical position expresses an idea of social and political life that points beyond the confines of liberalism and sketches out normative conceptions of emancipation, duty and solidarity more closely aligned with ideas of social democracy, communitarianism and democratic socialism (Marcuse 1970; Avineri 1972; Honneth 1995; Williams 1997). On such a reading the potential ‘end’ of recognition is thus open-ended, with the idea that mutual recognition between subjects and groups has the capacity to
transform their understanding of their selves and their understanding of others and their world. This does not mean intersubjective recognition cannot all go badly wrong, turning social relations into forms of problematic and domineering encounters of ‘misrecognition’. Yet the potential of self and social transformation within an idea of recognition exceeds any defined historical limits or normative relations as set down by liberal or capitalist social relations (Rose 1981).

Such an understanding of recognition at the heart of identity formation was clear to a number of inheritors of this aspect of Hegel’s theory. For Frantz Fanon the racialised experience of a lack of recognition within the context of colonialism led to a struggle for recognition as a form of radical social and political transformation. This involved the struggle of a colonised people not to replicate the discursive field of cultural, economic, and normative relations expressed by Western ‘civilisation’ and liberalism, but the fight for the realisation of a social and political existence beyond the colonial and neocolonial confines of modernity (Fanon 1963). In this sense any authentic mutual recognition between the postcolonial subject and the former Western colonisers can only take place if the latter give up their belief that Western values of liberalism, progress and enlightenment are ‘universal’ and participate instead in a shared process of discursive and normative mediation, communication and self-other affirmation. In a similar vein Simone de Beauvoir’s understanding of identity formation pointed to the critique of the construction femininity across European history and social relations and as something that was to be challenged wholeheartedly at the level of social, political and economic transformation. Mutual recognition in this normative sense meant not merely the admission of women to the status of equals within liberalism, but the radical overturning of the gendered epistemologies that underpin and sustain liberalism and capitalist accumulation (de Beauvoir 1993).

Yet, there is no such space for a socially transformative idea of recognition-based identity within Fukuyama’s account. His discussions of the ‘identity politics’ of race and gender hold a normative and legitimate space only for those groups who have and continue to struggle to attain formal liberal equality and liberty. Hence his account praises a supposedly ‘liberal’ Martin Luther
King, but denounces the revolutionary demands of the Black Panther movement (Fukuyama 2018, p. 107-8). Similarly he praises women’s struggles for the vote, or in relation to the ‘#metoo’ movement, but has little time for the identity politics and transformative political agendas of radical feminism (Fukuyama 2018, p. 108-9).

In this respect within Fukuyama’s account the ideas of ‘identity’ and ‘identity politics’ have no legitimate meaning outside of the iron cage of political liberalism. Hence the sense of diverse, socially critical and transformative accounts identity, along the lines of those say developed by scholars such as Judith Butler (Butler 1999b), Gayatri Spivak (Spivak 1999) and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (de Sousa Santos 2016), are largely jettisoned from the realm of identity thinking by Fukuyama. In this manner Fukuyama’s approach either misunderstands, or actively refuses to accept, that contemporary struggles over race, gender and sexuality in the USA, Europe or Australia are more than just struggles to gain entry into the status of liberal autonomy. Rather, these are struggles tied to histories of economic, epistemological and cultural domination and involve the consequent radical demand to transform liberal-capitalist societies so as to usher in a different form of justice.

In broad terms then Fukuyama’s recognition-based account of identity offers a weak theorisation of the idea of identity devoid of any robust account of intersectionality and absent of any genuine attempt to engage with the substantive conflicts and contradictions faced by individuals and groups who are forced to navigate aspects of liberal, capitalist and bureaucratic societies which label, sort and mark them by sharp and distinct categories. An example of this is Fukuyama’s portrayal and criticism of policies of multiculturalism, which he feels has become a danger to liberal societies when group identities, rights and cultural practices are recognised in ways which infringe upon the autonomy of individuals within those groups (Fukuyama 2018, p. 147-8). Such a perspective repeats the problems of liberal ‘tolerant’ forms of recognition as noted by Slavoj Žižek in his critique of liberal multiculturalism. For Žižek policies of liberal multiculturalism typically only tolerate particular, containable aspects of cultural difference, such as ‘foreign food’, to the extent that these do not challenge the fundamental tenets of liberalism and its basis in the social-property relations of modern capitalism (Žižek 2008).
The operation of cultural recognition in this sense of liberal multiculturalism operates as a form of ‘multiculturalism light’ and stands in contrast to an alternative, albeit ideal, form of robust multiculturalism. Such an ideal, sketched by thinkers like Enrique Dussel and Costas Douzinas (drawing upon the work of Emmanuel Levinas), is built upon genuine attempts at mutual recognition in which citizens are open to the idea that the ethical encounter with the other will involve the possibility of the transformation of the self and hence the potential transformation of the self’s political, economic and legal institutions (Dussel 1996; Douzinas 2000). Whether this ‘other’ to liberal citizenry is the indigenous inhabitant and first nation of country, or the refugee, or the natural environment and ecosystem, such an ideal, normative type of recognition (always bound up with the problematics of epistemic misrecognition) points to an open direction of human political, economic and legal ‘ends’, and something that cannot be circumscribed in advance by liberal theory.

The Danger of Fukuyama’s Account of Identity

Alongside Fukuyama’s silence on the connections between neoliberalism, social equality and popular resentment, and alongside also his severely circumscribed liberal account of intersubjective and intercommunal recognition, Fukuyama’s account too readily detaches questions of identity and recognition from histories and contexts of social and constitutional conflict. Yet questions of recognition and identity cannot be detached from diverse forms of social, political and cultural hegemonic conflict operating within and across liberal democracies.

Contra Fukuyama the idea of the ‘struggle for recognition’ can be interpreted in much broader terms than that given by his liberal interpretation. The idea can be better understood as struggles by groups and individuals to realise and have accepted by others a particular conception of justice. Such struggle may be the attempt to actualise and bring into being an idea of justice relevant to the reshaping of an entire political community. Such struggle may also, at a level of micro-politics, amount to the attempt to realise an idea or sense of justice within a particular, concrete and sometimes very personal situation. In each case one key premise of the Hegelian idea of recognition is an understanding of social relations as being often heavily antagonistic and filled with conflict as
groups, polities, cultures and subcultures express competing claims to normative and epistemic ‘universality’. Often certain moments of conflict are not resolved in an ideal Kantian or Habermasian sense by practical reason, communication and dialogue, but remain in fundamental disagreement and result in the imposition of a set of very particular and contingent ‘universal’ values upon others.

Fukuyama’s account of identity grasps elements of this antagonistic idea, but assumes that the fundamental principles and values of modern liberalism are generally immune to this process. In this sense Fukuyama’s account of recognition is always already overlaid and limited by a liberal Kantian idea of practical rationality whose heritage is the Anglo-European intellectual tradition of natural law and natural rights. Yet the legacy of the post-1960s terrain of identity politics which Fukuyama attempts to come to terms with is characterised by an endless flux of agonistic and antagonistic social relations in which struggles over issues of class, race, gender, sexuality, religion and ecology amount to more than struggles over liberal civil and human rights. Crucially, these involve struggles over the nature of social, material and biopolitical reproduction, over the meaning and extent of democracy, and over the nature and meaning of ‘justice’ itself (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Derrida 1994; Hardt and Negri 2001; Federici 2012).

The terrain of identity politics, as multifarious and conflicting struggles over justice, also takes place as struggles over meaning and representation within cultural institutions of the mass media, parliament and government administration, schools and universities, the advertising industry, social media and the internet more generally (Poulantzas 1980; Althusser 2001; Butler 2016). Hence, in a manner largely overlooked by Fukuyama, the social construction of identity is shaped not merely by an individual’s ‘inward gaze’, but by the construction of the social meaning of an identity – the ‘Muslim’, the ‘welfare scrounger’, the ‘illegal immigrant’, the ‘feminist’, the ‘white supremacist’ – within an antagonistic public, performative and media-heavy context marked by struggles over the very meaning of each name and term. As such the manufacturing of identity by, for example, Fox News, the Murdoch Press, Breitbart News and 8Chan, all of which are largely absent from Fukuyama’s account, remain as important (or somewhat more important) today.
to understanding the denigration of minority groups and celebration of right-wing nationalist identity, than the recounting of Rousseau’s romantic conception of individualistic sentiment.

Yet, these well discussed positions within the discourse of critical and cultural theory are absent from Fukuyama’s portrayal of identity. For Fukuyama the position of the abstract, rights bearing autonomous liberal citizen is portrayed as the embodiment of trans-historical reason and not merely as one very dominant identity which has emerged in relation to many others as the outcome of centuries of often bloody social and political struggles. Similarly Fukuyama’s account perpetuates the fiction that the contemporary liberal democratic state has not and continues not to be a participant in a series of ‘culture wars’ in which debates over identity are often the manifestation of struggles over what constitutes a ‘just’ society. In this respect in his discussion of the emergence of ‘identity politics’ since the 1960s in Western democracies Fukuyama fails to discuss the various ways in which liberal political elites, through the mass media, had mobilised at a level of hegemonic social and cultural contestation the construction of supposedly ‘legitimate’ and ‘valued’ national identities which actively denounced and attempted to delegitimise the social struggles of communist, socialist, radical black, radical feminist, and indigenous movements.

Fukuyama’s account of identity politics is equally problematic in the manner in which it fails to describe the ways in which, since the 1980s, neoliberal political elites have engaged in culture wars as a strategy of constructing national identity and mobilising media and popular consent and legitimacy for the destruction of the welfare state (Harvey 2005; Brown 2015, 2019). Such neoliberal culture wars have often been justified by the liberal state in the name of national ‘security’ and have openly attacked rival political and social movements who have critiqued and challenged the foundations of the liberal-capitalist order (Neocleous 2008; Foucault 2009). Consider in this sense examples such as: Reagan’s notions of the ‘evil empire’ and ‘moral majority’, or Thatcher’s neoliberal creed that there is ‘no such thing as society’, or John Howard’s ‘battler’ myth of the ‘spirit of the ANZACS’, or G.W. Bush’s ‘war on terror’ and ‘they hate our freedoms’, or Trump’s ‘America first’, or the ‘Blitz spirit’ and ‘glorious Britannia’ myths of Brexit as ‘taking back control’ by Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson. Each of these neoliberal enunciations of national
identity have been bolstered through endless denunciations and attacks on the rights and socio-economic position of many racial, ethnic and religious minorities, refugees, migrants, Muslims, women, gay, queer and transgender groups and indigenous peoples, as well as attacks on those political movements and media agencies who have voiced criticism or have attempted to defend the remnants of the welfare state against the creative destruction of ongoing neoliberal reforms.

Viewed in this light Fukuyama’s account of identity is dangerous precisely because he attempts to detach a contemporary extremist and right-wing nationalist discourse from the history of a less extreme, though very similar, neoliberal nationalist discourse that has mobilised the language of identity politics as a political strategy and weapon against progressive political movements and against social democracy and the welfare state. His account is problematic because he presents a story in which far-right and white nationalist groups mimic and respond to a discourse of left-wing identity politics but do so in a way which is disconnected from an exclusionary, anti-egalitarian, individualistic and often nationalist identity constructed by successive neoliberal Western governments since the 1980s.

Fukuyama’s account is dangerous also because it attempts to normalise a discourse of blame in which the apparent decline of ‘political consensus’ is laid at the feet of those historically socially disadvantaged and excluded minority groups whose identity politics are portrayed as representing only narrow sectional interests. Such an account chastises ‘the left’ for failing to come up with visionary plans to solve contemporary problems of social and economic justice while at the same time subsuming identity politics within the conceptual framework of liberal rights. This approach denies the reality that multiple indigenous, feminist, socialist, postcolonial and ecological groups all today offer radical ideas of social justice in which the critical understanding of historical and contemporary identity is intimately bound up with the principle of social transformation.

Part of the account of blame mobilised by Fukuyama involves the sense in which he portrays identity politics as an inherently individualistic phenomenon even when it involves group-based identity claims. He presents identity as a story in
which the individual expresses their inward view of their authentic self and demands that society and the state recognise this. Further, any identity claim for recognition is portrayed as somewhat irrational, perverted or selfish if at its core it does not give way to the affirmation of the higher normative value of liberal individualism contained within a liberal political and legal system. From this position Fukuyama can blame the overtly political identity claims of left or right-wing groups for disrupting and denigrating the liberal political order and he can dismiss any such identity claims as being motivated by either self-interest or hatred.

One example of this is a moment where Fukuyama criticises an Afro-American student at an elite US university who demanded that the curriculum being taught be changed to reflect wider perspectives of Afro-American and postcolonial scholarship. Fukuyama portrays this challenge to the Western, liberal intellectual canon as a largely selfish expression of the individual’s feeling and sentiment of wanting his ‘identity’ recognised and affirmed by the University (Fukuyama 2008, p. 102-3). However, crucially what is lacking in Fukuyama’s account is an acknowledgment that this and many similar challenges to University curricula are public, political and scholarly acts aimed at contesting the institutional and pedagogical dominance of a set of normative, racialised epistemologies. Such acts help to highlight or ‘stage’ a political conflict (Rancière 1999) which is already present within the fabric of social and political reality but is hidden via scientific, technocratic and bureaucratic institutions and systems which portray the knowledge contained within the works of dead white, liberal authors as somehow ‘universal’ and ‘neutral’.

Such an example points to a substantial deficit within an understanding of identity and recognition which focusses too heavily upon individual expression and ignores the antagonistic social and political context of identity formation. Furthermore, the example appropriates the concepts of ‘identity’ and ‘recognition’ and puts these to use to sustain a version of neoliberal rationality and neoliberal politics which constantly attempts to depoliticise any aspect of identity politics that might potentially disrupt neoliberal political order, security and capitalist accumulation. Crucially, by appropriating and treating the questions of identity and recognition in this way Fukuyama asks us to tread a path which can only ever misunderstand and misrecognise contemporary
problems of right-wing nationalism. Fundamentally his position refuses the genuine attempt to recognise the identity of the right-wing nationalist subject. His account refuses the genuine ethical basis of recognition which is grounded in the attempt to understand, comprehend and acknowledge a particular subjectivity whose position and claims have a history and a relational context.

In the least such an effort of recognition might mean the attempt to comprehend some of the causes linked to the lived experience of those whose economic and social position has declined through processes of deindustrialisation, marketisation, austerity, the stripping of social protection and erosion of democratic institutions by corporate and neoliberal elites. It might mean the effort of attempting to better understand the subject position of those whose lives and ‘public sphere’ have been completely saturated by the mobilisation and repetition of a culture of hate, blame and caricature by neoliberal political elites, right-wing media, social media and the entertainment industry. While there is a broad literature which makes an attempt at genuine epistemic, discursive and sociological recognition (Main 2018; Hawley 2019) the mode of theorisation declared by Fukuyama generally ignores and blocks this and attempts to focus our attention instead upon a relatively vague legal and constitutional idea of ‘creedal liberalism’ which offers no solutions to those impoverished and alienated whose dignity has been attacked by decades of neoliberal reforms. In this sense then Fukuyama’s tract on identity and recognition is dangerous. This is not because it ignores the wealth of insight of a wider critical literature and repeats a host of well-worn liberal assumptions about social, political and legal relations. Rather, it is a dangerous text as it offers a subtle neoliberal defence of a form of nationalism which lays claim to the legitimacy of the Enlightenment constitutional heritage of the American and French revolutions. In doing so the text legitimises an increasingly popular right-wing discourse in which the blame for social dislocation and rising inequality is placed at the feet of a vacuous process of ‘globalisation’ portrayed as detached from neoliberal agency, and, lays blame at the feet of minority, progressive and left-wing groups whose ‘identity politics’ are portrayed as selfish attempts to grab unearned privilege and a larger slice of the pie. While Fukuyama does ask that we pay attention to the socio-economic conditions of those suffering from an increase in inequality, the circularity of his account leads
us away from neoliberalism’s role in shaping inequality and right-wing nationalism. His proposal that societies should turn towards an affirmation of liberal ‘creedal’ values justifies a version of nationalism while papering over the problem of an ongoing neoliberal war waged against human dignity.

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Notes


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