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The end of endism

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Introduction

When history ends, that will be the end of everything; but of course we are talking about a different sort of end. In the late 1980s, several cycles of history came to an end, although the events of that time were the culmination of changes that had been gathering for some time. The paradoxical feature of the debate at the time was that the potential for genuine change and the capacity for critical reflection on the epochal developments taking place at the time were derailed by the publication of Francis Fukuyama's 'The End of History' in *The National Interest* in the summer of 1989. The debate thereafter focused on the rather hollow philosophical debate on the possibility of alternatives to liberal capitalism rather than on what could potentially have been a much richer discussion on the quality of the relationship between markets and democracy and the balance to be drawn between state intervention and market autonomy. No less significant, the quality of the peace order that could be built as the Cold War came to an end should have been centre stage. Instead, discussion of these two fundamental issues was muted as a sterile historicism once again predominated. Just as Marxist historicism was being chased out through the front door, a rather vulgar and conformist neo-Hegelian interpretation about the meaning and purpose of history slunk in through the back door.

Universalisation of the neoliberal West

In certain respects, 1979 was more important than 1989. Both dates of course are symbolic, yet they crystallise certain issues. In May 1979, Margaret Thatcher was elected at the head of a Conservative Party that was beginning to repudiate the Butskellite consensus politics that had predominated in the UK since the Labour Party victory in 1945. Ronald Reagan's victory in the US presidential election in November 1980 also represented a fundamental rupture with the New Deal style of state activism in the United States. In a series of articles in *Marxism Today* in 1978, Eric Hobsbawm warned about 'The Forward March of Labour Halted?'. The times were certainly changing, and the long march of neoliberalism through the institutions of the contemporary capitalist state was beginning. It intensified in the years to come through financial deregulation, the shift from universal social security to American-style contingent welfarism, the delegitimation of state activism (except in extending the rights of capital and markets) and the erosion of meaningful democratic participation.

A decade later, 1989 signalled not a moment of reflection on the character and consequences of this shift to competitive markets blue in tooth and claw but their generalisation through the

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concept of 'globalisation'. Of course, there were objective changes in technology, above all the communications revolution and in shipping (above all containerisation) that precipitated a new phase in the internationalisation of markets that was reminiscent of the first globalisation of the late 19th century, yet the politics was constructed and deliberate. If before 1989, the term globalisation was barely encountered in academic literature, afterwards it was barely possible to avoid the term (a comparison of the indexes of relevant publications before and after 1989 show the scale of the shift). Globalisation is an objective process, but it also became an ideology.

This half century of liberal market fundamentalism is now coming to end, once again opening up opportunities for the sort of debates that were not held earlier. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the failings of neoliberal forms of governance while reviving popular demands for more responsible society-centred state activism, rather than a statism in the service of competitive markets. However, it would repeat earlier mistakes if the earlier sterile debates were once again to be reproduced. A simple revival of the worn nostrums of social democratic restoration would hardly help develop the debate that was lacking at the end of the Cold War. The rapidly accelerating tide of climate change adds a new urgency to the debate. Above all, the war in Ukraine reminds us of the second great failure in 1989 – the failure to devise a genuine 'new world order', to use the terminology of President George H. W. Bush at the time.

For that, we need to move conclusively beyond historicism of any kind, and that means repudiating not only a dialectical view of history, but the logic on which such a view rests. In 1989 the Marxist view of class conflict as the driver of history gave way to a more fragmented yet recognisably dialectical view that history is driven by the primal urge of individual freedom in competitive markets. In his later and more developed version of his theory in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) Fukuyama provided a subtle and nuanced assessment of the consequences of the end of the ideological evolution of humanity and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the prototype of governance throughout the world. The key problem, however, is not the vulgar view of the historical process (however much misunderstood by some of his critics), but the failure to distinguish between form and substance. Fukuyama was right to stress that since the French Revolution of 1789 the cause of human freedom has increasingly been expressed through various forms of parliamentary democracy and relatively free markets, although he certainly never suggested that the US is the primary model for the success of the endeavour.

However, he tied the goal of human dignity with a specific set of institutional responses. The prescriptive quality of the work made it accessible and powerful, as an unabashed defence of the type of governmental structures that had developed in specific locations at a certain period of time. Fukuyama's historicism was set in a rather narrow framework of time and place, despite its pretensions of universal relevance. The criticisms coming from societies with different cultures, civilisations and historical experiences could be dismissed as parochialism and symptoms of regressive nationalism. Samuel Huntington's discussion of the issue of cultural distinctiveness (*The Clash of Civilisations*) also followed the path of agenda-setting article (1993) to much-cited book. The work was a direct response to 'The End of History' but also shifted discussion to rather constrained themes. Instead of examining the problem of civilisation-states and alternative forms of political community and social integration, and the possibility of alternative forms of modernity (as argued by S. N. Eisenstadt), we ended up with a rather mechanical division of the world into undifferentiated blocs. The key point is that for Fukuyama a specific response to the question of the individual and the state was generalised, as if the liberal democratic form was part of an ineluctable dialectic of development. In later works, he repudiated elements of this fundamentalism, but the core argument was maintained.

His grand theory identified a genuine inflection moment, but corralled the response into unnecessarily narrow confines. The dissolution of Soviet communism and the associated disintegration of the Soviet bloc signalled the end of the radicalised version of French revolutionary aspirations but not of the sentiments inspired them. By the 1840s, Babeuf's communist inflection of the revolution was given theoretical form in Karl Marx's theory of revolutionary socialism, which in turn inspired Vladimir Lenin's seizure of power in October 1917 and the system to which it gave birth. It was the institutional form of this particular strand of revolutionary socialism that came to an end in 1989 and not necessarily the emancipatory socialism out of which milieu it was born. In fact, representatives of this more profound form of socialist transformation were the first to criticise Lenin's narrow and intolerant form of socialism, notably in famous critiques penned by Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxembourg and (more obliquely but ultimately more devastatingly) by Antonio Gramsci, in the wake of the October Revolution. It was this line of thinking that Mikhail Gorbachev sought to revive during perestroika, which the draft Party programme in 1991 called a 'humane, democratic socialism'. All of that was swept away in the ebullience of liberal capitalist triumphalism to which Fukuyama gave expression.

The response to the excesses of that particular end of history is not a return to neo-Leninist practices but a more profound appreciation that the dialectical and historicist thinking that nurtures both Leninism and neoliberalism can be challenged by a renewed appreciation of alternative ways of thinking. Instead of mechanistic dialectical approaches that generate historicist illusions that the meaning and purpose of history can not only be divined but also controlled and directed through purposive human action, a more dialogical approach can help fulfil the promise of modernity in more rich, generous and sustainable forms.

This entails a repudiation not only of the Babeufian revolutionary socialist tradition, that gave rise to Leninist-Stalinist oppression, but also of the intolerances generated by the French revolutionary approach to radical liberalism. This was the real moment of innovation that the narrow Fukuyama version of 1989 failed to exploit. Instead, in interpreting the collapse of revolutionary socialist tradition as the end of a particular historical phase, it conflated fundamentally different processes – quite apart from limiting the terms of debate into a sterile dead-end. It is still a source of amazement (to me at least), that the widely predicted and predictable failure of the ideological carapace justifying the Soviet system should be taken as anything other than the exhaustion of something that in any case had long destroyed its own intellectual creativity. By then even the Soviet Union had shifted the source of its legitimation to welfarism (generating the convergence debate), victory over Nazi Germany, and the geopolitical standing of the Soviet state. This had very little to do (other than in the works of the Agitprop Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) with revolutionary socialism, which as an idea had long ago shrivelled into stale and shallow denunciations of enemies and original thinking. That the end of an exhausted and always intellectually narrow project should be taken as the end of history in the Hegelian sense (however much reduced in the Kojevian version applied by Fukuyama) remains a source of wonder.

Instead, this could have been a moment for the renewal not only of emancipatory socialism through dialogical engagement with the real ideas and concerns of the peoples of the time, using the opportunity of the end of revolutionary socialism to learn from those failures and what it told us about the contradictions within (Western) modernity itself. The same strictures also apply to the inherent inadequacies of radical liberalism, which were also exposed at this time as the neoliberal revolution gathered pace. The combination of emancipatory liberalism, drawing on critiques of the French Revolution such as Edmund Burke as well as the liberating spirit that inspired the revolution in the first place, with emancipatory socialism, drawing on critiques of the Bolshevik Revolution by the likes of Kautsky, Luxembourg and Gramsci, would have opened up a rich terrain for new and

genuinely transformative emancipation. Instead, 1989 became a project for the stale rehashing of ideas that were already proving problematic in the historic West (the political West created during Cold War).

From cold to hot war

This however is only half of the story. Fukuyama's version of 1989 failed to problematise revolutionary socialism as a problem of Western modernity but simply as a failed version of that modernity. The discussion was narrowed further when the former Soviet and Soviet bloc countries held Russian political culture and its associated imperialism responsible. Thus they were absolved of responsibility, and the complexity of the historical situation that allowed a particularly repressive and moribund form of revolutionary socialism to triumph across the region. This compartmentalisation of responsibility, moreover, fed narratives of victimhood that as the years passed intensified rather than diminished. Instead of reconciliation, the grievances were amplified. The legacy Cold War institutions of the historical West played their part in this, notably NATO and its unmediated enlargement, as well as what was to become the European Union. Instead of acting as it had done earlier to overcome historical antagonisms (notably between France and Germany), with the accession of a cohort of embittered former Soviet and Soviet bloc countries, the grievances were now given an institutional platform. The EU's decision in the 1990s that Russia would not be considered as a potential candidate member embraced the same logic as that which drove NATO forward ultimately into war with Russia.

The end of history thesis is associated with democratic peace theory, the argument that mature democratic states do not go to war with each other. Thomas Friedman put this memorably when he argued that no two countries with McDonald's would enter into conflict (in his *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, 1999). With the Berlin Wall coming down in November 1989 a new era of peace was in prospect, and was proclaimed in the Paris Charter in November 1990. However, here too the year 1979 is pivotal, setting in train a chain of events with consequences remain to this day. The fall of the Shah in Iran was followed by a hostage crisis that established a permanent US naval presence in the Gulf, but also pushed up oil prices that unexpectedly swelled Moscow's coffers, giving the Soviet leadership the courage to launch the invasion in December of that year. It is no accident that today certain strategists in Washington seek to destroy Russia by bogging it down in an endless Afghan-like war in Ukraine. Meanwhile Iran and Iraq were locked in conflict for most of the 1980s, with the historical West effectively supporting Saddam Hussein, only to turn against him when he invaded Kuwait in August 1990. The Soviet Union supported attempt to reverse the occupation, but the First Gulf War ended with a permanent US military presence in Saudi Arabia, prompting the disaffected Saudi prince Osama bin Laden to establish Al Qaeda and launch the 9/11 attack, which set the collective West on its path of the Global war on Terror.

1979 was also the year that Deng Xiaoping launched his economic reforms, propelling China today into the ranks of the great powers. In June 1989 the Chinese leadership refused to take Gorbachev's option of *reform communism* (the view that revolutionary socialism could assume an emancipatory humanistic form), and instead crushed the Tiananmen democracy protesters to confirm that China would continue on the path of the *communism of reform*, whereby the Communist Party manages the transition to a market economy. There is not a whiff of the end of history here.

There were alternative paths of historical development available in 1989. However, the way that the end of the Cold War was formulated ultimately excluded Russia from the peace settlement – or at least on terms acceptable to the Moscow leadership. If history in Fukuyama's sense really had

ended, then Moscow had little choice but to become part of the liberal democratic community. However, this also now entailed an element of political subordination to the historical West, and that meant accepting not only US leadership (which Moscow had been willing to do in the First Gulf War) but also US hegemony, and that it could not and would not do. This in turn provoked geopolitical contestation in Europe, the struggle for mastery in the contested neighbourhood in Eastern Europe, and ultimately war. Plenty of contingent decisions were taken on the way, but a gun was constructed. Putin in February 2022 pulled the trigger, and for that he bears responsibility. The road from 1989 to 2022 is twisted and rutted, but there is nevertheless a path from the one event to the other.

Conclusion

The authors of *The End of the End of History* are right to argue that we have reached another of those inflection points that are misleadingly described as moments in the end of history. Globalist liberalism is indeed being eroded from within, even though the forceful response of the power system in which it is embedded to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has given it a new sense of unity and purpose. This unity has deleterious consequences of its own, including the increasingly forceful suppression of alternative views. The Labour Party under Keir Starmer even advanced the astonishing argument that opposition to NATO is incompatible with party membership, thus repudiating the party as a broad church and its venerable tradition of peace activism. The authors are right to identify what they call the Neoliberal Order Breakdown Syndrome (NOBS), a confused yet vindictive response to the breakdown of the new order so triumphantly celebrated in 1989.

However, the period that the authors describe as the end of the end of history is unlikely to benefit from the resurrection of dialectical and historicist modes of political thought and action that mimic the period whose demise the original end of history celebrated. A 'comprehensive version of universal emancipation' (p. 34) that 'necessitates the willingness to tolerate the inevitable disruption that follows, as the structures and institutions of the *ancient regime* are broken up' (p. 35), threatens only to reproduce the political closures that attended earlier bouts of revolutionary action. The pursuit of neo-Leninist strategies is in keeping with the logic of the original end of history thesis, and will have learned nothing from its intellectual failures. In other words, the end of the end of history is once again a politics of intellectual closure, although it may open up new political possibilities. However, this potential carries the dangerous stamp of earlier revolutionary moments. Instead, the transformative drive of both 1789 and 1989 are best served when political dialogism is combined with emancipatory energy. Only then will the old history end and a new history begin.

Author Biography

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