

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7681>



Ukraine/Russia

Ukraine: the return of Francis Fukuyama

- Debate - 2022 - Ukraine -

Publication date: Wednesday 1 June 2022

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After the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the Stalinist states in 1989-91, Fukuyama shot to international fame by predicting the ‘[end of history](#)’. By the ‘end of history’ he meant the end of the contest between competing social systems and competing ideologies, and the victory of liberal democratic capitalism, which from now on would become increasingly dominant.

From the 1960s onwards right-wing philosophers like Karl Popper accused Marxism and the Left of ‘historicism’, the idea that history had an inherent and inevitable endpoint—socialism. Fukuyama developed his own ‘historicism’—this time a real one—that the endpoint of human history was a system as near perfect as possible, liberal democratic capitalism.

After 1989 this thesis fell apart. With the rise of Islamism, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the rise of China and the emergence of powerful far-right ‘populist’ regimes and movements (aka ‘creeping fascism’), the dominance of liberal democratic capitalism was far from assured. Liberal democracy seemed under fire from a range of enemies, not least the right-wing populist in the White House, Donald Trump.

Today, according to Fukuyama, after this unfortunate glitch, history is getting back on track. He has published an article in [American Purpose magazine](#) which contains two elements substantiating his thesis, first, a conjunctural assessment of the war in Ukraine and its potentially dramatic effects; second an overall assessment of how world history will now bend towards liberal democracy.

On the state of the war, Fukuyama says Putin and the Russian army are stuck, unable to go forward or back. This is the precursor of inevitable defeat, and things could unravel quickly. It’s hard to make a definite judgement on this, especially as news about the fighting is dominated by propaganda, often directly from Pentagon or Ministry of Defence press releases. But obviously, the Russian army is suffering harsh blows and the victory Putin wanted is off the cards.

Second, Fukuyama sees the worldwide political conflict as clarifying itself into ‘liberal democracy versus its authoritarian enemies’, including right-wing ‘populism’, Russia and the main long-term enemy, China. All those who befriended or admired Putin—mainly people of the far right—will suffer a blow to their prestige and authority. This includes Matteo Salvini in Italy, Viktor Orban in Hungary and Marine Le Pen in France (he could have mentioned Nigel Farage in the UK).

In a series of online interviews with right-wing journals, Fukuyama says the invasion of Ukraine has created ‘moral clarity’. It shows the advantages of the liberal democratic state, namely that it is ‘not authoritarian, it’s not a dictatorship, it doesn’t kill people, and it doesn’t invade its neighbours.’ [1] There are obvious falsehoods in this theory, but it is the centre of the giant propaganda offensive going on in the West and beyond.

The dozens of wars started by the United States and its allies which have killed perhaps two million people since the second world war—directly as in Korea and Vietnam or by heavily armed proxies as in Afghanistan, Nicaragua and El Salvador—are simply ignored, which seems strange when Iraq and Afghanistan have happened in the last 20 years. And the economic and social crisis, demonstrated by the 2007-8 crash and the subsequent austerity and turmoil it caused, including in part the Arab Spring in 2010, are also left out of account. This is the central weakness of Fukuyama’s theories, namely that they concern only the formal political regime and not the underlying economic and social questions that have led liberal democracy into an impasse.

The rise of [creeping fascism](#) and extreme right authoritarianism after the 2007-8 crisis came mainly from within the liberal democratic states, not because of pressure from without. People made desperate by plunging living standards moved to support the political extremes, but disproportionately the far right, because of the weakness and defeats of the Left and the support given to the far right by sections of the capitalist ruling class—appealing to the most backward sections of the working class and the middle classes through anti-immigrant racism.

Fukuyama's view of how the defeat of Putin in Ukraine will give rise to a new flowering of democratic capitalism is identical to the NATO discourse over the Ukraine war. Arms and soldiers are being poured into Eastern Europe to 'defend democracy.' This is ideological fog and gaslighting of Western public opinion behind which a new wave of militarisation is being prepared [2]. Many politicians and many parts of the media are calling for a no-fly zone or 'stronger weapons' to be sent into Ukraine, opening up the danger of a clash between Russian and NATO forces. While the war remains primarily one of defence of Ukraine's self-determination against Russian aggression, there is a significant danger of 'mission creep'. It's obvious that many sections of the political right want to turn the fighting into a proxy war against Russia, militarily as well as economically. The goal of stopping the war in Ukraine is regarded by them as less important than inflicting a harsh military defeat on Russia, at whatever cost to the Ukrainian people themselves. The US-led sanctions regime is designed to collapse the Russian economy as part of inter-imperialist conflict, inevitably inflicting massive poverty and suffering on the Russian people. Yes, reparations will have to be paid and that will come at a cost to the Russian people. But sanctions, as shown by French economist Thomas Picketty, can be specifically aimed at the 'oligarchs'—the super-rich guarded by the Russian bureaucratic-capitalist state—without inflicting the enormous damage that 'crutch Russia' sanctions will impose.

The goal of crushing the Russian economy reveals the fault lines which really dominate the world economy and world politics. It is not liberal democracy versus dictatorship, but a contest between rival imperialisms, involving especially Russia, China and the United States—a battle in which the United States can rely on Britain, as well as Australia to be in its camp and in which Russia and China collaborate across many fronts. The United States is relying on the European countries of NATO to relay the ideology of democratic capitalism, and also to increasingly give up the aim of creating an independent foreign and defence policy. Putin has done the United States a huge favour in reinforcing NATO and hence the political hegemony of American imperialism in the West.

The ideology of democratic capitalism is powerful because it is obviously true that Putin's Russia and Xi Jinping's China are harsh dictatorships in which individual freedoms are brutally repressed. In these states, there is much less room for political criticism of the incumbent regime than in the United States and Europe. In the West, the mountains of racism, violence, misogyny and poverty needed to prop up the status quo are partially exported to the countries of the Global South, economically exploited and brutally bombed and invaded—the victims of imperialism internationally.

For huge sections of the population in the West, the reality of imperialist violence and exploitation internationally is hidden away through blinkered news bulletins and the entertainment spectacle. Out of sight, out of mind. How many people know about the vicious terror bombing of civilians in Yemen and Britain's direct role in it? Virtually the whole of the British news media has lined up behind the Fukuyama-NATO ideology, even those that tend to be radical on social and environmental issues, like Channel 4 News. This is how liberalism lines up behind its own imperialism in crucial questions of war. As Phil Ochs put it in his wonderful song Love Me I'm a Liberal, 'When it comes to times like Korea, there's no one more red, white and blue.'

In an interview with [Times Radio](#) Fukuyama backs up the widespread view of right-wing foreign policy experts that the ultimate fight for liberalism will be with China. Despite the enormous NATO push of arms and soldiers into Eastern Europe, it remains the Pacific region that is the target of the biggest build-up of Western, especially American, military hardware and forces, principally naval.

Fukuyama's fundamental position—that the world conflict is between authoritarianism and capitalist liberal democracy, with the West representing democracy—is rehearsed by [Paul Mason in his argument with the International Socialist Tendency](#). Mason calls for bold NATO military action in Ukraine 'without embarrassment.' In his latest article, he says that '[Britain must increase its military spending](#)', complaining for example that the Johnson government has committed itself to 'just' 48 F-35 stealth fighters, at a cost of many billions. He even niggles at the lack of clarity on the need for higher arms spending on the Labour front bench.

Here we have it, someone who considers himself a Marxist supporting NATO and taking sides with his own imperialism. Right slap bang in the middle of the Fukuyama-NATO ideology. I predict: in his exchange with the IST, we have seen the last time Paul Mason will refer to himself as a 'Marxist.'

For Mason, NATO is in eastern Europe, at least in part, because of the growth of a pro-NATO, pro-EU culture among people who want to be defended against autocracy. There is doubtless some truth in this assessment of popular consciousness. But NATO is not in eastern Europe as a benevolent uncle; it is there as a militarist forward projection of American and European imperialist power against the rival imperialism in Russia.

The question of pro-Western consciousness among those under threat, or actually living under, autocratic regimes is not new. We on the militant Left all supported the Tiananmen student democracy protestors, and many of them sang the Internationale, but others built a replica of the Statue of Liberty. More clearly, the 1989 marches of tens of thousands in Leipzig and other East German cities in favour of German unification were full of militant pro-Western, pro-EU, pro-NATO ideology—not completely dominant, but pretty much so. Hundreds of West German right-wingers went to join these marches. When Dave Packer [3] and myself asked West German socialists why they also couldn't go to the marches and raise slogans for a unified socialist Germany, all of them said the same thing—it's not possible, you are crazy, we will just get beaten up. And yet the movement started with protests by the New Forum, which included socialists and church dissidents, that was soon marginalised by the huge wave of feeling for unification with West Germany, democracy and consumer goods at the same time!

What many East Germans actually got through unification was unemployment and the collapse of state health care, state kindergartens and other social welfare provisions. Only the young and vigorous who could move to the West had a brighter future in the short and medium-term.

In any case, the ideology of the Cold War—the original one—was all about democracy versus authoritarian Communism and until the mid-1960s it was very hard to fight against it. It broke up over nuclear weapons, the Cuban missile crisis, the American civil rights movement and above all over the Vietnam war, with its mass slaughter of civilians [4].

The great virtue of the original Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the 1950s and 1960s was that it broke with the NATO consensus, and thus with right-wing pro-American liberalism, of the type fronted by the CIA's cultural magazine 'Encounter' [5].

Paul Mason's argument has made the slippage between the right to self-defence and self-determination of Ukraine, to support for Western imperialism against rival imperialisms, Russia and China. This position is going to exert a lot of pressure on the Left, in Britain and internationally. When imperialist powers clash, there is always enormous pressure to identify the 'bully', especially if that bully is fighting your own imperialism.

The danger of supporting the 'democratic' imperialist powers against the undemocratic ones is twofold. First, it prettifies actually existing liberal capitalism, in which democratic rights are under harsh attack and under pressure from creeping fascism. Fukuyama is guilty of a non sequitur in saying the fall of Putin would automatically spell big

trouble for the authoritarian right like Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Matteo Salvini's Lega Party in Italy; that may be true in the short term, but if the Republicans win the 2024 Presidential election, which seems very likely, and especially if Donald Trump is the candidate, then ideological defeat for far-right 'populists, may be short-lived. In any case, it is far from clear that the mass of supporters of Orban in Hungary or Salvini in Italy sees a significant connection with Putin in Russia.

Second, backing liberal capitalism ignores its ongoing crisis since the 2007-8 economic collapse, which is heading it rapidly towards new economic slumps which will again strengthen the authoritarian right, as well as—we hope—the radical Left. Most importantly Paul Mason's collapse in front of a Fukuyama-type position represents an abandonment of fundamental elects of a Marxist worldview.

The war in Ukraine is a war of national self-defence, but the world situation is increasingly dominated by a clash between major imperialist powers. The defence of Ukraine should not turn into siding with NATO, or be an excuse for dropping the Left's critique of NATO and NATO's growing further militarisation of Europe.

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[1] See [See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btOHGuzdDVY&t=21s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btOHGuzdDVY&t=21s)

[2] Within minutes of the news of the invasion I predicted it would lead to a new wave of militarisation and arms expenditure in the West

[3] Dave Packer was a leader of the International Socialist Group who died in 2009. Much loved and much missed.

[4] To the mass slaughter of civilians in Vietnam, you have to add the CIA-assisted mass murder of 500,000 communists in Indonesia and the killing of perhaps 20% of the population of North Korea during the 1950-3 Korean war. All of course doubtless necessary to 'defend freedom.'

[5] See the essays by EP Thompson and Alasdair Macintyre in the collection *Out of Apathy* (1960).