

Book World: Authoritarianism is surging. Can liberal democracy fight back?

By
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LIBERALISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

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Liberalism and its Discontents

When warring cultures and distant poles are the recurring metaphors for our politics, genteel calls for moderation may seem quaint. When authoritarian impulses are ascendant, wishing for self-restraint can feel foolish, a denial of reality and an abdication of responsibility.

But what if moderation and restraint – the acceptance of limits in political life – are not just the right thing, but really all that is left to try?

“We are now in the midst of the most sustained global assault on liberal democratic values since the 1930s,” Gideon Rachman writes in “The Age of the Strongman,” his survey of illiberal political leaders in countries such as Brazil, China, Hungary, Russia, Turkey and, yes, the United States. It is not exactly a novel account – the death-of-democracy bookshelf is quite crowded – and it covers the greatest hits of aspiring autocrats: the cults of personality, the us-vs.-them populism, the disdain for law, the manipulation of racial and xenophobic resentments. It is most intriguing, perhaps, for placing one country, and one leader, virtually alone on the other side of the fight. “A crucial question for the Biden era,” Rachman writes, “is whether the new president will be able to restore the prestige of the American liberal democratic model – and so halt the global march of strongman politics.”

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The question becomes even more crucial when that restoration must take effect within the United States as well as beyond it, when liberalism, the doctrine that limits the powers of government and upholds the rights of individuals, is under assault not just by competing ideologies but by those long living under its protection. In “Liberalism and Its Discontents,” Francis Fukuyama restates the case for liberalism even as he considers its critics on the nationalist right, who despise its cultural and secularist manifestations, and on the progressive left, who abhor its economic inequalities and its privileging of individual over group identities. “The answer to these discontents is not to abandon liberalism as such,” Fukuyama argues, “but to moderate it.”

It is a tricky thing to march into the breach under a banner of moderation, to make impassioned pleas on behalf of dispassion and incrementalism. Fukuyama freely acknowledges the “legitimate criticisms” of liberalism from right and left, but still contends that the benefits flowing from liberal values – reduced violence, enhanced personal autonomy and economic growth – are worth the price. Besides, he asks, “what superior principle and form of government should replace liberalism?”

The question sounds like a throwback to Fukuyama’s end-of-history days, as though the answer is obvious: that there is no superior alternative, that liberal democracy remains the end of our ideological evolution. But authoritarian leaders are choosing their own adventure, standing together “in revolt against the liberal consensus that reigned supreme after 1989,” Rachman writes. “Their success is a symptom of our crisis of liberalism.”

It should not surprise that these works pose uncomfortable questions and offer dissatisfying answers. That can be the way of liberalism, too.

Writers too easily rely on new decades and new centuries as inflections in the historical timeline, but in the case of Rachman's strongman age, it sort of works. "It is all too symbolic," he writes, that Russian President Vladimir Putin took over the office from Boris Yeltsin on New Year's Eve in 1999. In the new century, Putin would become "the archetype and the model" for a new generation of authoritarian leaders.

Putin moved to influence, then control, mass media. He assailed Western powers for allegedly stoking revolutionary fervor in the neighborhood. He depicted Russia as not just a country but a civilization and then enhanced the powers of the state – that is, his own power, and his own permanence in office – in its supposed defense. He was not the first to do so, of course, but "for right-wing and nationalist politicians," Rachman writes, "Putin has become something of an icon." The war in Ukraine may erode that status, although Rachman emphasizes that strongmen capitalize on foreign military adventures to strengthen their influence at home.

In "The Age of the Strongman," authoritarian leaders form a chummy club. Donald Trump's giddy admiration for Putin was evident before, during and after his presidency. Chinese President Xi Jinping shares Putin's belief that the demise of the Soviet empire was a catastrophe and worries that such a fall could come his way, too. In Trumpian style, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro entrusts family members with significant official roles, and he fuels middle-class fears about crime in a manner reminiscent of outgoing Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte. Poland's Jaroslaw Kaczynski, leader of the right-wing Law and Justice party, deploys conspiracy theories as freely as Trump does, while Bolsonaro's swearing-in in 2019 featured Hungary's nationalist president, Viktor Orban, as a guest of honor. When Fox News host Tucker Carlson takes his show on the road to Hungary and the Conservative Political Action Conference holds a shindig in Budapest, the affinities are too clear to contest.

Why have so many such leaders arisen now? Rachman points to the declining life expectancy and increasing poverty in Russia during the 1990s that left the public disenchanted with the post-Soviet experiments, boosting the appeal of a leader "who promised to turn back the clock to better days." Similarly, the global financial crisis of 2008 broke the assumption that economic well-being would

continue flowing from the liberal model, with its free movement of money and people and ideas. Authoritarian leaders promised to “get tough” with outsiders and played on worries that the dominant majority would be brushed aside. “It is when economic grievances are linked to broader fears – such as immigration, crime, or national decline – that strongman leaders really come into their own,” Rachman explains. They alone can fix it.

Fukuyama layers on a more theoretical explanation. Liberalism, ascendant for so long, went too far, lapsing into a “counterproductive extreme.” On the right, it devolved into neoliberalism, whereby “property rights and consumer welfare were worshipped, and all aspects of state action and social solidarity denigrated.” On the left, Fukuyama writes, the personal autonomy that liberalism advances “evolved into modern identity politics, versions of which then began to undermine the premises of liberalism itself.”

But if liberalism has gone too far, so have its critics, Fukuyama contends. Religious conservative thinkers decry the “moral laxity” of liberalism and flirt with overt authoritarian governance to restore “religiously-rooted” standards of behavior, he writes. Progressive thinkers, meanwhile, have transformed what Fukuyama considers a more valid version of identity politics – extending liberal equality to groups that were historically denied its full benefits – into a new iteration that elevates group rights and experiences over the commonalities binding a people, and a nation, together.

It is one thing to critique liberalism as having failed to live up to its own principles; it is another to say that those principles themselves are no longer worth affirming. These threats to liberalism are not symmetrical, Fukuyama emphasizes. The assault from the right is more immediate and endangers democratic practices – voting rights and the transparency of the electoral process – inextricable from the liberal project. The attacks on the left are mainly in the cultural realm and often proceed more incrementally, even if they elicit a further backlash from the right. Just about every critique of liberalism, Fukuyama concludes, “begins with a number of true observations, but then is carried to unsupportable extremes.”

Yet he endorses the legitimacy of those critiques. Liberal societies, Fukuyama admits, can be excessively consumerist, permissive, tolerant of inequality, dominated by political and cultural elites, and slow to respond to the needs and demands of citizens. (The procedural and institutional obsessions of liberal governance almost render that slowness obligatory.) To say that we simply have

no better system may be true, but it is hardly encouraging, and it won't do much to maintain a constituency for that system. Fukuyama's conclusion about liberalism's critics – they have a point but go too far – is similar to his assessment of liberalism itself: a worthy project that believed its own hype, producing its modern “discontents.” Some discontents do come from malcontents, but not all.

These two books are familiar in distinct ways. Rachman's is one more in the spoken-word poetry of titles on its subject (*How Democracies Die . . . On Tyranny*; *How Democracy Ends . . . Surviving Autocracy*) whereas Fukuyama's distills insights from many of his past works on political order, identity and liberalism. (It is his shortest book but manages to incorporate much from the others, and even Hegel makes his obligatory cameo.) One book is a state of play; the other, a culmination.

Rachman lingers on the dual challenges for Biden: a Republican Party still dominated by Trump and “increasingly assertive” rivals in Moscow and Beijing. These two fronts are linked, he argues, because “America will not be able to defend freedom overseas, if it cannot save its own democracy.” He worries Washington will have to pick and choose, allying with less-than-savory characters against bigger foes. (It would not be the first time.) Rachman believes that the Age of the Strongman will eventually pass, but this belief seems anchored in his hopes more than his analyses, and he remains aware of the damage that can be inflicted in the interim.

Fukuyama's solution is twofold. First, to promote a sense of national identity not focused on “fixed characteristics” such as race or faith but on patriotism and love for a liberal, open society of which citizens, whatever their politics, should be justly proud. He worries that the left too easily cedes this ground to right-wing nationalists. Next, he urges moderation in our politics, both from classical liberals such as himself and from the discontented. “Sometimes fulfillment comes from the acceptance of limits,” Fukuyama writes in his final lines. “Recovering a sense of moderation, both individual and communal, is therefore the key to the revival – indeed, to the survival – of liberalism itself.”

That moderation would involve conservatives learning to embrace, rather than reject, the nation's demographic shifts, Fukuyama writes, once they realized that many voters, including recent immigrants, could be enticed more by conservative policies than by right-wing identity politics. It would mean the left grasping that “there are strong limits to the appeal of the cultural part of the

[progressive] agenda” and that writing off large segments of society as beyond moral redemption is not a path to expanding that appeal.

Fukuyama wants everyone to calm down, and that’s an attractive proposition. If only politics came with a common understanding of which moves and positions are too extreme to be productive, and which stands are in fact principled and necessary. But choosing which hills to die on and which to gently hike down is a matter of individual choice. And that is the promise of liberalism as well.

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