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KİTAP İNCELEMESİ / BOOK REVIEW

Liberalism And Its Discontents
Francis Fukuyama
(London: Profile Books Ltd., 2022)

Nadejda CANALI*

Kitap İncelemesinin Geliş Tarihi // Received: 30.12.2022

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In March 2022, the new book of an eminent philosopher and political scientist, director of the Ford Dorsey Master's in International Policy at Stanford University and author of well-known works, entitled *The End of History and the Last Man*¹ and *Political Order and Political Decay*², Francis Fukuyama published *Liberalism and its Discontents*. Right after its release, the book received many reviews and was called "a brilliantly acute summary of the way some aspects of liberal thought have consumed themselves" by *Guardian Magazine*³.

Analysing the book's structure, we can see that Fukuyama tries to show his reader in an accessible and intelligible way that liberalism is under threat. In contrast, he tries to defend the doctrine of liberalism. As Fukuyama himself points out, his work is not a text about the history of liberal thinking; instead, the author invites the reader to focus on what he regards as the core ideas underlying contemporary liberalism, as well as some of the grave weaknesses afflicting

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liberal theory (Fukuyama, 2022, pp. 9-10). *Liberalism and its Discontents* is divided into ten chapters, based on which the reader will be able to get answers to the following questions:

- What is liberalism, and what are its three primary historical justifications?
- How has economic liberalism evolved into the more extreme form, neoliberalism, and provoked strong opposition and discontent with capitalism?
- How was the basic liberal principle of personal autonomy absolutised?
- How did the critique of modern natural science spread from the progressive left to the populist right?
- How has modern technology harmed free expression?
- Are there any viable alternatives to liberalism on the right or left?
- What is the need for national identity in liberalism?
- What principles are required to rebuild faith in classical liberalism?

In the preface, we are first confronted with the statement that “this book is intended to be a defence of classical liberalism” (Fukuyama, 2022, p. 7) and then with a disclaimer about what exactly Fukuyama means by the term liberalism. He informs the reader that European liberalism and American liberalism are two distinct concepts, and his use of the term liberalism precisely does not imply either an American or a European meaning. He also makes the distinction between classical liberalism and liberal democracy.

Further, Fukuyama gradually brings the reader to the book's main argument: Liberalism is surrounded by threats, namely populists on the right and progressivists on the left. As an example of populists, the author cites Viktor Orban, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Donald Trump, the leaders of Hungary, Türkiye, and the U.S., respectively. Thus, Fukuyama makes it clear that these leaders used their electoral mandates primarily to attack liberal institutions such as the courts, the justice system, independent media, nonpartisan state bureaucracies, and other bodies limiting executive power under a system of checks and balances (Fukuyama, 2022, p. 6). The author also claims that while the populism of the right may be weaker than the progressivism of the left, both trends endanger the well-established principles of liberal democracy. In his most famous work, *The End of History*, he makes the prognosis that liberal democracy has attained a level of nearly universal approval, and everyone will eventually embrace it. When we look at the current situation in the world, we can see that numerous

organisations and ideas within liberal society are criticising liberalism.

In Chapter I, Fukuyama defines the term liberalism based on the words of John Gray⁴. Gray (1986, p. x) characterises liberalism by describing it as an individualist, egalitarian, universalist, and melioristic concept. After the definition of liberalism, Fukuyama takes the reader through the history of the evolution of liberalism as a doctrine. Fukuyama emphasises that liberalism often falls under the term democracy, and he prefers to use this term to describe liberalism and adopt liberal democracy. Then, the author gives three essential justifications for liberal societies, namely pragmatic rationale, moral justification, and economic justification, and analyses each of them in detail. Fukuyama cites many positive aspects of liberalism as a defence of it; however, he also mentions that the above justifications are theoretical, and its theory differs from its practice. He then provides the reader with examples of how the U.S. did not grant citizenship and the right to vote to African Americans until after the Civil War, nor did it grant voting rights to women until the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919. These examples serve to show how the implementation of liberalism and democracy in practice can be hindered by certain social forces.

In Chapter II, Fukuyama provides a concise historical overview of liberalism, tracing its origins from Enlightenment thinkers to its development as a dominant ideology in the Western world. He discusses key figures and concepts, highlighting liberalism's core principles and its impact on shaping modern democratic societies. First of all, the reader is confronted with neoliberalism. The author focuses on the consequences of neoliberal ideas that encouraged liquidity to move freely across international borders, which led to numerous and regular financial crises. Fukuyama shows that the threat of neoliberalism is not limited to its economic and political effects. For Fukuyama, the deeper problem is the underestimation of neoliberalism's understanding of human behaviour. He then provides examples of property rights and consumer welfare and their effects on society. Summing up neoliberalism, Fukuyama singles out the economic problem, but he does it not convincingly enough and rather confusingly. Based on the words of the author, the issue with neoliberalism in economics did not stem from its foundation on false premises. Its premises were often correct, but they were simply incomplete and often historically contingent. Liberalism's defect was to carry those premises to an extreme level where property rights and consumer welfare were worshipped, and all aspects

of state action and social solidarity were denigrated (Fukuyama, 2022, p. 58). Neoliberalism is, therefore, incomplete, and it fails to consider wider economic, social, and political issues that are vital for a well-functioning economy.

In Chapter III, Fukuyama explores the differing perspectives of left and right liberals regarding the conception of individuals and their roles within society. One of the main ideas emphasised in *Liberalism and its Discontents* by Francis Fukuyama is the significance of individual autonomy, which the author considers the heart of liberalism. Arguing that the increased autonomy of individuals will create greater economic and political stability in the long run, Fukuyama takes a strong stance in favour of individual autonomy and against government control of markets and individuals. He then emphasises that both the right and the left have taken this concept to extremes. The echo of individual autonomy on the extreme right has resulted in the worship of property rights, consumer welfare, and economic freedom, while this concept on the extreme left has resulted in subjectivism in identity politics. Fukuyama argues that both approaches ignore the concept of individual autonomy, which requires individuals to be allowed to make autonomous choices within a stable framework of rules and social structures.

Chapter IV, titled *The Sovereign Self*, explores the concept of individual sovereignty within liberal democracies. Fukuyama examines the balance between individual autonomy and the common good, highlighting the potential benefits and challenges associated with prioritising individual freedom. The chapter prompts readers to consider the implications of an emphasis on personal agency and self-determination for social cohesion and collective responsibilities. Fukuyama's analysis provides a thought-provoking examination of the complex dynamics surrounding individual sovereignty in contemporary liberal democratic societies.

In Chapter V, the author offers an interesting examination of the rise of identity politics and its impact on liberal democracies. Fukuyama adeptly highlights the potential drawbacks of an excessive focus on group identities, emphasising the erosion of social cohesion and the overshadowing of universal human rights. Fukuyama's nuanced analysis invites readers to consider the challenges posed by excessive group identity focus while also highlighting the need for a more comprehensive understanding of historical contexts and the complexities within identity politics.

Moving to Chapter VI, Fukuyama delves into the critique of rationality, particularly as it relates to identity politics and

the modes of discourse associated with liberalism. The chapter acknowledges that the critique of liberal principles and rational discourse has produced some valid observations, but the chapter argues that this critique emerges on loose ground. One of the key points is that the critique denies the possibility of rational discourse altogether, which leads to a cognitive wasteland where “nothing is true, and everything is possible” (Fukuyama, 2022, p. 64). This extreme scepticism undermines the foundations of liberalism, which is strongly associated with rationality and the pursuit of objective truth.

Chapter VII sheds light on the potential threats posed by technology to individual privacy. It highlights how the increasing digitalisation of human life has made personal data more vulnerable to exploitation and surveillance. The author compellingly argues that safeguarding privacy is crucial for maintaining individual autonomy and protecting democratic values. Furthermore, the chapter explores the complex relationship between technology and freedom of speech. It delves into the challenges posed by online platforms, where the power to regulate and moderate content lies in the hands of a few corporations. The author aptly highlights the concerns regarding censorship, algorithmic bias, and the potential suppression of diverse voices in the digital realm.

Chapter VIII engages with readers by presenting a range of alternative ideas and approaches across various domains, including economics, governance, and social systems. It challenges the reader to consider new paradigms that prioritise sustainability, social justice, and inclusivity. The chapter offers an exploration of potential alternatives to existing systems. It encourages readers to question the status quo and think of innovative approaches that prioritise sustainability, equity, and social well-being. While the chapter presents a wide range of alternative models, a more nuanced analysis of challenges and real-world examples would have made it even more impactful. Nonetheless, it serves as an excellent starting point for readers interested in exploring alternative visions for a better future.

In Chapter IX, Fukuyama elaborates on the challenges posed by globalisation and its potential effects on national identity. He adeptly highlights the tension between the desire to preserve traditional cultural values and the need to adapt to an increasingly interconnected world. This discussion prompts readers to take the complex dynamics between globalisation, nationalism, and the construction of national identity into account. The chapter effectively explores the historical and cultural dimensions of national identity, emphasising its role in shaping collective narratives and fostering a sense of belonging

among citizens. Fukuyama's analysis of how national identity can be both inclusive and exclusive provides the reader with a detailed understanding of its impact on social diversity.

In Chapter X, Fukuyama highlights the importance of strong institutions and the rule of law as the foundation of a liberal society. He underlines the significance of accountability, transparency, and the separation of powers in ensuring the integrity and effectiveness of governance. Furthermore, the emphasis on the necessity to address corruption and promote trust in public institutions is particularly relevant in today's political climate. Moreover, the chapter explores the role of civil society and the need for active citizen participation in shaping a liberal society. Fukuyama highlights the importance of a vibrant public sphere where diverse voices can be heard and engaged in constructive dialogue. Later in the chapter, he emphasises the value of pluralism, tolerance, and the protection of minority rights in maintaining social cohesion.

In conclusion, Fukuyama's *Liberalism and its Discontents* fall short of igniting the passion and idealism necessary to rally readers behind the defence of the doctrine of liberalism. While the book effectively analyses the current state of the world and presents the framework of liberalism, it lacks a strong philosophical element that would inspire readers and provide a vision of a perfect society. Fukuyama's emphasis on the weaknesses of liberalism and the absence of compelling alternatives leaves the reader uncertain and unenthused. The book fails to provide a clear and convincing case for why liberalism is the only viable path forward. Instead, Fukuyama acknowledges the flaws of liberalism and essentially settles for its defence by default, as there are no better alternatives.

The absence of a rousing endorsement of classical liberalism, which was exemplified by the paraphrasing of Churchill's quote, further dampens the book's ability to excite and mobilise readers. Without a clear vision and a passionate call to action, the reader is left without a compelling reason to fully understand and ardently defend the liberal system. Despite its shortcomings in generating enthusiasm, *Liberalism and its Discontents* offer valuable insights into the challenges and weaknesses of liberal democracies. It prompts critical reflection and serves as a starting point for further discussions on the future of liberalism. However, to fully rally readers behind the cause of liberalism, additional sources and works may be necessary to stimulate a deeper understanding and appreciation of its merits.

¹ Fukuyama, F. (1992). *The end of history and the last man*. New York, NY: Free Press.

² Fukuyama, F. (2014). *Political order and political decay: From the industrial revolution to the globalization of democracy*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

³ Andrew, A. (2022). *Liberalism and its discontents* by Francis Fukuyama review – A defence of liberalism... from a former neocon. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/mar/08/liberalism-and-its-discontents-by-francis-fukuyama-review-a-defence-of-liberalism-from-a-former-neocon>

⁴ Gray, J. (1986). *Liberalism*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.