Fukuyama's The End of History and the Last Man: summary, argument and critiques

Francis Fukuyama's thesis is one of the most quoted and most misquoted ideas in International Relations. This document gives you the argument as he actually made it, the philosophy behind it, the main critiques, and a method for using all of this in a CSS essay without the two common errors: treating the thesis as a claim that events would stop, and dismissing it without engaging its logic.

1. The 1989 essay and the 1992 book

1.1 The essay

"The End of History?" appeared in the summer 1989 issue of the American journal *The National Interest*, before the Berlin Wall fell in November. Fukuyama, then a State Department official and former RAND analyst, argued that the Cold War was ending not with a mere pause in great-power rivalry but with the exhaustion of every systematic alternative to Western liberalism. The question mark in the title was deliberate: he was proposing, not pronouncing.

1.2 The book

The End of History and the Last Man (1992) expanded the essay into a full argument in five parts: the pessimism of the twentieth century and why it was misplaced; the "mechanism" of modern natural science that drives economic modernisation; the struggle for recognition that drives the demand for democracy; the post-historical world and its relations with the historical world; and the last man, Fukuyama's own doubt about whether liberal democracy can satisfy the human need to be recognised as superior. The book is therefore less triumphant than the essay: it ends on a question about the stability of the end point, not a celebration of it.

> **Definition to learn: the end of history.** Fukuyama's claim that liberal democracy, paired with market economics, is the final form of human government because it has defeated or outlasted every rival ideology (hereditary monarchy, fascism, communism) and because no coherent alternative with universal appeal remains. "History" here means the directional process of ideological evolution, not the flow of events. Wars, coups and crises continue; what has ended is the argument about the best form of political order.

2. The philosophical basis: Hegel and Kojève

2.1 Hegel

Fukuyama's "history" is the Hegelian one. For G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) history is the dialectical unfolding of the idea of freedom through successive stages of consciousness and political form, each of which contains contradictions that drive it to the next. Hegel saw the Battle of Jena in 1806, where Napoleon defeated Prussia, as the moment the principles of the French Revolution (liberty and equality) became universal in principle; after that, he thought, the remaining task was to spread and consolidate them, not to discover anything new. Fukuyama borrows three things from Hegel: history as directional, the state as the embodiment of freedom, and the idea that human beings are driven by a

MEGA LECTURE · Stuck on this topic? Free 1-on-1 demo class WhatsApp a tutor +92 336 7801123
Scan: free demo class

need for recognition and not only by material appetite.

2.2 Kojève

Alexandre Kojève (1902-1968), a Russian-born philosopher, gave the lectures on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in Paris between 1933 and 1939 that shaped a generation of French thinkers and were published as *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. Kojève read Hegel's master-slave dialectic as the engine of history: the master risks his life for recognition but is recognised only by a slave whose recognition is worthless; the slave, through work and fear, develops the consciousness that eventually produces a society of free and equal citizens who recognise one another. Kojève held that Hegel was literally right about 1806 and that the post-war "universal and homogeneous state", which he saw in the United States and in the European Community that he helped to build as a French civil servant, was that end point. Fukuyama took from Kojève the seriousness of the claim that history could end, the emphasis on recognition, and the term universal and homogeneous state, which he renames liberal democracy.

> **Definition to learn: the struggle for recognition.** In the Hegel-Kojève account, the distinctively human desire is to be recognised by other human beings as a being with worth and dignity. Early history is a struggle for one-sided recognition (masters over slaves); its rational resolution is a state in which every citizen is recognised as free and equal by every other. Fukuyama uses this to explain why people want democracy, not only prosperity.

3. The argument: liberal democracy as the end point

3.1 Two mechanisms

Fukuyama's argument rests on two independent "mechanisms" that both point in the same direction.

1. **Modern natural science.** Science is cumulative and directional, it confers decisive military advantage on states that adopt it, and it makes industrialisation and then a market economy rational for any state that wants to survive. Because all societies face the same science, their economies converge on broadly similar modern forms. This explains capitalism and the homogenisation of the world's economies, but on its own it does not explain democracy: a technocratic authoritarian state could in principle industrialise just as well, as Fukuyama admits with the examples of Singapore, South Korea and Spain under Franco.
2. **The struggle for recognition.** People are not only economic animals. They have thymos, the part of the soul in Plato's *Republic* that feels pride, shame and anger when its worth is denied. Economic growth produces educated middle classes who demand recognition as adults and citizens; only liberal democracy, with universal and reciprocal rights, satisfies that demand rationally. This is why authoritarian modernisers (Taiwan, South Korea, Spain, Chile) tended to democratise once they became rich, and why communism, which delivered neither prosperity nor recognition, collapsed.

3.2 Evidence Fukuyama offered

Fukuyama used the growth in the number of liberal democracies: by his own count there were three in 1790, thirteen in 1900, around thirty in 1975 and over sixty by 1990, the "third wave" of democratisation that began in Portugal in 1974 and swept southern Europe, Latin America, East Asia and finally Eastern Europe. He also pointed to the defeat of fascism in 1945, the collapse of Soviet

MEGA LECTURE · Stuck on this topic? Free 1-on-1 demo class WhatsApp a tutor +92 336 7801123 megalecture.com

communism in 1989-91 and the absence of any rival with universal appeal: nationalism had no theory of political order beyond the nation, and Islamism, though a real force, could not attract non-Muslims.

3.3 The post-historical and historical worlds

Fukuyama did not claim that the whole world had reached the end of history. He divided it into a post-historical world of consolidated liberal democracies, where relations are governed by economics, international institutions and the democratic peace (liberal democracies do not fight one another), and a historical world where ideology, nationalism, religion and power politics still rule. Conflict would continue along the boundary between the two and inside the historical world; the post-historical world would be drawn into it through terrorism, migration, oil and proliferation. This distinction is the answer to the crude objection that wars after 1989 refute the thesis.

> **Worked example: the "9/11 refutes Fukuyama" objection.** Weak answer: "The attacks of 2001 and the rise of Islamism proved history had not ended." Strong answer: "The attacks occurred in the historical world and spilled into the post-historical one, exactly as Fukuyama's two-world model predicts. The real test is whether Islamism offers an alternative with universal appeal that is capable of organising a modern society. It does not attract non-Muslims and has not produced a successful modern state, so it is a rejection of modernity, not a rival end point. The stronger challenge comes from a modern, prosperous authoritarian state: China." Note how the strong answer uses Fukuyama's own categories before testing them.

4. Thymos and the last man

4.1 Thymos, isothymia and megalothymia

> **Definitions to learn. Thymos**: the spirited part of the soul that seeks recognition of one's worth. **Isothymia**: the desire to be recognised as the equal of others, which liberal democracy satisfies through equal rights. **Megalothymia**: the desire to be recognised as superior to others, which drove conquerors, founders and tyrants, and which liberal democracy can only channel into business, sport, politics and art, never fully satisfy.

Fukuyama's deepest argument, and his deepest worry, concerns the balance between these two. Liberal democracy is built on isothymia, and the modern welfare state and the politics of equal dignity extend it ever further. But megalothymia does not disappear. If a society offers no outlet for striving, risk and greatness, the men and women who feel it most will rebel against the comfortable peace itself.

4.2 The last man

The phrase comes from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The last man is the contented citizen of the end of history: secure, well fed, risk-averse, without ideals worth dying for, who "has his little pleasure for the day and his little pleasure for the night". Nietzsche despised him. Fukuyama asks whether the end of history produces last men, and whether their boredom will drive them to restart history through nationalism, religion or war simply to have something to struggle for. He also raises the opposite danger: that the demand for equal recognition becomes so extreme that it attacks every distinction of merit. The book ends with the image of wagons on a long trail, most of which will arrive at the same town, though some may be lost and a few travellers may decide that the town is not worth living in after all.

MEGA LECTURE · Stuck on this topic? Free 1-on-1 demo class WhatsApp a tutor +92 336 7801123 megalecture.com

5. The main critiques

5.1 Huntington: civilisations, not ideologies

Samuel Huntington replied first in "No Exit: The Errors of Endism" (1989) and then in "The Clash of Civilizations?" (*Foreign Affairs*, 1993) and the 1996 book. His claims: the end of ideological conflict releases older cultural and religious identities; the fault lines of the future run between civilisations (Western, Islamic, Sinic, Hindu, Orthodox and others); Western values are not universal but particular, and the attempt to spread them provokes resistance; modernisation does not equal Westernisation. Fukuyama's reply is that Huntington confuses cultural difference with political alternatives: Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and India are non-Western liberal democracies, so civilisation does not determine political form.

5.2 Derrida: the spectres of Marx

Jacques Derrida, in *Specters of Marx* (1993), attacked the thesis as a triumphalist "gospel" that announced the death of Marxism at the moment when the new world order was producing its own plagues: unemployment, exclusion, debt, the arms trade, ethnic wars and the dominance of great powers over international law. For Derrida the "spectre" of Marx, the demand for justice, cannot be exorcised by declaring liberalism the winner; Fukuyama oscillates between liberal democracy as an empirical fact and as an ideal that is never realised, and uses whichever suits him. This is the standard critique from the left.

5.3 Realism: anarchy does not end

Realists argue that the thesis mistakes a change in the distribution of power for a change in the nature of international politics. John Mearsheimer's "Back to the Future" (1990) predicted that the end of bipolarity would make Europe less stable, not more; Kenneth Waltz held that anarchy and self-help drive state behaviour whatever the regime type; and the democratic peace on which Fukuyama's post-historical world depends is, for realists, a product of American hegemony and shared threats rather than of democracy itself. Realists also note that liberal states still arm, balance and go to war against non-democracies, so the "historical world" is not a residue but the main arena.

5.4 The rise of China: authoritarian capitalism

The strongest empirical challenge is a state that has grown rich without democratising. China's four decades of growth under one-party rule, with a capable bureaucracy and an urban middle class that has so far accepted the bargain of prosperity for obedience, contradict the expectation that modernisation produces democratic demand. Azar Gat's "The Return of Authoritarian Great Powers" (2007) argued that China and Russia offer a model of authoritarian capitalism that is at least as competitive as liberal democracy. Fukuyama's response has been to concede that the link between wealth and democracy is probabilistic, to argue that China's model depends on continued growth and on the quality of a few leaders, and in his later work on political order to stress that a strong state is a precondition of democracy, not its opposite.

5.5 Populism and democratic backsliding

Since 2016 (the Brexit vote, the election of Donald Trump, the rise of Viktor Orban's self-described "illiberal democracy", Narendra Modi's majoritarianism, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's consolidation) the challenge has come from inside the post-historical world. Liberal democracies have produced majorities who vote against liberal institutions. Critics say this refutes the claim that liberal democracy

MEGA LECTURE · Stuck on this topic? Free 1-on-1 demo class WhatsApp a tutor +92 336 7801123 megalecture.com

is stable at the end point. Fukuyama's own reply, in *Identity* (2018), is that this is thymos reasserting itself: identity politics on the left and nationalism on the right are both demands for recognition that the liberal state has failed to meet, which is exactly the problem of the last man that the 1992 book flagged.

5.6 Religion

Political Islam, Hindu nationalism, evangelical politics in the Americas and Orthodox nationalism in Russia show that religion remains a source of political order and legitimacy. Fukuyama dismissed Islamism in 1992 because it has no appeal outside the Muslim world; critics reply that a doctrine does not need universal appeal to govern a billion people, and that the thesis assumed a secularisation that has not occurred. The fairest judgement is that religion has restarted history in parts of the historical world without producing a rival model that liberal democracies wish to copy.

5.7 Fukuyama's later position

In "Reflections on the End of History, Five Years Later" (1995), in his two-volume history of political order (2011 and 2014), and in essays after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Fukuyama has maintained the core claim while narrowing it: there is still no ideological rival with universal appeal; the danger to liberal democracy is political decay from within (captured institutions, vetocracy, identity politics), not a superior alternative from without; and the thesis was always a claim about the direction of history, not a timetable.

6. How to use the thesis in an essay

6.1 Where it fits in the syllabus

- **Theories of IR:** as the strongest statement of liberal optimism after the Cold War; pair it with democratic peace theory (Kant, Doyle) and contrast it with neorealism.
- **Post-Cold War order:** Fukuyama against Huntington is the standard framing of the 1990s debate; add Mearsheimer for the realist third voice.
- **Rise of China and multipolarity:** use authoritarian capitalism as the empirical test of the thesis.
- **Democracy, populism and the West:** use the last man and thymos to explain why prosperous democracies produce anti-liberal movements.
- **Political Science:** the thesis is a modern application of Hegel's philosophy of history and a test case for the relationship between economic development and regime type.

6.2 A reliable paragraph structure

1. State the thesis precisely (end of ideological evolution, not of events) and its two mechanisms.
2. Give the evidence Fukuyama used (third wave, collapse of communism, absence of universal rivals).
3. Apply one critique with a named author and a concrete case (Huntington and the Balkans or 9/11; Gat and China; populism and 2016).
4. Give Fukuyama's reply or the limit of the critique.
5. Judge: has the thesis been refuted, qualified or confirmed? Most strong answers conclude "qualified": the directional claim survives, the confidence about stability does not.

MEGA LECTURE · Stuck on this topic? Free 1-on-1 demo class WhatsApp a tutor +92 336 7801123 megalecture.com

6.3 Common errors

- Writing that Fukuyama predicted the end of wars or of events. He did not.
- Using Huntington as if he had the last word. Huntington's own predictions (a Confucian-Islamic alliance, civilisational bloc wars) have fared no better.
- Ignoring the last man. The book's own strongest doubt is the best material for a critical answer.
- Treating China as settled proof against the thesis. It is the best evidence against it, but the case is still open.

6.4 Sample essay titles with one-line plans

- **"Liberal democracy is the final form of human government." Critically evaluate Fukuyama's thesis in the light of developments since 1989.** Plan: thesis and mechanisms; evidence for; three critiques (China, populism, religion) with Fukuyama's replies; judgement: direction qualified, finality unproven.
- **Compare Fukuyama's end of history with Huntington's clash of civilisations as explanations of post-Cold War conflict.** Plan: what each predicts; test both against the 1990s Balkans, 9/11, the Arab Spring and Ukraine; argue that neither fits cleanly and that Fukuyama's two-world model explains more than is usually admitted.
- **Explain the concepts of thymos and the last man and assess their relevance to the rise of populism.** Plan: definitions; isothymia versus megalothymia; populism as a recognition revolt; limits (economic causes, media, elite failure).

Quick check

1. State what Fukuyama meant by "the end of history". (3 marks)
2. Describe the two mechanisms that, according to Fukuyama, drive history towards liberal democracy. (6 marks)
3. Explain the contribution of Hegel and Kojève to Fukuyama's argument. (8 marks)
4. Explain the terms thymos, isothymia and megalothymia and their role in the argument. (6 marks)
5. Describe who the last man is and why Fukuyama regards him as a danger to liberal democracy. (6 marks)
6. Explain the distinction between the historical and post-historical worlds and why it matters for assessing the thesis. (6 marks)
7. Outline Huntington's critique and Fukuyama's reply to it. (8 marks)
8. "The rise of China has refuted the end of history." Evaluate this claim. (12 marks)
9. Explain how populism since 2016 can be read both as a refutation of Fukuyama and as a confirmation of his own doubts. (8 marks)
10. Critically evaluate the claim that Fukuyama's thesis is a work of Western triumphalism with little analytical value. (12 marks)

1. The end of ideological evolution: liberal democracy with a market economy is the final form of government because every systematic rival (monarchy, fascism, communism) has been defeated and no alternative with universal appeal remains. It is not the end of events, wars or crises. (One mark for each element: ideological evolution, liberal democracy as end point, not the end of

MEGA LECTURE · Stuck on this topic? Free 1-on-1 demo class WhatsApp a tutor +92 336 7801123 megalecture.com

events.)

2. First, modern natural science: it is cumulative and directional, gives military advantage and makes industrialisation and market economics rational for every state, so economies converge; this explains capitalism but not democracy. Second, the struggle for recognition: human beings have thymos and demand to be recognised as free and equal; economic development creates educated citizens who demand this, and only liberal democracy, with universal reciprocal rights, satisfies it. The two mechanisms together explain why modernised societies tend to democratise and why communism, which delivered neither prosperity nor recognition, collapsed. (Three marks each.)

3. Hegel provides the conception of history as the directional, dialectical unfolding of freedom through stages, the state as the embodiment of freedom, the view that humans seek recognition and not only material goods, and the claim that the principles of the French Revolution became universal at Jena in 1806. Kojève, in his Paris lectures of 1933-39, read the master-slave dialectic as the engine of history, argued that Hegel was literally right that history had ended in principle, and described the post-war universal and homogeneous state as its realisation. Fukuyama borrows the directional view, the primacy of recognition and the universal and homogeneous state, which he identifies with liberal democracy, and credits Kojève with taking the idea of an end of history seriously when academic Hegelians had abandoned it. (Four marks for each thinker.)

4. Thymos is the spirited part of the soul in Plato's *Republic*, the seat of pride, shame and anger, which seeks recognition of one's worth. Isothymia is the desire to be recognised as equal to others; liberal democracy satisfies it through equal rights, and it underlies the demand for democracy and the welfare state. Megalothymia is the desire to be recognised as superior; it drove conquest and tyranny, and liberal democracy can only channel it into business, politics, sport and art. The role of the distinction: isothymia explains why history moves towards liberal democracy, megalothymia explains why the end point may be unstable. (Two marks per term, including its role.)

5. The last man, from Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, is the contented citizen of the end of history: secure, comfortable, risk-averse, without ideals worth sacrificing for, satisfied with small pleasures. Fukuyama sees two dangers. First, a society of last men offers no outlet for megalothymia, so those who feel it will rebel against peace and prosperity themselves, restarting history through nationalism, religion or war out of boredom and a need for struggle. Second, the opposite excess: a demand for equal recognition so complete that it attacks every distinction of merit and undermines the achievement that liberal society depends on. The danger is therefore internal to the end point, not an external rival. (Three marks for the description, three for the dangers.)

6. The post-historical world consists of consolidated liberal democracies whose mutual relations are governed by economics, institutions and the democratic peace; the historical world is where ideology, nationalism, religion and power politics still operate. Conflict continues inside the historical world and along the boundary, and spills into the post-historical world through terrorism, migration, energy and proliferation. It matters because it disposes of the crude objection that any war after 1989 refutes the thesis: the thesis predicts continued conflict in the historical world. The proper test is whether a rival model with universal appeal emerges, or whether post-historical states fight one another or abandon liberal democracy. (Three marks for the distinction, three for its use.)

7. Huntington (1989, 1993, 1996) argued that the end of ideological rivalry releases older cultural

MEGA LECTURE · Stuck on this topic? Free 1-on-1 demo class WhatsApp a tutor +92 336 7801123 megalecture.com

and religious identities; that future conflict will run along the fault lines between civilisations; that Western values are particular rather than universal and the attempt to export them provokes resistance; and that modernisation does not mean Westernisation. Fukuyama's reply: Huntington confuses cultural difference with political alternatives; Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and India are non-Western liberal democracies, so civilisation does not fix regime type; most conflicts since 1989 have been inside civilisations, not between them; and Huntington offers no account of what a non-liberal civilisation's end point would be. (Four marks each.)

8. For the claim: China has grown for four decades under one-party rule, built a capable state and a large middle class, and has not democratised, which breaks the expected link between modernisation and democratic demand; Gat's "authoritarian capitalism" presents it as a competitive model; China's example is attractive to other authoritarian states; and it has produced wealth and recognition (national pride) without liberal rights. Against: Fukuyama's claim about wealth and democracy was probabilistic, not a law; the Chinese model depends on continued growth, a capable leadership and the suppression of demands for recognition that may reappear; China has no universal ideology to export, only an example; and no liberal democracy wishes to copy it. Judgement: China is the strongest evidence against the thesis and keeps the question open, but it has qualified rather than refuted it; the thesis would be refuted if China's model proved stable through a prolonged slowdown and attracted imitation among developed societies. (Four marks for, four against, four for a supported judgement.)

9. As refutation: populist movements since 2016 (Brexit, Trump, Orban, Erdogan, Modi) show majorities in consolidated democracies voting against liberal institutions, courts, the press and minorities, so liberal democracy is not stable at the end point and may be eroded from within, which the confident 1989 essay did not foresee. As confirmation: the 1992 book argued that the end of history would be threatened by thymos, by last men bored with comfort and by groups whose demand for recognition was unmet; Fukuyama's *Identity* (2018) reads populism as exactly that, a recognition revolt by groups who feel disrespected, on both left and right. Judgement: populism refutes the confidence and confirms the diagnosis; it offers no alternative model, which is why Fukuyama calls it decay rather than a new stage. (Four marks for each reading.)

10. For the claim: the essay appeared at the moment of American victory and was read, and used, as a celebration of it; it identifies the end of history with the Western liberal model; it dismissed Islam as lacking appeal; Derrida called it a gospel that ignored the plagues of the new order; and the 1990s policy of democracy promotion drew on it. Against: the title had a question mark; the book is built on Hegel and Kojève, not on American politics, and ends in doubt about the last man; the two-mechanism argument is a serious theory linking science, economics and the politics of recognition that can be tested, and has been, against China and populism; the historical and post-historical distinction predicted continued conflict; and Fukuyama's later work on political decay turns the analysis against the West itself. Judgement: the thesis was received triumphantly and some of its confidence was misplaced, but it remains analytically valuable because it asks the right question (is there a rival end point?) and provides concepts (recognition, thymos, the last man) that explain the present crisis of democracy better than its critics' alternatives. (Four marks for, four against, four for a supported judgement.)

MEGA LECTURE · Stuck on this topic? Free 1-on-1 demo class WhatsApp a tutor +92 336 7801123 megalecture.com