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## **Review: Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition by Francis Fukuyama — the big ideological shifts shaking our world**

*An academic superstar's primer on a powerful but controversial idea*

Review by Andrew Marr

We are living through a great political flip: the old ideological politics of left and right, focused on arguments over the role of the state, equality and taxation, are in fast retreat. Instead, there has been a great advance of what most people now call “identity politics”, which is essentially a struggle for status and respect by groups as different as white Americans in the flyover states and Muslim migrants in Denmark.

Francis Fukuyama puts it this way: “In the 20th century politics had been defined on a left-right spectrum by economic issues, with the left wanting more equality and the right greater freedom. By contrast, today’s left focuses more on promoting the interests of a wide variety of groups perceived as being marginalised — blacks, immigrants, women, Hispanics, the LGBT community, refugees and the like.” The right, by contrast, increasingly redefines itself “as patriots who seek to protect traditional national identity, an identity that is often explicitly connected to race, ethnicity or religion”.

Although that is an American-tinged way of looking at things, any observer of British politics can see parallels. Is not Corbyn’s Labour Party at the vanguard of protecting rights for Muslim immigrants, gay and transgender people, refugees and women seeking greater equality? And is its agony over anti-semitism not a reminder of the new problems identity politics brings? Similarly, is not the Brexit revolt by white English voters on the east coast and in the industrial north not in part a demand for respect by people who feel their national identity is coming under attack?

Dealing with these changes requires new ways of thinking about politics, including new language, Fukuyama — still a kind of academic superstar — suggests. In 1992, he wrote *The End of History*, a book initially lauded, then derided. In it, he argued that the really big conundrums of politics had essentially been resolved. The best form of human organisation was liberal democracy and market capitalism and, bit by bit, all human societies were converging on that truth. But with the upsurge of militant Islam, chaotic Western military interventions, the rise of authoritarian post-Communist states and the current return of populist, big-man politics, it seemed to many that history was biting back with a vengeance.

In this, he gently suggests that he was misunderstood. He didn't mean that history would actually end, or that there would be no more conflict: "The word end was meant not in the sense of 'termination', but 'target' or 'objective'."

He turned his attention to studying the origins of political order, and political decay, around the world. But now, with the arrival of Donald Trump and anti-globalisation, and with nationalist movements on the rise around the world, he seeks to explain and analyse this great flip.

As one would expect with Fukuyama, he begins with the philosophers, tracing ideas of human dignity from Socrates, through Luther, Rousseau, Kant and Hegel. In sum, it's the story of growing interest in internal "lived experience" as the root of authenticity; and therefore the demand of the individual for political recognition. This, essentially an alternative to the Marxist emphasis on class identity, is a hugely powerful idea with great progressive potential. The demand for dignity and respect has driven the Black Lives Matter movement in the US; the #MeToo rebellion against male sexual predation; and multiple campaigns for rights and respect in the realms of sexuality and race.

Fukuyama quotes the political thinker Charles Taylor, who said that identity is "the most powerful moral idea that has come down to us", crossing borders and building on universal human psychology. "This moral idea tells us that we have authentic inner selves that are not being recognised and suggests that the whole of external society may be false and repressive. It focuses our natural demand for recognition of our dignity and gives us a language for expressing the resentments that arise when such recognition is not forthcoming." Identity politics is, in short, a weapon against the unfairnesses of old power structures, a means for those on the outside to fight their way towards the centre.

But it produces problems. By subdividing society into ever-smaller groups with their own demands for dignity and recognition, it weakens liberal democracies. It can produce intolerable self-righteousness, groups drunk on virtuous resentment, unwilling to listen to anyone else.

But, above all, when identity politics is deployed by a majority, in this case, in the West a white majority, it can produce a bullying, menacing new order. It's one described by Eric Kaufmann in his highly controversial new book as a "Whiteshift", but it can be seen in action from Trump's America to Orban's Hungary, and its intolerance of minority cultures is probably the single biggest political challenge of our times. The single biggest flaw in this book is Fukuyama's too-relaxed attitude to it. Indeed it has been argued that because the term "identity politics" embraces both minority campus revolt and a majoritarian white voter assertion, it is becoming too capacious to be any longer useful.

And yet somehow the term has become inescapable, a description of political decline we are stuck with. Fukuyama identifies five stages on the road downhill. First, modern liberal democracies, going through rapid economic and social change, become far more diverse. Second, globalisation creates demands for recognition by groups previously invisible to the mainstream. Third, this produces a perceived lowering of status of the groups they have

displaced, leading, fourth, to the backlash. Finally, both sides retreat into ever narrower identities, undermining the possibility of collective action: “Down this road lives, ultimately, state breakdown and failure.”

Meanwhile, it can feel plain nasty. Under the old politics, it was perhaps easier to disagree without calling your opponent “a Nazi”. You can argue about the proper levels of taxation without regarding him or her as morally evil. But if your politics are deeply rooted in your innermost sense of self, and a burning belief that your identity has not been properly recognised, then, emotionally, you may feel that you are fighting a war, not conducting a discussion. The verbal effects of this are splattered over Twitter and Facebook.

Unfortunately, but probably inevitably, the final “what is to be done?” section of this short book is the weakest. Fukuyama wants a single citizenship for the EU and reform of US immigration law as well as more successful assimilation of minorities. It is a bit apple-pie. But as a primer on the big political shift of our times, and an explainer of how we got here, this is not a book to pass by.