

# Intellectual Discourse

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# *Intellectual Discourse*

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**Book Review**

Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for

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## ***Book Review***

**Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition.** By Francis Fukuyama. London, UK: Profile Books, 2019, pp. 218, ISBN: 978-1-78125-981-8.

*Reviewer:* Syaza Farhana Binti Mohammad Shukri, Department of Political Science, International Islamic University Malaysia. Email: [syazashukri@iium.edu.my](mailto:syazashukri@iium.edu.my)

Famous for his declaration on the end of history after free-market liberal economy triumphed over communism at the end of the Cold War, Francis Fukuyama is back to elucidate on the recent rise of identity politics in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Starting with the vote by the British electorate to leave the European Union, we have seen the rise of more populist leaders such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orban, and Geert Wilders using the rhetoric of identity to rile up voters. While there is a growing body of literature on the subject, what Fukuyama does best is explaining a complex phenomenon in a simple yet elegant prose to make his arguments digestible to a wider audience and thus, helping him make a case on the danger of ignoring identity politics and its roots.

Identity politics is any civil movement that is spearheaded by people with shared experiences based on a social construct whether it be race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. While the twentieth century saw class conflict taking centre stage, the struggle now has evolved to be between people with different social identities. As Fukuyama pointed out, this is a natural evolution because there has been a gap in our understanding of human motivation. Why would developed countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom experience the rise of discontented voters? While economics has been understood as human desire for maximum utilization, there is a desire that cannot be met in material terms—dignity. Fukuyama talks about the politics of resentment whereby “a political leader has mobilized followers around

the perception that the group's dignity has been affronted, disparaged, or otherwise disregarded. This resentment engenders demands for public recognition of the dignity of the group in question." (p. 7). The argument is that while free-market economy has brought countries and people out of poverty, it has not successfully made the middle-class politically and socially visible. This feeling of marginalization is the glue that has mobilized people across specific countries.

*Identity* is not just a book on politics, but it is also an abridged philosophical and historical reference on the development of the modern man since the Enlightenment. For that reason, it is easy to follow Fukuyama's argument on the concept of *thymos*, its relation to Rousseau's idea of man and society, and how human conception of the self has changed with the slow decay of religious authority in the West. Although as a species we have had more liberties to choose our form of existence today, it has also led to anxiety and insecurity because our identity is still tied to our own understanding of society. Fukuyama writes:

This crisis of identity leads in the opposite direction from expressive individualism, to the search for a common identity that will re-bind the individual to a social group and re-establish a clear moral horizon. This psychological fact lays the groundwork for nationalism. (p. 56)

It is, therefore, not surprising to see the current rise of populist nationalism in which leaders utilize nationalist rhetoric to gain the people's trust to supposedly bring a country back to its purported former glory. People have been too detached in the modern world that they are now seeking commonality that used to exist in the form of national or religious identity.

On the outset, this book might appear to discuss a uniquely western phenomenon. However, the author makes a good point to emphasize that current identity politics is not just one of nationalism, but it also incorporates the ongoing debate on religious extremism, specifically Muslim radicals, whether they are in Europe or the Middle East. Of course, this is not a new argument, for scholars on political Islam have been proposing the idea of the marginalized Muslims that lies behind the anger towards their own government and the West. What is unique about this chapter called "Nationalism and Religion" is how Fukuyama



situates this possibly separate issue into a wider discussion on identity politics that is affecting humanity as history unfolds today. Nationalism and Islamism “both provide an ideology that explains why people feel lonely and confused, and both peddled in victimhood that lays the blame for an individual’s unhappy situation on groups of outsiders.” (p. 73). Understanding this would allow policymakers to approach Islamism as a psycho-social phenomenon as opposed to irrational religious interpretation, though it does play a role.

Another important discussion by the author is on how our understanding of experiences have become much narrower to only include those who share the same “lived experiences”. In other words, the subjective experience of one group differs from that of another, and thus making it difficult to find common grounds that could unite people of different races, genders, or even nationalities. At the end of the twentieth century, we saw the left’s enthusiasm to uplift minority cultural groups to gain some sort of equality at the expense of individual liberty. It is impossible to downplay the importance of this development; but with it, identity politics now brought a different sets of problem. Fukuyama outlines a number of those problems: 1) identity politics has become an easy way out for policymakers from having to deal with rising inequality; 2) as identity politics focused on the traditionally marginalized, the problems of the majority has not been given adequate attention; 3) the rise of political correctness has limited vital political discourse on identity; 4) polarization in society has increased as identity politics does not appeal to a wide audience; and 5) the rise of identity politics on the left stimulated the same passion on the right. Therefore, while identity politics per se is not a problem, it is how it has been understood and implemented that has brought us to where we are today.

This book is a valuable contribution to the debate on identity, nationalism, and populism. The author’s assertion that the path we are on is not irreversible is due to the nature of identity itself which is that it is not set in stone. However, there is a strong drive for dignity and recognition especially from one’s own government. Interestingly, identity politics entered the vocabulary in the late 1970s and early 1980s and yet, the full-blown impact of it is only being felt now. Is it because it is unfolding in the West? For example, scholars have debated the role of identity formulation to understand the interminable crisis in the Middle East. The different and persistent manifestation of identities in

the Middle East have made it difficult for liberal democracy to take foot. This situation perpetuates the rise of authoritarian leaders that pit citizens against one another. So, when the world declares the victory of liberal democracy, the 'world' seems to be limited to the West and the rise in identity politics has been considered perplexing. However, to the rest of the non-Western world, identity politics have always been prominent especially in post-colonial societies. This is not a fault of Fukuyama per se, but it is worth pondering.

As the name implies, *Identity* attempts to be a concise book. Fortunately, it is able to do so without compromising on the wealth of information that is included to help readers understand the phenomenon that is widely reported in the press these days. The narrative style of writing is definitely useful, especially to general readers who may or may not be familiar with research-based writings. However, there were times when the book feels like it has been patched by different anecdotes as some chapters are not equally distributed in length. Nevertheless, the argument is clear, and the author tries his best to appear non-biased in his judgment. There is no doubt that the book is calling for greater awareness by everyone that identity is a social construct and it does not have to be jealously protected. Once creedal identity takes the front seat, liberal democracy may be back on its track to lead us to a possible second end of history.

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**What Happened. By Hillary Rodham Clinton. New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2017. ISBN-10: 1501175564; ISBN-13: 978-1501175565.**

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One of the most consequential American Presidential elections in recent years saw nominees Hillary Rodham Clinton, the Democrat nominee; and Donald J. Trump, the Republican nominee battle head to head for the honour to occupy the Oval Office. The 2016 Presidential campaign



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