

00:00:02

Jonathan: From Amsterdam, This is Bright Minds, the podcast from the John Adams Institute, a treasure trove of the best and the brightest of American thinking. I'm Jonathan Groubert, and this episode's guest is indeed one of the brightest, Francis Fukuyama, the writer, thinker and teacher. You may remember him from his book 'The End of History', where he proclaimed the triumph of liberal democracy as something of a societal finish line. Well, he does not think that anymore. What changed his mind? It was the election of Donald Trump and people who say things like this:

00:00:39

Francis Fukuyama: I don't care if I lose my job or I take an economic hit as long as our country stops filling up with all these damn foreigners. And the other thing was, I really don't like it when you lecture me this way, as if you know, I don't know what my own self-interest is.

00:00:54

Jonathan: That's Mr Fukuyama. They're espousing some of the thinking he outlines in his most recent book 'Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment'. In 'Identity', Fukuyama argues that populist nationalism is not motivated by economics, as it was through the second half of the 20th century. Populist nationalism is motivated by an innate need for dignity. That sounds like a given, but Francis Fukuyama says this is being exploited. Democracy is being undermined as the old world order is swept away and demagogues rise, country by country, as they preach identity politics based on religion, ethnicity and gender. Former President Trump may be the most obvious example of this, but as Mr Fukuyama told our audience at the University of Amsterdam in 2019: in this message of identity based authoritarianism, Trump had plenty of company.

00:02:00

Francis Fukuyama: At this point, I think a lot of us could reel off a list of new leaders that have appeared on the world stage in the last few years: Erdogan in Turkey. Viktor Orbán in Hungary. Kaczynski in the Law and Justice Party, the PiS in Poland. The folks that voted for Brexit and Britain. Now we've got a populist government in Italy, and Jair Bolsonaro is the latest populist leader that we can add to that list in Brazil. This is a global phenomenon that is, I think, very dangerous for a number of reasons. The first reason just has to do with the nature of liberal democracy. Most of these leaders were in fact, legitimately elected. Maybe they tilted the playing field a little bit, but there's no question that people voted for them. So the problem wasn't democracy. The real threat I think that they pose is to the liberal part of liberal democracy. Because as I'm sure you're aware, a democracy is not just a matter of elections, it's also a constitutional structure that limits power. It's checks and balances. It's an impartial bureaucracy. It's a free media that is able to criticize the government. And almost all of these populist leaders felt that they had such a degree of legitimacy for representing the people. Most of them are highly charismatic and they say: Well, I'm representing you, and here you have all of these institutions, these elites that are standing in the way of what you want to accomplish. And they all therefore try to undermine those institutions and so in Hungary and Poland, you have basically a stacking of the courts. Viktor Orbán has had all of his rich friends buy up the media in Hungary so that there's not going to be any critical information published about him. Donald Trump came into office. So first of all, you know, as a marker of the, you know, his charismatic authority when he was nominated by the

Republican Party back in 2016, he said, I alone understand your problems and I alone can fix them. So it's not about institutions, it's not about the Republican Party, it's not about the American Constitution. It's me personally. Donald Trump. That's going to, that's going to make you happy. And sure enough, he goes about trying to attack every single established institution the intelligence community, his own FBI, his own Justice Department. He calls the media, the mainstream media, enemies of the American people, all because they're opposed to him. And so I think there is an almost inevitable authoritarian... I wouldn't say that these people are authoritarians in the sense that they start out wanting to be an authoritarian ruler. But there's certainly an authoritarian tendency because they want power, and they're not that concerned about the niceties of rule of law and constitutional government in their pursuit of power. The other big problem with this kind of ruler has to do with international politics. Because we live in an international liberal international order. Like it or not, we live in a globalized world that is promoted by things like the World Trade Organization, regional agreements like the European Union or NAFTA. And it's underpinned by a series of international alliances: the NATO alliance, the US-Japan, US-South Korea alliances. And I would say that order has worked pretty well. Global output has quadrupled between 1970 and the end of the first decade of the 21st century. A lot of people have gotten much wealthier, moved into the middle class. Poverty has been reduced by hundreds of millions of people, and so the system is really working in many respects. It's also become much more democratic for the world. It became much more democratic. So in 1970, there are only about 35 electoral democracies, and by the early 2000s, that number had had increased to about 110 or 120, depending on how you define a democracy. And so the performance of that liberal international order was pretty good. But it is now gone into reverse. Some of that reversal is due to the rise of overtly authoritarian states like China or Russia that are now very self-confident and assertive. But I would say the more frightening development is what's going on in the most established democracies themselves, that the democratic Part is turning on the liberal part and trying to dismantle those institutions and then attacking the international foundations of that liberal order. So we have a president in the United States, that's question whether NATO is worth it, whether these long standing treaty arrangements are worth it, he's a protectionist. He has launched, you know, he says trade wars are easy to win. So this is the twofold challenge. So the question is, you know, why is this happening and why is it happening in... Why did it pick up steam in the second decade in the middle of the second decade of the 21st century? And I think there's a conventional wisdom about this that says: it's all about globalization and there is some truth to that. So if you took in university, your international trade theory course, the economists will tell you: a system of free trade where you can move people, goods, services, investment ideas across international borders that will maximize everybody's benefit. Everybody gets richer under that system. And again, as I said, they were right about that in the aggregate that countries that participate in that system do get richer. However, not every individual in every country gets benefits. And in particular, if you are a lower skilled, less educated worker in a rich country, you are liable to lose employment to a similarly skilled worker in a poor country. And in fact, that's what's happening. So as you get a rising middle class in a place like China or India, you have a declining middle class in, you know, in rich countries. And so there's been wage stagnation. We can make up for it a little bit with welfare states and social protections. But the underlying job base for people with relatively poor educations has been shrinking. Automation is another thing that really underlies globalization, and that as well

has been undercutting, undercutting the wages of the working class and people that thought of themselves as middle class in rich countries. Another factor is politics. So the rap against democracies is democracy produces weak government. The government can't make up its mind, people talk and argue, and there's interest groups and lobbyists and so forth. But in the end, it doesn't really deliver on economic growth or decisive action. When that is called for. And you know, again, that's in many cases a true charge. And what it leads to is a desire on the part of a lot of people for strong leadership. We need a strong man is going to cut through all this nonsense and make decisions and get stuff done. And you know, it leads to people like Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines that is dealing with a drug problem. And it turns out that, you know, the rule of law is a little bit of an obstacle to getting rid of all the drug dealers and drug users. And so he just launches a campaign of extrajudicial killings. And, you know, that's one way of solving the problem. So that's another, that's another stimulus. But in my opinion, I think that I... there's a cultural explanation for why this is happening that I think is actually as powerful, if not more so in explaining the particular nature of the world that we're living in. And that's related to the word 'identity'. If the problem in the world were simply the global economy and the inequalities that the globalization drive of the last 30 years has produced, you would expect that we would be seeing the rise of a lot of left wing populist because, you know, think about the financial crisis in 2008 or the euro crisis. You have these big crises that are produced by banks on Wall Street. The, you know, the people that have a lot of money and resources survive just fine. Ordinary people lose their homes, they lose their jobs. And so this ought to lead to a lot of anger that would say, no, we need to redistribute. We need some form of socialism back, that's going to redistribute money from the rich to the poor. Instead, what do we get? We get, you know, a very weak Occupy Wall Street movement and a powerful tea party or in Europe, the growth of anti-immigrant, anti-EU populist parties on the right. How do you explain the fact that populism takes this right-wing form rather than the left wing version? And I think that the fundamental explanation is related to this concept of identity. All right. So I have a specific definition of identity and it is in fact quite expansive. And it's important to see that actually, there's a lot of phenomena that fall under this general rubric because I do think that it responds to something of a part of the human psychology that is universal in human beings. So in Plato's Republic, Socrates has this conversation with a couple of young Athenians. And he says, isn't there a third part of the soul? We know that human beings have reason, and we know that they've got desires or preferences. But isn't there a third part of the soul that late that Socrates labels 'thymos'. In English this is sometimes translated as spiritedness or pride. And that 'thymos' is what drives us to seek the approval and the recognition that other people give us, that we feel that we've got an inner worth and we get very angry when people do not recognize us and accord us the kind of esteem that we think we deserve. Conversely, we feel shame when we feel that we're not worth what you know our public value is and this is something that I think is important because it's completely missing in the economic model of man. You know, the economists say, Yeah, you've got you've got rationality and you've got preferences, and that's it. That explains all of human behavior. And they don't understand that there is this actually third part of the soul, third part of the human psyche that sometimes overrides material self-interest. And I think you can see it in some of the current controversies. So a lot of the people who voted in Britain for Brexit, were told, you know, repeatedly and in fact lectured incessantly by the Remain side about how economically devastating leaving the European Union would be. And, you know, maybe they contested

that, but they came away with two responses. The first one was, I don't care if it's, you know, if I lose my job even or I take an economic hit as long as our country stops filling up with all these damn foreigners. And the other thing was, I really don't like it when you lecture me this way, as if you know, I don't know what my own self-interest is. You know, you graduate of Oxford or Cambridge, living in London and working in the city. You know, don't lecture me in that fashion because you are looking down on me. And that's an example. I think of 'thymos' at work, of someone valuing their self-esteem more than, you know, material resources now in the modern world. This desire for recognition takes a very specific form, which has to do with the notion that we have an inner self that is sometimes hidden to us, that deserves esteem and dignity and is not being recognized by the outside society. But what's particularly modern is the view that it's not the inner person that has to adjust to the external social rules. It's really the society itself that is corrupt and unjust, and the society has to adjust in ways that allow us to express that authentic inner self. In the book, I argue actually the first major thinker that argued along these lines was actually Maarten Luther, because Luther said what God cares about is not whether you go to mass and say the rosary and perform all the rituals that the Catholic Church is telling you to perform all that. Actually, we're in a Lutheran church here or former Lutheran. So, you know the story. So his argument was, you know, what God cares about is the inner believer, and only God really knows if you have faith or not, it's not visible through any of your external works. That's what has value. And he said the entire external structure that's created by the Catholic Church can crumble. It doesn't matter because what matters is the inner faith of a Christian believers. So this idea that secularized by thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant has a different, slightly different version of it. And by the 19th century, I think in Western thought it's a very common idea that actually the highest form of human flourishing is not achieved through conformity to existing social rules. It's achieved through the liberation of that inner self, that valuable inner self and the elimination of all of the social norms and laws and rules that are repressing the expression of that inner self. And I think you can see it again in a lot of modern movements. And so, for example, the MeToo movement, right? What is that fundamentally about? It's a movement about dignity that women are complete human beings. They have talents, they have experience. They have, you know, lots of things that they that make up the whole of their being and men do not value them for that. They value them simply for their looks or, you know, physical, superficial, physical appearance. And that is, you know, it's a modern idea because. What's being asked is not that women adjust to those male norms set by the outside society. The demand is that those norms themselves are wrong. They're corrupt and they have to change. And in fact, we are going through a cultural revolution right now where that is exactly what is happening, that the outside society is adjusting to the demands for dignity of that inner person. And I think the structure of many political and social movements can be understood in that way. So in 2011, there's a Tunisian vegetable seller named Mohamed Bouazizi. He gets his vegetable cart confiscated. He's in the informal economy so he doesn't have a license. He goes to the governor's office. He says, Where's my card? Nobody will talk to him or give him an answer. And in despair that he's lost his livelihood, he douses himself with gasoline and that self-immolation is what sets off the Arab Spring. It sets off the Arab Spring because many people living in Arab dictatorships, and there was not really a single Arab democracy at that time, saw their own experience in Mohamed Bouazizi that they were living under authoritarian regimes that did not recognize them. They didn't even owe him the courtesy of giving him an answer of why

they confiscated his vegetable cart. And that's what led millions of people, literally millions of people out into the streets in Tunisia, in Egypt, in Syria, in Yemen, in Libya to protest against governments that were not treating their own citizens like human beings. And I think democracy itself is based on a recognition of basic human dignity. That is to say, by giving us rights, a democracy or a liberal democracy recognizes our right to speak, to believe, to associate and ultimately to vote, which means we have a right to participate in our own self-governance. And that, you know, those are attributes of a, of a human being. They recognize our agency, which is at the core of the modern understanding of what is fundamentally a human being dignity. By contrast, an authoritarian government, if it's a mild one like Singapore, treats its citizens like children that don't really know their own self-interest, and they have to be guided by a wise, paternalistic state. And if they're like North Korea, they basically treat their citizens like, you know, like, you know, objects that can be thrown away and used for the purposes of the state. So behind democracy is a certain idea of dignity, of universal human dignity in which all people are equal because all people are equally moral agents. And that's baked into the constitutions of many modern democracies. The Irish Constitution, the German Basic Law all say, you know, the fundamental right is derived from the fact that human beings have dignity, and that's something the state must respect. All right. So there's an identity component. In fact, in something like democracy, the trouble is that there are many other ways of interpreting the demand for dignity. And one of the other ones that emerged at the same time as the rights of man, you know, out of the French Revolution was nationalism. So a nationalist also feels 'I have an inner self that is being hidden and repressed because I have to live in, I don't know, the Austrian Hungarian Empire or, you know, I'm living in this country called Spain, but I actually don't feel Spanish. I feel Catalan.' And so the demand of the nationalist is for recognition by granting people of a single cultural group their own state, that is a form of recognition. Other people, you know, send ambassadors and they've got a representative at the United Nations. That means that they can be proud to take their place, among other recognized nations in the world. And obviously, that's a much more problematic form of recognition than is the universal liberal form of recognition, because it oftentimes evolves from a demand to be recognized as an equal country among the community of nations in the world to being a dominant country. Right. And I think this is the, you know, this is what happened to Germany in well in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Russia in the 90s, in the 1990s was felt, you know, despised and mistreated, disrespected because it had been the Soviet Union. And now it was this small, you know, as Obama once said, a regional power. And the trouble with Russian nationalism is that the assertion of their demand for status and dignity seems to always come at the expense of their smaller and weaker neighbors. And so obviously, that type of identity politics led to a really big international disaster. I actually think that certain forms of radical Islam are also driven by a quest for identity, especially among young, you know, the young European Muslims that went to fight on behalf of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Many of those people actually had this big question: Who am I? Right? They didn't accept the traditional culture of their parents or their grandparents, but they also did not feel that they were accepted by the society into which they moved. That could be here in Europe, or it could be in a modernizing country in the Middle East. And the one thing that Osama bin Laden or Baghdadi or any of these Islamist leaders could successfully do is say, 'I'll tell you who you are. You're a proud Muslim. You're part of a large international Ummah. You've been mistreated, you've been disrespected. And we are

offering you a way to exercise your agency to fight back against those people that would deny you basic, basic dignity. So as you can see, there are a lot of versions of identity politics, and I think it pervades a lot of, you know, of politics, plain and simple. But then we come to the version that exists in the existing developed liberal democracies like the Netherlands, like Germany, like Britain, like the United States. So all of these movements start with real social injustice, so African-Americans are discriminated against. Women have, are not treated equally in a basically male dominated patriarchal society, which is what most Western societies were in the early 1960s. Gays and lesbians couldn't marry. They were, you know, forced to be in the closet. Disabled people, Native Americans, indigenous people. There are many categories of marginalized people that were facing real injustice, and so their identification with their group was a way of fighting back, and it continues to be up to the present day. So that is a legitimate form of identity assertion. The problem really came in the way that the left in general began to think about inequality because in the 20th century, left wing parties everywhere in the world were built around the proletariat. They're built around the working class. And if you, you know, if you're European, I mean, a lot of them were actually overtly Marxist. And you know, they saw the fundamental clash as one between workers and capitalists. But after the 1960s, the left began to interpret inequality in these much more specific and narrow terms as inequality to particular groups, women, minorities, immigrants and the like. And they began to even perceive, you know, the old working class that they had previously claimed that they were representing, you know, as a sort of privileged stratum because they were unionized and they were getting benefits and they were actually becoming more middle class than working class. And as a result, that old working class began to feel that these parties no longer represented them. So in the United States, you know, this has been going on for 30, 40 years. It really started first under Ronald Reagan, when a lot of so-called Reagan Democrats that had been the core of the Democratic Party's support from the 1930s on, began to vote Republican. And by the way, that's why Donald Trump became president. He lost the popular election to Hillary Clinton by almost three million votes. But enough working-class voters in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, three northern industrialized states who had voted for Obama in previous elections flipped over and voted for Donald Trump and then got him an election in the Electoral College. But this has been happening in Europe as well, so a lot of the traditional center-Left parties have gone into, in some cases, almost terminal decline. The French Socialist Party has virtually disappeared. The German Social Democrats have gone from about 45 percent to 25 percent, and in their place, a lot of people are now switching, as in the US, voting for the left wing party to voting for a right wing anti-immigrant anti EU party. Now this is where I think a clear understanding of the dignity dimension of this is really important because there is a tendency among liberal minded people to look at this phenomenon and look at the people that vote for populist parties and say, well, they're basically a bunch of uneducated racists and xenophobes, you know, they were previously privileged white people that are angry that, you know, all these immigrants are coming in and they think they're stealing their jobs. And, you know, they don't understand really that, you know, there's nothing wrong with this. No, I think that that interpretation is certainly true for a certain group of that voting bloc. But I think that there is a certain legitimate sense in which people that vote for populist parties actually do have a case to be made that they are being disrespected. If you look at working class, you know, working classes. I mean, it's particularly the case in Britain. In the United States, it's a little bit less so in continental

Europe because of the welfare state here. But if you look at what's happened to a lot of those old white working class voters, they've not been doing well. They've gone through a decline. You know, where 70,000 Americans died in 2017 because of opioid overdoses, families are breaking down. Crime levels are rising in these communities, and a lot of them feel stuck. You know, they're trapped in a rural community. They really don't have good job prospects and they don't see a route out of their, out of their situation. And this is where I think the recognition part is particularly important. They really feel that they're being looked down upon by the elites. And I think that is true to a important extent. If you think of the elites as the major, you know, established political parties, the mainstream media, the commanding heights of the art world and the humanities and people of that sort, you know, which are people like you and me. I suspect there is a certain snobbery, you know, towards those people that has really not appreciated the fact that a lot of them are really not just ex-privileged white people that are mad, that they're losing their privilege, but are really in a social category that has seen genuine downward social mobility. All right. And I think it's important to be able to distinguish between different motives for voting for a populist party because if you're going to solve the problem, you need to, you know, you need to appreciate what's driving people. I do think that a lot of politicians have profited from driving partial identities that have led to polarization in many countries and that this is a bad thing for a democracy. And therefore, I think that you need to emphasize larger integrative identities and for better or worse, even here in Europe, I think those have to be national identities. But the national identities have to be liberal ones. They have to be accessible to the 'de facto' diversity of the populations that that live in these countries and therefore they cannot be based on things like ethnicity or religion. They have to be based on ideas, basically. So that's what I call a crystal identity. I think there are various specific things you can do in the realm of immigration as a concrete public policy, because I don't think we have an ideal immigration system, either in Europe or in North America. And then the final thing I would say is how do you stop populists? Well, you win elections. I mean, it's as simple as that in a democracy, that's what determines power. How do you win elections while you organize? You make coalitions, you communicate with people, you develop ideas, you reach out and you persuade people. And that's hard work. You know, it's hard work to do that sort of thing. But if people that want to defend a liberal order don't slug it out in the trenches this way, yeah, they're going to keep losing elections to populists that are energized and organized and so forth. So thank you.

00:31:36

Jonathan: Francis Fukuyama speaking at the University of Amsterdam in 2019, we also spoke to Professor Fukuyama at an online event in 2020. He talked about how the COVID-19 crisis could shift the balance of power around the world. I'll put a link to the video of that interview in the show notes. Did you know that you can go to our website, www.john-adams.nl/videos where there's a link to the video of this extraordinary event. We also have a newsletter you can sign up for, and a veritable treasure trove of great American thinkers and speakers at www.john-adams.nl. And while you're there, why not become a member of the John Adams? Not only will you support what we do. You get a discount to future live events. In the meantime, you should go to wherever you get your podcasts and leave a review of this show. This will help get the word out, and we can keep on sharing the very best of American thinkers in Europe with you free of charge. That's it for this week's show. Our theme song is called La Prensa by the Parlando's. Our editor is Tracy Metz. From

Amsterdam, this was Bright Minds, the podcast from the John Adams Institute. I'm Jonathan Groubert. Thank you for listening.