
Political by Nature

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A review of: *The Origins of Political Order*. By Francis Fukuyama. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011. ISBN: 978-0374227340

Think back to any history of government or political science class you may have taken, or book you may have read. How far back into history did it begin? Ancient Greece? Mesopotamia? In his new book *The Origins of Political Order*, political scientist Francis Fukuyama argues that we must go back much further if we are to properly contextualize how political systems are created; he believes that a complete analysis must start with our evolutionary history. In this sweeping magnum opus, the first of a planned two-volume set, Fukuyama emphasizes the “science” in “political science” by creating a model of government and political order which is firmly grounded in human biology. Humans, he asserts, are social and political by nature, making some form of politics inevitable, and any theoretical system that does not take our nature into account is therefore incomplete.

While this may not come as a surprise to evolutionists, political science, like so many other academic disciplines, has often viewed its subject matter in a vacuum, without reference to our evolutionary history, so Fukuyama has built an extremely significant bridge with this work. Many foundational political theorists whose writings form the basis of the field, such as Locke, Rousseau, and Hobbes, believed that the “natural” state of humans was isolated and apolitical; in their view, social cooperation and government were fabricated at some point as necessary reactions to the unnatural novelty of society. Fukuyama, by contrast, believes that the origins of politics are within us and have been shaped by evolution, thus providing a crucial link between political science and the natural sciences.

Evolutionary perspectives are utilized in two distinct ways in *Origins of Political Order*. Without using the term, Fukuyama invokes *meme theory* to draw analogies between biological evolution and the process of political development, showing how governments are dynamic ideas that can spread if successful and vanish if they are not, like organisms subject to natural selection. More excitingly, however, Fukuyama bases his theory of political development deeply in prehuman evolutionary psychology, invoking the concepts of inclusive fitness, kin selection, and reciprocal altruism to show that, contra Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, humans are naturally cooperative. He also discusses some of the evolutionary bases of

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morality and goes into fair depth on the hierarchical and coalitional elements of chimpanzee society, to compare and contrast our own social natures to theirs. Religion is presented as a cultural adaptation to enforce norms, encourage social cohesion, and discourage the selfish behavior that would otherwise stymie the cooperation of unrelated family groups, which is necessary for larger political structure.

As the book's title implies, Fukuyama's goal is to create an integrative model of why and how political systems arise, what form they will take, and why and how they break down. While he admits that there are countless varying historical contingencies that make a true predictive model impossible, Fukuyama is able to construct an impressive explanatory model of causes and effects by comparing a large number of historical governments in dizzying detail. The 16th century rise of the Lutheran church in Denmark, we learn, is part of the reason why the country eventually became the standard for prosperous, functional democracies; the Lutheran belief that ordinary people should be able to read the Bible promoted a literacy movement in Denmark that transformed the peasantry into a socially mobile class which advocated for economic and political rights.

The bulk of the book is dedicated to a rich history of the rise of so-called "modern government." For Fukuyama, successful modern government consists of three elements, not all of which are necessarily present in every political system. These elements are state-building, in which a central government claims coercive authority over a territorially described (as opposed to kin-based) group of people; rule of law, in which the government must comply with formal rules as opposed to acting on its own caprices; and accountable government, the most familiar form of which is democracy.

The advent of each of these institutions is given its own section of the book; each chapter within contains a superbly detailed history of a different pre-modern government, along with analyses of why and how each institution arose (or failed to arise) in comparison to other countries. According to Fukuyama, China was the first nation in which a true centralized state was achieved. In general, he describes the scaling up of societies—from small family groups to extended lineage-based tribes to chiefdoms to legitimate states—as resulting from the need to wage war; China was the first to make this full transformation. However, the Chinese emperors were not constrained by rule of law or accountability to their subjects. Fukuyama also covers the histories of India, Eastern and Western Europe, the Islamic Empires, Russia, and Latin America in detail, for comparative purposes; France and Spain had rule of law but no government accountability, India had rule of law but lacked a strong state, and so on.

With his understanding of inclusive fitness and kin selection, Fukuyama is able to theoretically ground the conflict between states and "patrimonialism" that appears throughout history (and thus throughout the book). He uses the latter term to describe the human tendency to favor relatives, and this force appears time and again as an antagonist to governments. Because patrimonialism often precludes higher allegiances such as loyalty to the state (and can eventually lead to political decay), institutions have invested enormous effort throughout history to undermine it. According to Fukuyama, the Catholic Church's prohibitions on divorce, cross-cousin marriage, adoption, and priest marriage were designed to ensure that wealth

and church offices would eventually revert back to the church rather than be bequeathed indefinitely, and to guarantee that the Church, not family, was the first allegiance of the clergy. The Ottoman Turks and a number of other Islamic empires instituted a forced conscription called “military slavery,” in which teenaged boys from outside the empire were forcibly separated from their families and raised to be senior administrators, palace officials, and elite soldiers. The catch was that they did not actually own their office or property, and were not allowed to bequeath it to family members. In this way, the most powerful offices of the land were placed beyond the reaches of patrimony.

One of Fukuyama’s implicit messages, which proponents of evolutionary psychology may find refreshing, is that the truth value of political viewpoints can sometimes hinge upon empirical science rather than heated rhetoric or philosophical arguments. For example, Fukuyama neatly sweeps aside a century and a half of Marxist Communist theory with his claim that Marx and Engels misconstrued anthropological reports of “primitive communism,” which their political system purported to recover: “[Anthropologist Lewis Henry] Morgan had described customary property owned by tightly bonded kin groups; real-world Communist regimes in the former USSR and China forced millions of unrelated peasants into collective farms” (p. 65). By appealing to evolutionary principles of kinship cooperation, Fukuyama recognizes Marxist political systems as unfeasible and obviates any further discussion on the matter. If only all political discourse could be settled this quickly

The Origins of Political Order is not light reading. Any given chapter contains an entire college course’s worth of history and analysis. It should, however, be required for all students of political science, as Fukuyama does a truly thorough job of answering ultimate “why” questions with a competence that would make an evolutionist proud. Those interested in how evolution can be applied to political theory should also take a look, but be warned that this is mainly a book of political science and history that uses evolution as a starting place, not the other way around. Nevertheless, all who appreciate applied evolutionary theory will be gratified to see someone outside the field integrate it so skillfully into their own work. For that reason, the mission of *Origins* is perfectly in line with that of the EvoS Consortium.

The only stone that Fukuyama leaves strangely unturned is during his discussion of the origins of law, a major theme of the book. He traces laws back to religion and early tribal customs, but no further—a surprise, given his penchant for rooting out ultimate causes. A naïve reader might walk away believing that if modern societies no longer explicitly recognize fixed natural law or divine authority as the source of our laws (as Fukuyama states), then laws must be completely synthetic and arbitrary human inventions. However, our evolutionary history shapes the various forms of human legal systems just as much as it does our political systems, by providing moral machinery which forms the basis for our notions of justice (Cosmides & Tooby, 2006). We are among those species that possess an intuitive sense of fairness and equity which allows us to live in socially cooperative groups (Walsh, 2000). Since humans engage in non-kin reciprocal cooperation, we must also have means to ostracize or punish defectors or cheaters, who could otherwise easily undermine the system by accepting the aid of others without themselves contributing (Fehr & Gächter, 2002; Bingham & Souza, 2010). Like other animals,

we retaliate directly for perceived wrongs against ourselves (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981); however, we also have cognitive systems in place that allow and dispose us to detect and punish cheaters and wrongdoers (Cosmides & Tooby, 2006), even when their violations do not impact us personally and even when such punishment comes at a cost to ourselves (although evidence for “altruistic punishment” is mixed—see DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009).

Laws pertaining to marriage and commerce, among others, can be seen as cultural inventions to check and regulate self-interested behavior that might normally be antithetical to the interests of other group members. Others, like those regarding incest and suicide, underscore the evolutionary harmfulness of objectively maladaptive actions, or serve to prohibit such actions when our novel environment precludes normal development of the cognitive systems designed to help us avoid them (see Lieberman, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2000). While some laws certainly are culturally or regionally specific, arbitrary, or even capricious, humans universally have emotions such as guilt and righteous indignation, which occur in response to violations, by the self or others, of certain “natural” laws (Nesse, 1990; DeScioli & Kurzban, 2009) that seem to cut across all cultures worldwide (Hauser, 2006).

Such an in-depth discussion of how laws, in addition to politics, are rooted in our evolutionary psychology would have made the analysis feel complete. On the whole, however, *The Origins of Political Order* is a well-written, informative, and fascinating book that should become part of college curricula everywhere. It is also tremendously important, not simply because it integrates evolution into political science, but because it does it so well.

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