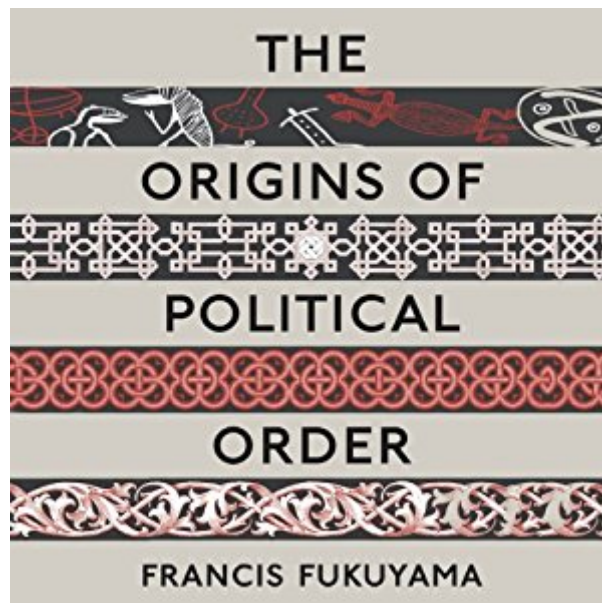




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The Origins Of Political Order: From Prehuman Times To The French Revolution



Synopsis

Virtually all human societies were once organized tribally, yet over time most developed new political institutions that included a central state that could keep the peace and uniform laws that applied to all citizens. Some went on to create governments that were accountable to their constituents. We take these institutions for granted, but they are absent or unable to function in many of today's developing countries-with often disastrous consequences for the rest of the world. Francis Fukuyama, author of the best-selling *The End of History and The Last Man*, and one of our most important political thinkers, provides a sweeping account of how today's basic political institutions developed. The first of a major two-volume work, *The Origins of Political Order* begins with politics among our primate ancestors and follows the story through the emergence of tribal societies, the growth of the first modern state in China, the beginning of the rule of law in India and the Middle East, and the development of political accountability in Europe up until the eve of the French Revolution. Drawing on a vast body of knowledge-history, evolutionary biology, archaeology, and economics-Fukuyama has produced a brilliant, provocative work that offers fresh insights on the origins of democratic societies and raises essential questions about the nature of politics and its discontents.

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Customer Reviews

I read this book after getting through Matt Ridley's "The Rational Optimist." I thoroughly enjoyed

Ridley's book but was skeptical about his single-minded emphasis on evolutionary bottom-up processes (a free market of ideas) as drivers of political development/order. Whereas Ridley almost always sees top-down governmental action as an impediment to development--something that stifles the naturalistic order produced by free market exchanges--Fukuyama takes a more even-handed, multi-dimensional and one might argue, accurate approach. Fukuyama ascribes the development of political order to the rise of governmental accountability, the rule of law, and a centralized, impersonal state/bureaucracy. To defend this premise, he tackles some of the simplifications offered by Enlightenment thinkers, Marxists and free-marketers/libertarians. For one, he shows how Enlightenment thinkers got the 'state of nature' wrong: humans evolved to hunt and gather in groups--there never was a time when individuals acted as free-agents who, in their rational self-interest, came to establish a 'social contract' wherein they would give up some liberty in order to provide for the common security (government). Instead, there was an ongoing interplay between an emergent market morality (provided by tit-for-tat exchanges), the need to wage war, and ideas (religion, ideology & normative beliefs regarding the law) that together have tended to promote the development of political order in societies. And political development, rather than being a constant progression toward some liberal-democratic or Marxist-utopian goal, is fragile and just as likely to decay as it is to progress. Furthermore, Fukuyama explains why it is futile to try to radically impose a new social order on a state (evidenced by the excesses of the French Revolution and failures of collectivist farming reform in communist societies); and also, why one cannot count on limited governments and free markets to produce political development. Fukuyama does not offer any simple causes or solutions to the problems of political development in this volume--and that's a good thing. Polemical condemnations of American imperialism, authoritarianism, and centralized government are, thankfully, nowhere to be found. Instead, some of the major contributors of political decay/disorder are described as patrimonialism (nepotism), a lack of social unity (collective exploitation by any one group), "collective action problems" (whereby individuals interests benefit from a suboptimal order) and a lack of faith in the law. The author does not expound democratic models over authoritarian models of development; nor does he consider economic development to be contingent on the rise of democratic institutions. He discusses the deficiencies of weak (inability to act decisively & tackle entrenched interests) and strong governments (potential for abuse of power). Furthermore, he provides evidence against the cynic's view that governments and political actors always seek to maximize their 'rational self-interests'--desire for recognition, institutional conservatism, and ideas being curbing factors. In all, I would say his treatment of the subject is even-handed, thorough and copiously defended with examples from across time and

regions. Fukuyama has called this book the primer that he wished he'd had as an undergrad student in political science. His style of writing is direct and well-organized. Fukuyama provides enough background information to make his discussions of most concepts and various instances of political development across regions and time comprehensible, but I still found myself getting a bit lost at times. Thankfully, he summarizes his points often and at the end of chapters. If I had to critique this book as a primer for undergrads, I'd say that perhaps it might be a bit too heavy-duty in the length and the number of examples provided by Fukuyama to make his points. However, this book is immense in scope and scale, well-reasoned and dispels a number of misconceptions starting political science students might have or might develop over time--making it invaluable to serious students. And, then again, what are professors for if not to challenge their students with "impossible" readings and then help make the difficult points understandable?

This book gives a broad historical overview of various ways in which political structure has developed in human societies, and tries to explain the reasons for the wide differences that have emerged. There is a whole lot that I liked about the book, I learned a lot from it, and I would recommend it strongly to non-specialist readers, which includes me. As an economist who has always loved history, I've spent lots more time thinking about the economic and social influences on history (and of history) than about the political process per se. Reading this book was like taking the kaleidoscope of history, giving it a good shake, and seeing multiple unexpected patterns emerge. Fukuyama begins even before humanity emerged, with primate social ordering; a key step in that it underlines the biological "hard wired" impact on some of the determinants of political behavior. He proceeds to look at political development in some but not all of the world's great cultures -- China, India, the Muslim world (some of it, anyway) and Europe. The cross cultural approach is very enlightening: I'm old enough to have learned history as "Whig History", and looking across cultures teaches much, much more. One thing that was particularly valuable to me is Fukuyama's convincing demonstration that it is not always the economy, stupid: indeed, the economy often doesn't have much to do with it. In the field of economics, much progress has been made in challenging the assumption of "homo economicus" -- the rational individual who always proceeds on the basis of rational self interest. This needs to be done in history as well, and Fukuyama brings out the importance of totally non-economic motivations, including family feeling, religion, and the desire for respect. In the end of the book, the author presents some conclusions; one hopes that these will be more fully fleshed out in a Volume 2. When and if it appears, I will read it immediately. Some readers may not be nearly so impressed. First, there is the question of style -- the arguments and

information in this book are gripping, but the prose is less than thrilling. That doesn't have to be the case in non-fiction (consider Margaret McMillan's "The War That Ended Peace", which I am currently reading). Second, and more important, there is the issue of political point of view. Before I read this book I thought of Fukuyama mainly as the neo-conservative who argued that political development had reached its end point in American democracy, which did seem rather Whiggish (or tendentious) to me. This book very much improved my opinion of Fukuyama, but there is still some tendency to regard American democracy as the end state. We shall see. Will Fukuyama produce another book, on developments since the French Revolution? And will American democracy survive the NSA?

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