Excerpt from Liberalism and Its Discontents by Francis Fukuyama

Liberalism has been challenged in recent years not just by populists of the right, but from a renewed progressive left as well. The critique from this quarter evolved from a charge—correct in itself—that liberal societies were not living up to their own ideals of equal treatment of all groups. This critique broadened over time to attack the underlying principles of liberalism itself, such as its positing of rights in individuals rather than groups, the premise of universal human equality on which constitutions and liberal rights have been based, and the value of free speech and scientific rationalism as methods of apprehending truth. In practice, this has led to intolerance of views that deviate from the new progressive orthodoxy, and the use of different forms of social and state power to enforce that orthodoxy. Dissident voices have been ousted from positions of influence and books effectively banned, often not by governments but by powerful organizations that control their mass distribution.

Populists on the right and progressives on the left are unhappy with present-day liberalism not, I would argue, because of a fundamental weakness in the doctrine. Rather, they are unhappy with the way that liberalism has evolved over the last couple of generations. Beginning in the late 1970s, economic liberalism evolved into what is now labeled neoliberalism, which dramatically increased economic inequality and brought on devastating financial crises that hurt ordinary people far more than wealthy elites in many countries around the globe. It is this inequality that is at the core of the progressive case against liberalism and the capitalist system with which it is associated. Liberalism’s institutional rules protect the rights of everyone, including existing elites who are reluctant to give up either wealth or power, and who therefore stand as obstacles to the march towards social justice for excluded groups. Liberalism constituted the ideological basis for a market economy, and hence in the minds of many is implicated in the inequalities entailed by capitalism. Many impatient young Gen Z activists in America and Europe regard liberalism as an outmoded baby boomer perspective, a “system” that is incapable of reforming itself.

At the same time, the understanding of personal autonomy expanded relentlessly, and came to be seen as a value that trumped all other visions of the good life including those put forward by traditional religions and culture. Conservatives saw this as a threat to their most deeply held beliefs, and felt that they were being actively discriminated against by mainstream society. They felt that elites were using a host of undemocratic means—their control over the mainstream media, universities, the courts and executive power—to advance their agenda. The fact that conservatives won any number of elections in this period in the United States and Europe did not seem to make any difference in slowing the tidal wave of cultural change.