

Scenes of Distress: Reflections on Francis Fukuyama's "End of History"

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"For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed!'³⁰ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.'"
Luke 23:29-30

Introduction: Geopolitics, Fukuyama, and Japan

Current international news presents a challenge, to put it mildly, for Francis Fukuyama's thesis that liberal democracy and free markets comprise the inevitable, triumphant system of human organization. With the resurgence of ideology, nationalism, and authoritarianism around the globe, with the re-assertion of regional and cultural identity, and with a growing ambivalence, if not outright hostility, toward globalization, "history" in Fukuyama's sense of the term seems to be returning with a vengeance. A quarter century after Fukuyama's essay ("The End of History," 1989) and book (*The End of History and the Last Man*, 1992), the world appears to be taking on a decidedly "Huntingtonian" cast. Samuel Huntington's rival thesis, the "Clash of Civilizations," predicted that cultural primacy among the world's great civilizational blocs would drive events and override the forces of globalization, the basis for Fukuyama's more hopeful projections.[\(1\)](#)

However, the dramatic, real time repudiation of Fukuyama's thesis distracts from a question that is equally important, if not more so. Let us suppose that the "end of history" were to proceed as Fukuyama projected, and that all ideological alternatives were indeed discredited and abandoned. In such a case, could the "end of history" succeed, not against ideological opponents, but on *its own terms*? This question, as to whether Fukuyama's post-historical society could survive its own success, worried Fukuyama himself, who was convinced that the end of history *would* succeed. He wrote the "last man" section of his book to address precisely this concern.

Real world examples are not lacking, though. Japan presents a particularly interesting case for exploring this aspect of Fukuyama's thesis, for investigating what the end of history would look like, and for asking what kind of society, what kind of *person* it would produce.

Fukuyama himself made much of Japan as a kind of advance guard for post-historical developments.

Yet Japan is not the same country it was when Fukuyama first advanced his thesis a quarter century ago. Japan's "bubble economy" was already collapsing when Fukuyama's book came out. A continuous period of stagnation and economic insecurity has followed, along with persistently elevated rates of suicide and depression. The widespread psychological distress, excellently documented by Junko Kitanaka (*Depression in Japan*), has ushered in the trend of mass palliative medication, and to some extent, redefined the terms of social existence itself. There has also been a rise in social isolation with substantial numbers of people removing themselves from society, or any social interaction at all. Furthermore, the burgeoning population of the elderly has presented increasingly urgent, even intractable problems of care in a society no longer buffered by the bonds of extended families. Given these demographics, democratic mandates tend more and more to be socialist in nature.

Any one of these developments would present problems for an optimistic reading of Fukuyama's thesis. Taken together, they might be considered a looming catastrophe at the end of history, indicating that Fukuyama's world is *not sustainable*. Insofar as his "end of history" succeeds, it carries within it the seeds of its own unraveling. It establishes a society that cannot renew itself, and which must inevitably collapse under its own weight. While the twin forces of liberal democracy and free market capitalism do indeed have, as Fukuyama so well observes, a forward momentum that is unstoppable, they leave in their wake a spent and nonviable social and economic order; one whose weaknesses are already becoming apparent. I hope to make this case economically, psychologically, demographically, and politically, by examining these four factors in Japan: the very nation Fukuyama regarded to be a showpiece for his thesis.

In the background of this reflection is Eric Gans, the founder of generative anthropology (GA), who has consistently endorsed Fukuyama's thesis (for instance, *Chronicles* 174, 227, 498, 503, and 527). Like Fukuyama, Gans sees liberal democracy and the market system as the best hopes for establishing a stable, peaceful, and flourishing human order. The main downside Gans identifies in this system is "victimary thinking" which can be broadly understood as identity politics. However, in Japan, where identity politics are as yet a novel distraction, the unraveling of the social order has little to do with victimary thinking. Thus, I would argue that the peculiarities of Western partisan politics may work to limit the conceptual focus of GA, and distract from what are more important civilizational dilemmas.

In this reflection I first offer a brief overview of Fukuyama's "end of history" argument. I then outline what I regard to be its strengths, including its resonance with GA. In the main section of this essay I elaborate on the challenges to Fukuyama posed by contemporary Japan, indicating a failure at the "end of history." Finally, I conclude with more general reflections about the global predicament and the direction of GA. Overall, this reflection is

not intended as an *attack* on Fukuyama's thesis, which in many ways is admirably clear-sighted, but as a critical engagement. Fukuyama's problem was not that he was wrong *per se* but often, if anything, more right than he realized. Specifically, he was not wrong to put Japan, and by extension East Asia, at the cutting edge of history. Yet developments in Japan call into question the sustainability of his "post-historical" future, and Japan's demographic trends in particular seem to augur a disconcertingly literal interpretation of "last man."

Fukuyama's End of History in Brief

The context of Fukuyama's essay and book was the end of the Cold War, dramatically realized with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the "Iron Curtain," the rapid collapse of communist governments in the Eastern bloc nations, and soon after that the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself in 1991. However, Fukuyama pointed out that long-standing authoritarian regimes around the world had also been collapsing, often bloodlessly, on the right, for instance in Spain (in the late 1970s), and Chile, South Korea and the Philippines (in the late 1980s). The trend was clear: the world was turning steadily, swiftly, and often unexpectedly, toward liberal democracy and free market capitalism. Together they were proving to be the ultimate, optimal, final, and triumphant system of government. It was no longer a question of *if* but of how long the rest of the world would take to enter the fold.

Fukuyama argued that this process would continue until the entire world had effectively adopted democracy and capitalism. He called this the "end of history," a term and idea taken directly from Hegel.⁽²⁾ Fukuyama's thesis is from beginning to end a Hegelian one, though he also made much use of Hegel's 20th century interpreter Alexandre Kojève. The "end of history" did not mean that time or human events would cease but that "history," if it is defined as the great contest of empires and ideologies, would simply cease to exist as such. The default winner was liberal democracy and capitalism. All viable alternatives had been or were in the process of being defeated, discredited, or dissolved. While there would certainly be holdouts and even regressions along the way, the overall direction was clear. It might be useful to think of the "end of history" as a milder, secular version of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's "Omega Point," a singularity of integrated human development that would introduce a qualitatively different level of consciousness. Likewise, the "end of history" is the "end" of one state but also the beginning of another.

Fukuyama made much of Japan as a model for his thesis. Not so very long ago Japan had invested its all in the fascistic, expansionist State Shintoism of Imperial Japan. Following its devastating defeat in World War II, a democratic constitution was imposed on Japan by the U.S., as occupiers. This small, crowded, ruined, impoverished and humiliated nation, poor in natural resources (and hardly a natural heir to liberal democracy), rose through wits and pluck and human capital to develop into a solid civil society with stable democratic institutions, and became an industrial and economic powerhouse. Fukuyama focused on post-war Japan extensively in his book, paying particular attention to its "economic miracle"

and Japan's famous worker culture. Fukuyama was impressed with the corporate culture of the overworked "salaryman" who gave his all to the company, receiving in recompense a sense of belonging, or Hegelian "recognition,"⁽³⁾ meaning roughly, sufficient respect or acknowledgement as an autonomous human agent.

Yet Fukuyama was impressed not just that Japan had adopted liberal democracy and capitalism with such astonishing (and unexpected) success, but that it had become one of the great *evangelists* for both, through the marketing of its high quality products around the world. Japan had become the promoter of a sophisticated global consumer culture and presented an example of national success that was already becoming the envy of peers, particularly in East Asia. Fukuyama noted in particular the Asian "Tigers" (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan) that were set to reproduce Japan's success.

Fukuyama developed the "last man" component of his thesis to consider what kind of human being would emerge when the end of history's triumph was complete. The last man was taken from Nietzsche,⁽⁴⁾ and Fukuyama also made use of a parallel idea from C. S. Lewis, "men without chests."⁽⁵⁾ These were the small-minded, rationalistic, materially preoccupied, self-interested humans who would emerge as the norm at the end stage of a materialistic or technocratic society. Fukuyama worried likewise that in a post-historical world where no more great battles or great causes could inspire humanity, we would lose some essential component of heroism, of idealism. Fukuyama was concerned that humanity would lose its soul, or in C. S. Lewis's stark terms, "man" as such would cease to exist. Fukuyama took these concerns quite seriously but was guardedly optimistic, and argued that while it was true there would no longer be great causes or battles to rally behind, those of heroic bent could find—were indeed already finding—their "niche" in activities provided by the free market in a free society. They could, he observed, test their mettle in courageous physical challenges such as rock-climbing, hang-gliding, whitewater rafting, or equivalent pursuits.

Positively Assessing Fukuyama's Thesis

Fukuyama's geopolitical projection has been arguably the most widely cited and discussed since the end of the Cold War. Its closest rival is the "Clash of Civilizations" thesis explicitly developed (also in an essay and book) by Fukuyama's teacher Samuel Huntington as a refutation of his former student's position. Fukuyama's thesis is thought provoking, well stated, well-informed, and deeply informative. It provides a powerful framework even for those who would contest it, including Huntington.

On some levels, it is very hard to quarrel with Fukuyama. For instance, whether or not one applauds the spread of liberal democracy, consumer capitalism, and globalization, it is hard to deny that they *have* spread, and have been extremely powerful forces, often virtually unstoppable. Like the Borg civilization in *Star Trek's Next Generation* series, they seem to

conquer and co-opt the strengths of nearly every system in their path. In the words of the Borg, "Resistance is futile. You will be assimilated." To those ambivalent about or hostile to globalization, Fukuyama was, if anything, too correct.

Fukuyama was also right about Japan and Asia, more than he would have predicted. Japan is more politically mature than it was 25 years ago (Fukuyama found Japan's then one party rule by the Liberal Democratic Party underdeveloped), and the "Asian Tigers" now include other emergent or emerging economies like Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and before long Cambodia and Myanmar. China has quickly grown to dominate global markets while (contra Fukuyama's thesis) retaining an official communist ideology and pursuing nationalistic goals and aggressive territorial ambitions, so it remains to be seen if China will ultimately follow a "Huntingtonian" course. Nevertheless, it could plausibly be argued that political and economic developments of this "Asian Century," taken as a whole, vindicate Fukuyama's vision.

What of GA? Eric Gans has consistently endorsed Fukuyama's thesis, though never without caveats, including the term "end of history" itself. It is important to note the general consonance between Fukuyama and Gans. The consonance is a natural one because of the emphasis in generative anthropology upon the market and the exchange system, both real and symbolic. Though originating in mimetic theory, GA does not see the world in the same apocalyptic terms, especially those spelled out in Rene Girard's last great work, *Battling to the End*. In the GA view, the exchange of *signs* and *goods* can and does defer violence. In this regard, Fukuyama and Gans use different terms but talk about very similar things.

For Fukuyama, the key to understanding participation in political and economic life in a liberal democratic order is that it allows people to get a sense of Hegelian recognition. Gans tends rather to interpret the same things in terms of *resentment*: voting and economic participation allow people to discharge and recycle resentment, and transform it into positive good for society. More recently, Gans has seen both the administration of Barack Obama *and* the election of Donald Trump as operating more or less successfully within Fukuyama's paradigm, where ongoing negotiation of values between left and right (in this case specifically about "victimary thinking") unfold within the framework of liberal democracy and the market system. Obama's "arc of history"—that the direction of history was inherently toward social justice—essentially took an end of history perspective (Chronicle 503), while Gans argues that Trump's election has renegotiated the terms of victimary thinking (Chronicle 527). In other words, identity politics present an ever expanding range of seemingly non-negotiable propositions, based on resentment, which threaten the give and take of a functioning democracy. The right re-negotiates this range, hopefully at a pace faster than or at least equal to the generation of new resentments. Yet both left and right actually work within the same framework and toward the same end: the triumph, in one form or another, of the market system and the liberal democratic order.

Failure at the “End of History”: The Case of Japan

As noted, geopolitics is moving away from rather than toward Fukuyama’s ideal, but the challenge I issue to Fukuyama is from within his system rather than without, societal rather than geopolitical. I argue that Fukuyama’s world is not sustainable, and make the case economically, psychologically, demographically, and politically, by examining these respective factors in Japan.

Scenes of Economic Distress

Fukuyama made his analysis of Japan with its “economic miracle” in mind. A quarter century later, we are better able to assess this aspect of Fukuyama’s thesis, but even at the time his essay and book came out (the early 90s), Japan was experiencing what came to be known as the collapse of its economic “bubble.” The bubble in specific terms related to extraordinarily inflated land prices that were tied into banks and the lending mechanisms that underwrote “Japan Inc.” (corporate Japan in the bubble years). Now it has come to signify more generally the surreal extravagance and frivolity of the era, roughly equivalent to “the Gilded Age” in the U.S. In popular culture, the “*bubble jidai*” (bubble era), particularly of the 1980s, is looked upon both sardonically and nostalgically as a great, wild, naïve, fun-filled illusion.[\(6\)](#)

Post-bubble Japan presents a much different economic picture, one characterized by stagnation, uncertainty, and decline. The long recession, first called the “lost decade” of the 90s, extended itself into the 2000s, and up to the global financial crisis of 2008 (Tsutsui and Mazzotta, 67-73). That crisis further undermined many of the great manufacturers Fukuyama so much admired, including Toshiba (which he praised for introducing the joys of consumerism to Iran), now in a state of imminent disintegration after hiding its losses for years (Fuse). Olympus lied about its finances for decades and is now a shadow of its former self (Hawkes and Goodley). The electronics giant Sharp was recently sold off to a Taiwanese manufacturer after suffering continuous losses, and Sony, Hitachi and Panasonic have only survived by scaling back and refocusing production, while their more limber Asian competitors now lead the fields they once dominated (Yoshida). Thus, to the extent that Fukuyama *was* right economically, namely, the replication of Japan’s success in other East Asian nations, it has also meant that Japan’s economic and industrial power have steadily eroded as its competitors become the newer centers of vitality.

It is important to recall in this context Fukuyama’s focus on the then famous work culture of Japan, as exemplified by the overworked but dedicated salaryman, the lifelong employee who got a sense of Hegelian *recognition* from his company identity, however poorly he might be rewarded or enriched personally relative to his output. Fukuyama generalized this, somewhat naïvely though understandably, to the entire worker culture of Japan. However, the post-bubble period, which in a sense introduced *real* capitalistic forces into Japan, as

opposed to a somewhat benign corporate paternalism, also introduced *risutora*: restructuring, or downsizing. Many workers have lost or can lose their jobs as companies struggle to cut costs and compete with more vibrant economies, or relocate or outsource industrial production to other Asian countries.

Lifelong job security is by no means the norm at present; for instance, the percentage of workers who are working either part-time or hired on short-term contracts has risen dramatically, standing now at about 40% (“Plight of Irregular Workers”). Thus, an increasing number of workers find they are only as valuable as their skill set until the termination of their contracts, or the bankruptcy of their company, or its cannibalization through mergers and acquisitions. This has introduced, increasingly, a two-tiered society in Japan, and a growing split between the stably and unstably employed, who very often work side by side. The Japan that Fukuyama so much admired was in many ways a universally middle class society, and his characterization of Hegelian recognition applied rather well when this social compact was in force and everyone’s contribution to society was valued, if not equally, at least sufficiently. Clearly this is no longer the case.

Another recent development is that both the stably and unstably employed may find themselves in shamelessly exploitative work environments typified by notoriously ruthless “black companies,” which focus aggressively on the bottom line (Suzuki). This is indicative yet again of the advance of “real” capitalism in Japan, as opposed to paternalistic corporatism. Again, even if one can see merit in this relatively unbridled mode of capitalism, in the form, for example, of more economic vigor, one certainly *cannot* see Fukuyama’s “recognition,” however well such a characterization may have applied during the bubble years. The contemporary work culture of Japan bears little resemblance to the one Fukuyama described. He was describing a temporary—and depending how one looks at it, illusory—period of economic success, not a permanent aspect of society.

This is a crucial point because Fukuyama’s projection is long term by definition: the “end of history.” If he held up as exemplar what amounts to a temporary stage of economic development lasting a decade or two, then clearly Japan as it was in the bubble years can no longer be considered valid support for his thesis. Conceivably, one could look to reinforce Fukuyama’s thesis elsewhere, for instance, by looking at Japan’s successful Asian competitors. Yet it would be just as easy, and more plausible, to see that success, too, as a temporary stage of economic development, and one that will end in more or less the same way: stagnation, uncertainty, and decline.

One could in fact project a wave of prosperity for global consumerist capitalism, advancing as Fukuyama describes but leaving everywhere in its wake not stably prosperous societies but a hollowed out economy and labor force. The “end of history” is, in other words, a kind of global economic bubble. The “cutting edge” of the bubble surges ahead like a tide, disruptive, destructive, with no regard to consequences, and with no reference for success

other than itself. Unfortunately, the bubble brings along more than just economic debilitation.

Scenes of Psychological Distress

Unsurprisingly, the period following the collapse of the economic bubble in Japan saw a dramatic increase in clinical depression, along with elevated levels of suicide that were already quite high in comparison to other industrialized nations. Depression became as much an issue among the stably employed as among those who were experiencing the brunt of the economic decline, and to the surprise of few in Japan, the overworked salaryman, so lionized by Fukuyama, easily became someone whose depression caused him or her to be hospitalized. In fact, many high profile cases of suicide—high profile because they resulted in litigation, leading in turn to new laws and workplace guidelines—concerned victims who worked for prestigious corporations, whose depression and suicide were directly linked to the workplace environment.⁽⁷⁾

The widespread depression necessitated a new public consciousness; while there was traditionally a strong stigma associated with emotional illness and a reluctance to talk about it, openness was needed now because depression had become too large a problem to ignore. This process, superbly documented by Junko Kitanaka in the book *Depression in Japan: Psychiatric Cures for a Society in Distress*, was a complex and multifaceted one, but it could roughly be characterized as twofold. On the one hand, depression was *medicalized*, and approached as a biological illness that could be treated with medicine. For instance, Kitanaka notes prominent ad campaigns for pharmaceuticals that called depression a “cold of the heart” (14). This sort of campaign lifted the stigma of depression by characterizing it as nothing to be ashamed of, comparing it to catching a common cold, and facilitating the acceptance of psychotropic medication. In this way, mass medication for depression was introduced to Japan. On the other hand, and at the same time, a somewhat contradictory public *narrative* about depression emerged that identified its nexus in intractable situations, social expectations, and human relations, particularly in the work environment. To no small extent, this led to a subtle redefinition of social existence itself; it was a potential scene of distress that might overcome anyone, anytime, anywhere, for any number of reasons.

The psychosocial scene in Japan indicates that the “last man” is (contra Fukuyama, Nietzsche, and Lewis) not a small-minded person but a deeply *distressed* one. The twin forces of liberal democracy and consumer capitalism, even when most successful—perhaps especially when most successful—appear to be poorly calibrated toward fulfillment or human happiness, at least not for the multitude that need to stay medicated.

Another sign that the social order has become increasingly dysfunctional in Japan is that many are withdrawing from it.⁽⁸⁾ In childhood, this has often taken the form of *futouko* (“school refusal”): prolonged absence from school. In adolescence and young adulthood it

has manifested as various forms of co-dependence, most strikingly *hikikomori* (“pull-inside”), who for extended periods, sometimes indefinitely, do not leave their home, and sometimes even their bedroom. Other kinds of social isolation have been emerging among the middle aged or elderly.⁽⁹⁾ The term *muen shakai* (“no relationship society”) was for a short time an umbrella term (no longer current) for people who live alone and have virtually no meaningful social relationships. The most striking manifestation of this phenomenon has been *kotokushi* (“lonely death”): isolated individuals who die alone in their homes, often undiscovered for days due to their lack of social contact.

There is certainly a tendency, inside and outside of Japan, to sensationalize such developments. Nevertheless, taking these psychosocial trends as a whole, it is fair to observe that debilitating neuroses and social isolation have become a common and even normal condition in Japanese society. This appears to be the legacy of Japan’s economic miracle, the last man at the end of history.

Scenes of Demographic Distress

A grim irony is that the last man may literally become *the last man*. Japan’s population implosion is now widely known, with fertility and birth rates far below replacement level, a rapidly aging society, a depleted labor force, and a strained safety net emerging as the nation struggles to allocate resources while fewer and fewer tax-paying workers support more and more aging retirees (Eberstadt, Pilling). Less well known outside Japan (though a constant topic in media within it) are the concrete difficulties involved as the nation comes to term with its aging population. Directly or indirectly, virtually everyone in Japan has been affected by the problems of the aging society.

Much of this is not immediately apparent in the middle of the bustling urban centers, but rural areas have been hollowing out for decades, and it is now in the areas ringing cities that the texture of life in an aging society can be most strikingly observed (“Desperately Seeking Young People”). In some areas, it is rare to see any children or young adults. Care facilities for the aged, both live-in accommodations and day care facilities, continue to proliferate in suburban neighborhoods. Care is now a growth industry and a major source of employment, often a default one with the decline of formerly vibrant sectors in the lingering post-bubble recession. Since 2000, government-supported care increased in response to families overwhelmed with the care of aging parents (Holder). Now the government typically supports 90% of care through insurance (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research) which has been incentivizing its growth and spurred the current explosion of facilities. However, these facilities may become less financially viable when government support is inevitably reduced (Brasor and Tsubuku). At any rate, they are not sufficient to accommodate the projected aging population, and there is also expected to be a shortage of care workers (Japan Nursing Association). Work in the care industry is often difficult and poorly compensated, and there are frequently cases of depression and fatigue

connected with it (Eberstadt, Japan Support Center).

To the extent that publicly assisted care is reduced, the burden of care for the aged will increasingly fall back on families (Oi, Japan Support Center). A key difficulty is that families themselves are much smaller now, often down to two or three people, and the caretakers themselves may be quite old, a phenomenon now called *roro kaigo* (“care of the aged by the aged”). Many people middle-aged or older may experience a sudden downward mobility into poverty when they quit their jobs to care for aging parents (“Japan’s Middle-aged Workers”). It should be noted that caregivers like these are often facing the situation alone; no family is available to care for them when their time comes.

Senile dementia is a particularly acute problem for caregivers. It is projected that by 2025 one in four people in Japan over 65 will have senile dementia, which is one in twenty people in the general population (Eberstadt). This is already an urgent public safety concern and incidents connected with it such as fatal traffic accidents, fires, and missing persons, are now quite common (McCurry, Japan Support Center, “Car Accidents Rampant,”). Care for dementia can be extremely difficult, and there have been cases of abuse when caregivers at facilities snap (Japan Support Center), or even murder-suicide among distressed family members who are caregivers, famously including the tragic case of a former pop singer (Brasor).

Turning back to Fukuyama, it is striking that demographic issues were not touched upon in his essay or book, even once. This most famous of expert prognosticators failed to see what in a very short time would become the most pressing concern in Japan, the centerpiece for his post-historical future. In retrospect, it ought to have been easy to predict the population collapse and its associated ills; there was enough data available to extrapolate with small nuclear families using a little math. That Fukuyama, along with more or less the entire educated world through the 60s, 70s, 80s and even 90s, could not imagine such a demographic crisis coming, either in Japan or beyond, cries out for explanation. How did such conceptual blindness become so pervasive that educated people could not grasp the fact that modern society might need babies?

A provisional answer is that a “population crisis” was conceptualized only in terms of swollen populations, scarce resources, and privation. Fukuyama seems to have adopted this view, albeit tacitly, as axiomatic. Thus, the good life in the paradigm of liberal democracy and consumer capitalism was equated with small families (if children were even considered at all) and the bad life with overpopulation and poverty, what the end of history was destined to overcome. But Fukuyama, along with most of the rest of us, missed the fact that children are the wealth of a given society, not its detriment. This “lost wisdom” is now blindingly obvious, but it seems to have been rediscovered too late to reverse the downward demographic spiral.

Scenes of Politics: The End of Capitalism?

It is easy to look at Japan from the perspectives of partisan politics in the West, but post-war Japan, whether in boom or bust, has nearly always been governed within a statist consensus, wobbling slightly between center-right and center-left, and generally with very low voter turnout and widespread emotional detachment from the “political process.” It seems clear now that Japan as a political order is morphing *de facto* into socialism, whatever name is ultimately applied to it. Japan must of necessity veer more and more to the “left,” but not for ideological reasons. It is simply that there’s nothing remaining for it to do; society has to make arrangements for the aging and the incapacitated, and to step in to provide basic benefits (e.g. insurance, pension supplements, welfare) for the workers who can no longer get the kind of positions that used to provide such benefits when the economy was booming.

These dependent groups also constitute voting blocs that—assuming the constituents vote at all—will likely vote in the end not for robust capitalism but for their particular self-interest, meaning the public safety net standing between them and total destitution. Thus, if Japan is any indication, Fukuyama’s system relies on a reciprocal synthesis of liberal democracy and free market capitalism that must, as a *democratic* order, progressively vote capitalism out of existence. However, to look at this in terms of right or left seems to be like adopting opposite and reinforcing errors, at least in the Japanese context. In these views, either capitalism has failed and we need to adopt socialism, or socialism fails to produce growth and therefore we need to go back to capitalism. In fact, capitalism has succeeded spectacularly well and, because of its success, has undermined the basis for growth. As a result, it must now morph into socialism. Socialism ultimately cannot sustain itself because it does not generate sufficient wealth, and capitalism cannot sustain itself because it generates a preponderance of wealth best enjoyed by singles, childless couples, or if one insists on children, at most small nuclear families. This demographic decline leads to a society that cannot sustain growth, whether it is governed on the basis of a progressive or conservative approach: in the end it will be progressive by default as the statist, interventionist dispensing of public welfare benefits becomes the paradigm.

From a *post-historical* perspective Japan, the near perfect exemplar for the end of history, simply cannot sustain its success. The end of history is in fact the “end of capitalism” insofar as the state must intervene increasingly to fill in the gaps in social support that cannot be addressed by the market economy. This is certainly the case now as the focus of intervention shifts increasingly from futile initiatives to boost the birthrate, or attempts to revive Japan’s national success via monetary policy like “Abenomics,” toward an attempt to manage the social decline in practical and reasonably humane ways—essentially a throwing up of hands. This consumes more and more of the energy of government and, so to speak, sucks all of the other air out of the room.

Conclusion

Japan, limited militarily by its own constitution, is not among the world's top military players, nor is it torn by such polarizing ideological struggles as those that roil so much of the West. The very fact that Japan has existed in this kind of blessed, if now more precarious, isolation makes it particularly illuminating for assessing Fukuyama's thesis, apart from the "noise" of history. Japan shows that the ideal society Fukuyama describes cannot viably propagate itself long-term. Even in the absence of imminent external threats, as is evidenced by Japan's national security and access to trade under the protection of the US military umbrella for decades, and even as a "post-ideological" country, the end of history can't work in Japan. If it cannot work here, of all places, how could it ever work anywhere? It is little surprise in this regard that Japan's problems, particularly its demographic problems, are being replicated in Europe and in other East Asian countries (Pilling), and before long will be spreading to the developing world (Roser).

A group of analysts led by Susan Yoshihara and Douglas Zerlov have recently begun connecting demographic decline with the Huntingtonian projections presented at the beginning of this reflection.[\(10\)](#) Counterintuitively, the "geriatric" nations may *not* be the calm and rationally calculating ones but will likely be prone to use military force in impulsive and unpredictable ways from a sense of their own depleted position of strength. Likewise, neighbors may sense the weaknesses of demographically challenged nations and may be duly emboldened. Thus, demographic decline could very well introduce a new and destabilizing calculus into the so-called "clash of civilizations." Whether or not this view, or for that matter Huntington's, turns out to be vindicated, what is less in dispute is that demographics will be directing and shaping the world in upcoming decades, much more than the post-historical forces that were the focus of Fukuyama's analysis.

That Gans continues to endorse Fukuyama's thesis raises the obvious question, in the context of this reflection, of whether he is correct to do so. There is no intellectual *diktat* that Fukuyama's thesis and GA must converge, but there are prominent commonalities, as mentioned earlier, particularly with regard to participation in the market and democracy as a way of negotiating resentment, usually subsumed by Fukuyama under the treatment of recognition. One way to reconcile the resonance between Fukuyama and GA with the manifest shortcomings of the former may be this; just as Fukuyama astutely observed the forward momentum of liberal democracy and the market economy while failing to predict their aftermath, so has Gans insightfully analyzed the same process from the GA perspective, though neglecting the downsides, unless they have to do with victimary thinking. As I have argued earlier, though, and as I hope this reflection has shown at a minimum, Japan demonstrates that there are profound economic, psychological, social, and demographic problems at the "end of history" that have nothing to do with identity politics.

How might GA, with its unique perspective on "the human," address these quintessentially

human problems connected with labor, social relations, psychosocial pathology, or demographics? I am not competent to analyze Hegel but can at least offer the intuition *either* that GA premises do not align particularly well with the “master-slave” dialectic, or that GA needs to develop a much different approach to it than Fukuyama.[\(11\)](#) Fukuyama seems to have gone astray with his application of the dialectic in his treatment of recognition, since, equipped with this “anthropology,” he could not grasp the most basic components of a human scene, and certainly not enough to anticipate current conditions, not even at a birds-and-bees level (population and reproduction). In contrast, GA by its very nature apprehends “the human” as existing within a communally signifying scene that, as a matter of course, encompasses the problems of co-existence, reciprocity, distribution, and long-term survival and flourishing—as opposed to one-to-one contests of will. It seems that for GA to rise to its potential here, it needs to play to its own strengths. Or, to consider it another way, to apprehend communal or societal dysfunction, GA may need to move beyond resentment. As a social model, GA certainly has an advantage over mimetic theory, which cannot comprehend social cohesion as anything other than an effluence of sacrificial violence.

One surprisingly hopeful contribution—surprising because it is a literary study concerning non-humans in dystopian science fiction—is Andrew Bartlett’s *Mad Scientist, Impossible Human*. In addressing the objectification of the human vis-à-vis science and technology, Bartlett takes pains to articulate an alternate vision of the human as communally situated, both humanized and humanizing through participation in labor, consumption, and exchange, as well as social, romantic, family, and community life: the agony and horror of Mary Shelley’s monster is that he cannot share in any of this. Bartlett’s vision, thoroughly informed by GA, is a deeply humanistic one and quite useful in thinking through the human within a different dystopian context—namely the currently unfolding one, as described in this essay. Another relevant contribution is Benjamin Matthews’ analysis of alternative work environments in the present issue of *Anthropoetics*. Matthews shows how such emerging communities structure the chain of command in such a way as to acknowledge and “humanize” the contributors, without ignoring market realities.

In my view, both Bartlett’s and Matthews’ studies connect with the original “social justice” that developed in the context of 19th and 20th century Catholic social teaching to articulate the principle of *subsidiarity*, or the scaling down of social responsibility to the lowest practical levels, and the economic philosophy of “distributism,” where ownership and production are established as far as possible at the smallest human scale.[\(12\)](#) These twin concepts were proposed to address the inherent weaknesses of socialist collectivism and capitalist corporatism, both of which stripped human beings of property and alienated them from their own labor, their fellows, and their sense of worth. In fact, Japan’s “post-historical” crisis is unfolding uncannily closely to what was predicted by distributist thinkers: the inexorable morphing of capitalism into socialism, a nonviable social and economic order, and a disfigurement of the psyche.[\(13\)](#) It may be worthwhile, therefore, to

follow up this reflection by considering subsidiarity and distributist thought from a GA framework, and to examine alternative business and community models along the same lines that Matthews has explored digital collectives.

As a final note of concession to Fukuyama, the implausibility of Japan serving as a model for the “end of history” is not an occasion for smug naysaying, but something to be truly regretted. The qualities that make Japan such a pleasant and interesting place are very “Fukuyaman” ones: including the advanced infrastructure, the civic culture, and the in many ways fair and egalitarian social system, all coexisting alongside Japan’s strong retention of cultural distinctiveness. A global civilization structured along such lines might have been a very fine one indeed. One can hardly fault Fukuyama for having recognized a good thing when he saw it, and it is arguable that no nation has made a better “go” of realizing Fukuyama’s ideal. The inherent fragility of advanced, industrialized democracies is tragic for it indicates the end, not of history, but of a very grand dream.

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Notes

1. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" and *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. ([back](#))
2. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. ([back](#))
3. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*. ([back](#))
4. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. ([back](#))
5. *The Abolition of Man*. ([back](#))
6. For a representative recent example see the au "1980 Shock!" television commercial for Y!mobile phone service. The humorous time travel premise, featuring actress Mirei Kiritani and a cameo from the 1980s diva Minako Tanaka, pokes fun at the dazzling but ridiculous spirit of the bubble years. ([back](#))

7. The most emblematic recent case is the suicide of 24 year old Matsuri Takahashi, which led to the resignation of the president of Dentsu Corporation. Her mother now leads a campaign for the reform of labor conditions. See Rothwell. [\(back\)](#)
8. I described these phenomena in a previous article for *Anthropoetics*, "Strategies of Dissociation." [\(back\)](#)
9. I surveyed this phenomenon in the *Anthropoetics* article, "Not with a Bang but a Whimper." [\(back\)](#)
10. The title of their edited volume, *Population Decline and the Remaking of Great Power Politics*, is a nod to Huntington: *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. [\(back\)](#)
11. *The Phenomenology of Mind*. [\(back\)](#)
12. See for instance G.K. Chesterton's *The Outline of Sanity*, Hilaire Belloc's *The Servile State*, and E. F. Schumacher's well-known update of distributist ideas in the 1970s, *Small Is Beautiful*. [\(back\)](#)
13. See for instance Chesterton, 40-43, and Cooney. [\(back\)](#)