

After the End of History

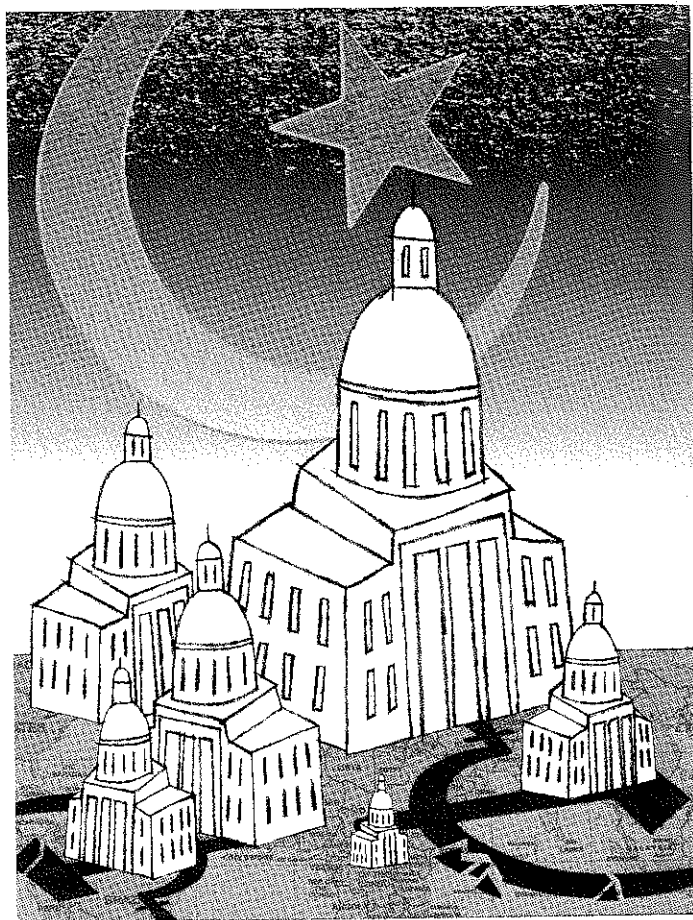
Julian Levinson

I found myself more truly and more strange.
—Wallace Stevens, “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon”

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away—1989 in the U.S.A. to be exact—a grand theory was bandied about that sought to explain the state of the world now that communism seemed to be in its final death throes. The theory, cooked up in reactionary think tanks and sent coursing through the collective national psyche, went by the ominous-sounding name of “the End of History.” A convergence of Manifest Destiny and Hegelian philosophy, it asserted that if by history we mean the progressive development of social life established through conflict between opposing world views, then history in this sense had ended. In more concise words: the West had won, and it was a gosh darn good thing, too. With the end of the Cold War, the only political system left standing in the field was liberal democracy, the only ideology possessive individualism, the only economic system free market capitalism. Communism, according to the theory, had been humankind’s last great effort to overthrow the dominant system and institute a new system based on a countervailing vision of human life. Now it was only a matter of time before every nation came around to embrace the basic ideals that were allegedly already in place in America, notions such as social equality, equality before the law, freedom of speech, and popular sovereignty. History as the scene of bloody revolutions and seismic cultural transformations had culminated in this, a world of nations designed as carbon copies of American democracy.

Hope, according to this view, was no mere thing with feathers. It was tangible in the collapse of the Berlin Wall. It was visible in images of people throughout the world suddenly wearing Benetton and drinking Coke. It was demonstrable according to statistics: from a grand total of three liberal democracies in 1790, the sum had risen to 61 by 1990, said Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History and the Last Man*. Most of all, hope in this new age was guaranteed

Julian Levinson is the Samuel Shetzer Professor of American Jewish Studies at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He is currently writing a book on self-invention and cultural politics in Jewish American literature.



by a singular (and cynically reductive) conception of human nature. At their core, said the voice of the End of History, humans are a bundle of basic and calculable needs. In short, they want things. And now that we’ve reached our superlative level of technological progress and finally hit upon the right political system, we can finally give the people what they want. Or at least make them think they’re on their way to getting what they want.

Today this version of unimpeded progress cannot help but seem slightly antiquated, at least to those with enough patience to tabulate casualties. It is like looking back at the fourth act of a tragedy from the standpoint of the fifth, after the hero has been trapped by his flaw. The endgame of history, it now appears, has been interrupted by a most recalcitrant foe, the uncooperative Islamic Other. Holed up in Najaf mosques, constructing nuclear arsenals in Teheran, infiltrat-

POLITICS

ing our office buildings and airports, "they" have derailed the smooth transition to a new world order of pliant, structurally identical nation states. Where once we saw one nation after another turning in their authoritarian regimes and joining the free market, we now have the prospect of endless battles against radically benighted enemies who reject all things American—our political system, our products, our lifestyle. In place of the End of History, we suddenly have a new paradigm: the Clash of Civilizations. (Of course, as in Nietzsche's eternal recurrence or Freud's return of the repressed, it may be but an old paradigm in a new guise, with a genuflecting, Koran-waving adversary rather than a coldly calculating communist one.) Already the voices for international trade agreements and global institutions are being overpowered by less sanguine voices for strengthened security measures and a retrenchment of American patriotism. And many progressives, who were suspicious about all of this Benetton and Coke being such a good thing all along, are suddenly terrified to realize how salient their critiques of globalization and American imperialism have been.

So where do we look for hope amidst our current wreckage? What does this new arrangement have to teach us about ourselves, our politics, and the work before us? One option, available mostly to those on the Right, is to cling doggedly to the idea that global uniformity modeled on American blueprints is still the ultimate destiny for the nations of the world, our current dilemmas being mere glitches in an otherwise perfect system. Another option, available to those on the Left (and not wholly without merit), is to redouble our efforts at *protest*, saturated as we are with proof of American destructiveness. But even this response, while vital, would not necessarily generate a renewed basis for hope, I fear. And without hope, protest can become its own form of violence, merely replicating in our own neighborhoods a version of the military conflicts in the Middle East. Let us all, then, rethink our place in the march of time.

The flaw inherent in the End of History scenario—one from which we all might learn—lies in the belief that the status quo we have arrived at is rational, that it has worked its way to the surface through an ineluctable development and that our only task is to remove the barriers to its universal extension. Whenever we worship rationality in this way, we forget that when we institute the systems according to which

we live, we always act on imperfect knowledge—not just imperfect data or an imperfect understanding of causes and effects, but imperfect knowledge of our very selves and of our own deepest motives. This is a lesson that must be learned and relearned, ever and anon. In a very real sense, we are fundamentally strange even to ourselves. Something remains hidden, whether it be in the recesses of the psyche or in the ultimately mysterious surface of an external world that beckons us while simultaneously withdrawing its secret when we felt ourselves on the brink of some ultimate decoding. And so what we have contrived to produce and set in stone is mutable. Or as it says in the old Yiddish proverb: *Der mentsh trakht un got lakht* (Man proposes, God disposes). The end that we have created will end over and over again.

This is not to say that effort is irrelevant, all insight mere delusion. What it does suggest is that we tread lightly and more humbly when we sense our grandeur swelling, that we allow for, as Abraham Joshua Heschel puts it, "a mental interim, with the cultivation of a feeling for the unfamiliar." Global solidarity is a worthy goal, no doubt. But its prospects are dim when we conceptualize our role as the dispellers of a final enigma, the exporters of a final solution, either from the Right or from the Left. (No solution, we should know by now, should ever be considered final.) Insight must always be seen as a provisional gift from the great unknown, one that is liable to be snatched

up again as soon as we overstep its province. And when it does come, it often takes the form of a question, a renewed sense of wonder in which all past certainties are suddenly insufficient.

I find hope in this, that we have once again been shown our folly. We have received notice again that it is time to return to ourselves, or to the ultimate strangeness that we inhabit and call ourselves. Instrumental reason, calculated risk, the totally administered society. These have left us marooned in repetition compulsion, desperation, and fury at the intractable other. The basis for solidarity and the prospect for hope cannot be the relentless imposition of our own design. It can only be in the willingness to bracket our grand theories and to open ourselves to the radical novelty that lies ahead. If our unknowingness can be embraced as a blessing, then hope can enter the clearing that is suddenly, strangely opened up. □

*The endgame of history,
it now appears, has been
interrupted by a most
recalcitrant foe, the un-
cooperative Islamic Other.
Holed up in Najaf mosques,
constructing nuclear arsenals
in Teheran, infiltrating
our office buildings and
airports, "they" have derailed
the smooth transition to
a new world order.*
