

**Review of Francis Fukuyama, “The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the
Reconstitution of Social Order”**
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Francis Fukuyama is a scholar of grand ideas. In 1992, he burst onto the world intellectual stage with *The End of History and the Last Man*, which maintained that liberal democracy and capitalism had become, and would remain, the dominant forms of political and economic organisation throughout the world. Although the book ignited fierce debate in both academic and media circles, its central contentions have largely been borne out.

Three years later, Fukuyama published another Tolstoyan tome - *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*. It entered into the burgeoning social capital debate, building on the work of writers such as Robert Putnam to argue that trust was essential to building a successful economy. This time he was a little less successful in capturing the spirit of the age. This was in part because the Asian economic crisis undermined some of his strongest exemplars of high-trust and good economic performance - in particular Japan and South Korea. He also failed to distinguish sufficiently between different forms of trust. The fact that members of a street gang trust one another is not of itself good for social capital.

With *The Great Disruption*, Fukuyama moves squarely into the realm of social norms and values. His thesis is that from the early 1960s until the early 1990s, most western countries (including Australia, which he deals with somewhat sporadically) witnessed a disruption in our social order. The Great Disruption came in three forms. First, an increase in crime. Secondly, a decline in interpersonal trust. Thirdly, the breakdown of the family, which Fukuyama perceives to be the result of rising illegitimacy and divorce rates.

It is not difficult to establish a correlation between these three phenomena, and here Fukuyama is on strong ground. The difficulty arises when he attempts to establish a causal relationship. Some links are self-evident - being a victim of crime will undoubtedly make one less trusting. Others are rather more tenuous. The fact that children whose parents are divorced commit more crimes does not mean that the act of divorce is likely to lead to an increase in crime. In fact, there is some evidence that the rise in divorce rates which followed the introduction of no-fault divorce actually served to reduce crime, by cutting rates of domestic violence.

Nonetheless, having bundled crime, distrust and family breakdown together, Fukuyama sets about explaining their occurrence. He canvasses four traditional explanations. Increased inequality? It may explain a fall in interpersonal trust, but does not adequately account for crime and family breakdown. Higher average incomes? Superficially attractive, but the data do not fit - those whose behaviour changed most from the 1960s to the 1990s were those whose income grew least. Softer policies on welfare, crime and divorce? Fukuyama is somewhat receptive to this. He points out that, self-evidently, welfare creates “moral hazard”, and that perhaps various state policies contributed to family breakdown, but queries whether government policies on divorce and crime can be as effectively linked to rising rates of both. Lastly, changed cultural norms? Undoubtedly, the twentieth century has seen a steady change in moral values, beginning with philosophers, psychologists and

anthropologists, and spreading into public consciousness through modernist literature, new forms of music and the mass media. The problem here is timing. Cultural explanations do not explain why things changed so suddenly in the 1960s.

More important than all of these, Fukuyama contends, is “the rise of moral individualism and the consequent miniaturisation of community”. Although he does not say so directly, he appears to concur in the argument that the “rights revolution” of the 1960s and 1970s came at the expense of shared values. He also appears to have adopted a somewhat more sophisticated approach to social capital than in his previous book, *Trust*. Networks have a valuable part to play in the social order, he maintains, but at their extreme, they can lead to tribalism.

If the past three decades have indeed been the time of the Great Disruption, what now? Never one to shy from a bold generalisation, Fukuyama opines that “in the political and economic sphere, history appears to be progressive and directional ... In the social and moral sphere, however, history appears to be cyclical”. Thus, whilst liberal democratic capitalism is the apotheosis of politics and economics, this is in fact just one of several “Great Disruptions”. As with other Disruptions, therefore, it will eventually be followed by a Great Reconstruction.

For the Disruption of the early nineteenth century (when crime rates in Britain and America soared), the Reconstruction came in the form of the Victorian period. Do we need a return to Victorian values? Whilst Fukuyama does not go quite so far, he undoubtedly favours moving in that direction. Perhaps “Dan Quayle was right” to criticise television star Murphy Brown for her decision to have a child out of wedlock, he suggests. Yet he stops short of advocating legislative changes to encourage marriage or discourage divorce. In fact, somewhat surprisingly, given the boldness of his diagnosis, his prescriptions for lawmakers are modest. Continue initiatives for community policing. Reform welfare to prevent dependency. And most importantly, don’t interfere with communities who are striving to create their own forms of social order.

Finally, Fukuyama turns to religion, unquestionably one of the foundation stones of the Victorian era. Alone, he admits, it does not hold the answer to the Great Disruption. But he anticipates that a hunger for community will presage a gradual movement of people back into faith-based organisations. Here, Fukuyama shows his ability to tap into the American *Zeitgeist*, for the current US Presidential campaign is already witnessing an unprecedented display of religiosity by the leading candidates. Yet he also demonstrates how American-centred his thesis is, for no such movement exists here – nor is it likely to in the near future. *The Great Disruption* makes fascinating reading for Australian social democrats and conservatives alike. Yet whilst it may have some interesting parallels for us, both problem and solution are fundamentally American.

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