



The Return of History: Conflict, Migration, and Geopolitics in the Twenty-First Century

Jennifer Welsh

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#1 National Bestseller

Part of the CBC Massey Lectures series

In 1989, as the Berlin Wall crumbled and the Cold War dissipated, the American political commentator Francis Fukuyama wrote a famous essay, entitled “The End of History.” Fukuyama argued that the demise of confrontation between Communism and capitalism, and the expansion of Western liberal democracy, signalled the endpoint of humanity’s sociocultural and political evolution, the waning of traditional power politics, and the path toward a more peaceful world. At the heart of his thesis was the audaciously optimistic idea of “progress” in history.

But a quarter of a century after Fukuyama’s bold prediction about transcending the struggles of the past, history has returned. The twenty-first century has not seen unfettered progress toward peace and a single form of government, but the reappearance of trends and practices many believed had been erased: arbitrary executions, attempts to annihilate ethnic and religious minorities, the starvation of besieged populations, invasion and annexation of territory, and the mass movement of refugees and displaced persons. It has also witnessed cracks and cleavages within Western liberal democracies, particularly as a result of deepening economic inequality — at levels not seen since the end of the nineteenth century.

The Return of History both illustrates and explains this return of history. But it also demonstrates how the reappearance of acts deemed “barbaric” or “medieval” has a modern twist. Above all, it argues that the return of history should encourage us all to remember that our own liberal democratic society was not inevitable and that we must all, as individual citizens, take a more active role in its preservation and growth.

The Return of History: Conflict, Migration, and Geopolitics in the Twenty-First Century Details

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Rhys says

This Massey Lecture was overall quite interesting, though at times I found myself on my knees begging for some critical analysis. For example: "Instead, the contemporary era is marked more by a clash of values — between the West's championing of open elections, freedom of expression and movement, and the rule of law, and Russia's hybrid version of democracy, with an oligarchic governance structure and limits on individual freedoms, in exchange for economic growth. The Russian model, with its emphasis on national identity and religion, also looks very conservative in its orientation, in contrast to the radicalism that underpinned Marxism-Leninism" (p.215). What does that even mean?

The last chapter, however, redeemed the book in my opinion. Some good critical analysis based on the premise: "The West must again defend itself, not primarily through military prowess, but by re-cultivating its liberal democratic ideal" (p.248) - or, more generally, cultivating a society of fairness.

Welsh argues: "Deepening economic inequality is a moral issue — it erodes individuals' capacity to see one another as worthy of respect and weakens social cohesion. Economists have demonstrated its pernicious effects on economic growth. Sociologists and medical researchers have outlined its devastating effects on health outcomes and life expectancy. And political scientists have illustrated how it undercuts the value of fairness, which is a critical foundation of liberal democracy" (p.292).

I'm not inclined to believe that the 'liberal democratic ideal' is the best mechanism for this today, but at least the author acknowledged that we are moving in the wrong direction.

Allister Mason says

This title of this book is a reference to the 1989 essay by Francis Fukuyama "The End of History?" which was written during the collapse of the USSR and explored whether the collapse meant that liberal democracies were now the final form of human governments and would be how we organize ourselves till the end of days.

As you can get from the title the author argues that, in fact, no, this is not the case and other forms of more authoritative governments can/will arise and there are signs that liberal democracies are not living up to their full potentials, both at home and abroad.

The book is broken up into four sections: conflict, migration, geopolitics, and inequality in the 21st century. The conflict section mostly focuses on the Middle East and ISIS, the migration section mostly focuses on refugees and their difficulties getting into Europe, and the geopolitics section essentially follows the deteriorating relations between Russia and the West. The final chapter on inequality was quite interesting and went into details about how inequality can cause instability in a liberal democracy and also make it less attractive to other people.

This book had a very similar premise to "Suicide of the West" by Jonah Goldberg (but with a slightly less sensational tone), in that it is easy to become complacent in a way of life and assume that it is the default and

will remain forever, but that's not the case. Societies take a lot of work and must continually work to preserve its values and prosperity.

My main gripe with this book is that it seemed to focus too much on Russia. I guess since it is about the return of "history" that makes sense, but I think I would have enjoyed some more comments on China, which was only ever mentioned in passing. Perhaps that was outside the scope though.

Vaseline says

Good summary of broad historical trends leading up to the 21st century. With exception of citing examples of Latin America and the Middle East in early chapters, this book is largely eurocentric in its critic of 'liberal democracy' (but to be fair Welsh did seem to have framed it as a critic of the complacency of WESTERN liberal democracies).

If you are familiar with major events in current affairs in recent years, upon which she bases her main 'return to history' thesis and illustrates at great length, namely - '03 Iraq War, '08 financial crisis, Crimea, Syria, Trump, rise of far-right parties in EU nations etc... yeah you can skip this book.

RK-isme says

A good introduction to what ails us.

The 2016 book version of CBC Radio's annual lecture series, the Massey Lectures, is a well written, competent analysis of issues currently faced by liberal democracies.

'The Return of History' by Jennifer Welsh is a very timely analysis of our modern world. In particular, she looks at the current state of the Western liberal democracies and waves a warning flag of distress. Welsh identifies and analyses a number of factors which she sees as indicators of the current threat to our lifestyles within liberal democracies and, to some extent, makes recommendations for moving back from the brink. As is often the case in works such as this, the strength of the book lies in the analyses, not in the recommendations. I should note that this book is written for the general educated public. It is not academic and is not in-depth.

The theme, and the title, of the book is a reference to Francis Fukuyama's article "The End of History" published in 1989.

"At the heart of Fukuyama's thesis was the audaciously optimistic idea of progress in history. [...] Fukuyama's claim was that history (at least the history of struggle documented by many historians) would effectively end, or culminate, in the victory of liberal democracy as the guiding ideology for the modern nation-state."

And so, Welsh has taken on to discuss the obvious: that Fukuyama basically got it wrong. In doing so, she addressed four aspects of our current situation in the world and how they effect the stability of liberal democracies.

After laying out her thesis in the first chapter, she sets about exploring different "dimensions of history's return in the twenty-first century."

She begins her exposition with an examination of "how the strategies and tactics of both state and non-state armed actors flouting established principles of international humanitarian law and putting civilian lives at greater and greater risk. This is followed by an analysis of "the unprecedented nature of today's migration challenge and show how new walls are being erected within and beyond Europe."

In the next chapter she discusses "how Russian President Vladimir Putin's revival of geopolitics and his particular brand of 'sovereign democracy' are challenging the West in ways reminiscent of the Cold War standoff." Finally, she examines "history's return within Western liberal democracies themselves ... the dramatic increase in economic inequality and its attack on the value of fairness ..."

As an intelligent introduction to these issues, the book serves the reader well. There is not a great deal in the way of new information to be found here but Welsh provided the thoughtful reader with good basic facts and clear analysis. And these issues do need to be explored if we are to get our democratic foundations back (inasmuch as we had them).

Indeed, I believe that Welsh has barely scratched the surface on these issues and would suggest that anyone who appreciates this book should look behind most of the issues raised for deeper causes and, therefore, more drastic steps to be taken to overcome our current situation.

I won't go on a typical rant here on the evils of our neo-liberal, globalized world but I do suggest that this is a good introduction to some of the issues and what we are losing (have lost). If nothing else, this book should be seen as a call for readers to become better informed and to get involved. (And she did this before Trump was elected. He does make a couple of cameo appearances however.)

This would have been 4 stars if Welsh had not offered up weak, undeveloped ideas for change, particularly in the area of migration.

David Marriott says

This is one of the best Massey Lectures in recent years. Dr. Welsh offers thoughtful insights into the causes of the current state of the world. In the face of so much biased and shallow reporting in the news media, Dr. Welsh's perspective is refreshing and welcome.

Matthew Lloyd says

In the multiple Star Trek television series, Starfleet and the Federation of Planets develops a code of conduct for its members who find themselves displaced in time – the Temporal Prime Directive. The aim of this Directive is to prevent damage to the timeline and history from being altered, which can frequently result in the erasure of the semi-utopian future in which they live. I'm not usually a fan of time-travel narratives, but I like the point behind the Temporal Prime Directive: the future is not inevitable; progress is not destiny, but

decision.

This theme is also the most appealing aspect of Jennifer Welsh's *The Return of History*. Throughout a sequence of five chapters structured as a response to Francis Fukuyama's 1989 essay "The End of History", Welsh argues against the narrative of the inevitable rise of liberal democracy following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and in favour of examining our history, learning from our mistakes, and anticipating the challenges faced by liberal democracies and how they can rise to defeat them. She stresses, however, that there needs to be a conscious decision to rise – the triumph is not inevitable.

The chapters cover the background to the argument, which I found very useful; 'Barbarism', meaning essentially civilian casualties in war, and how the actions of liberal democracies affect how they are viewed overseas; refugees and the failure to appreciate how mass flight has changed since the Second World War; the rise of Russia and 'Cold War 2.0'; and the destabilizing effects of inequality and the failure of governments to tackle it – largely because they do not accept responsibility for it. The first and last were the ones I found most engaging – the former because the intellectual background interests me and the latter because inequality feels like something I am positioned to challenge – but all the chapters are interesting, even if "The Return of the Cold War" feels a little over-long (maybe I'm just sick of hearing about Russia).

It has to be said that my impression of this book was shaped by the time in which I was reading it. So, for example, had I read the line "Corbyn's strong critique of inequality and the ruling economic policy of austerity were deemed to have made him implausible and unelectable" (p. 277) prior to 5pm EST on Thursday, I would have sighed and nodded in mute agreement; reading it not only after the release of the UK exit poll at 5pm EST last Thursday but also after the relative accuracy of that poll had been confirmed by the end of the next day, I laughed in derision at the fools who thought Corbyn was unelectable (despite having occasionally been one myself), even though he didn't actually win the election. This comes down to that prevailing theme: progress as decision, not destiny. Before Thursday, I had grimly accepted that my country would continue to make decisions that lead in the worst possible directions; now I have hope that we can make the decisions that will lead us to address inequality at home.

In the closing chapter, Welsh referred to Fukuyama as an "optimist" in contrast to her own "Chicken Little" approach (pp. 286-87). I couldn't help but think of Rebecca Solnit's definition of 'optimism' as assuming that things will turn out for the best, and 'hope' as the decision to work to ensure that they do. On this definition, Welsh is very hopeful; between this book and the election, I now feel that I can be more hopeful too.

Ian Robertson says

Since 1961, the Massey Lectures – an annual fall talk on a philosophical, economic or cultural issue which is broadcast on Canada's CBC Radio – have edified and entertained listeners, and for those who purchase the resultant book, readers too. In the 2016 lecture, professor of International Relations Jennifer Welsh responds to Francis Fukuyama's 1989 essay and 1992 book "The End of History and the Last Man". Unfortunately, her response is off target. Most of the book is just a recounting of recent history – in particular the world's trouble spots – rather than a cogent argument against Fukuyama's thesis.

Fukuyama's central point was that the end of the Cold War "signaled the endpoint of humanity's sociocultural and ideological evolution and the 'universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of government.'" As Welsh notes, the ideological victory "entailed three key elements: freely elected

governments, the promotion of individual rights, and the creation of a capitalist economic system with relatively modest state oversight.” The argument was not that we would no longer face challenges within or between countries, but rather that we could now agree on a governing ideal and that over time this is what we would all work towards. Our societal evolution had found its final plateau.

With thirty years of additional history to draw upon, Welsh tries to rebut Fukuyama’s thesis. Since the Massey Lectures themselves are actually a five city series of talks, her book contains five chapters: an introduction to the topic; the return of barbarism; the return of mass refugee flight; the return of the Cold War; and the return of inequality. After the introductory setup, each chapter offers a different set of examples to show that Fukuyama was early with his call, or wrong, and that things are so much worse now for the three elements that are core to his ‘end of history’ claim; more specifically that democracy, individual rights and capitalism are under assault.

The CBC show that broadcasts the Massey Lectures is called “Ideas”, and the irony in this year’s lecture is that Welsh is long on narrative and examples but short on ideas. For anyone who has followed the news the past 25 years her early narrative contains nothing new and little insight. Her later chapters devoted to Putin and Russia, and to inequality, do contain some interesting insight, but neither enough to redeem this work nor of any use in rebutting Fukuyama’s original thesis.

Fukuyama wove history, economics and most of all philosophy (especially the German philosopher Friedrich Hegel, whom he references over 300 times) throughout his argument. Fukuyama’s logic flowed consistently through his narrative of our human development, and he used the fall of the Berlin Wall as history’s ending point – the irrefutable triumph of liberal democracy and the death knell of fascism and communism. By contrast, Welsh references Hegel just twice and never engages with Fukuyama’s philosophical underpinnings, preferring instead to recount recent history, as if providing enough examples was a philosophical rebuttal in itself.

Even Welsh’s three central themes are weak and obvious, and unworthy of the intellectual rigor to which a Massey Lecture should adhere. Welsh contends:

1. “that if history is returning, it is doing so with a modern twist”;
2. that “today’s global system contains pockets of those who wish actively to return to [the Cold War]”;
3. “that our own liberal democratic society was not inevitable ... and that we must all, as individuals, take a more active role in its preservation and growth.”

Almost any geopolitical event occurring today will have a modern twist. There will always be challenges to liberal democracy, and we should not take them or our progress lightly. But this is hardly deep thought, and it in no way engages with Fukuyama’s far more thoughtful original work.

SpaceBear says

The 2016 Massey Lecturer, Jennifer Welsh, seeks to challenge Francis Fukuyama's assertion that the "end of history" came with the end of the Cold War, and the end to ideological disputes around the world. She argues that far from an end to history, what we are witnessing in 2016 is the return of history; a return of barbarism, inequality, the Cold War, mass flight, and inequality. Although I feel she relies on a sensationalist view of instability in the world, her lectures are interesting and insightful.

Malak says

Other than the Russian chapter which was a let down, the book gives a decent account of the current political environment making the connection to historical events. Not listing Libya as one of the countries in the middle east that had a revolution, if done on purpose is genius. I learned a lot reading this book :)

Daniel says

Welsh centres her book on refuting Fukuyama's thesis from the end of history. She does so by pointing out the challenges liberal democracy has been facing over the past 5 years. However her book is very short on the analysis and policy or global suggestions usually provided in the Massey lectures. Her thesis is essentially that the world may not be moving toward liberal democracy as quickly or readily as Fukuyama thought, and as individuals we must play a role in its growth. She also states that if history is returning, "it is doing so with a modern twist" which seems to be stating the obvious.

She focuses on geopolitical events that have been front page news over the past few years, without adding much insight. As a result, if you have kept up with the news, the book is a rather slow read, offering little you aren't already aware of. Finally there were also several instances (eg. pg 128) where she conveyed the same statistic in several ways to demonstrate their magnitude when the initial statistic was sufficient, making for tedious reading.

Jacey says

An amazing book, that challenges your understanding of what is happening in the world, how we got here and pushes you to see the need for change. Written a couple years ago, it explains accurately, what we are seeing around the world. I'm in awe of how Jennifer Welsh seemed to understand where we were going.

Andrew says

So we're heading back to an older world with great power politics, inequality, and human suffering.

But I wonder if Jennifer Welsh would have done better to take the much longer view (*à la* Piketty) and position this change as being waaaaay back to the future? Instead we hovered around the beginning of the twentieth century a bit too much.

That would have set her up to talk about the last half-century as historical exception and really go for our return into history.

Cameron Mitchell says

The premise of the book is flawed to begin with. Is a rebuttle of "The End of History" really necessary? Does Fukuyama exist as anything more than a joke for undergrads anyway? Have you been following current events for the past twenty five years? Great, you can probably skip this one. Most of the book is recap, and the conclusions Welsh reaches aren't worth the time it takes to get to them. The chapter on Russia is relatively insightful, owing to the author's background in international relations. For the rest of the book I found myself (to quote another review) "on my knees begging for some critical analysis."

Lucas Johnston says

I wouldn't call this book bad, it is certainly full of interesting anecdotes and good arguments. However, reading it as a work of philosophy and evaluating it as such, much of the book is just superfluous. The actual critical engagement with Fukuyama's ideas could likely be condensed down considerably aside from the historical stories she presents.

Daniel Kukwa says

Anyone with even a half-hearted interest in the history and politics of the post-cold war era will find most of the content in this book very familiar. However, there's nothing like having a clear-cut, well-written, concise, useful primer on the state of affairs of the early 21s century to refer to and use when needed...and this history teacher can already see numerous opportunities to use this lovely resource in the future.
