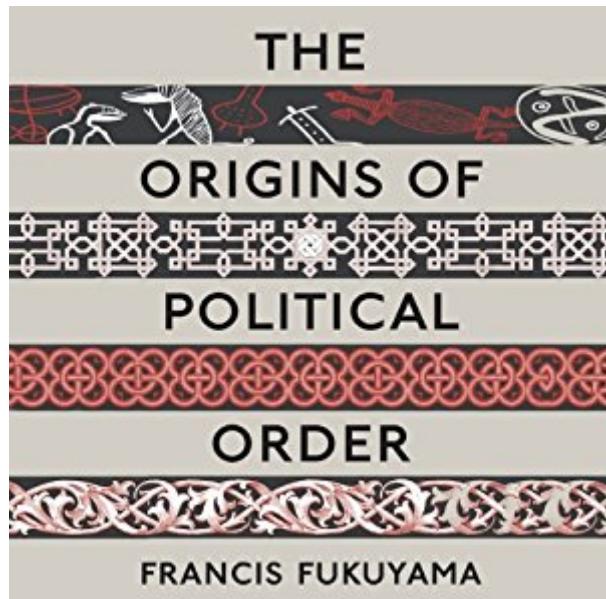


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The Origins Of Political Order: From Prehuman Times To The French Revolution



Synopsis

Virtually all human societies were once organized tribally, yet over time most developed new political institutions that included a central state that could keep the peace and uniform laws that applied to all citizens. Some went on to create governments that were accountable to their constituents. We take these institutions for granted, but they are absent or unable to function in many of today's developing countries-with often disastrous consequences for the rest of the world. Francis Fukuyama, author of the best-selling *The End of History* and *The Last Man*, and one of our most important political thinkers, provides a sweeping account of how today's basic political institutions developed. The first of a major two-volume work, *The Origins of Political Order* begins with politics among our primate ancestors and follows the story through the emergence of tribal societies, the growth of the first modern state in China, the beginning of the rule of law in India and the Middle East, and the development of political accountability in Europe up until the eve of the French Revolution. Drawing on a vast body of knowledge-history, evolutionary biology, archaeology, and economics-Fukuyama has produced a brilliant, provocative work that offers fresh insights on the origins of democratic societies and raises essential questions about the nature of politics and its discontents.

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Customer Reviews

The Origins of Political Order is an engaging read for anyone willing to grant the author license to do some old school multidisciplinary broad-scope theorizing on a hugely important question: What are

the origins of political order? Why did key political institutions -- a centralized state with a monopoly on the use of force, enforcement of legal norms by third parties, and accountability of the state to outside forces -- develop in some places and not others? The real standard for evaluating this kind of book, a work in the world-historical Guns, Germs, and Steel genre, is not whether the author gets details wrong, or misconstrues some of the theories or cultures he discusses. This is inevitable. No one can be an expert in biology, the history of China, cultural anthropology, primate behavior, and legal history. But as Fukuyama correctly argues, that the task is necessarily imperfect and difficult doesn't mean it isn't worthwhile. The standard for success is whether the necessarily imperfect effort nonetheless tells us something new and interesting. And Fukuyama succeeds on this metric. Fukuyama abolishes any doubts the reader might harbor about political development as separate from economic or social development, and destroys any notion the reader might have that political order is somehow automatic or natural. Fukuyama will persuade you that political order is instead fragile and contingent. And he'll do it while taking you on a fascinating tour of the history of several different nations as well as the history of humans as a species. You'll learn about geography, primate behavior, and religion. Indeed, the pages are brimming with interesting theories on the various sub-topics that make up the volume, each of which could form its own PhD project.

Since publishing his essay "The End of History?" in *The National* in 1989, Fukuyama has cemented himself as an important public intellectual and historical anthropologist. A former neo-conservative, Fukuyama, 58, now serves as the Olivier Nomellini Senior Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. In this book, Fukuyama attempts to understand how humans moved from tribal and familial connections to organized institutions of states and governments. He writes, "In the developed world, we take the existence of government so much for granted that we sometimes forget how difficult it was to create." Fukuyama artfully navigates the transition of humans from hunter-gather bands to tribalized communities to states and organized forms of government. Fukuyama emphasizes China because the Qin Dynasty was the first "state" to gain victory over tribalism. He contrasts this with Europe, which did not overcome tribalism until 1000 years later, and had to progress through feudalism before creating citizens loyal to the state. Fukuyama's approach to historical anthropology stands in stark contrast to the "single cause" approach of Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (2005). Fukuyama points to familial connections, human behavior, organized religion, and the human propensity for war as variable causes to the evolution of societies. Fukuyama engages disciplines outside of his usual realm including anthropology, economics, and biology. He notes, "It does seem

to me that there is a virtue in looking across time and space in a comparative fashion.

I read this book after getting through Matt Ridley's "The Rational Optimist." I thoroughly enjoyed Ridley's book but was skeptical about his single-minded emphasis on evolutionary bottom-up processes (a free market of ideas) as drivers of political development/order. Whereas Ridley almost always sees top-down governmental action as an impediment to development--something that stifles the naturalistic order produced by free market exchanges--Fukuyama takes a more even-handed, multi-dimensional and one might argue, accurate approach. Fukuyama ascribes the development of political order to the rise of governmental accountability, the rule of law, and a centralized, impersonal state/bureaucracy. To defend this premise, he tackles some of the simplifications offered by Enlightenment thinkers, Marxists and free-marketers/libertarians. For one, he shows how Enlightenment thinkers got the 'state of nature' wrong: humans evolved to hunt and gather in groups--there never was a time when individuals acted as free-agents who, in their rational self-interest, came to establish a 'social contract' wherein they would give up some liberty in order to provide for the common security (government). Instead, there was an ongoing interplay between an emergent market morality (provided by tit-for-tat exchanges), the need to wage war, and ideas (religion, ideology & normative beliefs regarding the law) that together have tended to promote the development of political order in societies. And political development, rather than being a constant progression toward some liberal-democratic or Marxist-utopian goal, is fragile and just as likely to decay as it is to progress.

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