

Reimagining Destiny

by Paul Berman

Is mankind governed by a vast, hidden system of natural imperatives? Are the natural imperatives gradually leading the world out of the darkness of ignorance and oppression and into the golden light of freedom, individual dignity, and prosperity? Is there a single destiny for mankind, and is progress its inner meaning? And is there something to be said on behalf of the many extravagant 19th-century thinkers who responded to those questions with a series of grandly elaborated answers that added up to “yes”?

It goes without saying that, in our present chastened era, most people are bound to think back on some main experiences of recent generations, and to roll their eyes in disbelief at those questions. Perhaps the most influential and thorough of the English-language arguments against the 19th-century notion of mankind having any kind of single destiny has been Karl Popper's *Open Society and Its Enemies*—a withering attack, in two volumes, no less, on the philosophers of destiny and universal progress from Plato to Georg Friedrich Hegel. And the single most dramatic and convincing word anywhere in those two volumes, the bleakest word of all, was surely the simple date “1943,” posted at the end of Popper's preface, marking the moment when he finished his manuscript and put down his pen. For in 1943 the world was at war, and on one side were Fascists and Nazis who drew on racist and nationalist versions of the Hegelian argument for a universal destiny of mankind; and on the other side, allied with the liberal democracies, were the Soviet Union and communists around the world, who drew on a left-wing version of the same Hegelian argument. It was obvious that nothing threatens freedom more surely than people who believe that freedom is destiny.

But that was then. In the last 20 years or so, and especially in the last 10, the world has undergone a set of very different experiences, good and bad, which are bound to cast a newer light on the old questions about universal destiny. It has become obvious that, all over the world in our present age, only one kind of economic system is capable of pro-

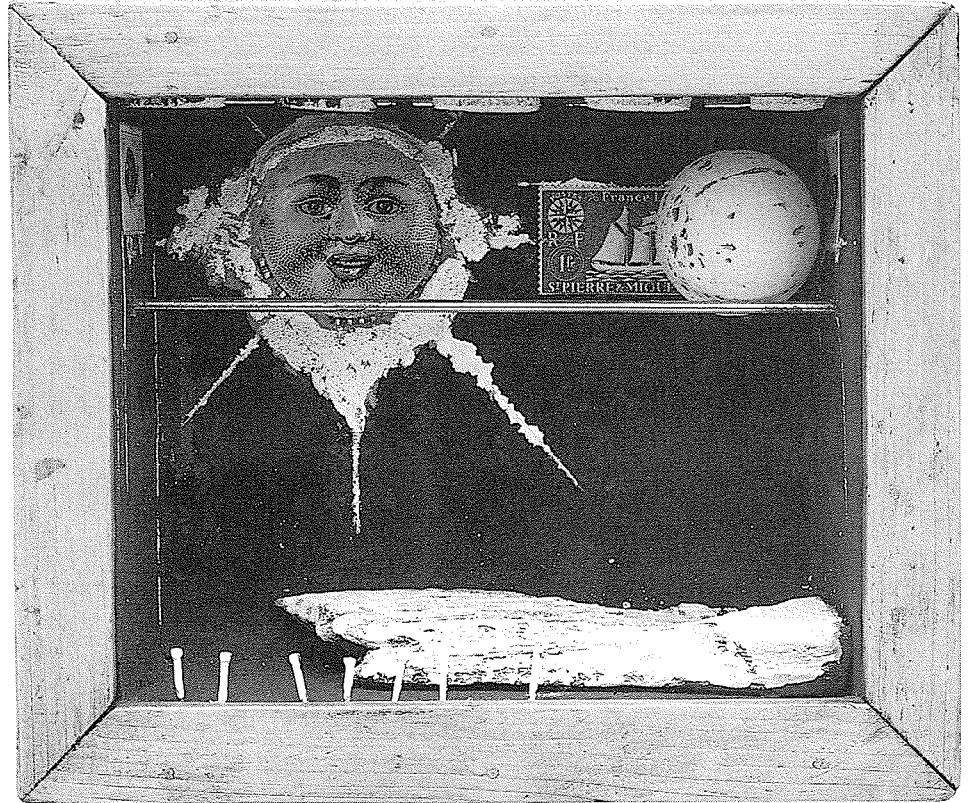
ducing significant wealth—the system of regulated markets. It has become obvious that regulated markets can prosper not just in northern Europe and North America, as many a thoughtful person had once imagined, but as far afield as East Asia—which is to say, everywhere (even if, right now, East Asia's market regulations turn out to have been less than regulatory).

It has become obvious that only one kind of political system, the system of liberal democracy, is capable in our present age of producing governments of great power and stability, and of inspiring imitation all over the world, as every continent can attest. The nonliberal rulers around the world—the stern Confucian authoritarians, the raving Caribbean communists, the mad nationalist demagogues, the flat-out dictators, the bearded theocrats, and the smooth-talking pseudodemocratic kleptocrats—may well be capable of lingering on forever in their sundry unprosperous homes. Somewhere on earth it will always be 1943. But none of those other systems appear capable of generating anything stable or reliable, and none appear capable of becoming anything more than a local misfortune—not any longer, anyway.

In the last decade or so, it has begun to seem obvious that all modern liberal societies tend to produce some of the same results, naturally in different degrees in every country. For all over the liberal democratic world today, at least in the older democracies, there are signs of a greater individual freedom than in the past, of an expansion of women's rights, of more flexible concepts of family life, and of an increased tolerance (on balance) of ethnic and religious differences. These are traits that point in the direction of greater freedom and individual dignity, though you could certainly worry about the side effects, too. And in the context of these several large developments around the world, doesn't it seem likely that, in one form or another, the grandiose, old, discredited philosophical questions from the 19th century are going to press themselves upon us anew, and we are once again going to find ourselves talking about the universal quality of mankind and the forces of inevitable progress? It seems more than likely, actually. It has already happened.

In the 19th century, the proponents of notions of universal progress came in several varieties. To mention three: There were the philosophical system builders such as Hegel and Auguste Comte, who worked up enormous theories of history and politics. There were the journalistic non-system builders, the describers, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, who recorded the rise of a new democratic civilization, and left the argument for universal inevitability to be quietly inferred (though Tocqueville, in the preface to his book about America, was careful to invoke "providence," meaning a destiny beyond human control, as ulti-

> PAUL BERMAN is the author of *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968* (1996). Beginning in the fall, he will be a Fellow of the New York Public Library's Center for Scholars & Writers. Copyright © 1999 by Paul Berman.



L'Humeur Vagabonde (c. late 1950s), by Joseph Cornell

mately responsible for democracy's growth). There were the scientific-minded observers who, agog at Charles Darwin's insights, invoked evolutionary theory to explain and predict the upward spiral of human history. And today we have begun to see each of those three 19th-century arguments making its way back into general discussion.

We have had theorists of world history such as David Fromkin, the author of *The Way of the World* (1999), with his notion of crucial stages in world history leading to the coming era of even greater American dominance. We have had theorists of democracy and its dialectical progress around the world (*dialectical* meaning, in this case, two steps forward, one step back), such as Samuel P. Huntington in his book from 1991, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*—though it's true that Huntington, in his book from 1996, *The Clash of Civilizations*, argued in the opposite direction, *against* any notion of a true universality of humankind (just to show that these resurrected 19th-century doctrines remain a little shaky). We have had Tocquevillian students of modern culture, such as Marcel Gauchet and Gilles Lipovetsy in France, who have analyzed the relentless advance of individualism in a democratic society. We have

had journalists such as Thomas L. Friedman, whose new book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, celebrates the global economy as not just progressive but inevitably so. (He compares it to the dawn.) And we have had a series of neo-social Darwinists or sociobiologists, notably Edward O. Wilson, the author of *Consilience* (1998), who stress the biological imperatives underlying social and cultural evolution.



Hegel

But among the several writers who have gone about reviving the old theories, no one has done it with greater flair or with more of the grand old tone than Francis Fukuyama. And no one else has managed to invoke all three grand 19th-century impulses that I have just cited—the Hegelian, the Tocquevillian, and the Darwinian.

Fukuyama's accomplishment, as I judge it, has been to lay out a large and appealingly ambiguous idea in his first book, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), and then to offer, in his next two books, a number of useful and sometimes fascinating (and frustrating) clarifications of that large and ambiguous idea. The argument in *The End of History* took the Hegelian idea of universal progress through history, gave that idea more of a democratic twist than Hegel would have liked, and specified that history's final end, the ultimate stage of universal progress, is the triumph of liberal democracy around the world—the triumph that has now become visible, with the collapse of liberal democracy's last remaining worldwide competitor, communism, and the failure of the remaining right-wing dictatorships to find any sort of philosophical basis for uniting among themselves or for offering any competition to the liberal democratic idea. The ambiguity was Fukuyama's worry that life at the End of History, after liberal democracy's triumph, was going to be mediocre and undignified. The argument, especially its cheerful half about liberal triumphs around the world, inspired all kinds of misinterpretations and confusions among Fukuyama's readers, and one of those misinterpretations, a main one, was to regard the entire argument as a gussied-up cry of victory for American nationalism—a swaggering boast that America was henceforth going to rule the world, and the End of History and American victory were the same.

Some people have, in fact, offered variations on that claim. Fromkin's *Way of the World* proposes a relatively mild-mannered version. Friedman's *Lexus and the Olive Tree* is written in a gloating tone. But that has not been Fuku-



Tocqueville

yama's approach. His second book, *Trust* (1995), was an economic treatise, or rather, a treatise on the cultural traditions that make for a healthy economy. This time his approach was Tocquevillian. He showed that, in America, the cultural legacy left by the old Protestant sects has generated a spirit of trust among people who don't know one another, and that the spirit of trust has encouraged the growth of the giant American corporations. But then again, in Germany a variety of strictly German cultural traditions have allowed for a similar growth, and in Japan still other traditions have done the same, which means that Germany's giant corporations are truly German, and Japan's are truly Japanese, just as America's are truly American.



Darwin

In still other societies, where the spirit of anonymous trust is much weaker, people have constructed entirely different institutions for generating wealth, better suited to their own customs and ideas. The French have demonstrated a remarkable talent for building efficient state bureaucracies, and the northern Italians have demonstrated a very different talent for running family businesses devoted to craft production. Then there are the South Koreans, who seem to resemble the French, and certain kinds of Confucian Chinese, who seem to resemble the northern Italians. In short, the economic systems of the future are likely to draw on many cultural traditions, not just on the example of the American corporations. It won't be McWorld, after all; the global economy will be multicultural. That was interesting to learn, and heartening for anyone who has feared that, in the future, we will not be able to pick among economic alternatives.

In his latest book, *The Great Disruption* (1999), and in his essay in this journal, Fukuyama has turned to another question that was raised by his notion of inevitable liberal democratic triumph—the possibility that culture and social life under liberal democracy, in its downward plunge into mediocrity and loss of dignity, might undermine the liberal democratic system itself. That is an old worry among the commentators on democracy. Tocqueville touched on it, and so did Daniel Bell in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976). But Fukuyama, having worried in *The End of History*, has come up with a cheering message in *The Great Disruption*—this time by making a deft little leap from Hegel and Tocqueville to Darwin and the social Darwinists of today. In Fukuyama's view, the regulated market economy, in its forward rush into greater efficiency and progress, did lead to some bad results in the liberal democracies, beginning around 1963. Because of the new, postindustrial technology, women left home to go

out and work. Birth control pills allowed sex and the feeling of family responsibility to go separate ways. Families weakened. Morals declined. Crime rose.

To cite his new book's title, it was *The Great Disruption*, morally speaking. But—this is his new argument—people are endowed with propensities that lead them to correct their own errors. Human rationality is one of those propensities. Another one is genetically inbuilt, a sub-rational propensity, the product of evolutionary adaptation, that leads people to re-create sociable behavior whenever the practical old customs of the past become disrupted. These factors have begun to function in the last few years, and the Great Disruption that seemed to be tearing apart liberal democratic life has begun to heal itself, and the moral basis of society is growing stronger, not because more women are returning to housework but because people are inventing new moral concepts and institutions for the present. We have Darwin to thank, or rather, the realities that Darwin discovered. For, in Fukuyama's latest estimation, human nature, as shaped by thousands of years of evolution, pushes us to correct the unfortunate side effects that result from the general history of progress.

Hegel, Tocqueville, Darwin—the trinity is complete. And so the 19th-century doctrines have climbed back into life from their ancient tombs. You may be surprised at the spectacle, but you cannot say these ideas are dead.

II.

What should we think of those revived doctrines? One response cannot be avoided. It is the product of those many decades of ferocious criticisms directed against anything smacking of social determinism or universal destiny. The ferocious criticisms lead us to ask, as the liberal and pragmatist and post-modern philosophers instruct us to do: Why speak of human nature at all? What sense is there in regarding history as having a forward direction, or any direction? Why should we suppose that we can predict the future, when we have never been able to predict anything very reliably in the past? A bit of sober mulling over those several questions is bound to put us into a skeptical mood, and the mood is bound to make us look a little closer at the new arguments and their evidence. We are bound to ask: How could we possibly know whether the new arguments are true or false? Reality has a zillion factors, and we have to wonder if there is room for a zillion factors in those simple doctrines.

We might ask, for instance, How can we tell if there is any truth to Fukuyama's account of rises and falls in the moral life of modern society? He informs us that moral conditions—judging by statistics on such matters as criminality and alcoholism and family decay—worsened in the early 19th century; improved in the late 19th century, due to the

preachings of the Victorian moralists; and worsened once again in the Great Disruption that began in the mid-1960s. But on what evidence can we judge these things? In his book, Fukuyama himself scrupulously offers a simple example of how difficult it can be to arrive at reliable grand-scale estimations. He observes that, judging by some of the conventional statistics, the moral culture of the United States appears to be much weaker than that of Europe.

But if we factor out the American underclass, which has different historical origins and is much larger than its equivalent class in Europe, the comparative figures for the United States and Europe turn out to be similar—which is to say, the raw statistics offer a misleading impression of the actual differences between America and Europe. Doesn't it seem likely that complications of that sort might lurk beneath any number of comparative figures, especially when something as vague as social morality is being compared across the centuries? The late-19th-century period in which Fukuyama says that Victorian preachings raised the moral level was, by gloomy happenstance, the very period in which the extent of slums and industrial violence likewise rose to its highest, most dangerous level in America and Britain. When Fukuyama says that moral values improved in the late 19th century, isn't he merely saying that certain values he admires were on an upswing, and never mind about certain other values?

The period of Fukuyama's "Great Disruption," with its declining morality, was also a period of spectacular progress against all sorts of racist and sexist prejudices. Why say, then, that personal morality declined during those years? Why not say "The Great Disruption" was actually "The Great Reform"? Or was both—a lamentable "Disruption" together with an admirable "Reform"? Perhaps a "Reform" for some people and a "Disruption" for others? Why say (as some people do) that "Dan Quayle was right"? Quayle made a famous speech in the aftermath of the Los Angeles riot of 1992, denouncing a sympathetic television sit-com portrait of an unmarried professional woman with a child—as if the street violence in Los Angeles was owed to media sympathy for single motherhood. It is argued, doubtless correctly, that black riots in the 1960s stemmed in part from the failures of family life (though it is hard to see how the media could have been responsible for those failures). But the Los Angeles rioters of 1992 were mostly Central American immigrants, and the television or radio broadcasts that appealed to them must surely have expressed the squarest of old-fashioned family values, in the Hispanic style, just as Dan Quayle would advocate; yet people rioted even so.

These may seem like quibbles on my part. They *are* quibbles. But when I wade into arguments such as Fukuyama's, quibbles surge around me in white foamy torrents, and there is no escape from them. I can't help wondering: Isn't the argument about moral decline during the Great Disruption hopelessly distorted by a mythology of a happier

American past, which had been ruined by the cultural movements of the 1960s and the evil media? Jon Margolis, a veteran reporter who spent many years at the *Chicago Tribune*, has published a book just now called *The Last Innocent Year: America in 1964*, whose very title makes the assumption, astonishing to me, that America once possessed a moral innocence which disappeared in the mid-'60s. How could anyone think such a thing? The American university system, to mention nothing else, was overwhelmingly segregated in 1964. You would think the partiality in ascribing innocence to those times would be self-evident. Evidently it is not evident. Which is bad enough. But what are we to think when the partial claims come wrapped in scientific thought and social theory and are presented as something more than one person's impressions?

Maybe we should conclude, as the modern and post-modern philosophers instruct us, that grand-scale arguments about universal human nature and historical progress have no positive value at all. The ratty 19th-century doctrines can be wrapped all too easily around any argument you choose. They are simply too threadbare to take seriously anymore. I certainly understand why a disciplined social scientist might insist on that conclusion. And yet, in spite of every quibble, I go on thinking that something in those ancient theories has got to be true. It is because the human race does seem to have evolved from cave dwellings to non-cave dwellings, and from no democracies 225 years ago to a multitude of democracies today. Large vectors of world history do seem to exist. It ought to be possible to wonder about those vectors by proposing a few theories. But since nothing in those theories can be tested, and nothing in them will allow us to make reliable predictions about next year's events, and truth in these matters is undefinable (I concede everything), it's best (say I) to regard the theories as a kind of poetry or expressive literature.

What does the poetry express? The little wave of late-20th-century neo-19th-century theorists—what are they trying to tell us, with their outlandish antique theories? I think they are expressing a mood, possibly more of an up-to-date mood than is expressed by some of their more sophisticated critics. They are expressing a sentiment that is half about feeling powerless, and half about feeling powerful, the powerlessness we feel in the face of enormous changes that have swept the earth in recent years, and that seem beyond human control; and the power we feel when we realize that, because of our ability to identify those changes, we might actually be able to influence their outcomes in some degree. The neo-19th-century theorists are expressing an ambition, which is to shape the whole of society. And an optimism, which is that, in spite of every terrible event that has taken place over this last century, society can be usefully and rationally shaped. In Fukuyama's case, the possibility of our shaping society along rational lines is the largest single conclusion that you can draw from his books, ever more firmly asserted as the author has gone treading his way from the tragic-minded Hegel to the hopeful-and-resigned Tocqueville

to the cheerfully scientific Darwin. Of course, that leaves the question: In what direction should the rational lines point?

III.

One way to see the new mood and the new writings more clearly is to glance back at the original theories from the 19th century, and at the practical projects that emerged from those theories, and make a few hasty comparisons with the present. In the 19th century, two of those practical projects turned out to be especially important: European imperialism and revolutionary socialism. Each of those projects followed more or less logically from the original premises about history and universality. For if mankind has a universal destiny of ever greater progress toward freedom, the people who are currently most advanced owe it to themselves and to everyone else to share the benefits of progress with all the world. And how to share the benefits? It might be through direct conquest of backward nations by the paternally minded advanced Europeans, in the case of European imperialism—direct conquest in order to establish the new, more advanced customs and institutions that are necessary for progress. Or progress might be shared through the conquest of industry and the establishment of a new society by the radical-minded proletarians, in the case of revolutionary socialism—by the proletarians who, alone in modern life, due to their place at the heart of heavy industry, have the necessary insight into the workings of economics and history to lead society into the future.

Naturally, we wouldn't expect to see either of those projects come back to life in anything like their 19th-century forms, and if they did come back, revenants from the past, we would have reason to shrink in fear. Those two ancient projects, imperialism and socialism, were exactly what brought about the calamities that Karl Popper observed all around him in 1943—European imperialism, because it not only committed innumerable crimes around the world but because it finally boomeranged back to Europe itself, in the form of fascist conquests and exterminations; and revolutionary socialism, because it gave birth to the communist heresy, which turned socialism's goals upside down.

Still, the 19th-century impulses that led in the past to imperialism and revolutionary socialism do seem to be showing a few new signs of life today, in a very different fashion. For how else, except as a sprouted seed from the 19th century, should we understand the current movement for human rights around the world? The logic of the human rights movement says that we, the privileged people who live in the prosperous liberal democracies, have a right and an obligation to extend our own advantages to everyone else. We have the right and the obligation precisely because freedom is mankind's future, which ought to be brought about sooner rather than later for the happiness of all, and because mankind is universal (so that, e.g., there is no special Asian

soul that prefers to languish under authoritarian despotism). It shouldn't surprise us that some people do see in that argument a sinister shadow of the imperialism of old. I think that people who look on human rights campaigns as a clever disguise for a modernized imperialism have gotten carried away with their own insight, or have gotten stuck in arguments from the past. (There are a lot of people like that, whole nations of them in the Third World.) Still, the filiation from the 19th century does seem clear enough. It's just that, unlike the imperialism of the past, the human rights campaigns of the present tend to be modest and even self-conscious about the dangers of intervening in other societies, which prevents those movements, or ought to prevent them, from turning their good intentions into a major new source of oppression.

The prospect of any sort of new version of socialism arising from the revived interest in the old philosophical themes seems more remote—unless by socialism you mean the kind of global banking regulation that has been bruited about in the wake of the recent economic crises in East

Asia, Russia, and Latin America. Socialism in any larger sense, socialism as a vision of a new kind of

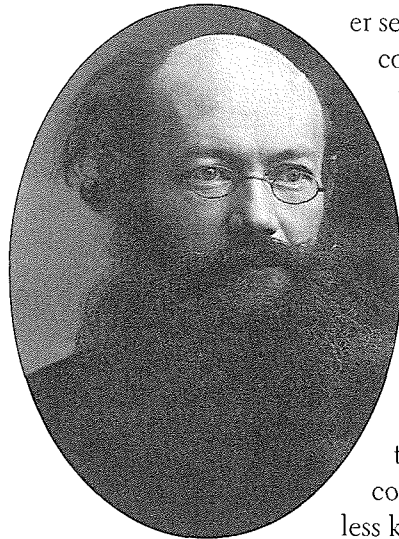
cooperative society, does seem out of the question today. You might suppose that, in

Fukuyama's case, the prospect of any revival of socialist instincts would be remoter still.

Nineteenth-century socialism mostly bloomed in fields that had been plowed by Hegel or Comte. But Fukuyama, in his new book, has made his leap to Darwin, whose social followers have tended to be vehemently antisocialist.

Still, it should be remembered that, in the late 19th century, social Darwinism did come in a left-wing version—much smaller and less known than the antisocialist version, yet real enough. What is being revived today, it seems to me, is largely the left-wing version,

without the left-wing language. The great classic of left-wing social Darwinism was Peter Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902), which he wrote in the 1880s and '90s, and the arguments that Kropotkin laid out so carefully in that book are recognizably the arguments of sociobiology today. You find the same citing back to insects and animals; the discovery that "sociability" (in Kropotkin's word) aids the survival of the species and its individual members; the scientific deduction that sociability must figure as an element within the evolutionary make-up of different species; and the recognition that humans are in this respect no different from insects and animals. The only difference is that Kropotkin, unlike the sociobiologists of today, invoked his Darwinian themes to show that imaginative programs for communal production, workers' control, grass-roots self-management, and the several other pro-



Kropotkin

jects of the old libertarian-socialist workers' movement were scientifically justified. Not very much of that turns up among the sociobiologists of today.

Fukuyama argues that, in our present age, we need to rally ourselves to oppose the Great Disruption and the moral decline of modern times. We need to fashion for ourselves new moral values and community structures, and not just look to the state. Kropotkin would have applauded those views heartily. But the structures that Fukuyama sees fit to praise are such things as today's fad for religious participation among people who don't really believe in the religion but go to a church or synagogue anyway, for the sake of belonging to a community. That is a pretty thin and pale response to the modern situation—doubly pale if you compare it with Kropotkin's extravagant plans for abolishing property and wages and trusting to neighborhood committees.

To be sure, you could remark that just as the world campaign for human rights today is properly modest and self-conscious, compared with the imperialism of old, so are the new proposals for revived church membership and suchlike—modest communitarian reforms in place of the wild-eyed socialism of the past, and all the better for being humble. Yes, certainly—there's truth in that. It's good to remember, too, that Kropotkin's doctrines had their violent side. The anarchist *pistoleros* running around Spain in the 1930s carried his *Conquest of Bread* (1906) in their coat pockets. And yet, the gap between arguments such as Kropotkin's and arguments such as Fukuyama's (in his sociobiologist mode) shows, I think, a large and not very attractive aspect of our current predicament.

It shows us the enormous difference between the original 19th-century mood and the neo-19th-century mood of today. The theories from the past expressed a nearly ecstatic sense of possibility and hope. But the revived versions are merely nervous, timid, and two-minded. A nervous and two-minded timidity may be unavoidable, given everything that has happened and the many philosophical criticisms that have been offered. Timidity may be wise. But it is sad. It speaks of fatalism, and of complacency, and of still more fatalism. Nobody has defined the ambiguous quality of the neo-19th-century mood more eloquently than Fukuyama himself, in the title and the argument of his first book, *The End of History and the Last Man*. The End of History, as he described it, is a triumphal idea—a grand celebration of the solidity and greatness of liberal democratic society. And the Last Man, in Fukuyama's account, is an antitriumphal reflection on what we citizens of the liberal democracies appear to be like, in our moment of success. For we have made our way to the End of History, only to find that, in our mediocrity, we lack imagination and passion. The victory of our own liberal principles means we are free to act as we choose, and what we choose is not to act. We have no big plans for making society any better than it already is. No small plans, either, only minuscule ones. Even our dreams lack bravery.