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Disruption & Redemption

By DAVID BROOKS

FRANCIS FUKUYAMA. *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order*. FREE PRESS. 336 PAGES. \$26.00

THE RANKS of conservatism are filled with cultural pessimists. There are those who think the ethos of the 1960s continues to eat away at America's moral capital. There are those who think America is being degraded by a vulgar mass media. There are those who see militant secularism trying to purge biblical morality from public life. And then there are those, such as Paul Weyrich, so disturbed by America's decision not to expel Bill Clinton that they are apparently tempted to retreat to remote monasteries where they will cultivate private virtue privately.

Our cultural pessimists need some fresh air. They should try wandering around any middle class suburb in the nation, losing themselves amid the cul-de-sacs, the azaleas, the Jeep Chero-

David Brooks, senior editor of the Weekly Standard, is writing a book about the manners and morals of affluent America.

kees, the neat lawns, the Little Tikes kiddie cars, and the height-adjustable basketball backboards. Is this really what cultural collapse would look like?

The fact is that America does suffer from many real problems: the rise in divorce and illegitimacy, mediocre schools, vulgar pop culture. And there are pockets of America where social capital is almost non-existent. But in most places, Americans learn to adapt to changing times. They have come up with new procedures, like community policing, or new institutions, like couch-strewn bookstores, that begin to restore community and social order. They take some of the things that seem intrinsically subversive — nose piercing, to take a shallow example — and they domesticate them so that they carry almost no cultural meaning. The evidence of our eyes, ears, and senses is that America is not a moral wasteland. It is, instead, a tranquil place, perhaps not one that elevates mankind to its highest glory, but doing reasonably well, all things considered.

Now along comes a data-packed book to give some credence to the things we can observe around us. Francis Fukuyama's *The Great Disruption* argues that the information age has weakened hierarchies and exacerbated the decline of kinship networks. It has led to a real decay of social order. But, the book explains, human beings have an innate hunger for hierarchy and social structure. When chaos licks at their lives, they adapt and rebuild. And there are signs that America is settling upon new social norms and rules of behavior.

Fukuyama is famous as the author of one of the most widely debated, and widely misinterpreted, essays in recent

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history. His piece, "The End of History," published in the *National Interest* in 1989, entered global public discourse (a fact brought home to me during a trip to deepest Ukraine just after the fall of the Soviet Union, where I had tea with a group of young journalists who talked about Fukuyama as familiarly as they talked about the local weather). A surprising number of commentators looked at his title and, idiotically, assumed that Fukuyama was arguing that from now on nothing important would happen. In fact, he was arguing that history has a progressive direction whose endpoint is liberal democracy — a thesis which has not been disproved by subsequent events. The book that grew out of that essay was one of the finest non-fiction books of the past quarter century — provocative on every page, and profound on a number.

Where political philosophy in the persons of Hegel and Alexandre Kojève informed *The End of History*, in *The Great Disruption* Fukuyama draws on, of all things, social science and even biology. The new book is largely a survey of data on various social problems, paired with a summary of recent findings from anthropology and brain research about innate human nature, to shed light on sociological trends.

The book starts with a description of the creative but destructive force of the information age. "A society built around information tends to produce more of the two things people value most in a modern democracy, freedom and equality," Fukuyama writes. "Freedom of choice has exploded, whether of cable channels, low cost shopping outlets, or friends met on the internet. Hierarchies of all sorts,

whether political or corporate, come under pressure and begin to crumble." The same culture of intensive individualism that leads to all the innovation corrodes sources of authority and weakens bonds that join families, neighborhoods, and nations.

In countries that have joined the information age — Fukuyama relies on

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data from the 29 member states of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) — there has been a widespread loss of trust in the institutions of authority, whether it is police authority, religious authority, or governmental authority. There has been a startling weakening of family ties. This has resulted in a tremendous rise in divorce. The U.S. divorce rate skyrocketed in the late 1960s and has only begun to drift slightly lower recently. Partly but not only because of weakened family ties, there has also been a marked decline in fertility. As Fukuyama notes, in countries like Spain, Italy, and Japan, fertility rates have dropped so precipitously that the total population in each successive generation will be 30 percent smaller than in the previous one. Mean-

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while, partly as a result of these two trends, illegitimacy rates have shot upwards. The trend took hold first in the United States and then later, to greater or lesser degrees, in most of the other OECD countries. In most areas, the U.S. suffered the sharpest deterioration and has enjoyed the most noticeable subsequent rebound, but almost all the nations exhibit the same trends. Catholic countries, like Italy and Ireland, did not see their divorce rates shoot up as fast or as far, but such cultural factors only seem to delay or mitigate the underlying forces.

What exactly caused this breakdown? Fukuyama explores the usual theories, giving a measure of credence to a few and finding serious deficiencies in others. Liberals say the information age economy punishes blue-collar workers, exacerbates inequality, and so leads to social breakdown. Fukuyama counters that the evidence doesn't correlate. For example, crime skyrocketed in the 1960s without a massive increase in inequality or poverty, and crime has plummeted in the '90s without any massive decreases in inequality and poverty. Others, conversely, say that greater affluence weakens traditional bonds and leads to social breakdown. It's true that divorce, say, is less costly for the affluent, but by and large the timing of the trends refutes this thesis as well. Social scientist Charles Murray says bad government policies caused much of the breakdown. But while illegitimacy correlates to bad welfare policies, Fukuyama points out, such policies don't take account of parallel changes in other indicators of family breakdown, such as infertility, divorce, cohabitation, and so on.

Fukuyama says, rather, that increas-

ing individualism, favored by the right on the economic issues and the left on cultural matters, is the primary reason for all the social decay. One possibility is that cultural and intellectual trends favoring greater individualism and self-expression — such as the growth of psychology and the spread of Nietzschean relativism — were building throughout the century. But their impact on the middle class was delayed by the Great Depression and World War II. Then after the war, everything hit at once and — kablooeey! “It is as if Emile Durkheim’s prediction that in a modern society, the only value uniting people would be the value of individualism itself, had come true: people reserve their greatest moral indignation for moralism on the part of other people,” Fukuyama notes.

But why, then, have so many of these social indicators turned around (if only slightly in some cases) over the past few years? The answer is that human beings are not merely victims of forces larger than ourselves. We respond. We respond by instinct and by reason.

We have an instinct for community, of a sort. Hobbes may have thought that the state of nature was a war of all against all, but biological research indicates this isn't true. Apparently, certain habits of social cooperation over time have become genetically encoded into our brains. “It is isolation rather than sociability that produces pathological symptoms of distress for most people,” Fukuyama observes. Aristotle said that man is instinctively a political animal; now there is genetic proof. All the thinkers great and small who treated individual brains as formless clay to be molded by environment seem to have had it wrong.

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Fukuyama spans disciplines. His forays into brain chemistry are impressive. He also devotes significant sections to an exploration of what research into primate behavior might tell us about the human hunger for hierarchy and order.

Fukuyama describes a chimp colony in the Netherlands observed by primatologist Frans de Waal. The aging alpha male of the colony was gradually unseated by a coalition of two younger males. Then, once the old one was out of the way, cooperation gave way to rivalry as the two younger ones started vying for control. It turns out that lead chimps don't dominate by physical intimidation. No one chimp is strong enough to hold off the rest of the group. Candidates for lead chimp must form coalitions through pleading, bribery, and begging. In this fashion, one of the Dutch chimps was able to form a larger faction on his side and come out on top. In a chimp colony in Tanzania, two rival gangs formed. Parties of four or five males from the northern gang would go out on raiding parties and murder isolated males from the other gang until every one of the southern males was killed, along with several females. In other words, primates cooperate in order to compete against rival individuals or gangs. The humane virtues like cooperation come intermingled with the Darwinian ones like the urge to dominate.

This instinct to cooperate and compete with our fellows is so strong in humans that we come into this world stocked with such emotions as anger, pride, shame, and guilt — all of which, Fukuyama says, “come into play in response to people who either are honest and cooperate, or who cheat and break the rules.”

The upshot is that when cooperative arrangements break down, people strive to create new ones. They don't wait for some lawgiver to hand down rules from a mountaintop. They do it themselves, because they are social animals with enough reason to figure out how to cooperate. “Knowing that there are important natural and spon-

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taneous sources of social order is not a minor insight,” Fukuyama writes. “It suggests that culture and moral values will continue to evolve in ways that will allow people to adapt to the changing technological and economic conditions they face.”

So as societies move through time, they build up social capital, use it up, and then begin replenishing it. This process of regenerating social capital, or renorming, Fukuyama continues, is complex, sometimes requiring several generations. Religions can play a role. So can capitalism, which polishes manners as much as it sometimes obliterates them. The Victorians regenerated their social order, taking a society that was chaotic and making it far more orderly. And so can we.

“There is growing evidence that the Great Disruption has run its course, and that the process of renorming has already begun,” Fukuyama writes in the final section of the book. He points to declining crime rates, falling divorce rates, dropping welfare rolls. The number of children born to single mothers appears to have stopped increasing.

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Furthermore, Fukuyama hints at but doesn’t elaborate much on less statistical straws in the wind — the popular success of such stern moralists as Dr. Laura Schlessinger, the success of the Promise Keepers, the growing stigma that now attaches to divorce.

These changes are by and large not imposed from the top down. Many social thinkers had theorized that as societies grow more complex, informal social norms, say those based on the customs of the family or the tribe, would be replaced by formal norms, written down as laws and regulations by the state. But if the evidence from biology is true, then even in complex societies, perhaps especially in complex societies, rules and norms will continue to burble up from the ground of human

instinct to create what Fukuyama calls “self-organization” — so long as the people in the society share some cultural understandings, have a sense of living within common boundaries, aren’t plagued by tyrants, and so on. People won’t forgo all hierarchical organizations, not by a long shot, but they will supplement organizations with organic norms of their own making.

In the end, Fukuyama concludes, there are two processes working through history. In the political and economic sphere, history appears progressive, gradually moving from tyranny to democratic capitalism. In the cultural sphere, there is no easy progression, but there is reason for hope, because human beings have innate capacities to reconstitute social order. That’s a moderately optimistic conclusion, and one I think borne out by the evidence around us.

The Great Disruption is also an informative tour through the recent histories of sociology, biology, even management theory. As always, Fukuyama’s range is dazzling. But perhaps he has shifted a bit too much from political theory to social science, too much from intellectual trends to statistics. Because surely there is a lot going on in America, as Fukuyama would be the first to concede, which can’t be described by data. Statistically, the Upper East Side of Manhattan of 1999 probably looks a lot like the Upper East Side of Manhattan of 1965, but that doesn’t mean there haven’t been important changes there in the way people think. Thirty years ago, Upper East Siders were throwing parties for the Black Panthers (a social capital-depleting enterprise if ever there was one). Now they are throwing parties

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for the Central Park Conservancy. In other words, had Fukuyama allowed himself to build a case based on reporting rather than just statistics, his argument would have been all the stronger.

Furthermore, if Fukuyama had taken a less empirical approach, he would have been able to address head-on a question that was central to his first book. Is the staid society we find at “the end of history” really the society we want to live in?

The full title of that book was *The End of History and the Last Man*. The Last Man is the figure left standing after the fundamental conflicts have all been settled. He is an orderly fellow. He would never do much that would cause him to show up in the statistics of social breakdown; a country of Last Men comes out near the top of the OECD comparisons. But he is also mediocre, tepid, mild. He is interested in health and safety, in comfort and self-preservation, and he has lost touch with troubling and transcendent ideals. He has shed loyalties and obligations that led his ancestors to desperate acts of courage and self-sacrifice. He is tolerant and non-judgmental, because to judge is to risk turmoil and conflict.

There were times during the American public’s recent outbreak of non-judgmentalism over the Monica Lewinsky scandal when it seemed that the Last Man had come and settled on these shores. And indeed, if we go back to the cul-de-sacs and wander through the suburbs, the threat of Last Manism — if something so mild and mediocre can be called a threat — seems more immediate than the threat of social breakdown. Maybe Fukuyama has simply accepted the triumph of the Last Man. Maybe he has adopted social sci-


ence in the same spirit that led the philosopher Alexandre Kojève to go off and become a bureaucrat in Brussels. If history is over and the Last Man is triumphant, then the grand questions have been settled and one might as well go about the mundane business of technocratic management.

I hope that’s not all there is. If America is able to rebuild social capital and restore order, perhaps the Last Man is not the end of the story. The reconstituted social order might turn out to be fertile ground for the flourishing of higher ideals and nobler aspirations of the kind that social science data can neither capture nor inspire. For that we need philosophy, or religion, or the inspiring examples of history.

The Way the World Works

By HOLMAN W.
JENKINS JR.

THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN. *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*. FARRAR STRAUS & GIROUX. 382 PAGES. \$27.50

 ONE OF THE MOST misunderstood formulations of economics is “comparative advantage.” All the term means is that if you are India and you can earn \$3 an hour growing wheat or \$5 an hour making

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