



# Identity Politics

*A critical analysis of Francis Fukuyama's thesis on the threat of identity politics to liberal democracies*

Lisanne Bunte

June 24, 2022

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master in Political Science (MSc)  
*Specialisation: Political Theory*

Supervisor: dr. B.R. van Leeuwen

Nijmegen School of Management  
Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Word count: 24.297  
Student number: S1009002

## Abstract

In this thesis Francis Fukuyama's criticism of identity politics as a threat for contemporary liberal democracies is critically evaluated. Identity politics is used by groups who demand recognition of their identity based on the perceived disregard and marginalization of their identity. The phrase was initially applied to social movements advocating for the rights and positions of marginalized minority groups who used identity politics to change social and cultural norms and improve social justice. Today, the phrase encompasses many more movements including majority and right-wing nationalist, religious, populist, or authoritarian movements. Fukuyama argues that contemporary developments regarding identity politics in terms of the formation of more narrow defined identity groups based on exclusionary identity traits is a threat to the functioning of liberal democracies by fuelling polarization and impeding possibilities for collective deliberation and state action. His thesis is contrasted with the original claims of identity politics and with the main critiques levelled directly against Fukuyama's arguments. It is concluded that Fukuyama's liberal approach in terms of the politics of universalism is problematic in the sense that it is unable to grant equal recognition, denies the reality of social groups, and supports an idea of colour blindness that prioritizes the experiences of dominant groups over the disadvantaged. Also, Fukuyama illegitimately generalizes all kinds of identity movements and proposes the development of a liberal national identity that is argued to be ambiguous and ineffective.

# Table of contents

- Abstract ..... 1
- 1 – Introduction ..... 3
- 2 – Identity politics..... 9
  - Historical development of identity and recognition ..... 10
  - The dialogical relation to the other..... 11
  - Social group identities ..... 12
  - Recognition and misrecognition..... 14
  - Politics of universalism and identity politics..... 16
  - A critical response to liberal universalism ..... 18
  - Recognition or redistribution?..... 19
  - Conclusion..... 20
- 3 – Fukuyama’s thesis ..... 22
  - The victory of liberal democracies ..... 22
  - Universal recognition in liberal democracies ..... 24
  - Development of identity ..... 25
  - Fukuyama’s criticism of identity politics ..... 27
  - Critical responses ..... 30
  - Conclusion..... 32
- 4 – A critical evaluation ..... 34
  - The liberal approach and recognition ..... 34
  - Colour blindness..... 36
  - Generalization of identity groups ..... 38
  - Narratives of blame ..... 40
  - A liberal national identity ..... 42
  - Conclusion..... 44
- 5 – Conclusion..... 46
- Bibliography ..... 50

## 1 – Introduction

What do the Islamic State, Black Lives Matter, Brexit supporters, and Russia's Vladimir Putin have in common? While they at first sight may seem like vastly different movements, according to Francis Fukuyama (2018), they all base their politics on the same social phenomenon of the demand for recognition of their group identity. The contemporary debate on identity politics is mainly about the question whether these kinds of politics are essentially constructive or destructive. While the dynamics of identity and group identities have always been present in politics, during the past decades the phrase 'identity politics' has arisen as a powerful force within politics. What this phrase exactly entails and how it should be interpreted remains disputed. In general, identity politics can be seen on the one hand as a set of political philosophical positions, and on the other hand as a mode of organizing or political strategy. Hill Collins (2000) for example defines identity politics as "a way of knowing that sees lived experiences as important to creating knowledge and group-based political strategies", and at the same time as "a form of political resistance where an oppressed group rejects its devalued status" (p.299). In contemporary liberal democracies, the expression is mainly used for political movements and organizations that base their claims in the marginalization and misrecognition of a particular identity (Heyes, 2020). Identity politics in this sense is aimed to be a constructive and transformative approach that addresses marginalization of a particular identity in order to reclaim a positive sense of self and community and ensure political freedom of the group.

In his book *Identity* (2018), Fukuyama writes on contemporary developments regarding identity politics and criticizes the practice of identity politics by arguing that it is a threat to the functioning of liberal democracies. In his main argument, Fukuyama states that especially the narrow focus of identity politics creates division, reinforces polarization, and impedes possibilities for state action and communication. The rise of identity as a central phenomenon within politics can, according to Fukuyama, partly be ascribed to the rapid and drastic developments in liberal democracies during the last decades, like globalization, increasing socioeconomic inequality, and the rise of populism. He argues these developments have had their impact on both the political left and the political right. While politics in liberal democracies used to be organized and dominated by economic issues, during the last decades the political spectrum has shifted towards an increasingly emotional spectrum defined by group identities. Fukuyama states that the political left abandoned their broader approach of general socioeconomic justice and started to focus on promoting the interests of more narrow marginalized groups. On the right, he argues, this created a nationalist and populist backlash where the focus became on protecting traditional national identities.

Fukuyama (2018) argues that feelings of indignity and disrespect among identity groups have created a politics of resentment: the mobilization of groups that perceive their dignity as being disregarded. This politics of resentment has been a powerful force in contemporary political issues and conflicts. Examples are political movements that aim to protect and glorify national identities, like governments in Russia, China, or Hungary, or movements who base their common identity on religion,

like the Islamic State. But politics of resentment are also present within liberal democracies. Examples are populist parties that aim to protect traditional national identities, like supporters of Donald Trump and the movement advocating for Brexit. On the political left there are also political and social movements advocating for recognition of identities. Examples are movements like Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and LHBQTQ+ movements. Another example are indigenous rights movements. According to Fukuyama, what all these groups have in common is that they base their politics on the perception that their dignity is being disregarded and that their identities are not being recognized adequately.

Identity politics is thus a form of politics of recognition. Charles Taylor (1994), an important theorist of recognition, argues that group identities are partly determined and shaped by the recognition or misrecognition of them. Misrecognition of an identity implies a lack of respect and can cause serious harm for the given identity group in terms of oppression by reducing persons to an inferior kind of being. It has consequences for the group's self-esteem, leading to self-depreciation or even self-hatred. According to Taylor, recognition of one's identity is a vital human need. Demands for recognition therefore often come from groups who have experienced misrecognition in the past. An important distinction that is made by Taylor, is between a universalistic understanding of recognition, also called a politics of universalism, in which everyone is to be recognized on the basis of a shared and equal human dignity, and recognition based on a politics of difference, which means to "recognize the unique identity of an individual or group, their distinctness from everyone else" (Taylor, 1994, p.38). Identity politics bases her claims in this second type, and claims recognition of group identities based on their distinctness and wish to retain these differences that form their identity. The phrase 'identity politics' has emerged originally during the 1960s with the rise of social movements that advocated for the rights of minority groups like women, black people, gays, and lesbians. While during the last decades this phrase has been extended to a much broader variety of identity groups, including populist, nationalist or religious based groups, this thesis will make no distinction between the politics of difference and identity politics, since both terms come down to the same substantive ideas and outlooks.

Fukuyama (2018) challenges identity politics in his book *Identity* by stating that the creation of identity groups that become more narrowly defined and claim recognition of their differences based on exclusionary grounds can be destructive and poses a threat to the functioning of liberal democracies. He argues that feelings of resentment have led to the rise of nationalist, religious, and populist parties within global politics which have been the driving force behind Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. According to Fukuyama, these feelings of resentment have been caused by developments on the political left that have chosen particular forms of identity over the larger collectives. While stating that liberal democracies have been built on notions of identity which form an inescapable part of politics and the universal human psychology, Fukuyama argues the problem with the desire for recognition of identity is that people are no longer satisfied with being recognized as simply equal human beings. Fukuyama states people in liberal societies have taken their rights and liberties for granted and have started to focus upon those parts of their personalities that have been constrained by social norms and institutions. He

argues this focus on differences has divided societies in increasingly narrow defined identity groups that leave people feel disconnected from their fellow humans. Fukuyama therefore warns for an impossibility of communication and collective action which will eventually lead to state breakdown. Instead of identity politics, Fukuyama argues in favour of a universalist politics of recognition and states that the modern nature of identity must be transformed. According to Fukuyama, in the same way as identity politics has divided people in smaller groups, it has the potential to create larger and more integrated identities that have the ability to make people recognize their shared values and turn to a mutual respect of dignity.

Yet, proponents of identity politics argue that the politics of equal dignity, that has been dominant within liberal democracies, poses a danger to social differences, justice and equality. Identity politics has in part arisen as a response to the failures of liberal democracies to guarantee a universal dignity (Heyes, 2020; Young, 1990). Critics of liberalism argue that the liberal social ontology on the relation between individuals is mistaken and neglects the importance of group rights and the representation of group interests. They argue that the marginalization of individuals is often caused by the subordinate relation of their social group to other groups. Liberal democracy in this sense is unable to ensure representation of marginalized groups and fails to recognize the oppressive and hierarchical systems of identity. According to Taylor (1994), 'difference-blind' liberalism is itself a reflection of the interests of a particular culture.

Iris Marion Young (1989; 1990) for example argues how a differential citizenship and recognition of identity groups is necessary to address structural injustices and oppression. She criticizes the idea of a liberal universal citizenship, because it has not led to social justice and equality, while instead certain social groups are still treated as second-class citizens. According to Young (1990), the emphasis on generality is a threat to social group differences and a source of oppression. The homogeneity required for public participation in liberalism is unrealistic and overdemanding because differences in experiences, needs and values simply exist. She argues that a promotion of universality in public would mean that privileges are reinforced and that minority groups are silenced and marginalized. Proponents of identity politics have thus made a compelling case regarding the potential and actual contributions of identity politics to social equality and justice. Fukuyama's thesis is sophisticated enough to not flatly deny this, yet he argues that the dangers and risks of narrow identity groups are bigger than their achievements.

In addition to these claims made by proponents of identity politics, several authors have directly criticized Fukuyama's thesis that identity politics poses a threat to liberal democracies. Critics have argued that Fukuyama's argumentation neglects the mutual differences among different identity groups and the variety of complex factors involved in the emergence of different forms of identity politics (Holmes, 2019; McManus, 2019; Amin, 2018; Menand, 2018). They state that Fukuyama illegitimately blames the political left for the rise of identity politics on the right, which disregards the social justice claims of identity groups at the margins. Another point of critique is how Fukuyama portrays his liberal

universal approach as neutral, while neglecting the role of liberal democracies in colonial and capitalist expansions that impact contemporary social relations (Makalintal, 2019, Coker, 2017; Menand, 2018). Instead of protecting liberal democracies from the threat of identity politics, critics argue that liberal democracies are a big cause of the injustices that identity politics addresses which requires a critical review of the system itself (Makalintal, 2019; Mutua, 2020). Others state that Fukuyama neglects both the distributional claims and the intersectionality and solidarity of identity groups advocating for social justice, which means that demands for recognition can also be empowering, instead of polarizing (Mutua, 2020). A last point of critique responds to Fukuyama's proposed solution to develop a broad-based, integrated, and liberal national identity, which is argued to be vague and ineffective (Rademacher, 2019; Mutua, 2020).

As follows from this introduction, there is a clear disagreement on the values and (dis)advantages of identity politics, as well as on Fukuyama's thesis regarding identity politics within liberal democracies. While the phrase has turned into a controversial and often negatively laden concept in contemporary societies and politics, identity politics bases its claims in a strong belief in the improvement of societal norms and values that can increase social justice and equality among citizens. Where Fukuyama sees identity politics and its narrow identity groups as a threat for liberal democracy, critics argue that identity politics in fact can contribute to a more broad-based coalition of justice. The research question that follows from this and will be central in this thesis is: *Is Fukuyama right in claiming that identity politics is a threat to contemporary liberal democracies?*

Fukuyama's thesis is interesting to examine given his relevant contributions to the academic debate on identity politics. Fukuyama (2018) has stated that identity is an inevitable and inescapable theme in contemporary politics with significant impact on the way we perceive and practice politics. While many authors have written about the phenomenon of identity within politics, Fukuyama has managed to give an overarching view of how identity is present within all spectrums of politics, from left to right, and from global to national movements. By detaching the phrase identity politics from belonging solely to social movements on the left and applying it to a broader range of identity groups, Fukuyama has showed how claims from different political movements share the same frames and perspectives and a similar basis in identity politics. His application of theory to major contemporary political developments allows us to understand and place his ideas in the real world.

Fukuyama's work is also relevant considering his earlier work *The End of History* (1992), in which he argued how Western liberal democracies had become victorious and would be institutionalized and universalized on the long-term, becoming the end point of human history and ideological development. In this book, Fukuyama explained the desire for recognition as the driving force behind a universal embrace of the ideas of liberal democracy. The book was criticized extensively, and with time it appeared that liberal democracy was less stable than presented and pressured by new political developments (Menand, 2018). In *Identity* (2018), Fukuyama turns to these new developments and

remarkably explains the dissatisfaction with the liberal world order again with ideas about the desire for recognition. His new and reconsidered ideas regarding the politics of recognition form the basis for his criticism of identity politics. In addition, Fukuyama tends to universalize his theory and explanations by using identity politics as the ‘master concept’ behind global developments, which is fascinating and contested at the same time.

Proponents of identity politics, among whom authors like Taylor and Young, have developed a body of literature on identity politics that can be contrasted with Fukuyama’s work and argues for the importance of group identities in politics. The work of Taylor (1994) is useful in this thesis in particular because it offers a distinction between two types of politics of recognition that allows for a more nuanced evaluation of Fukuyama’s thesis. Young’s (1990) work has in turn been particularly relevant in addressing how a politics of difference is necessary to address social injustices and in criticizing the liberal and universal approach of politics of recognition. Where they view liberal principles as obstructing identity politics in achieving a greater social justice, Fukuyama (2018) instead views liberal democratic values as the solution to the dangers of identity politics and the divisions it creates. The fact that the number of liberal democracies at the start of the twentieth century has never been higher before, while two decades later both liberalism and democracy are facing a crisis, indicates the relevance and urgency of this debate (Crouch, 2004).

The productive tension between ideas on identity politics within liberal democracies therefore requires closer attention. Academically, there is no consensus on the notion of (group) identity and on the role of demands for recognition within liberal democratic societies. This thesis contributes to an understanding and evaluation of identity politics and its implications for the political and social life of citizens in liberal democracies. Although much research has been done on the politics of recognition and the implications of (mis)recognition for individuals and social groups, contemporary developments regarding new demands for recognition require renewed insights in the consequences this will have for global politics. The terms of identity politics and the politics of resentment have both emerged quite recently and are related to political dynamics and developments that emerged during the first decades of the twenty-first century. Questions regarding identity politics in contemporary liberal democracies remain disputed but are of great relevance for the philosophical and political understanding of the politics of identity.

More clarity on the political and philosophical perspectives behind contemporary developments of identity politics is also significant on a societal and political level. While identity has always been a part of politics, the expression ‘identity politics’ has become a hot topic only in the last decades. Right from the emergence of the concept, it has been a controversial and mostly negatively laden concept. The concept has also been a target of critique and is often opportunistically misused to label political failings. Some even argue that the term is overdetermined by its critics and has become an obstacle for interrogation. Most of today’s global and local political movements and conflicts can be interpreted based on identity politics and demands for recognition, and these movements are growing. Movements

like Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, Brexit, but also developments within authoritarian regimes like Russia and China are dominating contemporary global politics. These developments require a better understanding of the theoretical assumptions underlying these demands for recognition and how these politics relate to and impact our societies.

To answer the central question, I will explore the concept of identity politics and its claims to evaluate Fukuyama's thesis. In the second chapter, the main claims of identity politics will be outlined while mapping out the contemporary political and philosophical debate on the politics of identity. The main concepts of identity, dignity and recognition will be discussed using the insights of several theorists. The chapter will discuss the development of the modern notion of identity and how proponents of identity politics claim it achieves a greater social equality and justice. In the third chapter, the thesis of Fukuyama will be central. It will discuss Fukuyama's criticism of identity politics as a threat to liberal democracy and the suggestions he makes to transform the nature of modern identity. The chapter will also include the main critiques that in turn are formulated regarding Fukuyama's thesis directly. The fourth chapter will be a critical evaluation of the various positions concerning the moral and political value of identity politics considering Fukuyama's criticism. It will address the original claims of identity politics as outlined by authors like Taylor and Young, as well as the critiques levelled directly against Fukuyama's thesis in his book *Identity*.

## 2 – Identity politics

Identity politics as it is understood today, as a philosophical position as well as a mode of organizing, is a form of politics of recognition. Charles Taylor (1994) distinguishes within the politics of recognition two main strands that are in tension with one another. The first one is a politics of universalism, which is about recognizing all human beings as equals based on a shared equal human dignity. This stance is favoured and supported by Fukuyama, whose position will be further examined in the third chapter. A second strand of politics of recognition is a politics of difference, which is not about recognition based on a shared equal dignity but based on differences between social groups. People are not recognized despite their differences, but because of their differences and because of what makes their identity unique from other group identities. Identity politics is based on this second type, the politics of difference, because identity groups make claims and demands for recognition of their specific identity. This chapter will examine the position of identity politics as a politics of recognition and as opposed to the universalistic approach of the politics of universalism.

A definition of the concept of identity politics on itself is hard to articulate, as it has become a contested and controversial notion. Originally the term ‘identity politics’ was applied to identity groups that emerged during the 1960s as social movements, fighting social injustice, and standing up for the marginalized position of oppressed minority groups like women, black people, gays, and lesbians. Fukuyama (2018) however argues that the term ‘identity politics’ as it is used today, refers not only to such groups, but also includes majority groups that base their politics on nationalist or religious grounds, or populist and authoritarian movements. LHBTQ+ and feminist movements, but also Brexit supporters or the Islamic State, all practice identity politics because they share the same perspectives in terms of their claims for recognition and perceived disregard of their dignity and identity. These groups base their politics on a perceived invisibility of their identity and a feeling that their demands for recognition are being disregarded. This thesis will make no distinction between the terms ‘identity politics’ and the ‘politics of difference’, because both terms are essentially based on the same philosophical and political perspectives and ideas. The term ‘identity politics’ can thus be ascribed to social groups who demand recognition of their group identity based on the perceived marginalized position of their identity.

In this chapter, the current state of affairs of the philosophical and political debate on identity politics will be outlined. It will address the philosophical concepts, ideas, and theories behind the politics of recognition in general, and identity politics in specific. The chapter starts with a historical overview of the development of the concept of identity and an understanding of the concept today. It will then discuss the notion of social group identities, social relations, and the implications of (mis)recognition for identity groups. After this, the concepts of on the one hand the politics of universalism, and on the other hand the politics of difference, or identity politics, will be explored more in depth and contrasted with one another. The emergence of the politics of difference as a critique of liberal universalist politics will be discussed, as well as its relation to redistributionist politics of justice.

## Historical development of identity and recognition

The modern notion of identity has been developed in line with the development of a politics of recognition that has been transformed from the 18<sup>th</sup> century on. During this age, identity was closely related to a sense of honour, which was determined by the ruling order of social hierarchies and defined by inequalities between social groups (Taylor, 1994). Around the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, revolutions made the social hierarchies defined by inequality collapse and the concept of honour got replaced by a new universalist and more egalitarian notion: dignity. Monarchies were replaced by democratic societies in which the concept of dignity that granted equal recognition to everyone was more compatible to democratic culture, and the notion of identity was transformed due to an emphasis on individualisation. While a notion of recognition has always existed within political philosophy, a politics of recognition as we have come to understand it today developed during this time (Honneth, 2001).

Taylor (1994) speaks of the concept of ‘authenticity’ that became central to the new understanding of identity. Ideas of individualisation and authenticity are about being true to oneself and having a moral sense about right and wrong based on personal feelings, which made being in touch with one’s feelings and inner depths crucial for acting right. The meaning of our modern identity thus implies a deep understanding of the ‘self’ (Taylor, 1989). This understanding is not about one’s own desires and capacities, or about caring for a self-image by living up to socially induced standards. What makes an understanding of one’s self essential to being a human individual is one’s relation to questions of the good, which means that an identity can never be an object of study in psychology or social sciences, as Taylor (1989) argues. This also means that an identity cannot be fully expressed in words, neither as a definition nor as an explicit description.

The focus on authenticity created a monological ideal in the Western world, in which identities were to be based on an inwardness and an independence of others. This has been a defining ideal for modern Western philosophy, in which the self has become understood as an autonomous being, existing relatively independently from its environment (Nooteboom, 2012). Especially during the Enlightenment, the self has arisen as a rational and autonomous being, a self that includes, understands, and encompasses itself. Before the collapse of social hierarchies, it was not thought or cared for that differences between people had any moral significance. But with a focus on authenticity, it became morally relevant to live your life in your own way, by being true to yourself (Taylor, 1994). Recognition was no longer taken for granted but had to be gained from others in society. Taylor argues that while the need for recognition itself had not changed, there was more at stake because the conditions for attempts to be recognized became much more fragile. The work of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who has written about the idea that one’s sense of self is dependent upon experiences of social recognition, has been especially important for the development of a modern concept of recognition (Honneth, 2001). Hegel presented the ‘struggle for recognition’, which is about subjects making progress through increasing demands for recognition to gain acceptance of their identities. Hegel has been the inspiration of several later philosophers and political thinkers, including Fukuyama.

Fukuyama (1992) argues in line with Hegel that the conception underlying a desire for recognition is as old as Western philosophy itself and refers to it by the concept of '*thymos*'. *Thymos* has been first introduced by Plato in the *Republic*, but other theorists have referred to the same idea with other concepts. Plato described three parts of the human soul: the reasoning part, the spiritual part and the desiring part and marked the second part, which exists in between reason and desire, as *thymos*. What is essential in the understanding of *thymos* and related ideas, is that it is about that part of human beings that "feels the need to place value on things – himself in first instance, but on the people, actions, or things around him as well" (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 163). In modern understandings, this conception is related to a sense of 'self-esteem', and closely related to emotions and feelings of anger, shame, and pride. *Thymos* is, according to Fukuyama, an essential part of the human soul that desires recognition. It is the most political part of human beings because it is the driving force in asserting power over others. Hegel also stressed the importance of *thymos* and argued that the first human was different from animals in the sense that they had a desire for recognition, which was a necessary precondition for the development of self-consciousness (Fukuyama, 1992).

### The dialogical relation to the other

What is crucial to understand in the close relation between recognition and identity is the dialogical character of human life (Taylor, 1994). Taylor (1994) argues that we understand ourselves and define our identity through a language of expression, in its broadest sense, and learn it in relation to others. Though the centrality of authenticity and individualism created a monological ideal of identity, the development and being of the human mind is essentially dialogical. Taylor argues that even though we are expected to be authentic and our own true self, the formation of our identity always happens in dialogue with or struggle against significant others. The Western monological ideal has underestimated the function of the dialogic and the fact that the most defining things of a person are related to their social space and learned through shared experiences (Taylor, 1989; 1994).

Identities are thus shaped and defined in relation to 'the Other', a concept that originates from Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas criticises the centrality of the notion of authenticity in modern Western philosophy and its tradition of emphasising the self as central to one's identity (Nooteboom, 2012). Levinas understanding of the self is instead defined by the relation between the self and the other and he emphasises that identity does not come from what is inside us, but instead of what is outside of us. This means that group identities are formed in relation to an 'other', and by distinguishing from those who do not belong to the same identity group. Stuart Hall (1997) uses this idea of the other to explain how people define themselves by creating an image of the other. He does also not agree with the Western monological ideal and argues that our sense of self is very focused on differences between people and social groups.

Hall (1997) argues that the other and the practice of othering is both necessary and dangerous. He states that "difference matters because it is essential to meaning", and explains differences are needed

to establish meaning and capture diversity (Hall, 1997, p.234). The danger however is that binary oppositions, like the self and the other, or black and white, are reductionist and never neutral. They oversimplify differences and allow for a relation of power in which one of the sides is dominant. Hall argues a meaning is never fixed or neutral but always subject to interpretation, and it cannot be controlled. A dangerous aspect of the function of othering is therefore that things that are considered abnormal are stigmatized and marginalized. This happens, according to Hall, when certain behaviour, characteristics or norms fall out of place or no longer clearly fit into a category, which will lead to an unsettling of the symbolic order and its meanings.

In response to the monological ideal of identity, Judith Butler (1990) has also challenged the assumption that the subject is a cohesive, self-identical subject. She argues, in line with Michel Foucault (1976), that subjects do not have an essential core that define their identity, but that instead the subject and its identity are a product of discourse. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990) states that gender identities for example ought not to be seen as internal and stable identities that determine the way we act. In contrast, gender can be seen as an act or performance that requires continuous repetition of a set of norms, acts and meanings that are established socially by relations of power and knowledge (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1976). Butler (1990) argues that philosophical discourse regarding identity mistakenly views identity as an internal and stable given and argues that identities instead are constituted by regulatory practices and socially induced norms. She states that when we view identity through stabilizing concepts such as gender or sexuality, it will marginalize or even banish the identities of those who fail to fit the social norms of cultural comprehensiveness.

Butler (1990) also draws from Hegel in her understanding of these power dynamics, who perceives the relation between the self and the other as reciprocal. Hegel argues that recognition of one's identity is never a unilateral given and expresses this in a dialectic known as the master-slave dialectic (Butler, 2005). In this understanding, both master and slave are similar and develop and recognize a self-consciousness in one another. One of the two will master the other, but recognition of the master by the slave could never be satisfactory because of their unequal status (Fukuyama, 2018). Demands for recognition thus shape identities and senses of self and other, and as Butler (2005) puts it, there is "a constitutive loss in the process of recognition, since the "I" is transformed through the act of recognition" (p.28).

### Social group identities

Identities are thus shaped through a dialogical relation to the other. While this other does initially not even have to be completely different at all, its existence will give rise to the forming of social and cultural differences and of collective identities that are the subjects of identity politics (Appiah, 2005). Social groups emerge and are differentiated in relation to one another and can be the subject of oppression or domination in this relation. Iris Marion Young (1990) deploys a concept of social groups as being reflective of the ways in which people identify themselves and others, resulting in the fact that they

associate more with some than others. While social groups exist out of individuals, they are socially prior to the individual because they in part constitute and shape individual identities and are “fundamentally intertwined with the identities of the people described as belonging to them” (Young, 1990, p.43).

Kwame Anthony Appiah (2005) argues that the contemporary common understanding of ‘identity’ is referred to in terms of identity traits and features like race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, ability, class, age, and so on. This shows that there is a strong general sense in society that our personal identity, in the sense of who we truly are, is determined by these social features and that they influence what we do and pursue in life. By creating labels and frames for groups that carry a certain identity feature, identities are ascribed meaning that carries ideas and judgements. Often these labels are even internalized “as parts of the individual identities of at least some of those who bear the label” (Appiah, 2005, p.68). Race for example has become a form of social categorization by appearance and social relations, which means that it is, just like most other identity features, a socially constructed notion (Gilbert, 2000). There are no significant biological or genetic differences between people with different skin colours which means that the differentiation is merely socially motivated. Gilbert (2000) however stresses that this does not mean that race does not exist, because it in fact plays a very real and significant role within social relations and the implications of the categorisation have real consequences in terms of social treatment.

Some identity groups do claim however that their identity is natural and comes from an essential core within them, for example certain members of LGBTQ+ communities (Heyes, 2020). Other groups claim that their social identity is socially constructed through societal norms, like several feminists during the second and third feminist wave. In philosophical and political thought, the idea that identities like race, gender, and sexuality are products of historical and social norms and discourses has become more common (Gilbert, 2000; Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). While there remains a dominant societal discourse on the essentialist nature of these identity features, there is more attention for the societal norms and hierarchies that are determined by and in turn define these identity features. The fact that we perceive for example gender as something natural, makes that we have created expectations and recognize, or better assume, different genders as identities (West & Zimmerman, 1987). The criteria by which we do this have become commonly known and accepted within society in terms of stereotypes about the beliefs, behaviours, and outlooks of the members of a group with a certain label, regardless of the truthfulness of these stereotypes (Appiah, 2005; 2006).

The formation of social and identity groups is also characterized by a notion of intersectionality, which means that social groups do not exist as strictly homogenous, separate, or differentiated, but that they instead are overlapping, cross-cutting, and mutually determining (Young, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; Butler 1997). Intersectionality is a concept developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), who argues that every individual is defined by multiple identity features, or axes, which cannot be seen as separate from others but intersect with one another and create new identities leading to particular forms of privilege or

oppression. Crenshaw (1991) reveals how social groups or political projects that seek to address the interest of for example women are oriented towards white women, and those that address the interests of black people are oriented towards black men. Both groups in this way neglect the specific interests of black women, whose intersecting identity traits create a new form of oppression. Judith Lorber (1999) argues that social groups are often formed out of a sense of injustice and that overlapping identities within a group can create conflict between different identity features. When certain people feel their specific identity feature to be marginalized within an identity group, it can result in a separation of a given part of the group, which will create more narrow identity groups. The problem of intersectionality would thus seem to call for erasing all boundaries to prevent an ongoing splitting of groups. However, this can become a problem for the political projects of identity politics because to practice identity politics, it is crucial that you know “who is “us” and who is “them”” (Lorber, 1999, p. 360). Intersectionality thus poses a challenge to identity politics in terms of who is to be included within given social groups and what identity features are relevant to be distinguished.

### Recognition and misrecognition

Social groups can be victim to discriminatory and marginalizing practices, because they are constructed in relation to one another. Appiah (2006) argues that while it is common to treat persons who are members of the same identity group with kindness, it is equally common to treat members from other identity groups with unkindness. In the contemporary understanding of identity, many identities like race, gender and sexuality have been shaped by discriminatory treatment as racism, sexism, and homophobia. This means identities are partly shaped by their recognition or the absence of it. Taylor (1994) argues that a person or group can really suffer when they are not recognised and that nonrecognition or misrecognition can be a form of oppression because it puts persons in a “reduced mode of being”, which will have a negative impact on one’s self-esteem (Taylor, 1994, p.25). Social groups that practice identity politics often base their politics upon their perceived marginalized position and lack of recognition of their identity.

The concept of the ‘other’ has inspired many feminist and post-colonial writers about the marginalizing implications of othering and misrecognition. Feminists have for example argued that women in patriarchal societies have been assigned an inferior identity status, which they have come to internalize. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) has used the notion of the other in her book *The Second Sex* to explain the marginalized position of women and how they are positioned as the inferior other, in opposition to men who are used as the frame of reference. De Beauvoir (1949) argues that the duality of the self and the other has always been a part of the human consciousness as a “fundamental category of human thought” (p.14). The self-other relationship is thus natural and often one of reciprocity, in which the self at some point becomes an ‘other’ to other selves. However, in certain cases, as with the position of women in the relation between the sexes, one group always finds itself in the position of the other and becomes subject to misrecognition. Where the man is seen as neutral, dominant, and positive,

the woman is defined by the negative and by peculiarities, she is defined as relative to him.

Within post-colonial thought, Frantz Fanon (1986) has explained how black people are positioned as the other by the white gaze that fixes the identity of blackness. In white culture, black people have always been constructed as the other, which has become internalized by black people themselves and Fanon (1986) states this has had a traumatizing impact on the self-image of black people and their communities. Racism and dehumanization have been destructive to the sense of self of black people and the construction of the black identity. Edward Said (2000) also wrote about the destructive consequences of a construction of the other in relation to postcolonialism in his book *Orientalism*. He argues that the idea of the 'Orient' is created as a discourse by the West to maintain relations of power and hegemony between the West and East. To the West, the Orient is seen as the other, and both identities are based on presumed differences between the East and West. Even though Western researchers and writers constructed the idea or identity of the 'Orient', it has become a reality with real consequences.

Axel Honneth (2001) argues that a lack of recognition or misrecognition is defined as a moral offence, as opposed to a mere misfortune, when there is no question of denied recognition. The positive attitude one can develop from gaining recognition is a form of self-respect or self-esteem, which makes one consider oneself an appreciated member of a community of morally competent actors. On the other hand, the negative attitude one can develop from misrecognition is an infliction of disrespect which can result in an oppressed status. Misrecognition and oppression are the basis of the politics of many identity groups. An example is the Combahee River Collective (2014), a collective of black feminists who were committed to struggle against multiple forms of oppression. They believed a liberation of black women is necessary, in the way autonomy is a necessity for human beings. They argued for the necessity of identity politics because their position had never been a priority and they argued the only people that would work for their liberation were themselves.

While there are many different ways, degrees, and perceptions in which a group can be oppressed, Young (1990) states that oppressed people are constrained in their ability to "develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings" (p.40). Oppression does not have to refer to brutal tyranny, it is also present in the everyday lives of people in liberal societies. It is about structural and deep injustices that are institutionalized in our societies, often even unconscious or unintended. Oppression, according to Young, has five central aspects, namely: "exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence" (Young, 1990, p.9). Misrecognition or a lack of recognition relates to marginalization as a form of oppression, which is described by Young (1990) as expelling people from "useful participation in social life" (p. 53). Potential material deprivation that follows from these kinds of oppression requires more than a material redistribution because they are connected to social group identities that require recognition. Misrecognition is thus not just a lack of respect; it can inflict serious harm on multiple levels. As it is argued by Taylor (1994), recognition is not just a courtesy, it is a vital human need.

## Politics of universalism and identity politics

Politics of recognition that have been developed from the desire or need for recognition have been distinguished by Taylor (1994) in two different conceptions: a politics of universalism and a politics of difference. The first one, the politics of universalism, has arisen out of the transition from honour to dignity and is about emphasizing the equal dignity of all human beings. This politics argues that all humans equally share and possess a notion of dignity that should lead to an equalization of their rights and recognition. This understanding is based on Kant's use of the term dignity and "on the idea that all humans are equally worthy of respect" (Taylor, 1994, p.41). Institutions of equal dignity assume a 'universal human potential' for humans to be rational agents, which makes them worthy of equal respect. Within the politics of universalism, there exist disagreements on the extent to which equalization needs to occur. For example, whether it should only be about formal and legal regulations, or also about a socioeconomic redistribution. Despite interpretation differences, the principle of universal dignity has become universally accepted and dominant in the Western world.

The second kind of politics of recognition, the politics of difference, is shaped by the development of the modern notion of authenticity (Taylor, 1994). This politics is about recognizing people not by their sameness, but by their differences and distinctness from others. The politics of difference makes claims for recognition based on unique and particular identity traits, especially for those identity groups that have been marginalized, oppressed, or assimilated in the past. Even this politics of difference has a universalist basis because it claims that "everyone should be recognized for his or her unique identity" (Taylor, 1994, p.38). The politics of difference however argues that to avoid discrimination, some cases require differential rights and treatment instead of equal rights and identical treatment (Young, 1990). Identity politics has originated from the ideas of the politics of difference, because it is about social groups making claims for recognition for oneself *as* different, instead of despite differences. While the phrase 'identity politics' has been extended to include a broader variety of identity groups, both terms express and encompass the same perspectives and ideas, which is why this thesis will make no distinction between the concepts of identity politics and the politics of difference. Identity politics is thus in tension with the politics of universalism, which bases claims for recognition not on an expression of differences, but on a shared and equal dignity.

The term 'identity politics' was initially appointed to the social movements and identity groups that emerged during the 1960s and made claims for social justice and recognition of marginalized minority groups. Applied to this context, Young (1990) has written about the importance of a politics of difference over a politics of universalism in addressing structural injustices and oppression. She argues that a differential citizenship and recognition of identity groups is necessary to counter discrimination and marginalization. Her theory of difference can be classified as post-liberal, because she argues that a focus on individual equality should not override group-based interests. Young argues that social justice should not start with a distribution of material means, but instead should focus on previously overlooked concepts of domination and oppression within decision-making and general culture. She rejects

universalistic theories of justice and uses critical theory to argue from historic and social contexts. Critical theory “rejects as illusory the effort to construct a universal normative system insulated from a particular society” (Young, 1990, p.5). A universal theory of justice, or a universal recognition, will always be too abstract and will not match the reality of social contexts, Young argues.

Young (1990) starts her theory of difference from the positions of these social movements that emerged during the 1960s that advocate for the rights and positions of for example women, black people, the poor, disabled, gays and lesbians, and so on. These movements base their claims in the perceived structural and institutional injustices and inequalities of their societies but have found no place within contemporary mainstream theories of justice. Just like these movements, Young rejects the mainstream paradigm of moral reasoning that claims an impartial and impersonal point of view. She denies the impartiality of this paradigm and its use of general and universal principles and questions the ideal of impartiality in itself. The identity politics of these movements therefore starts from so called ‘lived experiences’, especially the experiences of those subjects within the context and social structures that generate injustices. These experiences are used to substantiate and legitimize certain claims (Harding, 2015). Sandra Harding (2015) argues that knowledge is always socially situated and deeply embedded within historic and cultural contextual structures. There is a tension between the knowledge of dominant epistemic accounts and so-called subjugated knowledges of marginalized groups in society. Because knowledge is always based on experiences, Harding (2004) argues that different experiences should allow for different perceptions and knowledges about ourselves and our environments. Group experiences are not only an important source of a common world view, but also of a sense of identity (Lorber, 1999). The ideal of impartiality in dominant moral reasoning assumes a conception of identity that aims to restrict differences. Young (1990) however argues that this is an impossible ideal, and instead argues that particularities and contexts should in fact be part of moral reasoning.

Today however the term ‘identity politics’ is no longer only reserved for the social movements from the 1960s that fight for the rights of minority groups (Fukuyama, 2018). According to Fukuyama, all identity groups that make claims for recognition based on shared experiences of marginalization or invisibility of their group identity, can be labelled as practicing identity politics. This understanding also includes (majority) groups and movements who make claims for recognition on religious or nationalist grounds, like the Islamic State or nationalist movements fighting for independence. But also, more authoritarian or populist movements practice identity politics according to Fukuyama, like the supporters of Putin in Russia or advocates of Brexit. Fukuyama argues that most contemporary political struggles are connected to issues of identity and recognition. All these groups share the perspective that their identity is marginalized relative to more dominant identities either within their society or globally, and that they suffer from an invisibility or negation of their identity group. By practicing identity politics, groups demand a recognition that preserves their group identity.

## A critical response to liberal universalism

With the centrality of dignity in understandings of identity and the emergence of liberal democracies in the Western world, the politics of universalism became central in modern liberalism. In liberal thought, an important aim is to make no distinction between specific identities or identity groups, but to treat members as the individuals they are (Appiah, 2005). The assumption is that because people are individuals worthy of equal respect that should be able to control and shape their own life, the government is not to interfere in this by advantaging or disadvantaging certain identities. The politics of difference arose as a response to this understanding by criticizing the liberal understanding of the politics of universalism and its unintended discriminatory implications. This paragraph will discuss two of the main critiques that identity politics levelled against the politics of universalism within liberal democracies.

The first critique is about the focus within liberal democracies on individualism and the neglect of groups and group rights. The social movements from the 1960s, to whom the term identity politics was originally appointed, responded to the emphasis on formal and legal equality within liberal democracies by criticizing there was too little attention for group rights and the representation of group interests (Heyes, 2020). The movements argued that the individual rights in liberal democracies are unable to protect those individuals who are members of social groups that are subject to marginalization. They claimed that liberal democracies are unable to ensure representation of marginalized groups and fail to acknowledge the oppressive and hierarchical systems of identity that impact individuals as well. Young (1990) has argued that an individualist conception of persons and society often tends to identify oppression with the existence of social groups. In liberal societies the idea exists that because social groups are subject to oppression, the cancellation of social groups would end oppression. When treating people as individuals instead of as members of groups, it would free them from social norms and with that oppression. Young (1990) disagrees with this stance and argues that it is unhelpful and “foolish to deny the reality of groups” (p. 47). Not only is group differentiation an inevitable part of current societies, but it is also desirable, Young argues.

This argument can be strengthened by the fact that a liberal and universal citizenship has not led to social justice and equality since some social groups are still treated as second-class citizens (Young, 1989). To ensure inclusion and participation of every individual, a differential citizenship is needed instead that attends to differences between social groups and grants special rights. Young argues that an emphasis on generality and universality is a threat to social group differences and can in this sense become a source of oppression. In liberalism, particularity is assigned to the private, and the public is associated with the universal, which “makes homogeneity a requirement of public participation” (Young, 1989, p.257). Young argues this is unrealistic and overdemanding because differences simply exist. Promoting a universality in public would mean that privileges are reinforced under the guise of ‘state neutrality’ and that minority groups are silenced and marginalized. This has put marginalized identity groups in a dilemma, who on the one hand had to deny that they are different, but on the other

hand were forced to affirm that their differences made the universal principle of equal treatment unfair.

The second critique of identity politics levelled against the politics of universalism is about the pretended neutrality of its principles. Taylor (1994) argues that these principles are not difference-blind at all, but a reflection of the dominant majority culture that constitutes an unfair and oppressive society in which minority cultures are forced to adapt. Both Taylor (1994) and Young (1990) argue that liberalism is not a neutral concept, it is an expression of a range of cultures that exist within liberal societies. Problematic in particular is that liberalism will present its principles as neutral and universal. The liberal ideal of impartiality “masks the ways in which the particular perspectives of dominant groups claim universality, and helps justify hierarchical decision-making structures” (Young, 1990, p. 97). Young argues that this universal ideal has worked to exclude persons who were defined by particularities. In the history of Western philosophy, the logic of identity has aimed to find a universal principle or law which has led to a repression of differences. The search for a universal category has positioned everything that remained different as the other. This means that universalism can only be reached at the expense of the particularities, or of those who are expelled and defined in the exclusive oppositions of self and other.

Chandran Kukathas (1998) has responded to this last point of critique and argues that Taylor’s view of liberalism is mistaken and that it is more than a particular cultural form and in fact a response to cultural and religious diversity. Kukathas argues that by being indifferent to identities and promoting no specific interests, liberalism allows for people to pursue their own activities and live together in peace. Demands for recognition of particular identities should not be granted within liberalism, because it will elevate conflict between identity groups and will make some groups come out better than others. Kukathas argues that the political survival of certain identities is not up to the state, because it is not a right.

### Recognition or redistribution?

Before the shift to identarian issues and a focus on recognition within politics, theories of justice used to be dominated by a focus on redistribution of material goods. Changes in political philosophy however have shifted this focus towards inequalities in terms of dignity and respect (Honneth, 2001). Young (1990) has argued that an extension of theories of redistribution to immaterial goods as self-respect and power is insufficient because these goods are not distributable and identifiable things. She therefore argues that besides a redistribution of material goods, the focus in identity politics should be on oppression and domination as important aspects of justice. However, considering the growing socioeconomic inequalities, critics are worried that these new conceptions of justice in terms of identity politics will fail to justify demands for redistribution.

One of these critiques is voiced by Nancy Fraser (1995), who argues that social justice requires both recognition and redistribution and warns for the risk of losing sight of the importance of redistribution policies. Material inequality, in terms of income, property ownership, access to education,

health care and work, and disparities in health and mortality, are increasing within and between states. Fraser argues that most identity features, like gender or race, have both an economic and a cultural dimension. She argues that social identities are organizing principles of the economic structures in our society, while simultaneously a status differentiation of norms and privilege traits. The fact that these dimensions overlap and intertwine, does not mean that problems of recognition can be subsumed under theories of redistribution, or that problems of distribution can be subsumed under theories of recognition. Fraser therefore argues for a third approach that combines the politics of difference with a politics of redistribution, which she calls a 'perspectival dualism'. While recognition and redistribution are often polarized against one another, Fraser argues it is precisely the relation between the two that constitutes a comprehensive theory of justice.

However, critics have responded to Fraser's dualism by arguing that it is misleading to present the development of a politics of redistribution as if historical social movements and their emphasis on legal and material equality had been unfamiliar with social recognition, in the same way as it is unfair to reduce current identity groups to solely cultural aims (Honneth, 2001; Butler, 1997). Honneth (2001) argues recognition and redistribution have never been two clearly separate dimensions and therefore assesses Fraser's distinction between a politics of redistribution and recognition as a false opposition. Butler (1997) also argues that the presumed distinction between the material life of redistribution and the cultural life of identity politics is not that stable and fixed as it is projected. Instead of dealing with two phases, it is simply a matter of differences in priorities and nuances. The distinction between redistribution and recognition is presented as if new social movements and identity politics are merely cultural to make them secondary to 'real', more conservative politics (Butler, 1997).

## Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the main points of the contemporary debate on identity politics and its underlying political and philosophical conceptions. Social groups that practice identity politics make claims for recognition of their particular identity as different, with a strong wish to preserve their specific identity and have their differences acknowledged. This understanding is contrasted with a politics of universalism that is dominant within liberal democracies which makes claims for recognition based on a shared human dignity and argues for an equalization of rights. Advocates of identity politics argue that it is a necessary response to the unfair structures and dynamics of society that generate social injustices and advantage certain groups over others. They state that since social group identities are constructed in relation to one another, social group differences determine their status in privilege or oppression. Especially within liberal democracies, where the emphasis is on universality and where group differences tend to become suppressed, identity politics is according to them a way to stand up for those who are defined as the marginalized other in society.

The next chapter will discuss Fukuyama's criticism of identity politics more in depth and focus on the liberal politics of universalism in defending this critique. It will also include some direct critical

responses to Fukuyama's thesis that is central in his book *Identity* (2018). The fourth chapter will return to the claims made by proponents of identity politics in this chapter, by developing a critical evaluation of Fukuyama's judgement of identity politics. The claims made by authors like Taylor and Young will, next to the direct critiques from the following chapter, play a key role in evaluating Fukuyama's thesis regarding identity politics within liberal democracies.

### 3 – Fukuyama’s thesis

Fukuyama’s position regarding identity politics and the politics of recognition in liberal democracies is best outlined by two of his most important works, the essay and book *The End of History* (1989; 1992), and his book *Identity* (2018). In both works he theorizes about the struggle and importance of recognition of a human dignity in politics. While acknowledging and emphasising the importance of recognition within politics, Fukuyama (2018) argues that contemporary developments regarding the rise of identity politics are a threat to liberal democracies. Fukuyama argues that the modern notion of identity must be transformed to keep collective action and deliberation possible and prevent ultimate state breakdown. Instead of moving towards particular and narrow group identities, as Fukuyama argues is happening within identity politics, we must create larger and more integrative identities.

This chapter will discuss Fukuyama’s thesis regarding his criticism of identity politics. It will start with a discussion of his ideas in *The End of History* (1989; 1992), in which he sets out the importance of recognition for liberal democracies. With the use of the concept ‘*thymos*’, Fukuyama explains the role of a desire for recognition in the victory of the liberal ideology over the world. Almost three decades later, Fukuyama wrote his book *Identity* (2018), in which he turns to new developments in global politics and reconsiders his ideas regarding the struggle of recognition. The chapter will discuss Fukuyama’s arguments from this later book on the reasons why the rise of contemporary identity politics is a worrying development for liberal democracies. The chapter ends with an overview of the main critical responses that have been levelled against Fukuyama’s ideas.

#### The victory of liberal democracies

Fukuyama wrote his article *The End of History?* in 1989 when he experienced something ‘fundamental’ was happening in the world history (Fukuyama, 1989). During this time, the Cold War had just ended and there was a general feeling that peace was settling in many places of the world. Fukuyama aimed to capture these developments within a broader and more coherent theoretical framework on structural changes in global politics. He argued that economic and political liberalism had triumphed during the twentieth century when it faced challenges of the remains of absolutism, fascism, and a new Marxism. These alternatives had been exhausted and the spread of liberalism was not only visible within politics, but also by the spread of Western capitalist culture. Fukuyama used the phrase ‘the end of history’ to point out “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (1989, p.4). In his following book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), Fukuyama further clarifies this idea by stressing how the end of history does not imply an ending of events or of the cycle of life, but rather an ending of the development of the basic principles and institutions underlying the big questions of society.

Fukuyama (1989; 1992) has based his ideas about the development of history on the German philosopher Hegel, who has also been the inspiration of Karl Marx’s philosophy of history. In Hegel’s dialectical thinking, there is an absolute moment in which an ultimate form of society would win and

become the endpoint of history. In Hegelian thinking, history is driven by contradictions, for example in the human consciousness in terms of ideologies (Fukuyama, 1989). The material and economic world are subject to culture, and human consciousness and the processes of history should therefore be understood in terms of developments in ideas. The end of history would be the end of human ideological evolution in the sense that further improvement of the general principles of justice is no longer possible. According to Fukuyama, there are no longer any fundamental contradictions that cannot be resolved within the context of liberalism, which will lead to the universalization of the victorious ideology of liberalism all over the world. He also stresses however that the impact of material factors is not to be underestimated, since liberal economies and its consumer culture have played an important part in the preservation of liberalism in the political sphere.

The victory of liberalism does not mean that there will not be any injustices or social problems within liberal democracies anymore, but according to Fukuyama (1989), they will merely be the consequence of a wrong application of the principles of justice, rather than a defect in the principles themselves. To substantiate his argument, Fukuyama argues that those challenges to liberalism that shape important political movements and are part of the world history must be critically exhausted. Two of these great challenges to liberalism have been for example fascism and communism. Both ideologies aimed to solve a perceived contradiction in liberal societies but were eventually side-lined. According to Fukuyama, the contradiction of the classes has been successfully solved within Western liberal states by egalitarianism. While he acknowledges that there remain great inequalities between groups of people that are rich and poor, these inequalities are not caused by the “underlying legal and social structure of our society” (Fukuyama, 1989, p.9). He in fact argues that the liberal society is fundamentally egalitarian and redistributes to a certain extent the negative consequences of those social characteristics that are the historical legacy of persistent past inequalities. Communism is therefore no longer an attractive alternative, according to Fukuyama.

Other challenges to liberalism that should be mentioned according to Fukuyama (1989) are religion and nationalism, both of which still play a significant role today in right-wing identity politics. Religious fundamentalism has for example risen quickly in the last decades. Fukuyama states that there is indeed something missing at the core of liberalism’s ideology that could be filled up by some form of religion and that seems unsolvable through politics. However, with regards to religious states, he does not believe them to be appealing to enough people and therefore not universally relevant enough. The other threat to liberalism he mentions that still plays a key role in the contemporary world is nationalism. However, Fukuyama (1989) is not convinced that nationalism represents an “irreconcilable contradiction” (p. 14) and argues that most nationalist movements do not represent an ideology or political program on its own apart from a desire of independence from others.

In *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), Fukuyama argues how the end of the twentieth century is to be seen as an endpoint leading humanity ultimately to liberal democracies. He does this with two main arguments: an economical argument about the spread of liberal principles in economics

and technology, and the importance of the struggle for recognition based on his ideas about *thymos*. It is the latter argument that I will use to examine Fukuyama's conception and criticism of identity politics. Fukuyama argues that an economic understanding alone is not sufficient to explain the victory of liberal democracies, because it ultimately arises out of the part of the human soul that demands recognition. In his book, Fukuyama stresses the importance of the struggle for recognition to view and explain the modern world.

### Universal recognition in liberal democracies

Fukuyama (1992) uses the concept of *thymos* and explains it as sense of self-worth that has been the driving force behind the historical development leading to the victory of liberal democracies. He argues that if human beings were based on mere desire and reason, there would be no demand for democratic governments that recognize the autonomy of individuals. While *thymos* has thus played a significant role in the victory of the ideology of liberalism, Fukuyama also argues that the desire for recognition that comes from *thymos* has a dark side. *Thymos* is on the one hand closely related to a moral dimension that determines people's feelings about right and wrong, but on the other hand also the source of disagreement and anger on the substantial contents of this moral dimension. In addition, it is not likely to assume that all human beings will recognize themselves and others as equals. Some may demand a recognition as being superior to other people, because of either their sense of inner worth or an arrogant estimation of themselves. Fukuyama (1992; 2018) uses the Greek term '*megalothymia*' for this, which means the desire to be recognized as superior. The opposite of this is indicated with the term '*isothymia*', which means the desire to be recognized as equals. Fukuyama uses these terms to explain how *thymos* can not only be a source of self-respect, but also of a desire to dominate.

While the concept of *thymos* has not necessarily been the widely used term to describe the phenomenon of the desire for recognition, it has always been present in the Western philosophical tradition, from Plato to Nietzsche (Fukuyama, 1992). However, early modern liberal philosophers have tried to expel the more visible expressions of *thymos*, especially *megalothymia*, in an attempt to channel them safely through democratic processes. A system of checks and balances was established to protect society from powerful ambitions, which instead were to cancel out one another. *Megalothymia*, the desire to be recognized as superior, was banished from liberal democracies and according to Fukuyama replaced by a combination of two main things. First, a reinforcement of the part of the soul that desires, which led to an economization of society. And second, a reinforcement of *isothymia*, the desire to be recognized as equals. This led to a contradiction, because while the founders of the modern liberal tradition aimed to expel *thymos* from political life, a desire for recognition has remained pervasively in terms of *isothymia*.

Liberal democracies thus aimed to solve the struggle for recognition by abolishing relations of master and slave and creating a more homogenous society in terms of social relations. The master-slave relation in Hegelian historical thinking can never solve the struggle for recognition because both sides

are left unsatisfied (Fukuyama, 1992). This contradiction has led to a historical progression away from master-slave relations towards a more egalitarian society. According to Fukuyama, what ultimately can solve the defect in the struggle for recognition is a universal recognition. By abolishing the difference between master and slave there was no longer a recognition at the expense of others. Fukuyama argues that Hegel offers a more accurate and noble understanding of modern liberal democracies compared to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of Hobbes and Locke. Where Hobbes and Locke based their liberal society on an agreement and the right not to interfere in one another's lives, Hegel has based this agreement on a mutual recognition among citizens. Instead of a pursuit of rational self-interest, the Hegelian interpretation of liberalism pursues a rational recognition, "recognition on a universal basis in which the dignity of each person as a free and autonomous human being is recognized by all" (Fukuyama, 1992, p.200). Fukuyama agrees with this understanding and argues that by choosing a liberal democracy, people do not merely choose freedom for the desiring part of their soul, they choose a satisfaction by recognition of their dignity. Liberal democracies are therefore, according to Fukuyama, successful in terms of satisfying both the desiring and thymotic parts of the human soul.

A rational recognition is thus expressed in terms of universalism. An irrational form of recognition is according to Fukuyama (1992) for example a form of nationalism in which states recognize their members as a group based on ethnic or racial characteristics. He argues that a distinction based on these characteristics is not natural but arbitrary and accidental and that recognition based on a particular culture will lead to clashes with cultural minorities. With an irrational recognition, Fukuyama argues the struggle for recognition will lead to an impasse and remain unsatisfactory. In liberal democracies, the struggle for recognition will be reconciled because recognition is granted based on the only natural and acceptable ground possible, which is the individual as an autonomous human being. Fukuyama (1992; 2018) thus argues for a politics of recognition as discussed in its first meaning: a politics of universalism. He argues for a universal and homogenous liberal state, which is founded upon open and rational principles. Liberal democracies recognize all humans as equals by granting and protecting rights, and recognition is assured to be reciprocal by means of self-government.

### Development of identity

Around twenty years after Fukuyama's *End of History* (1989), lots had changed in global politics and Fukuyama's stances had received fundamental critique. The victory of liberal democracies seemed to be on a rollback and critics argued that neither liberalism nor democracy was dominant or victorious (Stanley & Lee, 2014; Menand, 2018). Liberalism has been facing new challenges that undermine important parts of Fukuyama's original argument. Fukuyama's use of liberalism in presenting his arguments had also been criticized, as Glaser (2014) argues how Fukuyama seems to disguise his arguments that are in fact right-wing neoliberal politics favouring economic liberalism. Critics accused Fukuyama of concealing and naturalizing the dominance of the right by falsely presenting the liberal ideology as natural and not systemic (Glaser, 2014). In addition, the left questioned Fukuyama's

'tendentious' statements that class issues had been resolved by liberal egalitarianism by the time of 1989.

In his new book *Identity* (2018), Fukuyama turned to some important developments in global politics and re-evaluated his earlier stances regarding struggles for recognition and the victory of liberal democratic ideologies. Where he had argued that liberal democracies had become an endpoint in history, new developments at the start of the twenty-first century changed this perspective. For Fukuyama (2018), especially Brexit and the election of Donald Trump had been crucial events that transformed the political spectrum from a focus on economic issues towards a spectrum defined by identity. Where he had argued in the *End of History* (1992) that the desire for recognition was a driving force behind the spread of liberal democracy, Fukuyama used the concept of *thymos* in his new book to explain the defeat of liberal democracy. He argued that while a focus on universal recognition had been a way to find common ground and bind people together by a demand for democracy and autonomy, a shift away from this universal approach towards a desire for recognition based on differences has threatened liberal democracy by creating division and undermining liberal principles. During the twentieth century, class-based and left-wing parties used to dominate politics, while today global politics is mainly shaped by nationalist and religious parties. It has become clear that nationalism has not disappeared but is becoming more prominent within populist and authoritarian movements. The same goes for religion, which has been a rising political phenomenon, most visible in the Middle East.

With the rise of these movements, the more traditional class-based left-wing politics have been declining all over the world (Fukuyama, 2018). While communism had already collapsed, traditional left-wing social democratic parties shifted to the centre, becoming harder to distinguish from centre-right parties. Given the rise of global socioeconomic inequality during the past decades, Fukuyama argues the rise of populist right rather than populist left is a noticeable development. He however explains this development by the indignity and invisibility of the poor and middle classes. Fukuyama argues that economists in general forget about the third part of the human soul, *thymos*, that explains most of our human behaviour. What may seem like an economic motivation driven by material desires is often in fact a *thymotic* desire for recognition. Fukuyama states for example that a demand for equal pay of women is a matter of recognition because it is about feelings of anger and justice, not about resources. The perception of invisibility is therefore a key factor in the new nationalism that had risen during the Brexit campaigns and the election of Donald Trump. The lack of recognition and perceived invisibility gives rise to feelings of resentment among people who experience their economic distress as a loss of social status and identity.

New social movements that emerged during the 1960s on the left no longer focused on class struggles, but on support for the rights of multiple marginalized groups, Fukuyama (2018) argues. These movements emerged out of the liberal democracies that aimed to recognize dignity of human beings as equals. However, as Fukuyama states, democracies will always fail to live up to this a bit, and people will be judged on assumptions about them as members of a group. Even when laws changed and citizens were formally equalized, liberal democracies could not guarantee an equal recognition of dignity,

because discrimination, prejudice and disrespect remained part of society. Fukuyama argues that individual self-esteem, *thymos*, is related to larger group esteem, which means that the personal is affected by the political. The rise of these movements impacted society and its members to think about their own identity and group memberships. These groups that demanded a public recognition of their collective identity practiced what we today have come to call 'identity politics'. These were in fact the same struggles and perspectives as the collective nationalist and religious movements that already existed, but only now the term came into being.

### Fukuyama's criticism of identity politics

The shift from a more universal recognition towards identity politics within liberal democracies was, according to Fukuyama (2018), a logical and necessary response to social injustices. He acknowledges that bringing attention to narrower experiences of social injustice has resulted in improvements in the recognition of these groups by creating consciousness and changing cultural norms. However, Fukuyama does state that this development has been problematic for liberal democracies and criticizes identity politics on several points. First, Fukuyama argues that within identity politics, it is problematic when identity is interpreted only in specific ways, by for example leaving out issues regarding socioeconomic inequality. Fukuyama argues it is much easier to debate cultural and identity issues, which is why he argues identity politics "for some progressives has become a cheap substitute for serious thinking about how to reverse the thirty-year trend in most liberal democracies toward greater socioeconomic inequality" (Fukuyama, 2018, p.115). Fukuyama thus accuses identity politics of neglecting more urgent problems in terms of socioeconomic inequality that require a redistribution.

A second problem regarding the narrow focus on marginalized groups, according to Fukuyama (2018), is that it overlooks and distracts attention away from older and larger identity groups whose problems have been ignored. Fukuyama mentions for example a big part of the American white working class, who by the growing socioeconomic inequality have shifted towards an underclass. Activists from leftist social movements have tended to overlook these issues and progressive social democratic parties are losing votes by lacking ambitious plans to deal with the problems of the large working class.

Third, Fukuyama (2018) states that the contemporary understandings of the concept of identity have the potential to threaten free speech and deliberation that is necessary for a healthy democracy. He argues that the commitment of liberal democracies to freedom of speech has started to clash with a preoccupation with recognition of identities and its focus on lived experiences. According to Fukuyama, the focus has become more on emotional rather than rational argumentation and a focus on lived experiences undermines rational argumentation by delegitimizing arguments that are perceived as offensive.

A final, and according to Fukuyama (2018) most severe, problem with identity politics is that the current practices on the left have given rise to an increase of more dangerous and exclusionary identity politics on the right. This has been caused by the fact that identity politics on the left has fuelled

a political correctness regarding things that can no longer be said in public without fear of being accused of moral indifference. Political correctness is a complex social phenomenon and the range of acceptable things to say seems hard to follow. According to Fukuyama, the concept is not about challenging the fundamentals of democratic principles, instead it is about challenging the dignity of an identity group by showing a lack of awareness of their experiences. The right has picked up more extreme forms of political correctness of the left and used it to create a false representation of leftist politics. During his election, Donald Trump openly criticized political correctness, which was appreciated by his followers as an expression of authenticity. According to Fukuyama, Trump has in this way played a key role in the shift of focus from identity politics on the left to the right, where it is increasingly taking root.

On the right, identity politics became embodied in identities like Christian religiosity, the white working class, and rural and traditional values, especially in the US, but also in other liberal democracies (Fukuyama, 2018). These groups perceive that their values and identities are threatened by leftist cosmopolitan elites and feel endangered by the political correctness. Fukuyama argues that the rise of these identity politics has further polarized liberal democracies. Proponents of identity politics on the left claim that demands for recognition on the right are illegitimate and incomparable to claims made by minorities and marginalized groups. They view identity groups on the right as the dominant mainstream culture that carries historic privileges at the expense of the marginalization of oppressed groups. Fukuyama (2018) notices how identity groups on the right have taken over certain perspectives and framings from the left. Identity groups on both sides base their politics on ideas of victimization of their group and perceive their problems and sufferings as invisible to the rest of society. They accuse the political and social structures, in specific the media and powerful elites, as responsible for their marginalization.

According to Fukuyama (2018), identity politics is a threat for liberal democracies because it hinders open deliberation and reinforces polarization. Where political disputes on socioeconomical problems are negotiable, claims about identity and demands for recognition are not. Fukuyama argues that rights and liberties within liberal democracies have been taken for granted and liberal societies have had too much freedom and choice in the sense that it leaves people feeling disconnected from their nation and society. It allowed people to focus on the way they have been held back by social norms and institutions and on those parts of their personalities that have not been allowed to flourish. Because disrespect remains a part of society and all identity groups experience this differently and seek their own dignity, identity politics divides society in more narrow groups by virtue of their lived experiences. Politics of resentment have led to more narrow identities, which has become a threat to deliberation and collective action.

While it is important, according to Fukuyama (2018), for a society to protect and stand up for marginalized and oppressed groups, a common agenda is necessary to keep communication open and collective action possible. Fukuyama argues that it is impossible to leave ideas about identity behind, because it has become too much part of our thinking and liberal democracies have been built on the

demand for recognition. *Thymos* is a part of the human soul that cannot and should not be suppressed. However, Fukuyama does believe that the nature of our modern identity can and should change, because despite other beliefs, identity traits and groups are not biologically determined, they are socially constructed. He argues that lived experiences can become shared experiences by striving for common goals. What is needed for this are larger and more integrative ideas about identity that account for diversity. Diversity is both a fact of life and an appreciated value in society and Fukuyama argues that it in general is a good thing for society. However, great diversity can also foster conflict rather than creativity, as has become visible in many places of the world facing civil unrest or war.

Fukuyama (2018) thus argues for the development of “larger and more integrative national identities that take account of the de facto diversity of existing liberal democratic societies” (p. 123). He argues that national identities often get a bad name because they are associated with exclusion and ethnic-based membership. However, Fukuyama argues it is not national identities themselves that are a problem, but their potential narrow, intolerant, and ethnic-based form. According to Fukuyama, weak national identities have been causing problems for many countries, for example in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, where countries suffer internal chaos, civil war, and political corruption. What is important, Fukuyama argues, is that national identities are built on “liberal and democratic political values” and “common experiences” to connect diverse communities. He emphasizes that there is no role for private cultural aspects that have the potential to be exclusionary, but only for the most basic liberal principles of individual dignity. Fukuyama claims national identities are important for reasons of physical security, the quality of government, economic development, national trust, and a strong social safety net. He argues that the functioning of liberal democracies is even dependent on it, since it depends on a contract between citizens and government, but also among citizens. This means citizens need to be connected by more than an acceptance of the basic rules, they need a shared sense of identity. However, a ‘passive acceptance’ of this democratic creed is not enough, citizens need to exercise positive virtues by participating actively and being open to democratic compromise and consensus.

While Fukuyama (2018) states that real and urgent problems that marginalized identity groups face, like sexism and racism, must be tackled, he argues this must be done by integrating smaller groups into larger wholes. The culture of liberal democracy is to be valued over other cultures that reject the values of liberal democracies. This means that identities must be integrated into the liberal democratic culture and immigrants are to be assimilated. Fukuyama argues that the left has wrongly supported a multiculturalism that downplayed the importance of integration, and that the right has wrongly longed for a culture free of immigrants and great diversity. He argues that in the same way as identities have been used to create division, they can be used to integrate. Next to creating more a broad-based liberal national identity, Fukuyama argues the political left needs to return to thinking about ambitious socioeconomic policies for ordinary people. This will lead to a decrease in feelings of resentment that are a big driving factor behind identity politics.

## Critical responses

Fukuyama's ideas and stances regarding identity politics and the struggle for recognition within liberal democracies have been extensively reviewed. Critics have commented upon Fukuyama's theorizing on multiple various aspects. Firstly, Fukuyama's optimistic outlook on the success of liberal democracies has been criticized (Stanley & Lee, 2014; Glaser, 2014). Fukuyama (1992) himself already noted that the left would criticize his statements that a universal recognition will be incomplete because there will always remain economic inequalities that are created by capitalism. A universal recognition in liberal democracies will therefore in reality be unequal. Fukuyama overlooks or underestimates the extent to which unequal power structures play a role in contemporary societies and neglects the history and role of liberalism within this (Mutua, 2020). Makalintal (2019) for example states how Fukuyama has wrongly overlooked the history of liberalism in the institutionalization of discriminatory and oppressive structures that privileged certain groups over others. Fukuyama portrays the Age of Enlightenment as promoting impeccable values of equality and freedom, but neglects how these values have also been used to justify colonial and capitalist expansions that impact contemporary international and societal relations. Critics argue that the aim should not be to protect liberal democracies from the threat of identity politics, because liberal democracies are in fact a big cause of injustices that identity politics address. The core of this critique is that Fukuyama's theorizing lacks a critical analysis of the system of liberal democracy itself, which makes it unconvincing in defending liberal democratic principles (Makalintal, 2019).

Second, Fukuyama has been criticized for his western centred view that presents and disguises liberalism as natural, while it is in fact an ideology on its own. This Western-centred approach makes his universalizing theory unconvincing (Coker, 2017; Menand, 2018). In *The End of History (1989)*, Fukuyama argues how states will move towards the direction of liberal democracies but focusses on the "more developed states who after all account for the greater part of world politics" (Fukuyama, 1989, p.15). By excluding parts of the world from the world history and focusing on developments in the Global North, Fukuyama's arguments become Eurocentric and with that weaker (Makalintal, 2019; Menand, 2018; Namboodiri, 2019). Moreover, Fukuyama does not make use of or references to any non-Western thinking, while according to his critics the non-Western world is crucial for the direction global history will be taking (Coker, 2017). Fukuyama aims to create a universalizing theory by merely sticking to traditional and classical western philosophers and political thinkers, but by leaving out thinkers outside the mainstream Western philosophical tradition, the universal application of his theory is argued to be unconvincing.

The third point addresses a problem in Fukuyama's universalizing practices regarding the different identity groups and movements. Critics argue that Fukuyama's argumentation neglects the broad variety of identity groups and historical factors and developments involved that gave rise to the emergence of identity politics (Holmes, 2019; McManus, 2019; Amin, 2018; Menand, 2018). Fukuyama problematizes identity politics without making a nuanced distinction between the political goals of

different identity groups. To put all the different political movements and struggles from the French Revolution to Black Lives Matter to contemporary China in the same criticism of identity politics is argued to be too 'far-fetched', because it implies that these movements share the same the same political strategies and perspectives, which is not the case according to critics of Fukuyama (Menand, 2018). Fukuyama's desire to universalize his arguments to include all kinds of identity groups mistakenly implies that feelings that gave rise to for example feminist movements are the same as those that led to the rise of Putin in Russia. Fukuyama illegitimately compares identity driven populist politics on the left and the right and by doing this discredits the demands and values of identity groups at the margins (Makalintal, 2019). Menand (2018) therefore argues that a more nuanced distinction between different identity groups is necessary, for example between groups who demand equal recognition or those who demand superior recognition of their differences.

Fukuyama's argumentation is also said to be insufficient to explain the relation between the rise of identity politics and right-wing nationalism (Chavoshi, 2020). It is argued that Fukuyama overlooks important factors in the rise of right-wing nationalism, like neoliberal policies, while blaming the left for its failure on socioeconomic policies. Mutua (2020) argues that Fukuyama mistakenly blames the political left for the rise of identity politics by its shift from large collective to smaller and narrow groups. Instead, she argues that the emergence of identity politics should be found in the growing economic welfare and imperialism of Europe. The structures of the industrial revolution and the use of race as a division of labour, with the emergence of white supremacy, have been inherited in the Western politics (of recognition). The privileged positions of white male elites within liberal democracies are, according to Mutua, early manifestations of identity politics. This is argued to be an unattractive alternative to Fukuyama because it would mean that the causes of the problem are rooted within the origins and traditions of Western liberalism.

A fourth critique refers to Fukuyama's understanding of the relation between the desire for recognition and a desire for material resources. It is argued that Fukuyama neglects the fact that the movements on the left that advocate for social justice of marginalized groups also make distributional claims in terms of economic justice (Mutua, 2020). Mutua (2020) draws on the work of Fraser who distinguishes between a politics of distribution and recognition and argues that Fukuyama overlooks the importance of redistribution within identity politics. She also argues that Fukuyama's suggestions regarding new understandings of the notion of identity are not likely to change the structures that generate globalization-induced inequality.

With regards to the variety and substances of different identity groups, a fifth point of critique addresses how Fukuyama overlooks the overlap and solidarity among different groups (Makalintal, 2019). By focussing on narrow identity groups, Fukuyama neglects how different marginalized identity groups work together and support one another and are closely related by the intersectionality of their politics. It is argued that Fukuyama is therefore wrong in concluding that demands for recognition are polarizing in democracies, because they instead can also be seen as empowering and enhancing to

democracy. Mutua (2020) states that “the voices Fukuyama seeks to silence in his critique of identity politics may be the very ones with the vision, willingness, and commitment to advance the kind of broad-based economic justice coalition for which Fukuyama advocates” (p.28).

The last point of critique addresses Fukuyama’s proposed solution to change the modern notion of identity and develop a more broad-based and integrated national identity. It is argued that this will not address the roots of the problems in terms of socioeconomic and cultural inequalities (Makalintal, 2019). Also considering its western-centred approach and the required liberal foundation of this identity, this solution is argued to be too universal in nature. Critics are disappointed by the suggestions Fukuyama puts forward, which remain vague and contradictory (McManus, 2019; Mutua, 2020, Menand, 2018; Rademacher, 2019). On the one hand Fukuyama argues that a broad-based liberal national identity is needed to create a democratic creed towards which citizens feel connected, while at the other hand simultaneously arguing that liberalism lacks this creedal core that is strong enough to provide a sense of commitment. Fukuyama’s suggestion to return to ambitious and broad socioeconomic policies sounds relevant but is not elaborated on and he remains vague on how this is to be achieved. Mutua (2020) also states that his recommendation for an integrated identity disregards claims of marginalized groups for social justice while prioritizing and reinforcing the claims, understandings, and privileges of the majority of ‘traditional nationals’. Fukuyama delegitimizes and diminishes the struggle of marginalized groups and their identity politics as victimization and resentment. Moreover, to change and redefine the modern notion and understanding of identities is quite a daunting and challenging task, especially when envisioned in practical implementations (Rademacher, 2019).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, Fukuyama’s thesis and ideas regarding identity politics and the politics of recognition within liberal democracies have been discussed. While the previous chapter focused on the claims made by proponents of identity politics, this chapter has discussed some important dangers of identity politics in terms of the impact it has on contemporary liberal democracies. Fukuyama has explained the importance of a desire for recognition in the global spread of liberal ideologies and democracies and argued that this desire for recognition and issues of identity have been crucial in historical developments. Even though he has reconsidered some ideas regarding recognition in his new book *Identity (2018)*, Fukuyama has stressed the relevance of a desire for recognition in global politics. While acknowledging the claims identity politics makes with regards to social justice and inequalities, Fukuyama warns for the negative consequences the narrow formation of identity groups has for politics. He criticizes the polarizing effect identity politics has on different identity groups and how a lack of focus on shared universal dignity is creating division and complicating constructive deliberation and state action. However, his ideas have in turn received critique in terms of his understanding of liberalism and contested universalisations. The next chapter will critically evaluate the content of Fukuyama’s arguments and criticism of identity politics to form a judgment on the tenability of his thesis. In doing

this, both the original claims of identity politics as discussed in chapter two and the direct critiques levelled against Fukuyama's book will be used.

## 4 – A critical evaluation

The previous chapters have discussed the positions of on the one hand the original claims of identity politics as discussed in chapter two and the direct criticism of Fukuyama's thesis as discussed in chapter three, and on the other hand the position of Fukuyama regarding his critique of identity politics. To turn back to the central question of this thesis, '*is Fukuyama right in claiming that identity politics is a threat to contemporary liberal democracies?*', this chapter will present a critical evaluation of Fukuyama's position concerning the claims of identity politics. In Fukuyama's thesis, he criticizes identity politics for its narrow focus on identities, and instead advocates for a politics of universalism and more broad-based and integrated national identities. He thus argues that contemporary identity politics is problematic in the sense that it is used to create division, while instead identity can also be an instrument for integration. This chapter will elaborate on several main discussion points regarding Fukuyama's thesis and criticism of identity politics by using the original claims of identity politics and the direct criticism of Fukuyama's thesis.

First, the chapter will start with a criticism of the liberal and universalistic approach on which Fukuyama builds his arguments by arguing that a politics of universalism is unable to grant equal recognition and denies the reality of social groups. It will then discuss a related criticism of how the liberal approach claims a false sense of neutrality and constructs an idea of colour-blindness that prioritizes the perspectives and experiences of dominant groups over the disadvantaged. A third point of critique addresses how Fukuyama universalizes his theory in a misplaced way by comparing all kinds of identity movements and phenomena that are subject to substantial mutual differences and calls for a more nuanced distinction between groups. Fourth, Fukuyama's analysis of the emergence of identity politics is discussed where he illegitimately lays the blame at marginalized groups at the political left. It will argue that feelings of resentment are indeed problematic, but also a cause of contradictions within liberal societies. The last point addresses Fukuyama's solution to develop a broad-based liberal national identity. It is argued this idea will fail because the basic liberal principles lack a creedal core and again prioritize dominant standards.

### The liberal approach and recognition

The first point will address Fukuyama's use of liberalism and its principles in criticizing identity politics. Fukuyama (2018) argues that identity politics is in tension with the liberal politics of universalism, which is about recognizing all individuals by their shared human dignity. While Fukuyama emphasizes the importance of recognition for human well-being, a liberal politics of universalism will be unable to grant an equal recognition to citizens. The universal approach fails to match the reality of social contexts and is a threat to social group differences, which are an important part of society. The approach also tends to deny the reality of social groups, which are an unescapable part of society and of importance for the formation of identities. In addition, Fukuyama ignores the role of liberal democracies in the institutionalization of social power structures that have a significant impact on the oppression and

privileges of contemporary social groups.

Fukuyama (2022) argues that liberalism is a big term that encompasses a broad range of ideas and views but that it comes down to an emphasis on “the importance of equal individual rights, law, and freedom” (Fukuyama, 2022, p.7). While Fukuyama announced in 1992 in his book the *End of History* that liberalism would become the victorious ideology taking over the world, in his latest book *Liberalism and its Discontents* (2022), Fukuyama argues how liberalism and democracy have been attacked from both the far and populist right and the renewed progressive left. However, he argues that these discontents are not about the essence of liberalism but about the misleading interpretation of certain liberal ideas in rather extreme terms, which is why he argues for a return to the basic and more moderate principles of liberalism in terms of individual universal rights.

Both Fukuyama (2018) and proponents of identity politics agree that a desire for recognition is an inescapable and necessary part of the human soul as well as of politics, and that misrecognition can be described as an injustice. Recognition is according to Fukuyama not only a necessary part of the human soul, but it is also essential for people’s sense of self and value of life. Misrecognition can thus be described as a form of oppression, which is present in the everyday lives of people in liberal societies (Young, 1990). It leads to the marginalization of one’s identity, because it reduces people to an inferior kind of being and excludes people from useful participation in social life (Taylor, 1994; Young, 1990). While misrecognition is often an unconscious or unintended practice, it has real implications for those who suffer from it and can inflict serious harm on people.

The politics of universalism, which is present in liberal democracies and favoured by Fukuyama, is however incapable of granting this equal recognition to different social groups and fails to protect social justice and equality. While Fukuyama (2018) argues that liberal democracies are able to satisfy both the thymotic and desiring part of the human soul, critics argue there will always be social groups for who this is not the case and are positioned as the ‘other’. Young (1990) for example argues that a universal recognition is incomplete and will always remain too abstract to match the reality of social contexts. To apply a universal system to a particular society is thus problematic, because reality is not perfect and social group differences will lead to specific relations that are not accounted for. An emphasis on generality and homogeneity threatens differences between social groups and therefore has the potential to become a source of oppression to those groups who fail to fit the dominant norms. To make homogeneity a requirement for recognition and participation is problematic because it works exclusionary to those who are unable to meet the universal standards.

Moreover, Fukuyama’s emphasis on the individualistic character of liberalism is argued to be problematic in the sense that it denies the reality and importance of social groups (Young, 1990). The liberal politics of universalism is based on the monological ideal that assumes identities are based on an individual sense of who one really is. However, the formation of identities is essentially a dialogical process, and identities emerge through social groups in relation to other social groups. Social groups are however not only necessary for the existence of collective identities, they also are of importance for the

individual because they in part constitute and shape the individual identities of its members. Social groups are thus prior to the individual and it is naïve to imply that they (should) have no place in liberal societies. Fukuyama tends to view identities as shaped by a mostly inward and individual process, while neglecting how identities are for a big part constructed through social and political processes by public discourses and for example the media (Kochi, 2021). Social group differences are an essential part of these processes.

Finally, Fukuyama ignores the role of liberal democracies in the institutionalization of social power structures that impact the privileges and marginalization of contemporary identity groups. He argues for a universal citizenship that is applied to the individual in the belief that an equalization of rights and laws will lead to an equalization of freedom for all. However, as Young (1989) argued around the end of the twentieth century, it has become clear that the political struggle for equal citizenship rights among excluded and marginalized groups has not led to social justice and equality for them. This is because historical power asymmetries still have their impact on contemporary social relations. These power structures are the result of how liberal concepts have been used to justify colonialist and capitalist expansions that impact social group relations (Makalintal, 2019; Mutua, 2020). Colonisation, enslavement, and transnational practices led to the institutionalization of contemporary economic and cultural structures that impact politics of recognition and distribution. Mutua (2020) for example argues how the industrial revolution and a cultural ideology of white supremacy have been determining in the development of these structures. Cultural identities, like race and gender, have become part of global capitalist structures and divisions of labour and cultural identities and economic class have become intertwined in social relations and institutionalized in government and social arrangements.

Fukuyama (2018) has thus detached notions of identity and recognition from (historical) contexts of social and political conflict within liberal democracies. He presents the liberal autonomous citizen as if it were natural and the result of reason, and not as a dominant identity that has been the outcome of conflict and political struggles. Fukuyama does not address the struggles within liberal democracies of identity groups that challenged the hegemonic order and were delegitimised by liberal political elites. While the liberal framework might remain the best way to protect individual rights and liberties, Fukuyama disregards claims of identity politics by neglecting how the liberal framework fails to grant equal recognition and overlooking its problematic role in contemporary social injustices.

### Colour blindness

The next point also relates to Fukuyama's use of the liberal and universal approach but is about the way in which this approach is used to construct a narrative of colour blindness by disguising it as a neutral and impartial approach. Fukuyama's use of liberal principles in his criticism of identity politics implies that liberalism is better than other cultures and ideologies, which makes it an obstruction for equal recognition. Also, this approach ends up defending a colour blindness that is dangerous in the sense that it will not result in equal treatment of individuals in societies that are not colour blind themselves.

Fukuyama discredits the focus on lived experiences within identity politics, but by doing this prioritizes the experiences and knowledges of dominant mainstream social groups.

What is problematic in Fukuyama's liberal critique on identity politics is how he frames and masks this approach as neutral and as being above all other positions. Fukuyama argues that liberal principles and ideas go far back in Western historical thought and states that the universal idea that people can and should be able to make their own basic choices, regarding their life and issues of good and bad, is as old as human thought (Leith, 2022). While acknowledging that this line of thought has been historically nurtured within Western thinking, he argues it is also present outside of the Western philosophical context and presents it as being a universally priced value. However, as Taylor (1994) argues as well, liberalism cannot and should not claim a cultural neutrality. Liberalism is an ideology on its own that cannot serve as a neutral meeting ground for other ideologies and cultures (Taylor, 1994; Coker, 2017, Menand, 2018). What is problematic about presenting liberalism as if it were in fact neutral, is that it presents itself as if the principles are installed from somewhere outside of us, as if they are almost divine. Without questioning the principles of liberalism, or denying they are of great value in protecting basic human rights, it can be argued that this neutral portrayal implies that liberalism is better than other cultures by claiming a false impartiality. This is problematic in the sense that it obstructs recognition in terms of equal worth. The fact that certain groups are valued over others in a recognition of their worth is also potentially polarizing for societies, which is one of the main problems Fukuyama has with identity politics.

This universal and liberal approach also defends an idea of colour blindness that is problematic for equal treatment of marginalized social groups and individuals in society. Ideas of colour blindness come from the belief that an individual's racial and ethnic (or other identarian) characteristics should not impact the way this individual is treated in society. However, while this perspective may seem to aim for an equal treatment, it can have unintended negative implications when in reality the people of a society are consciously or unconsciously not treating one another in terms of colour blindness. In liberal democracies, prejudices and discriminatory practices still exist. As Gilbert (2000) argues, the fact that there are no significant biological or genetic differences between people with different skin colours and that the concept of race is a social construct, does not mean that the concept of race does not exist. The social categorisation of different identity features has real implications and plays a significant role in terms of social treatment. Defenders of the liberal politics of universalism, among whom Kukathas (1998), argue that recognition should not be granted to particular identity groups because it elevates conflict between them, but this argument falsely assumes that society itself is colour blind. A society that wants to treat its citizens equally in terms of fairness, can therefore not do this by being colour blind when society itself is not colour blind.

Fukuyama (2018) theorizes that the original movements of identity politics on the left that emerged during the 1960s had a choice to perceive oneself either in broad or narrow identity terms. Choosing for a more broad-based understanding would imply a demand for recognition of its members

to be treated not only equally, but also identically, to the dominant groups in society. Choosing for a narrower understanding of identity on the other hand would imply a demand for recognition that asserts a separate identity and a demand of being treated based on this different identity. The latter option became endorsed in identity politics and Fukuyama sees this as the start of a politics of resentment that led to division and polarization. However, by arguing that identity groups should have chosen broad identities that demand an identical treatment, Fukuyama is defending a colour blindness that will continue an unequal treatment of marginalized individuals in contemporary liberal democracies.

Fukuyama (2018) thus goes straight against social groups that demanded more than a legal and formal equality. Where he praises the initial civil rights and feminist movements who focused on equal treatment in the workplace, education, and law, he problematizes the development in which these movements started to focus on their fundamentally different experiences that did not align with dominant norms of society. He thus criticizes the focus on ‘lived experiences’ within identity politics and argues that these experiences need to be transformed into ‘shared experiences’ to have a common agenda that allows for collective action and open communication. He argues that a focus on lived experiences hinders the possibility of just having ‘experiences’, which can be shared across different identity groups. However, to go from lived experiences to shared experiences would mean to prioritize and reemphasize the dominant experiences and disregard experiences of minority groups. It puts marginalized groups back in the position of the ‘other’, where their particular experiences that do not match dominant experiences are subjugated.

### Generalization of identity groups

The third point to be addressed is about Fukuyama’s tendency to universalize his theory by illegitimately generalizing all kinds of different identity groups that are subject to significant mutual differences. Fukuyama (2018) has extended the term ‘identity politics’ to include not only social movements on the left, but also more right-wing nationalist, populist, and authoritarian movements. A strength of the extension of this term is that it shows how these different movements all base their politics on perceptions of the disregard of their identity. However, Fukuyama’s overall thesis can be perceived as incoherent precisely because his universalisation of the term ‘identity politics’ to a broad variety of political groups and movements (Kochi, 2021; Holmes, 2019; McManus, 2019; Amin, 2018; Menand, 2018). He illegitimately compares all kinds of identity groups that in reality want different things and pursue a different kind of politics. Fukuyama uses *thymos*, the desire for recognition, to explain all sorts of global developments and movements, from Osama bin Laden, Vladimir Putin, anti-immigration and nationalist movements to leftist campus identity politics, the French Revolution and gay marriage. His tendency to universalize his ideas to all these extremely diverse phenomena does not work that well when considering the mutual differences between them.

For example, the emergence of feminist movements during the last century has derived from a shared conviction that women have been unfairly disadvantaged in comparison to men. However, even

within feminist movements there exist significant differences in understandings of equality and about the strategies to achieve this (James, 2003). One source of conflict is for example between liberal and Marxist feminists, who disagree on the extent to which equalization needs to occur in terms of legal and civil rights. While liberal feminists during the first feminist wave viewed conventional societal norms of marriage and family life as compatible with the aim of female emancipation, Marxist feminists did not. They instead desired a more radical transformation of societal discourses and norms regarding gender and sexuality. To discuss all these different, but still relatively similar, political ideas under the single frame of 'feminism' can already be considered a bit confusing or incoherent, let alone to discuss them under the same header as movements like the Islamic State. Fukuyama analyses very divergent movements within the same paradigm of identity politics as if they were grounded in similar origins, which falls short of the enormous mutual differences. What all the identity movements share is a similarity in the fact that their ideas are based on collective identities, but since these identities, perspectives and strategies are so different, they should not be generalized this way.

In his books, Fukuyama (1992; 2018) makes a distinction in the desire for recognition by the concepts of '*isothymia*', the desire to be recognized as equals, and '*megalothymia*', the desire to be recognized as superior. However, he does not use these concepts again when analysing contemporary identity movements, even though it could be used as a relevant distinction. Among identity groups, there are significant differences in political aims and strategies and as Menand (2018) addresses, it would be helpful and important to make some nuances between these groups. One of these distinctions can be between the concepts of *isothymia* and *megalothymia*, that can be used to distinguish more inclusive and exclusive identity politics. Inclusive identity politics are groups who strive for equality, such as Black Lives Matter, while exclusive identity politics are groups who undermine equality, such as the anti-Islam movement Pegida. Other distinctions can be made between groups who in specific wish to retain their differences and those do not want their differences to matter, or between identity movements that aim for a transformation of liberal rights and freedoms within the liberal framework, and those that aim for a more radical transformation outside of the liberal context. Outside of these identity groups, there are also many people who do not belong to them in terms of their identity features, but who do support or object different political projects. Fukuyama overlooks the complexity and intersectionality of identity groups and the contradictions and conflicts that are inherent to identity groups (Kochi, 2021). It raises the question whether it is helpful or even possible to speak of 'the risks of identity politics', when in fact the phrase identity politics is not that unilateral and unambiguous as it may seem.

By disregarding the practice of identity politics in general, Fukuyama also silences those groups who are not necessarily a direct problem in terms of exclusion and polarization. Why should movements advocating for equal recognition of marginalized groups suffer and take the blame for those groups who undermine equality and equal recognition? Fukuyama (2018) himself argues that it is the rise of identity politics on the right who based their politics on exclusionary grounds that led to a stronger polarization. A more nuanced distinction between different forms of identity politics would therefore be helpful in

identifying what kinds of identity politics bring risks for liberal democracies, and what kinds are more innocent. Mutua (2020) argues in line with Fraser (1995) that there are forms of identity politics that are not worthy of respect, but also that there are forms that are. They relate this to the two-folded nature of political struggles of identity groups, that always have on the one hand a cultural, and on the other hand a material dimension. A comprehensive theory of justice includes both recognition and redistribution and ‘good’ identity politics are the ones that “respect human rights, seek to address the problems of misrecognition, and actually seek to address the economic maldistribution of resources” (Mutua, 2020, p.43). While for example the politics of right-wing nationalist identity groups are about both recognition and redistribution, they do not address this adequately but instead support a politics of maldistribution and a misrecognition of other groups.

### Narratives of blame

The fourth point addresses the way in which Fukuyama blames the political left for the rise of more dangerous identity politics on the right. In addition to the implications of globalization, Fukuyama mentions the shift of traditional left politics from socioeconomic to identarian issues and policy aims as resulting in the increasing socioeconomic inequality and feelings of resentment that gave rise to the emergence of more dangerous right-wing identity politics (Fukuyama, 2018). He blames the left for the rise of right-wing nationalism and implies that without a shift to identarian issues on the left, there would not have been a ‘white nationalist backlash’ (Holmes, 2019; Kochi, 2021; Mutua, 2020). He also blames the left for the emergence of discourses of political correctness that have fuelled feelings of anger and displacement among ordinary and middle-class citizens. However, feelings of resentment that led to right-wing nationalist identity politics can also be argued to be a result from contradictions within liberal democracies regarding the liberal ideology.

Identity politics has been criticized by several theorists, among whom Fukuyama (2018) and Fraser (1995), for prioritizing the cultural and identarian dimension of social justice and risking losing sight of the material and distributional dimension. This is a justified criticism in the sense that injustices always have both a cultural and material dimension that are closely connected and therefore often require a two-folded approach of both recognition and redistribution. Fukuyama makes a fair point in arguing that identity politics on the political left should not ignore issues of redistribution but instead should focus more on these broad-based socioeconomic issues. However, as stated by Fraser (1995), social injustices are deeply two-folded, and projects of recognition and redistribution should not be polarized against one another. It is about balancing both dimensions and acknowledging the importance of both sides without prioritizing one over the other, to not accidentally lose sight of either dimension.

However, it is worrying that Fukuyama lays the blame of contemporary problems of polarization and right-wing nationalism at leftist minority groups that have been fighting for recognition of their historical devalued and marginalized cultural and socioeconomic position, especially since these social relations have been the result of liberal practices. Instead of arguing that the rise of identity politics on

the right was a backlash responding to the shift of the political left to identarian issues, it can also be argued that it was a response to the activism against racialized and gendered social and economic injustices that made the right feel attacked and wanting to maintain power structures. It seems Fukuyama is (unintentionally) normalizing right-wing nationalist discourses by neglecting other explanatory factors for the rise of socioeconomic inequality and feelings of resentment (Kochi, 2021). For example, within critical and social democratic scholarship there has been written about the negative consequences of neoliberal policies in terms of redistribution and social welfare. Wendy Brown (2019) has argued how neoliberal policies like privatisation, growth of capital markets and corporate power, and the weakening of labour power and democratic accountability have affected inequality and the rise of populist and right-wing movements. While accusing the left of political ‘failings’ in creating effective redistribution policies, Fukuyama fails to see how neoliberal practices on the right have undermined these kinds of policies and neglects the connection between neoliberal policies and the rise of extremist right-wing nationalism.

In addition, Fukuyama remains silent on the role of post-cold war US foreign policy that has had its impact on the formation of Islamic identities and the war on terror (Kochi, 2021). Fukuyama (2018) does not reflect on the Western liberal discourses and their social construction of the identity of Islamic terrorists, which in turn have had a significant impact on the construction of right-wing nationalist identities. At the same time, Fukuyama does accuse the left of problems that follow from the notion of political correctness in terms of open and sincere dialogue. Political correctness has arisen from the political struggles of marginalized and disadvantaged groups to promote decency and civility (Mutua, 2020). And while it can indeed become a potential barrier in constructive conversations in terms of its sensitivity, the reason this political correctness has led to resentment among certain groups is that it targeted their privileges to degrade others. Fukuyama constructs a narrative that explains the rise of right-wing nationalism by degrading claims of leftist minority groups. He accuses the left of undermining “the legitimacy of the American national story by emphasizing victimization, insinuating in some cases that racism, gender discrimination, and other forms of systemic exclusion are somehow intrinsic to the country’s DNA” (Fukuyama, 2018, p. 170).

Feelings of resentment are thus argued to be a big contributing factor in the emergence of identity politics. Fukuyama (2018) describes politics of resentment as the mobilization of groups that perceive their dignity as being disregarded and base their claims for recognition on experiences of marginalization or invisibility. By basing their sense of identity and claims for recognition on previous experiences of oppression, a form of oppression must thus remain to preserve the particular identity of a group. While identity groups want to overcome their victimization, they are often unable of perceiving their identity in other terms (Brown, 1993). The impotence to change the historical context of subordination makes the identity stick to these feelings and it can only cease from investment in this history when it gives up that part of the identity. While demanding recognition based on previous marginalization, groups practicing identity politics thus run the risk of getting devoted to exclusion for

their existence as an identity as well as for their claims for recognition. Feelings of resentment are therefore an obstruction in moving forward and away from the history of oppression. However, it is thus not so much identity politics itself that is the problem, but instead the underlying feelings of resentment that have the potential to make identity politics destructive.

While Fukuyama lays the blame for contemporary feelings of resentment at leftist identity groups that have neglected issues concerning majority groups and the middle classes, feelings of resentment can also be explained by other factors. For example, by a paradox in the dominant ideology in liberal democracies between “the individualism that legitimates liberalism and the cultural homogeneity required by its commitment to political universality” (Brown, 1993, p. 400). This paradox leads to the fact that on the one hand politically significant differences are stimulated by individualism, while on the other hand being suppressed by a demand for homogeneity and universality. By focusing on individual freedom, liberalism will fail its fulfilment of equality which will breed a resentment among the disadvantaged as well as among the rich and powerful in terms of guilt. When focusing instead on its commitment to equality, economic and redistribution policies will restrain individual freedom and cause resentment expressed in racism and neoliberal feelings against the state. This is reinforced by the liberal presumption that individual success is self-made and that insists that the terms and rules for competition are fair, while in fact there are high levels of social injustice and inequality that are dependent on social structures. Liberal democracies have no policy for equal opportunities, but instead trace success and failure back to own responsibilities which fuels feelings of resentment.

### [A liberal national identity](#)

The last point to address in this chapter concerns Fukuyama’s proposed solution to transform the modern notion of identity and counter polarization by developing a broad-based integrated national identity. His solution to the polarizing effect of identity politics is to create a national identity based on a ‘creedal liberalism’ that can unify people by emphasizing a shared human dignity instead of focusing on exclusionary differences. He argues that for liberal democracies to survive, citizens must be committed in an irrational way to its ideas by way of democratic patriotism and pride. However, this idea contains a serious contradiction since the most basic liberal principles of the liberal ideology are incapable of providing this kind of unifying identity and of building a strong community precisely because they lack this ‘creedal’ core. The emphasis on individual freedom will hinder a longing for community and mutual identification, which means that a ‘creedal’ liberalism inherently must transcend the basic values to which Fukuyama wishes to return.

This idea of a liberal national identity by Fukuyama responds to his concern of the polarizing consequences of identity politics. Fukuyama (2018) argues that polarization in contemporary liberal democracies has been the result of a white nationalist backlash in response to leftist identity groups who had neglected the problems of larger and older identity groups. These groups feel that their traditional values and identities are threatened by leftist elites and distance themselves further apart. This is indeed

a problematic development in terms of open deliberation and possibilities for state action. Fukuyama is right to argue that it is much harder to negotiate and reach compromise and consensus on issues of identity than it would be on more ideology-based issues. The most logical response thus would seem to aim for an overarching identity that can bring people together to allow a constructive discussion on differences. However, Fukuyama's arguments on how to form this identity and the exact meaning of the idea remain vague and imply problematic consequences.

Fukuyama (2018) argues that an overarching broad-based identity cannot be based on arbitrary identarian characteristics such as race, ethnicity, or culture. He states that this is exclusionary and polarizing and will leave people fighting over their mutual differences. Instead, he argues that liberal principles are the only that can suffice in providing the right foundation for such an identity, because it allows for an inclusion of differences and cultures if they are compatible with the priority of individual freedom. There are however two main problems with this assumption. The first is that the liberal ideology is in fact not able to allow an inclusion and flourishing of differences. As touched upon in the first point, a universal identity will prioritize the understandings and privileges of 'traditional nationals' and disregard those of the already marginalized groups. Complete social justice and equality is unattainable within liberal democracies which means that a narrative of universalism will always work in the advantage of the privileged and at the expense of minorities and the disadvantaged who will be positioned as the 'other'. Their perspectives will be overshadowed and dominated by the perspectives of majority and dominant groups. Also, as Fukuyama argues for the assimilation of immigrants, he already implies that a national liberal identity will leave less room for diversity. This creates the risk of becoming oppressive and exclusionary to those who fail or are unable to adapt to universal standards. Differences are however necessary for identities to exist, because social group identities always emerge in relation to other social groups and are shaped through a dialogical relation to the other (Young, 1990; Hall, 1997).

The second issue with Fukuyama's idea of a liberal national identity, as he has already mentioned himself, is that liberalism lacks a creedal core that is able to commit people in an irrational way to this identity. There is a contradiction in Fukuyama's argumentation, where he argues that liberalism is the only thing that can provide the right principles to build a national identity upon, while simultaneously stating that it lacks a creedal core that is strong enough to provide a sense of commitment. He states that a national identity is not to be built on diversity, but instead on the most basic and broad liberal principles of rule of law, equality, and constitutionalism. However, to use liberalism in such a universal and broad way means that it loses substantial meaning that can offer ground for a national identity. The definition of a liberal national identity will remain too vague and superficial to be endorsed as a tool for commitment and unification.

This contradiction is also expressed in another paradox, where Fukuyama (2018) argues that the desire for recognition is expressed through feelings and emotions that can undermine the necessary rationality of deliberation and debate. He thus on the one hand emphasizes the need for rationality in the

functioning of liberal democracies. On the other hand, he argues that for liberal democracies to function, citizens also need to be connected to one another by some irrational attachment to the ideas of government and a common agenda. This contradiction makes a shared national identity based on liberal ideas more difficult to realize, because it seems likely to fail at least one of these conditions.

Fukuyama (2018) himself remains vague on the substantive meaning of a liberal national identity. He has raised the question how a national identity is to be defined and who belong to ‘the people’ of a nation. Fukuyama mentions how the American Constitution for example is unable of answering this question as well, since it does not define who the American people are. This is according to Fukuyama a big issue for liberal democracies, which are often build within already existing nation-states with a developed sense of national identity. Often these identities however are based on exclusionary identity traits, which is why they need to be transformed into more broad-based and liberal understandings. He concludes that a national identity should come down to including those who live within the borders of a nation-state. However, this again shows how ‘the people’ of one nation then are not required to share any similar cultural values, as the only thing that puts them together is the fact that they live within a certain territory. This makes it extra difficult to impose a broad liberal national identity on them that is lacking a substantial core.

Finally, an overarching liberal national identity is no solution to the excluded, alienated, and marginalized groups whose dignity has not been recognized and who have been affected by social and historical contexts and neoliberal policies. In terms of steps towards social justice, Fukuyama does not present any concrete and clear recommendations. Following from his analysis that blames the left for the rise of identity politics, Fukuyama argues minority groups on the left should stop with their narrow political organization regarding their subordinated position, and instead should focus on larger collectives. However, this disregards the claims of marginalized minority groups and neglects the deeply intertwined relation between cultural and economic identities. Fukuyama’s solution of an integrated liberal national identity will not solve inequality and economic distress that is the result of marginalization of identity groups or of globalization, neither will it reduce identity politics when failing to provide a strong base of commitment.

## Conclusion

The main points addressed above conclude that Fukuyama’s thesis regarding identity politics falls short when it comes to analysing the problems of identity politics and developing a targeted solution. While rightly emphasizing the importance of recognition for human beings, his liberal approach from the politics of universalism is unable to grant this equal recognition. The universality that Fukuyama argues in favour of, demands a homogeneity of individuals that will ultimately lead to exclusions when differences are not taken into account. Especially when there are unequal power structures and social group differences in terms of privilege and oppression, as is the case within liberal democracies, an enforcement of equal treatment and universalism will reinforce and perpetuate existing privileges and

disadvantages. While there is indeed a risk in identity politics in terms of division and polarization, by neglecting social group differences Fukuyama constructs a dangerous idea of colour-blindness that will lead to unequal treatment of individuals.

Fukuyama illegitimately sees the developments on the political left as the source of contemporary problems and degrades their claims for recognition and social justice by silencing them without proposing focused alternatives in the struggle to achieve greater social justice. Also, by generalizing all kinds of identity groups, Fukuyama makes no distinction between very divergent political goals and strategies and delegitimizes those who might have the same goals as him. Fukuyama portrays identity politics as exclusive and militant, while portraying liberalism as inclusive and moderate. Greater, integrative, liberal identities are in his thinking more inclusive, but the liberal criticism above has shown that this will not be the case for all since liberalism is not a neutral value. Ideals of universalism will always work at the expense of those who are defined as the other and the particular.

As a solution to polarization, the idea of a broad-based liberal national identity will therefore be insufficient. The basic liberal principles remain too vague and lack a creedal core to connect people to one another and make them feel like they are part of the same identity. What is essential for the idea of a unifying national identity within liberal democracies to work, is that it implies recognition and a reciprocity that allows for social groups to respect one another. Without creating room for social group differences and their particular experiences, this idea will not only fail to connect people but also reinforce the unequal recognition of certain identity groups over others.

## 5 – Conclusion

This thesis has evaluated Francis Fukuyama's criticism of identity politics, who argued that developments during the last decades regarding identity politics pose a threat to the functioning of contemporary liberal democracies. The thesis has contrasted Fukuyama's critique with the original claims of identity politics in terms of recognition and social justice, as well as with the most important directly formulated criticisms of Fukuyama's arguments. The central question of this thesis to which I now return is: *Is Fukuyama right in claiming that identity politics is a threat to contemporary liberal democracies?*

The phrase 'identity politics' has been subject to significant changes and interpretation differences from its emergence during the 1960s. Today, the term can be about a wide variety of identity groups that practice politics based on a perceived misrecognition and marginalization of their identity. When the term first came into being, it was applied to leftist social movements that stood up for the rights of minority groups like women, black people, gays, and lesbians. Fukuyama has played a key role in extending the term to encompass many more identity movements, among which also majority groups and right-wing nationalist, populist, and authoritarian movements. In Fukuyama's understanding, all movements that base their politics on notions of shared identity, from Black Lives Matter to Brexit and from the Islamic State to LHBTQ+ groups, share similar perspectives in terms of their perceived invisibility and misrecognition of their identity. They base their demands for recognition on this perception and wish for a preservation of their identity.

The original claims of identity politics can be traced back to important theorists of the politics of difference, such as Taylor and Young. Taylor (1994) argues how social groups are shaped by the recognition or misrecognition of their identity and states how misrecognition has a negative impact on the group's self-esteem and can become a form of oppression by reducing one to an inferior kind of being. According to Young (1990), social groups constitute in part the identity of individuals in relation to other social groups, which makes social group differences an important part of one's sense of self and of society. Both emphasize the importance of identity politics in addressing structural social injustices and forms of oppression and in countering discrimination and subordination. Identity politics bases its claims on the lived experiences of the members of the identity group that often are overlooked and not represented within dominant societal discourses. Identity groups are formed in a dialogical relation to one another, and identity politics aims for a more equalized and just relation between different groups to prevent that the same groups repeatedly end up in the subordinated position as the 'other'.

Fukuyama's (2018) thesis on identity politics responds to contemporary developments regarding the practice of identity politics. He argues that while the identity politics of social movements had been a logical and necessary response to social injustice, the spread of identity politics to more exclusionary groups is a threat to the functioning of liberal democracies in terms of collective deliberation and state action. He has been worried by the formation of identity groups that become increasingly narrow defined by sometimes exclusionary identity traits. According to Fukuyama, this

creates division and polarization and becomes a barrier to constructive deliberation on concrete policy issues, since it is much harder to negotiate on issues defined by identity than on for example socioeconomic issues. He claims that the political left has been focusing too much on the issues of narrow identity groups and neglected problems of larger and older identity groups, such as the white working class, who have been negatively affected by the growing socioeconomic inequality. This created a backlash that gave rise to the emergence of more dangerous identity politics on the right, who felt endangered by leftist elites. Fukuyama also states that contemporary identity politics have the potential to threaten free speech and rational debate.

In arguing for a solution, Fukuyama (2018) focuses on the problem of polarization that follows from the division created by identity politics. He argues for the development of a more broad-based and integrated national identity based on basic liberal democratic values. This identity should not be based on difference and diversity because that leaves room for exclusion and conflict, but instead on individual liberal rights and common experiences. The culture of liberal democracy is to be valued over other cultures that reject its values, and the notion of identity should be transformed in a way that it can be used to integrate instead of divide.

Next to the contrast with the original claims of identity politics, Fukuyama's thesis is also contrasted with directly formulated criticisms of his thesis. These critiques have responded for example to Fukuyama's use of the liberal universal approach that is argued to be unable to grant equal recognition and overlook the historical role of liberalism in the institutionalization of discriminatory and oppressive identity structures of society. Fukuyama's thesis has also been criticized for its colour-blind approach and illegitimate universal application. Another problem concerns Fukuyama's tendency to generalize the widely different political goals and strategies of a variety of identity movements. It is argued to be far-fetched and inappropriate to compare these different movements since they do not share the same political views. Fukuyama's argumentation is also said to be mistakenly blaming the political left for identity politics and overlooking the deeply intertwined relation between cultural and material dimensions of recognition and redistribution. Finally, his proposed solution of a liberal national identity is criticized for being incapable of addressing the roots of the problem.

The biggest and most encompassing opposition between the different perspectives on identity politics is an opposition between the philosophical ideas behind the liberal politics of universalism on the one hand and the politics of difference on the other. Fukuyama uses a liberal approach of the politics of universalism, which main view is based on a belief that recognition should be granted based on a shared and equal dignity of all human beings. The politics of difference, or identity politics, has emerged as a response to this and stresses a recognition based on the uniqueness of a person or social group. Where the politics of universalism aims for an equalization of rights and freedom based on individuality, identity politics argues that equal treatment should not always mean identical treatment and argues for differentiation of rights and recognition of social groups.

This distinction has been crucial in evaluating Fukuyama's criticism of identity politics. While

Fukuyama is right in arguing that narrowly defined identity groups that practice an exclusionary form of identity politics can pose a threat to collective deliberation and state action and can create polarization, a problem is that his approach is not able to respond adequately to these issues, also considering the sacrifices it makes in terms of social justice and equality. Identity politics criticizes the universal approach precisely because of its unintended discriminatory practices by its enforcement of homogeneity and universality. To ensure inclusion and participation of every individual, identity politics argues that group interests should not be overruled by a focus on individual equality. An enforcement of homogeneity is unrealistic and overdemanding, while also having discriminatory effects when society does not treat its members 'difference-blind'.

Fukuyama's thesis is strong in the sense that it brings attention to the way identity has come to play an increasing role in politics. He is right in arguing that a shift towards a focus on identarian issues has complicated (global) politics in several ways. Identity politics based on exclusionary identity traits is polarizing and is potentially a threat to the functioning of states. However, the greatest shortcoming of Fukuyama's thesis is that the liberal approach of universality in current liberal democracies will hardly be better than identity politics as a response to social injustices and polarization. His rejection of identity politics overall, I believe, works in his disadvantage because it disregards all identity-based politics, without distinguishing between different approaches. While exclusionary identity politics and feelings of resentment are problematic in terms of progression and overcoming victimization, identity politics can also have a transformative approach aimed at inclusion and solidarity. By turning his back on identity politics in general, Fukuyama is silencing those voices as well who have the vision and advocacy to address the problems about which he is worried.

Chapter four has discussed five main points of discussion that are considered problematic in Fukuyama's criticism of identity politics. First, it is argued that the liberal politics of universalism is unable to grant equal recognition to individuals and does not acknowledge social groups, which are important for both individuals and societies. Second, this approach is argued to support the idea of colour blindness that prioritizes the experiences of dominant social groups over the disadvantaged and results in unequal treatment of individuals. Third, Fukuyama's generalization of identity groups and movements is criticized by arguing that there should be made a more nuanced distinction between different forms of identity politics, for example between exclusionary and inclusionary identity politics. Fourth, the way Fukuyama blames the left for the rise of identity politics is problematized by arguing that this disregards claims of oppressed groups and neglects the role of liberal societies in feelings of resentment. Lastly, Fukuyama's solution to develop a broad-based integrated national identity based on liberal democratic values is argued to be incapable of providing sufficient commitment by lacking a creedal core and again prioritizing dominant social groups.

To conclude: *is Fukuyama right in claiming that identity politics is a threat to contemporary liberal democracies?* The answer is likely to depend on a more concise definition of the groups practicing identity politics on different terms. Fukuyama is right that exclusionary identity politics are a

problem for collective deliberation and rational debate by making claims for recognition that have a polarizing effect on social groups by either demanding a superior recognition or by undermining equality and social justice. However, identity politics in itself does not have to be a threat when it is aimed at promoting social justice and improving the position of marginalized identity groups. Instead, the universal approach of liberal democracies that promotes homogeneity and universality can be threatening the aim of identity politics to acknowledge social group identities and allow social group differences to flourish.

This thesis has contributed to an understanding and evaluation of identity politics and its implications on the politics of liberal democracies. Because of the expansion of the term 'identity politics' to an inclusion of more diverse identity movements, it has been relevant to elaborate on the contemporary developments that Fukuyama has shed light upon. However, since the conclusion is in part depending on the way identity politics is interpreted and practiced in terms of exclusion and inclusion, further research on the distinctions underlying the term 'identity politics' is required. While this thesis has succeeded in bringing attention to the controversy surrounding Fukuyama's generalization of the term, it has not been able to analyse the characteristics of 'good' and 'bad' identity politics accurately and coherently. Also, it has not succeeded in formulating an alternative answer to the way potential negative implications of exclusionary identity politics should be tackled. Future research could focus on making useful distinctions on how various kinds of identity groups differ in the risk they bring in terms of the functioning of liberal states. In my belief, not all kinds of identity politics are to be considered equal in terms of the way they potentially threaten liberal democracies, which is why there should be more attention for the different ways in which identity politics can be practiced.

Future research on identity politics should therefore focus on how identity politics can be used as a positive tool for on the one hand changing social and cultural norms to improve the position of marginalized groups and to counter real problems such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and other exclusionary practices, and on the other hand for providing a collective identity and sense of commitment without resulting in exclusion and polarization. Identity politics remains to play an important role in tackling social injustices and creating consciousness on discriminatory and exclusionary societal and cultural norms and practices. When practiced in a way that is inclusive in nature, open to deliberation regarding differences, and willing to use lived experiences to find a common ground, identity politics is, instead of being a threat, a potential contribution to liberal democracies.

## Bibliography

- Alim, A. N. (2020, July 29). *Book Review | Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment by Francis Fukuyama*. LSE International History. Retrieved 19 February 2022, from <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseih/2018/11/14/book-review-identity-the-demand-for-dignity-and-the-politics-of-resentment-by-francis-fukuyama/>
- Appiah, K. A. (2005). *The Ethics of Identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Appiah, K. A. (2006). The politics of identity. *Daedalus*, 135(4), 15–22.  
<https://doi.org/10.1162/daed.2006.135.4.15>
- Brown, W. (2019). *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Brown, W. (1993). Wounded Attachments. *Political Theory*, 21(3), 390–410.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591793021003003>
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2005). *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.  
[doi:10.5422/fso/9780823225033.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.5422/fso/9780823225033.001.0001)
- Butler, J. (1997). Merely Cultural. *Social Text*, 15(3/4), 265–277. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466744>
- Chavoshi, S. (2020). Commissioned Book Review. *Political Studies Review*, 18(4), 3–4.
- Coker, C. (2017). Book review. *Kantian Review*, 22(1), 172–176.
- Condon, W. (2022, January 28). *'Identity' by Francis Fukuyama | Book Review*. WordPress.Com. Retrieved 16 May 2022, from <https://democracyandsociety.net/2019/09/23/identity-by-francis-fukuyama-book-review/>
- Corey, E. (2021, August 30). *Identity and the Politics of Recognition*. Law & Liberty. Retrieved 28 May 2022, from <https://lawliberty.org/identity-and-the-politics-of-recognition/>
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>

- Crouch, C. (2004). *Post-Democracy* (1st ed.). Oxford: Polity.
- De Beauvoir, S. (1949/2011). Introduction to The Second Sex. In *The Second Sex*, (pp. 11-18). New York: Vintage.
- Fanon, F. (1986). *Black Skin, White Masks* (C. L. Markmann, Trans.). London: Pluto Press.
- Foucault, M. (1976/1990). *The History of Sexuality. Volume I*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Fukuyama, F. (2018). *Identity. Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*. London: Profile Books Ltd.
- Fukuyama, F. (2022). *Liberalism and Its Discontents*. London: Profile Books Ltd.
- Fukuyama, F. (1989). The End of History? *The National Interest*, 16, 3-18.
- Fukuyama, F. (1992). *The End of History and the Last Man* (Reissue ed.). New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Francis Fukuyama [Radboud Reflects]. (2019, March 11). *Against Identity Politics | Francis Fukuyama, political scientist, lecture* [Video]. YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33VQg5Vqjis>
- Fraser, N. (1995). Recognition or Redistribution? A Critical Reading of Iris Young's Justice and the Politics of Difference\*. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 3(2), 166–180.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.1995.tb00033.x>
- Fraser, N. (1998). Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, Participation. *Discussion Paper FS I 98 -108*. Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung.
- Gilbert, P. (2000). Race and Ethnicity. In P. Gilbert (Ed.) *Peoples, Cultures and Nations in Political Philosophy* (pp. 9-76). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press
- Glaser, E. (2018, February 22). *Bring back ideology: Fukuyama's 'end of history' 25 years on*. The Guardian. Retrieved 12 May 2022, from

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/mar/21/bring-back-ideology-fukuyama-end-history-25-years-on>

- Hall, S. (1997). The Spectacle of the 'Other'. In S. Hall (Ed.) *Representations. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (pp. 223-279). London: Sage and The Open University
- Harding, S. (2004). Introduction. In S. Harding (Ed.), *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader* (pp. 1–16). Routledge.
- Harding, S. (2015). *Objectivity and Diversity: Another Logic of Scientific Research* (1st ed.). Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Heyes, C. (2020). *Identity Politics*. (Fall 2020 Edition). *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, E. N. Zalta (Ed.). Retrieved 18 January 2022, from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/identity-politics/>
- Hill Collins, P. (2000). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Holmes, S. (2019, January 17). *The Identity Illusion*. The New York Review of Books. Retrieved 19 February 2022, from [https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/01/17/the-identity-illusion/?lp\\_txn\\_id=1328581](https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/01/17/the-identity-illusion/?lp_txn_id=1328581)
- Honneth, A. (2001). Recognition or Redistribution? Changing Perspectives on the Moral Order of Society. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 18(2–3), 43–55.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/02632760122051779>
- James, S. (2003). Feminisms. In T. Ball & R. Bellamy (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought*, (pp. 493-516). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kochi, T. (2021). A Dangerous Text: Francis Fukuyama's Mischaracterisation of Identity, Recognition and Right-Wing Nationalism. *Borderlands: Culture, Politics, Law and Earth*.

- Kukathas, C. (1998). Liberalism and Multiculturalism: The politics of indifference. *Political Theory*, 26(5), 686–699. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591798026005003>
- Leith, S. (Host). (2022, March 21). Francis Fukuyama: Liberalism and its Discontents. [Podcast episode]. In *The Book Club*. The Spectator. Retrieved May 30, <https://audioboom.com/posts/8051716-francis-fukuyama-liberalism-and-its-discontents>
- Lorber, J. (1999). Crossing Borders and Erasing Boundaries: Paradoxes of Identity Politics. *Sociological Focus*, 32(4), 355–370. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380237.1999.10571147>
- Makalintal, J. (2019). Book review. Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition by Francis Fukuyama. London: Profile Books Ltd, *POLITIKON* 43(1), 86-89. <https://doi.org/10.22151/politikon.43.5>
- McManus, M. (2019, September 25). *Francis Fukuyama's "Identity": A Book Review*. Areo. Retrieved 19 February 2022, from <https://areomagazine.com/2019/09/25/francis-fukuyamas-identity-a-book-review/>
- McManus, M. (2020, May 29). *Why Wendy Brown Remains as Relevant as Ever*. MerionWest. Retrieved 28 May 2022, from <https://merionwest.com/2020/05/29/why-wendy-brown-remains-as-relevant-as-ever/>
- Menand, L. (2018, August 27). *Francis Fukuyama Postpones the End of History*. The New Yorker. Retrieved 19 February 2022, from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/09/03/francis-fukuyama-postpones-the-end-of-history>
- Mutua, A. D. (2020). Liberalism's identity politics: a response to professor Fukuyama. *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Law and Social Change*, 23(1), 27–49.
- Namboodiri, A. (2019, January 12). *Book Review: Identity by Francis Fukuyama*. Deccan Herald. Retrieved 16 May 2022, from <https://www.deccanherald.com/sunday-herald/sunday-herald-books/need-recognition-712672.html>

- Nooteboom, B. (2012). Levinas: Philosophy of the Other. In B. Nooteboom (Ed.) *Beyond Humanism. The Flourishing of Life, Self and Other*. London: Palgrave Macmillan  
[https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230371019\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230371019_8)
- Rademacher, G. (2019). Dignity and the Psychology of Nationalism: Review of Francis Fukuyama's Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 20, 160-162.
- Said, E. W. (2000). *Orientalism*. In M. Bayoumi & A. Rubin (Eds.), *The Edward Said Reader* (pp. 63-113). New York: Vintage Books
- Stanley, T., & Lee, A. (2014, September 1). *It's Still Not the End of History*. The Atlantic. Retrieved 15 May 2022, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/09/its-still-not-the-end-of-history-francis-fukuyama/379394/>
- Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Taylor, C. (1994). The Politics of Recognition. In A. Gutmann (Ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Revised ed., pp. 25–74). Princeton University Press.
- The Combahee River Collective (2014 [1978]). A Black Feminist Statement. *Women's Studies Quarterly* 42(3/4), 271-280.
- West, C. & Zimmerman. D. (1987). Doing Gender, *Gender & Society*, 1(2), 125–51.
- Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice And The Politics Of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Young, I. M. (1989). Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship. *Ethics*, 99(2), 250–274. <https://doi.org/10.1086/293065>