

Review - The End of Certainty

Written by Ioannis Mantzikos

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IOANNIS MANTZIKOS, APR 6 2012

The End of Certainty: Towards a New Internationalism
by Stephen Chan
Zed Books, 2009

The early 1990's were without a doubt one of the Western world's proudest moments, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the unification of Germany under NATO, and the first Gulf War nearly coinciding. The George H.W. Bush Presidency, despite its political difficulties, left a lasting impact on its self-proclaimed New World Order.

In the immediate post-Cold War era, many scholars sought to construct a new framework to encapsulate these changed realities. Put another way, many scholars sought to position themselves as the George Kennan of the post-Cold War world. Perhaps the two most successful attempts came from Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington. Fukuyama and Huntington's works had a substantial impact on the subsequent academic discourse, and strongly influenced how policymakers' interpreted the world they inhabited. Fukuyama and Huntington acted, one might say, in a similar fashion to historians on the winning side of a medieval war.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall still fresh in everyone's minds. Fukuyama published an article arguing that the collapse

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of communism signaled the triumph of liberalism over all its ideological competitors. His article became almost a motif of the U.S triumphalism of the period. Three years later, Fukuyama wrote a book based on this initial article entitled *The End of History and the Last Man*. The book draws heavily from Alexander Kojeve's interpretation of Hegel, particularly the latter's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, which put forth a teleological interpretation of history with a dialectical ideological struggle occurring before the rationale end was reached. In this context, Fukuyama argued that Hegel's dialectic struggle had concluded with the end of the Cold War, in so far as all ideological competitors of Western Liberalism had been discredited. Philosophical Liberalism, though not completely monolithic, was therefore the "last man" meaning the dialectic competition that had driven history beforehand was over.

Among the myriad responses Fukuyama's writings elicited, Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* stood apart. In his *Foreign Affairs* article and later book, Huntington argues that whereas the past few centuries had been defined by ideological competition, culture would be the primary fault lines in the emerging world order. As Huntington noted, this would not be a new development so much as a return to the old ways of the world. Although the book was based on world cultures, Huntington overwhelmingly draws from Western sources.

Distinguished Professor of International Relations Stephen Chan criticizes current analyses of international developments as being based primarily on western systemic models that steadily impose a cultural monopoly on the field. Chan himself is multi-cultured: he is the son of Chinese political refugees who had immigrated to New Zealand. Early on, however, Chan relocated to Africa where he led student movements supporting the recently won independence of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). After working for a number of years at the British Commonwealth in Zambia, Chan decided to devote his life to academia (while remaining an activist). His book, *The End of Certainty: Towards a new Multilateralism*, is the continuation of a series of articles that stretch from André Malraux, the Finnish national consciousness as a building of modern African literature, and the Falun Gong. All three texts reflect Chan's academic interests: non-Western methodologies of philosophy and international relations. "If the games are demons and vampires are strange beings so are Sudanese or the Chinese to Western International Relations," Chan writes to symbolize how oversimplified the western world interprets other cultures.

The author begins by recounting a personal story his travels in the highlands of Mount Soira, Eritrea during that country's war of liberation (1991) from Ethiopia. It's a compelling story that is meant to embody the problematic relations between love, war and death, which all aim to highlight an occasionally contradictory side of the human nature. He then makes a brief reference to the creation of modern national identities. Chan helps us understand the components of a future "internationalism" identity, but not of a Marxist-Leninist type. According to the great Finnish diplomat Max Jakobson, "national consciousness is cultivated only by historians, poets and composers." Finland's national anthem, "Finlandia" is telling in this regard. The anthem is based on Elias Lonrot's poem "Kavenala." Furthermore, "Finlandia's" composer Jean Sibelius has influenced the soldiers of the stillborn state of the Nigerian Biafra. Sibelius poem has been used as the base for the Biafran national anthem in 1967. Meanwhile, Chan praises Kenneth Kaunda's attempt to create a collective national identity in Zambia. Although this identity never caught on among Zambians, Chan argues that its strange mix of African and Christian mysticism and romanticism marks a milestone.

Later in the book the author considers Osama Bin Laden and the theology of Wahhabi Islam. Furthermore, after exploring the ontological philosophy and worldview of Bin Laden, Chan compares the differing concepts of compassion in the western and non-western world. Chan is using examples from the Hindu and Buddhist philosophy and the Persian Literature to show that many of the so-called "western values" have their roots in the eastern world, and bad-good dichotomous worldviews also come from (non-Kantian) philosophy.

Although Osama Bin Laden is a controversial figure, demonized in a large part of the world, Chan believes that this does not solve the biggest problem of international relations, which he argues is the lack of bridges of understanding between different cultures. Then the author uses Czech philosopher Jan Patocka's example of the battlefield. The image depicts two armies on the battlefield, which, when seen from miles away, appear as a single entity. But before brutality became the common feature, their faith was the only hope. Returning to Bin Laden, for the West this was not the only modern demon. Ayatollah Khomeini and General Muammar Qaddafi had been the demonized before him.

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Whereas both Khomeini and Bin Laden were seeking *Umma* (the worldwide unity of Islamic states), Qaddafi championed secular pan-Arab and pan-African ideologies. Although Bin Laden's religious convictions derive from the House of Saud, the doctrine of Wahhabism, according to Chan, is steeped in the concepts of ethics and duty. Bin Laden's path is therefore a testament to what Chan identifies as Fukuyama and Huntington's biggest error, the last man of the West is replaced by the new man, who is eager to begin the story with his own terms or what Chan calls *thymos*, the need for recognition. These "Young People" are those who rebelled against the "last man" philosophy.

Next, Chan turns to Robert Kagan, a leading intellectual of the U.S. neoconservatism movement and a strong advocate of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Power is central to Kagan's beliefs; for instance, he thought the U.S. was powerful enough to force Europe to go along with the War in Iraq. Chan points out an alternative paradigm that also is influential with the U.S. foreign policy establishment. Specifically he refers to the Interdependence theory as conveyed by Harvard's Joseph S. Nye and Princeton's Robert Keohane. Without rejecting the necessity of hard power, Nye's later work deemed soft power-the power of attraction- as the most potent "weapon" in Washington's arsenal. And here again the Chan states that the basic problem of international relations remains the same: the sense that a powerful state should export its values because its enlightened Leaders think so either in soft power or hard power terms.

To demonstrate the interaction and compatibility of world cultures, Chan draws up a hypothetical constitution of the world. Chan's example of that Constitution contains 33 provisions aimed at limiting the power of the state and protecting individual rights. This society is grounded in the rule of law with each citizen enjoying equal protection in the legal system regardless of gender, race, sex, religion, color, language, beliefs. The country is neither the U.S. nor France, nor Iran, nor India, but South Africa, which Chan sets as a benchmark. The triumph of coexistence for Chan is not the Kantian system of values but the "Kantian Wish": The ability of humans to produce constitutional texts that will arise and will not require legalization from the God given right (Iran) or the name of the Son of God {(Neo-conservatives Evangelical-Right)-USA)}, but the human need to live in a pluralistic world.

One drawback of the book is that it often reads more like a novel than a piece of social science. Characters appear and disappear throughout which is likely to confuse readers not steeped in Persian, French, and African philosophies, where many of the characters are drawn from. By including these philosophical characters Chan is no doubt trying impress upon the reader the importance of looking beyond the mundane established Western thinkers like Fukuyama and Huntington. This is a tall order; indeed, as Chan himself admits in the first line of the book, "I have been advised not to write this book '....

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