History Restarts

MAGA, Recognition, and the Failure of the End of History

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Abstract

Conventional accounts explain the MAGA movement through immigration, economic anxiety, globalization, cultural conflict, and institutional distrust. This essay reads it instead through the philosophical line running from Hegel through Alexandre Kojève and Francis Fukuyama, set against Fritjof Capra's systems thinking. Using Kojève's struggle for recognition, Fukuyama's distinction between isothymia and megalothymia, and Nietzsche's Last Man, it interprets MAGA as a reappearance of historical negation inside a liberal order that once appeared to have settled history's fundamental questions. It engages Fukuyama's own 2018 application of thymos to populism and the contested empirical literature on status threat, and argues that the same frame fits other post–Cold War populist movements. The essay's central claim is that, read through Capra, the backlash is less a failure of the post–Cold War settlement than its product, and that this open-ended reading, in which each resolution generates the next contradiction, may be more faithful to Hegel than Kojève's final-state interpretation of him.

1. INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has spent a career architecting large networks learns one lesson early and relearns it constantly: there is no final state. Every fix changes the conditions the system runs under, and the new conditions eventually produce the next problem. This essay takes that lesson somewhere less comfortable than a routing table.

The rise of the MAGA movement is usually explained in conventional political terms: immigration, economic anxiety, globalization, cultural conflict, distrust of institutions, and dissatisfaction with political elites. Those explanations matter, but they do not fully capture the movement's deeper significance. Read through the line that runs from Hegel through Alexandre Kojève to Francis Fukuyama, and then set against Fritjof Capra's systems thinking, MAGA can be understood as something more basic: the reappearance of historical negation inside a political order that once appeared to have transcended it.

2. HEGEL: HISTORY AS CONTRADICTION

For Hegel, history is not a chronology of events. It is a process through which contradictions within forms of social life become visible and eventually generate their own transformation [1]. An established order contains tensions it cannot permanently reconcile; those tensions produce opposition, and that opposition is the mechanism through which history moves.

3. KOJÈVE: THE STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION

Kojève's influential reading of Hegel put the struggle for recognition at the center of that process [2]. Human beings do not merely desire things. They desire recognition from other human beings: acknowledgment of their dignity, status, identity, and significance. Much of human history, on this reading, is a struggle over who gets recognized and on what terms.

The master–slave dialectic illustrates the point. People risk conflict because recognition matters so deeply that they may value it above physical security. Through struggle, labor, domination, resistance, and eventual reconciliation, they transform both themselves and the societies they live in.

This leads Kojève to his most provocative claim: that history, in its essentials, is already over. For Kojève, Napoleon's victory at Jena in 1806 established the principle of the universal and homogeneous state, in which every citizen is recognized as free and equal. The fundamental contradiction that drives history was resolved in principle at that moment. What followed, including the revolutions and world wars of the twentieth century, was the working-out of that principle across the rest of the world [2]. On this reading, history does not end someday. It has already ended, and what remains is its aftermath.

4. FUKUYAMA AND THE LAST MAN

Fukuyama took up this idea at the end of the Cold War [3]. Where Kojève dated the end to 1806, Fukuyama read the collapse of communism as its confirmation. His claim was not that wars, recessions, or political conflict would stop. It was that liberal democracy might be the endpoint of humanity's ideological evolution, because no rival system could make a stronger universal claim to legitimacy. The struggle over the basic form of political society appeared, at least potentially, to be settled.

But Fukuyama attached a warning, and it sits in the second half of his title. The Last Man comes from Nietzsche: the comfortable human being who values security, consumption, health, and predictability, but no longer has a compelling reason to struggle, sacrifice, create, or overcome himself [4]. That creates a paradox at the center of the post-historical world. If the struggle for recognition produces history, and liberal democracy successfully provides recognition, what happens to human beings once the struggle has been won?

Fukuyama's answer turns on a distinction he drew from Plato's *thymos*, the part of the soul that demands recognition. *Isothymia* is the desire to be recognized as the equal of others. *Megalothymia* is the desire to be recognized as superior. Liberal democracy is built to satisfy the first: citizenship, rights, and equality before the law. It has no comparable outlet for the second. A society that delivers prosperity and formal equality may therefore produce a different dissatisfaction, among people who want distinction, honor, belonging, or a part in something larger than themselves. Fukuyama worried about last men; he worried just as much about the return of “first men,” people willing to upend a comfortable order simply to have something worth fighting for.

5. FUKUYAMA SAW PART OF THIS COMING

Any honest version of this argument has to acknowledge that Fukuyama got there first, at least in part. In *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (2018), he applied thymos directly to Trump, Brexit, and the populist movements across Europe, arguing that demands for dignity unmet by the liberal order were driving the backlash [5].

The claim here, then, is not that MAGA refutes Fukuyama in a way he failed to anticipate. He anticipated more than that: in 1992 he already warned that the order's own success could breed the “first men” who reject it, so the idea that the settlement produces its own backlash is partly his. Where this essay parts from him is on what follows. For Fukuyama the backlash is a standing risk the liberal order has to manage, and the endpoint holds: no rival system makes a stronger universal claim, so the task is to supply enough recognition within it. Read through Capra, there is no endpoint to defend. The backlash is a product of the settlement, and whatever settlement follows will produce its own. That distinction is where this essay ends up.

6. MAGA AS A CRISIS OF RECOGNITION

The phrase “Make America Great Again” is revealing. It is not, at bottom, a promise to make Americans wealthier. It is a promise to restore greatness, and greatness is relational: to be great is to hold a recognized position of status, strength, dignity, or prestige.

The 2024 Republican platform opens by describing the United States as a nation in “serious decline,” and organizes its program around restoration: of borders, manufacturing, energy production, military strength, sovereignty, and national confidence [6]. Whatever one thinks of those claims politically, their philosophical structure is unmistakable. Something valuable once existed. Something has been lost. The present order has failed to preserve it. It must be restored.

> *That is a politics of negation. In Kojève's terms, history starts again.*

7. RECOGNITION, NOT ONLY MATERIAL INTEREST

None of this means economics does not matter. In Pew Research Center's September 2024 survey, 93 percent of Trump supporters said the economy was very important to their vote, and 82 percent said the same of immigration, up from 61 percent in 2020 [7].

But material questions can carry symbolic weight. A factory is a unit of productive capacity, and it can also stand for a community's importance. A manufacturing job is a wage, and it can also stand for competence, independence, and social standing. A border is an administrative line, and it can also stand for sovereignty and control. Foreign policy is a calculation of alliances, and it can also become a question of whether one's country is respected. In each case, a material question becomes bound up with a question of recognition.

There is empirical work on this, and it is contested. Diana Mutz's 2018 study in *PNAS* used 2012–2016 panel data to argue that changes in personal finances did little to shift candidate preference, and that the shift tracked perceived threats to dominant-group status, including anxiety about America's global standing [8]. Stephen Morgan replied that her data could not cleanly separate status threat from economic interest, and that the panel results are consistent with economics mattering at least as much [9]. The fair summary is that the recognition thesis has real empirical support and real empirical challenges. It is an interpretive frame, not a settled finding.

It is also not a demographic diagnosis. The coalition is heterogeneous: different income groups, religious communities, ethnic groups, and professions, with supporters who prioritize different issues and disagree among themselves. The philosophical point concerns the shape of the political appeal, not the psychology of tens of millions of individuals.

8. THE REBELLION OF THE LAST MAN

Nietzsche adds another dimension. A post-historical world of managerial institutions, bureaucratic administration, consumer abundance, and incremental improvement may provide security without providing meaning. The Last Man is satisfied but not heroic. He avoids danger, distrusts sacrifice, and asks mainly whether life can be made safer and more predictable.

MAGA rhetoric draws on nearly the opposite vocabulary: strength, winning, fighting, greatness, sovereignty, restoration, national purpose. Through a Nietzschean lens, that reads as a reaction against the Last Man's condition, an attempt to restore struggle, distinction, and historical significance. Political participation becomes more than a vote on tax rates. The individual is no longer simply administered by institutions; he believes he is helping take the country back and redirect history.

This says nothing about whether the movement's account of what was lost is accurate. The narrower point is that a movement organized around restoration offers something a managerial political system usually does not: a sense of historical agency.

9. THE CONTRADICTION INSIDE THE LIBERAL ORDER

The post–Cold War order carried an implicit promise: globalization, economic integration, technological progress, and expanding individual rights would produce growing prosperity and freedom. In many respects they did. The same processes also produced dislocation.

Globalization can raise aggregate wealth while disrupting particular communities. Technology can raise productivity while eliminating familiar occupations. Cultural pluralism can expand individual freedom while leaving some people feeling their inherited identities have moved to the margins. Professionalized institutions can grow more technically capable while appearing more distant from ordinary citizens.

The contradiction does not require one side to be entirely right and the other entirely wrong. The same system can produce both progress and dislocation. That is a recognizably Hegelian problem: an order generates outcomes that erode the consensus it depends on, until part of the population says no, and negation re-enters history.

10. WHY MAGA, AND NOT ONLY MAGA

The same frame fits other movements of the past fifteen years: Brexit, the populist parties of Europe on both right and left, and, in different ways, the Sanders campaigns and Occupy, which also rejected the post–Cold War settlement rather than asking for adjustments within it. They differ in which kind of *thymos* they draw on. The left variants lean toward *isothymia*: a demand for equal standing against an order seen as rigged for those at the top. Restoration movements carry a stronger *megalothymic* charge: the demand that the nation, and a particular idea of it, be recognized as great. MAGA is the focus here because it states the restoration claim most explicitly, in its slogan and in its own platform. It is one instance of the pattern, not the pattern itself.

11. CAPRA: NO SINGLE CAUSE

Fritjof Capra's *The Turning Point* complicates the picture [10]. Capra argues that complex social problems cannot be understood by reducing them to isolated causes; systems have to be understood through relationships, feedback loops, interdependence, and emergent behavior. From that perspective, explaining MAGA solely through Trump, economic anxiety, immigration, racial attitudes, globalization, social media, or institutional distrust would be misleading. It is better understood as emerging from the interaction among them:

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globalization        --> employment patterns --> community structure
community change     --> identity
technology           --> work and communication
social media         --> how grievances spread
declining trust      --> how information is interpreted
polarization         --> separate information environments --> more distrust
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Most of these are one-way causal chains; only the last closes on itself. But the chains feed the loop: dislocation sharpens questions of identity, identity sharpens polarization, and polarization deepens the distrust through which the next dislocation is read. That reinforcing loop is what can push a political system into a new configuration. On a Capra-like reading, Trump did not create the underlying conditions; he became an unusually effective organizer and symbol within a system already under significant stress. The distinction matters, because systemic pressures do not necessarily disappear when a particular leader does.

One caution about Capra. *The Turning Point* has its own direction: it argues for a shift from a mechanistic, Cartesian worldview toward a holistic, systems one, which is a soft endpoint of its own. What this essay takes from Capra is his account of how complex systems behave, not his forecast of where the culture is headed.

12. MORE HEGELIAN THAN KOJÈVE

This is where the threads come together. Kojève's reading holds that the decisive contradictions of history were reconciled once and for all, in principle at Jena. Capra's systems view suggests something different. Complex systems do not normally reach permanent equilibrium. They reorganize, and each solution changes the conditions of the system, which eventually produces new tensions. The sequence is not

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contradiction --> resolution --> final equilibrium
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but rather

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contradiction --> crisis --> reorganization --> temporary stability -->
    new contradiction
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The irony is that this open-ended loop may be closer to Hegel than Kojève's final-state reading of him. Hegel can be read both ways. His lectures on the philosophy of history call Europe “absolutely the end of History” [11], and Kojève built on passages like that. But a long line of readers has argued that the dialectic does not terminate. Adorno's negative dialectics rejects any final reconciliation of contradiction [12], and Pinkard reads the Phenomenology as an account of social practices that keep revising their own standards, not a march toward a closing state [13]. On that reading every reconciliation becomes a new form of life with its own internal tensions, and Capra is not overturning Hegel. He is helping recover a Hegel that Kojève's endpoint obscured. The End of History was never really available. What looked like an endpoint was a period of temporary systemic stability, and that stability generated its own opposition.

The open-ended reading has a cost, and it should be stated. A thesis that every resolution produces the next contradiction can absorb almost any outcome. What would count against it is a settled order that absorbs its opposition indefinitely, channeling dissent into adjustments within the system rather than rejections of it. For a while after 1989 the liberal order looked like that. That it did not last is the evidence offered here; it is not proof that no order ever could.

13. CONCLUSION

Read through Hegel, Kojève, Fukuyama, Nietzsche, and Capra, MAGA's significance extends beyond electoral politics. It is evidence that people still demand more from political systems than prosperity or administrative competence. They demand recognition, agency, and belonging. Some want equality; others want distinction or the restoration of status. And they want to believe they are participants in history, not merely residents of a system whose fundamental questions have been settled.

The weakness of the End of History thesis may be hidden inside its greatest achievement. When a political order resolves yesterday's contradictions, it changes society: identities, relationships, expectations, institutions. Those changes eventually produce contradictions of their own. MAGA is then neither simply a return to the past nor simply a rejection of modernity. It is one manifestation of a deeper process: new political conflict emerging from within the supposedly settled order of liberal modernity.

> *The End of History did not fail because history's contradictions were never resolved.*
> *It failed because resolving one contradiction created the conditions for the next.*

Every network architect already knows this. There is no final state. There is only the next configuration, and the problems it was always going to create.

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