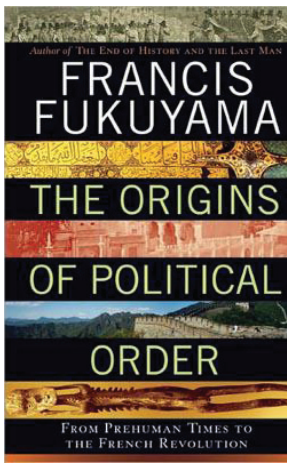

Book Review by Danny Unger*

The Origins of Political Order (2011)

Author: Francis Fukuyama

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Francis Fukuyama searches in this tome for the sources of "the miracle of modern politics"—the capacity of some political systems to underpin capable states resting on rule of law and accountable to their citizens. The "cornerstones of political order", he writes, are self-interest and legitimacy. His account of how political order is created and sustained delves into literatures on the emergence of state societies and the early histories of Chinese ("in a sense, they invented good government"), European, Indian, and Muslim states. This is a rich synthesis of an extensive array of literatures that is of considerable interest to students of contemporary Thailand. Its overarching argument is that the robustness of formal institutions is dependent on the nature of social norms and structures within which they are embedded.

Fukuyama identifies a number of false starts on the road to law-governed, accountable states. These include the Chinese innovations of merit-based recruitment into a centralized bureaucracy imposing uniform rule over a large population and territory. Another example would be the citizen-based oligarchic republics of the Dutch United Provinces and Venice. Ultimately, some Europeans proved "precocious" in several respects: fostering individualism and the rule of law, and retaining at least some feudal, accountability-carrying elements in the course of creating modern states. In explaining why Europeans' innovations ultimately went farthest in the direction of effective, law-bound, accountable states, Fukuyama places considerable stress on war

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fighting in Europe. He also gives much attention to the impact of constant warfare in China during the Warring States period. For example, these states instituted mass conscription. And the creation of a modern bureaucracy, including merit-based recruitment, started in the army. For these states at war, meritocracy was "not a cultural norm but a condition for survival."

In accounting for the emergence of modern state institutions, Fukuyama also puts much emphasis on the Catholic Church. By offering various compensations, for example, the Church may have eased the way for tribes to sacrifice their freedoms in the course of allying themselves with, and lodging themselves within, state hierarchies. Unlike the Chinese case in which the rule of law was never entrenched, in Europe the rule of law was bolstered by the Church's struggle against secular authority which led the Church to codify its canon law. The relatively rare achievement of rule of law, argues Fukuyama, is rooted in norms, often religious ones. In England by the fifteenth century, the judiciary featured levels of competence and independence still absent in many countries.

Fukuyama also emphasizes the enduring impact of religion in the case of India where religious and state authority diverged in the distant past and the status of Brahmins was above that of Kshatriyas. Kings allegedly were guardians of sacred law rather than its authors, a point often made of Thai kings before the reign of King Chulalongkorn. Also in common with some early Thai civilizations, religion-grounded social cement may have been more important than political authority or state institutions in fostering social order. Based on his reviews of the Chinese and Indian cases, Fukuyama suggests that "a better form of freedom emerges when there is a strong state *and* a strong society, two centers of power that are able to balance and offset each other over time."

Fukuyama uses his narrative of various Muslim states to illustrate the "permanent tensions that exist between people's private kinship ties and their obligations to a broader public political order." Those tensions help to account for the institution of military slavery used by the Abbasid dynasty and others. For all the efforts of the Ottomans, however, to combat patrimonialism, the "hereditary principle" survived and eventually reasserted itself to the detriment of the state.

Family patterns in Europe differed from those found elsewhere as early as the fifteenth century due to lower rates of marriage, later marriages, lower birth rates, and, in general, greater gender equity within households. Europe also featured greater individualism and a relatively early shift from status to contract features in society. He cites Bloch's argument that European feudalism emerged in such formidable fashion due to the inadequacy of kin ties as sources of security.

In his review of European states, Fukuyama notes the rarity of an ability to tax or regulate key elite groups. Instead, such elites tend to penetrate the state. In Spain, for example, constitutionalism "was granted from above by elites who could take it back when it no longer suited their interests." In extreme cases such as Hungary or Poland, centralizing kings were never able to overcome the powers of the nobles with disastrous consequences for the emergence of powerful states and the survival of those states. In Russia, "a national network of families and client systems" made a mockery of formal institutional arrangements.

This book is a valuable stimulus to thinking about comparative politics across world regions and historical epochs. It elaborates several themes Fukuyama has developed in his earlier works and, as noted above, it offers a variety of implicit hypotheses that we can apply in considering the nature of states and politics in different polities around the world.