

## LIBRARIES AT THE END OF HISTORY?

by Mark Rosenzweig

In the summer of 1989 a young State Department intellectual suggested that, with the imminent end of the Cold War, humanity was poised at what he called, reprising Hegel, "the end of history." Francis Fukuyama's article, "The End of History?," appearing in the conservative magazine *The National Interest*, earned him considerable celebrity both here and abroad with its self-consciously provocative thesis.<sup>1</sup> In the intellectual wasteland "inside the Beltway" it was considered a contribution of major (if not historic) proportions. The end of history became, for a time, an intensely fashionable idea—it was even alluded to by the intensely fashionable author Tom (*Bonfire of the Vanities*) Wolfe in his predictably glib presentation to the American Library Association's 1990 Annual Conference, where its invocation, in his rant against the follies of the Left, met with knowing nods of approval. The uncritical response to the invited keynote speaker's diatribe ominously suggests that his post-historical perspective resonated with the prevailing consciousness of the library mainstream. We are thus led to ask: are libraries at the end of history?

Before this perspective becomes fully incorporated into the *Weltanschauung* of American librarianship as part of the consensus on the social context of our profession, let us pause to examine this new philosophical contribution and its organic connection with our profession's other background ideas.

Fukuyama's thesis, for those who missed its debut, is that "the U.S. [has created] a truly universal consumer culture, both the symbol and the underpinning of what followers of Hegel have termed the universal homogeneous State." The essence of this ultimate State, in Fukuyama's felicitous formulation, consists in combining "liberal democracy in the political sphere with easy access to VCRs and stereos in the economic sphere." With this development History realizes its *telos* (comes to an end) in a global consensus that the American way of life is the "final form" of society.<sup>2</sup>

If this sounds to you more like Dr. Pangloss than Hegel you are not alone. The vulgarization of Hegel's philosophy of history ("a dialectical process with a beginning, a middle and an end"(!)) in-

volved in Fukuyama's banal argument, did not, of course, go unremarked upon in the scholarly community, even though his mentor, well-known conservative philosopher Allan Bloom praised Fukuyama's work, with partisan recklessness, as both "bold and brilliant". If, despite Bloom, we can safely discount Fukuyama (the former deputy director of the State Department's policy planning staff) as a Hegel scholar or as a serious political philosopher, we should not be tempted to dismiss his work as merely a media-created intellectual fad, already half forgotten, or as a bad philosophical joke. On the one hand it is important to recognize the broader significance of Fukuyama, as an "insider" of the policy establishment, in articulating and giving respectable "philosophical" form to the prevailing mentality of the Reagan/Bush administrations: in fact, if an official State philosophy were needed, the "end of history" would be perfectly consonant with President Bush's recent declaration of a New World Order. On the other hand, we can profitably view Fukuyama's position as the continuation of more established and academically respectable currents.

Librarians who believe, as an article of faith, that we are living in a "post-industrial, information society" should be familiar with the views to which I refer. For the significant intellectual roots of the best-of-all-possible-worlds millennialism of the "end of history" are not in Hegel's nineteenth century at all, but in the dominant ideological trend in post-war American social theory, the trend which began with sociologist Daniel Bell's announcement of the "end of ideology" (which, in turn, begat the notion that we are living in a post-industrial/information society that has transcended all the problems of old-fashioned capitalism about which Marxists made such a fuss). The frequent occurrence of Daniel Bell's work<sup>3</sup> on the required reading lists of the core curricula of our library schools - supplying the prevailing sense of the social setting of our professional practice - rather than, say, the work of C. Wright Mills, suggests an affinity for this particular point of view (if not downright tendentiousness) in library education.

This line of thought, then, shaped profoundly by the assumptions of a bi-polar Cold War world, began by emphasizing the allegedly chiliastic irrationality of modern revolutionary ideologies and the necessarily dire consequences of the social movements they inspire. The idea of any alternative to the present transubstantiated form of

capitalism was supposed to be discredited in advance by the failures of the “secular religion” of Soviet-style Communism, which was thought to be the only end to which alternatives could in good faith aspire.

The evolution of a post-industrial/information society brought us then to the brink of post-history, but there still remained this one obstacle to ending the messy storm-and-stress of the historical epoch. That obstacle was not an internal one, but the continued existence, despite its “failures”, of Communism as a formidable opposing world power with hegemonic ambitions. History, therefore, marched on, if only in the form of the Cold War between the two contending forces, admittedly a rather dreary kind of war, made exciting mostly by the fact that the concomitant nuclear arms race threatened to result in the end, not just of History, but of life on Earth. Not least among its many peculiarities, this Cold War view of History is one in which the vast majority of the world’s peoples stand “outside History,” either as passive subjects or as pawns in the big game. The winner of the Great Contest, if the contestants didn’t blow each other up, would naturally claim to be the embodiment of the *Weltgeist* and assert eternal post-historical dominion. Such was the logic of the Cold War, which came, in the hands of intellectuals from Bell to Fukuyama, to be equated more and more completely with the logic of History itself.

The “end of history” thesis simply carries this reasoning into the post-Cold War era, the era not just of the failure but of the collapse of so-called Communism (once, not so long ago, thought to consist of unmoveable, unassailable totalitarian societies). Fukuyama maintains that now “ideology,” which he defines as *any* debate over (social/political/economic/cultural) “first principles”, is not only rendered irrelevant for the time being by historical developments (i.e. by the collapse of Communism) but has been overcome once and for all as we emerge on the other side of History (i.e. we won the Cold War and our “first principles” are the *only* “first principles”).

If Bell’s “end of ideology” leads logically to Fukuyama’s “end of history” the result, ironically, (to Bell’s dismay) is the *ultimate* ideology, freezing the history of thought by postulating the impossibility of all further considerations of first principles. In this virtual theodicy all roads now lead to Disneyworld. As we await the inevitable universalization of American principles (as if they are so

univocal), with Ronald MacDonald and Donald Duck, I imagine, in the vanguard, we can simply rest assured that under the reign of the multinationals and the watchful eye of the U.S. military all the remaining problems of mankind will be addressed in good (post-historical) time. The End of History. The New World Order.

In case you think this sounds suspiciously Utopian (a "bad" word for neoconservatives), Fukuyama has offered a caveat. There is a "down side" to the "end of history" and embracing it heartily requires a degree of stoicism. For, in a rather pessimistic turn of thought, he admits that when the whole globe is one big consumer society and the "end of ideology" is finally fully realized in the epoch of true post-history, with the end of struggle over "first principles," there will also be "neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of history." When we have properly limited our concerns to the on-going solution of "technical" problems and the satisfaction of increasingly sophisticated consumer demands, Fukuyama fears that our greatest problem will then be enduring an eternity of spiritual boredom. But one might imagine that the "caretaking" function mentioned above may alleviate the boredom, at least for post-historians, as it will undoubtedly include the demanding task of minding the "memory hole", the great oblivion machine so important to making sure history remains good and dead. Actually this machine is already at work. Initial attempts at reviewing history from a post-historical perspective have included the recent reassessment, on the occasion of its bicentennial, of the French Revolution which has now been "exposed" as, at best, a completely unnecessary and rather bloody affair, if not the virtual origin of all the evils which have come to fruition in twentieth century totalitarianism. Another example of the same oblivion machine at work would be the preparations for the celebration of the quinquennial of Columbus' "discovery" of America, preparations in which the Library of Congress is playing a major part, and in which we can discern strenuous efforts to drown out the voices of Native Americans who cry genocide at the all-for-the-best history of their own extermination.

But don't despair altogether for lack of positive ideals on the other side of history. Fukuyama has perhaps overlooked that we are already witnessing the creation of a new world religion to fill the spiritual vacuum left by "the God that failed," a secular faith to

bolster the spirit as we meander, sovereign consumers into eternal post-history. Call it the "religion of the Market." Librarians have already shown considerable interest in this new creed. Sermons appear regularly in the pages of *Library Journal* extolling the magic of the market, the virtue of vendors, the miracle of merchandising, the epiphany of the entrepreneur, the beatitude of the bottom line.

Librarians have not turned to this suddenly. Long ago many embraced the idea of the "end of ideology," maintaining that libraries not only should be (which is arguable) but, in fact, *are* "neutral" institutions, beyond ideology, and that politics, in the classic, "ideological" sense are irrelevant to our profession. This prepared the way for leaving the "invisible hand" of the market the task of finding optimal and efficient solutions to every question. We have already mentioned that librarians, *en masse*, swallowed whole the notion that we are already living in the promised land of the "information society," a new social formation brought into existence entirely by technological evolution, in particular by the development of modern computers and information technologies, a society which, it is claimed, is neither driven nor riven by the old contradictions of industrial society.

Even if this latter claim is true (which it isn't) the reality of this "information society" should be more sobering than its celebrants wish to admit. It represents, after all, the globalism of unaccountable transnational corporations; an international cultural sphere increasingly dominated by manipulative corporate interests; a value-system, with claims to universality, based on the apotheosis of consumerism; the ongoing "privatization" of all aspects of the public sphere and, at the same time, the technological invasion of the private sphere of the individual citizen; an information sector controlled more and more by fewer and fewer monopolistic firms; sharpening inequalities between information "haves" and "have nots"; the growing power of the mass media and of the corollary public relations industry, systematically creating mass civic disempowerment and public stupification while contributing to emptying the forms of political democracy of content and meaning.

Having effortlessly accepted and rationalized all this as the wave of the future, are the librarians of the "information society" ready now for the end of history? I feel that unfortunately U.S. librarianship is all too likely to adopt an essentially post-historical stance in the

coming period even as our own country (information society or not) faces industrial (and even post-industrial) stagnation; urban collapse; rural decline; a crime explosion; widespread homelessness; rampant drug addiction; cyclical economic dislocations; rising racism; widening economic inequality; industrial pollution on an ever vaster scale; a growing crisis of health care provision; escalating levels of unemployment; a deteriorating educational system; a high rate of illiteracy; the resurgence of obscurantism, fundamentalism, and the cthonic forces of fascism - despite this, or perhaps to avoid thinking of this, it is infinitely easier to imagine that in the global arena of History *we* have somehow been proven "right" because our Cold War opponent has been proven wrong. *Our* problems are not systemic, internally generated, endemic—*theirs* were. With this mindset, librarians can feel free to go on automatic pilot, riding the currents of technological innovation and market forces without regard to fundamental value-decisions.

We can thus expect a library culture, to the extent that it conforms to this society's self-image, which will be increasingly complacent, distant from any sense of democratic mission and which, indeed, will allow itself to become a passive adjunct of the profit-driven information industry. Against this tendency we can only hope that individual librarians, "radicals," will organize as best they can to demonstrate that societal alternatives have not been pre-empted or exhausted. The fall of Stalinism has after all solved nothing, not for the East and not for the West (and certainly not for the rest) but has only raised the question (finally outside the straightjacket of an either/or choice of ossified "systems") of how a democratic polity, in the fullest sense - politically, economically and (of special concern to librarians) culturally democratic - can enjoy the prosperity and abundance we have proved capable of producing, while remaining committed to international equity, world peace, social justice and respect for the ecosphere.

For librarians this means, above all, insisting that the question of "social responsibility" is at the heart of what it means to be a library professional, rather than a special concern of a minority. Our fundamental definition as professionals, after all, is that we profess something: let us profess against those who are ready to wax post-historical, that conflict over "first principles" is not an argument that has been settled by recent developments no matter how dramatic;

that the meaning of democracy and prosperity, of the “good life” has not been predetermined by the outcome of the Cold War; that social justice can not be taken for granted as an automatic by-product of our way of life and that these concerns are of the greatest relevance to librarians in orienting our work.

In post-historical perspective libraries will increasingly come to be viewed as mere instrumentalities, facilitators of an “information economy”. If, against this current, libraries are to continue to represent the dimension of human reason, emancipation possibility that they have represented historically, if the human significance of the library is not to be entirely effaced, renewed effort to create a space for radical reflection on our purposes, our vocation, our responsibility is required. This is the fundamental task of progressive librarianship.

#### Notes

1. Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History,” *National Interest*, Summer 1989.
2. Francis Fukuyama, “Are We at The End of History?,” *Fortune*, vol. 121, January 15, 1990, p.75.
3. See *End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, Glencoe IL: Freepress, 1962; and *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*, New York: Basic Books, 1973.

