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## **A CRITICAL LOOK AT FRANCIS FUKUYAMA'S CONCEPT OF *THYMOS***

### **Krytyczne spojrzenie na koncepcję *thymos* Francisa Fukuyamy**

**Słowa kluczowe:** Francis Fukuyama, *thymos*, koniec historii, filozofia polityczna, psychologia

**Key words:** Francis Fukuyama, *thymos*, the end of history, political philosophy, psychology

#### **Streszczenie**

Francis Fukuyama (ur. 1952) nie potrzebuje specjalnej prezentacji, ponieważ ten amerykański filozof polityczny zasłynął w świecie tezą o „końcu historii”. Autor omawia w artykule koncepcję *thymos* Fukuyamy, która została skrytykowana. Według autora, Fukuyama upraszcza rzeczywistość, kiedy z koncepcji *thymos* wywodzi przechodzenie państw do demokracji, co jest nieuzasadnione.

#### **Abstract**

Francis Fukuyama (born 1952) needs no special presentation; this American political philosopher became famous around the world with the thesis of “the end of history”. In this article the author discusses and criticizes the concept of Francis Fukuyama's *thymos*. According to the author, Fukuyama simplifies reality when, from the concept of *thymos*, he demonstrates the transition of states towards democracy, because this practice is unjustified.

The American political philosopher Francis Fukuyama (born 1952) became famous around the world with his thesis of “the end of history” (Fukuyama 1994)<sup>1</sup> (understood in the Hegelian sense), which states

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<sup>1</sup> Fukuyama has resembled many times the thesis “end of history” and is still a supporter of it, e.g. “Alexandre Kojève, the great Russian-French interpreter of Hegel, argued that history as such has ended in the year 1806 with the Battle of Jena-Auerstadt, when Napoleon defeated the Prussian monarchy and brought the principles of liberty and equality to Hegel's part of Europe. In his typically ironic and playful way, Kojève suggested that everything that had happened since 1806, including the sturm

that liberal democracy is somehow the “culmination” of world political systems, because it defeated the monarchy, fascism and communism, and humanity is basically unable to invent anything better than it.

The thesis about the “end of history” was criticized many times, which seems justified, because in today’s world powerful economic influences have China ruled by the communist party, Russia is strong through authoritarian rule, and in the Muslim world there are undemocratic regimes. With democracy may seem closer to its ideal – although everyone “has it on their lips”, but everyone also understands it “in their own way”.

In this paper we will criticize the Fukuyama’s concept of *thymos*, through which he, among others things, proves the thesis of “the end of history”. It seems that it is doubtful and not very well justified in at least in few points.

### Francis Fukuyama’s concept of *thymos*

To check whether the concept of “the end of history” is adequate, one needs to rely on some concept of man – says Fukuyama. Hegel writes that only man can conquer his animal instincts. In his opinion, it was the desire for recognition which led the first two fighters to fight for mutual “respect” of humanity. Consequently, when one of them gave up, a relationship of hegemony and submission arose. These considerations are close to the concept of Plato’s soul<sup>2</sup>, in which there

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and drang of the twentieth century with its great wars and revolutions, was simply a matter of backfilling. That is, the basic principles of modern government had been established by the time of the Battle of Jena; the task thereafter was not to find new principles and a higher political order but rather to implement them through larger and larger parts of the world. I believe that Kojève’s assertion still deserves to be taken seriously. The three components of a modern political order – a strong and capable state, the state’s subordination to a rule of law, and government accountability to all citizens – had all been established in one or another part of the world by the end of the eighteenth century” (Fukuyama 2011: 420).

<sup>2</sup> In his philosophy, Plato distinguishes between three parts of the soul: rational (*logos*), angry (*thymos*) and lustful (*eros*). The most important thing is the rational soul with which the angry soul can cooperate, but the angry soul can also connect with the lustful soul – if it is spoiled by bad education. According to Plato, the ideal state system corresponds to the structure of the human soul; reason corresponds to the ruling class (philosophers), bravery corresponds to the class of warriors, and lust corresponds to the class of farmers, craftsmen and merchants (Reale 1997: 291–298; Platon 2003).

are the parts: rational, lustful and brave – that is, *thymos*. *Thymos* is associated with the search for self-worth, self-esteem and ambition. Life inconsistent with self-esteem causes shame, and its proper assessment – pride (Fukuyama 1994: 205–206, 15, 18).

According to Hegel, history reached its end with the liberal (French) revolution. This revolution brought people recognition of their dignity, and this satisfied human needs. The move towards democracy results from *thymos* – the part of the soul that demands recognition (Ibidem: 18).

*Thymos* of Plato is the psychological habitat of Hegel's desire to recognition. Thanks to *thymos*, every person sees himself as a moral subject capable of making choices. This part of the soul is also the psychological habitat of all noble virtues such as altruism, idealism, morality, self-denial, courage and honour (Ibidem: 242–245).

According to Fukuyama, *thymos* and the desire for recognition has its place in economic motivations, in the interpretation of politics and historical changes, and even refers to the relationship between men and women. The desire for recognition in people caused the fall of communism in the USSR and Eastern Europe (Ibidem: 253–261).

The desire for recognition, however, also has its "dark side"; the desire to be recognized as someone better than others – this is megalothymia, which can be a tyrant's trait. Its opposite is isothymia – this desire to be recognized as equal to other people. Thanks to megalothymia and isothymia, we can understand the transition to modernity. In the modern world, however, people are driven by lust and reason, not *thymos*; whereas the greatest supporter of *thymos* was Nietzsche (Ibidem: 263–275).

A believer fulfills the need for recognition by demanding respect for his gods, and a nationalist requires recognition of his nation. These two forms are less rational than the universal recognition proposed by the liberal state, which is why religion, nationalism and local culture were treated as obstacles to liberal democracy. Democracy has a need to be recognized as equal (Fukuyama 1997: 15–27).

Rational liberal institutions depend on irrational *thymos*. The most effective capitalist societies achieved high economic growth because they had irrational work ethics (such as Calvinism or Puritanism) that originated from *thymos*. That is why today some form of *thymos* is needed to develop the economy. Economic and political liberalism is not

completely self-sufficient, but needs support from *thymos*. Irrational forms of *thymos* – such as religion, nationalism or pride of professionals – affect economic behavior in various ways (Ibidem: 42–58).

*Thymos* is also a habitat of identity policy (Fukuyama 2019: 37). Fukuyama states that the demand for recognition of identity is the main idea that connects much of what is currently happening in world politics (Ibidem: 16). Nationalism and religion are the two faces of identity policy in the 21st century (Ibidem: 98). Immigrants are very reluctant today because their presence in a country is usually a threat to identity policy (Ibidem: 117). Identity is today the leitmotif of many political phenomena, which is why we will not escape thinking about ourselves and our society in terms of identity. On the other hand, identity is neither permanent nor given to us by origin and can be used both to divide and to integrate people (Ibidem: 224).

To sum up, for Fukuyama, *thymos* is a feature of the human soul that is associated with a desire for recognition, self-esteem and ambition. Moving nations towards democracy is motivated by *thymos* – people want democracy because their dignity (*thymos*) is respected in this system. *Thymos* also usually motivates us to constructive actions, such as setting goals in life, having ethics at work and building a marriage. In many people, *thymos* is manifested by a strong attachment to religion or nationalism, but it is liberal democracy that provides the fullest, rational satisfaction of the desire for recognition, and is therefore the “end of history”. *Thymos* can take the form of megalothymia (the desire to be recognized as someone better than others) or isothymia (the desire to be recognized as equal to other people). In democracies, there is usually isothymia, and in earlier societies – aristocrats were characterized by megalothymia.

## **Józef Bańka’s concept of *thymos* and *phronesis***

Before proceeding to the criticism of the Fukuyama’s concept, it is worth examining a concept of similar problems proposed by the Polish philosopher Józef Bańka. Bańka (1934–2019) studied at Catholic University of Lublin and he was for many years the director of the Institute of Philosophy at the University of Silesia in Katowice. He created recentivism – a philosophy which claims that man’s life is important

directly to "now" (Lat. *Recens* – present), and should not be regarded as means of accomplishing something in the future. Obviously we can talk about the future without using categories that may or may not be true. We are able to describe a given phenomenon in all possible tenses, but it is true only in the present tense. Whatever is, is now (Bańka 1998: 9–10).

Bańka writes, that there are three such basic types of culture and three types of relationship of those principles:

– diathymic culture – sensual in its very essence, determined by *thymos*;

– diaphronic culture – based on the intellectual value of *phronesis*;

– euthyphronic culture – which represents harmony and synthesis of the two previous ones (Bańka 1998: 17; Bańka 1986; 1987; 1991).

The constructional principle of diathymic culture is trust in sensual reality as the only real one. *Thymos* is what we see and hear, what is meaningful for our sensory perception and inner feelings. The sensual culture penetrates all kinds of art, religions, and philosophies, and constitutes the basis for the civilization of instinct and physical compulsion. The next is the system of diaphronic culture that is rooted in the principle of supersensual, logical cognition in the sphere of *phronesis*. It is a rational culture that penetrates all kinds of scientific, philosophical, and juridical research, and becomes the foundation of all civilization based on economical organization and economical compulsion. Lastly, the euthyphronic culture forms a specific synthesis of both principles, *thymos* and *phronesis*; consequently, the image of existence of the human community is constructed on the harmony of these values. Civilization rooted in this harmony is based on moral ethos and education, and expresses the idea that true reality is partly sensual, partly rational – that its nature is both emotional and rational. Assessing the synthesis of opposite values is extremely difficult, because there were few, short-lived periods where euthyphronic culture was dominant in the history of mankind (Bańka 1998: 17).

In summary, Bańka understands *thymos* like Fukuyama – as a sphere of emotions and motivation. However, unlike the American scholar, he writes that the harmony of *thymos* and *phronesis* is the highest goal of man and civilization. Nevertheless, this concept is not completely different from Fukuyama's, because although the American

does not write directly about *phronesis*, his theory that modern times direct people's desire for recognition (*thymos*) implies that *thymos* must be connected with *phronesis* (i.e. contemporary world of technical civilization). However, it was the Polish scholar who first clearly emphasized the need for unity between the sphere of *thymos* (emotions) and *phronesis* (reason).

Another part of Bańka's philosophy is euthyphronics (philosophy of pure-minded man) (*euthyphron* – pure, naive). The Polish philosopher writes that *thymos* signifies the emotional components of man's life referring to the peripheries of an event; *phronesis* is defined as the rational components related to an event itself. *Thymos* marks "soft values": ethical, aesthetic, and emotional ones. *Phronesis* indicates the sphere of "hard values", rational ones susceptible to computerization and calculation. Consequently, euthyphronics deals with the problem of discord between *phronesis* of being of astute man (lie-man) and duty of the *thymos* sphere of pure-minded man. The tension between *phronesis*, or values actualized in reality, and *thymos*, or values emitted by intuition, signifies the contradiction between the pure-mindedness of values and the non-pure-mindedness of life. Each value is characterized by a moment of pure-mindedness or readiness of its apostle to act accordingly. Good as a value for itself is a means of communication (that is how we can translate the Latin: *bonum est sui diffusivum*), so when it is not transmitted, it cannot be seen as "good". Otherwise, the essence of *phronesis* is characterized by indifference toward values, so man is obliged to introduce those values into the world dominated by the pragmatic sphere of *phronesis* (Ibidem: 42).

Summing up, in euthyphronics, Bańka emphasizes that there is a conflict between the sphere of *thymos* and the sphere of *phronesis*, i.e. between emotional and rational values, but Fukuyama does not emphasize it. Therefore, it is certainly important to see the conflict between rational civilization and the emotional nature of man; for example, many people feel lost in the world of modern technology.

## Criticism from socio-economic point of view

My basic objection against Fukuyama's concept of *thymos* is that first he presents *thymos* as a key part of the human soul, and then

proves that *thymos* plays a central role in the transformation of societies and civilizations towards democracy. In my opinion, such a procedure is a great simplification, and in addition it is unjustified. One can agree with Fukuyama and Plato that *thymos* is part of the soul of man, which expresses the quest for self-esteem. However, the birth of modern liberal democracy has been accompanied by many social phenomena and changes, and it is unlikely that all of them can be reduced to *thymos*. The prime element responsible for the development of democracy is economic growth (that is, people getting rich), which began with the first industrial revolution, then – raising the level of education in societies and in general – political awareness. Both these factors (economic growth and education) developed from a variety of cultural, technical and social reasons, which is why they cannot all be derived from the tendencies in the human soul alone.

The desire for recognition (a significant part of *thymos*) is a desire that only began to manifest strongly among people somewhere during the nineteenth century, and in particular in the twentieth century. Earlier, in antiquity and the Middle Ages – all masses of people lived in huge poverty, and moreover, the life of the average person was very short due to the small number of doctors and poor medical knowledge – and in such conditions it is difficult to say that there would be some high level of ambition and motivation among people. For centuries and even millennia – most people focused not on “life” but on “survival” – that is, on poor vegetation. It was only with the increase in the level of affluence of societies (from the 19th century) – that people (having generally met their basic living needs) – could then begin to educate, study and to formulate new laws of freedom, equality and democracy. Therefore, it cannot be said that a worker working on the construction of the pyramid in ancient Egypt or a peasant in medieval Russia had the same level of *thymos* as a modern German or American. Rather, it is that the features of man, which Fukuyama understands by the term *thymos* – appeared relatively recently among people (they have been present somewhere around two centuries), and previously were common at a very low level. If people do not have education and lack a livelihood then their aspirations are also very small, or even non-existent.

To understand the motivations behind human behavior, I believe that instead of relying on the Fukuyama's concept of *thymos*, it is bet-



ter to refer to the concept of hierarchy of needs (the so-called “pyramid of needs”), which was created by the American psychologist Abraham Maslow (Zimbardo, Ruch 1998: 404; Maslow 1990). This theory was created over 70 years ago – in 1943, but its basic assumptions present human motivations rather well, at least in general terms and at least more accurately than Fukuyama. Maslow claims that human needs form a hierarchy – from the most basic (physiological, security) to the higher (love and belonging, respect and recognition), and finally, the highest need self-realization. According to Maslow, higher needs only appear in human life when lower needs have been met. So, as for centuries, lower human needs were frustrated (physiological – when people lived in poverty and insecurity, when there were constant wars), it is natural that in such situations most people did not have those higher needs (recognition and self-realization) that Fukuyama connects with *thymos*.

### **Criticism from psychological point of view**

One has to question whether Fukuyama’s use of the term “soul” for so many years is justified. This is, after all, a religious concept (Christianity speaks of the resurrection of the body and soul, whereas in Buddhism and Hinduism, the journey of souls refers to reincarnation). However, in modern psychology, biology and medicine – one does not talk about the soul, but about personality, mind or brain functions. It is also necessary to ask the same question of Fukuyama’s use of Plato’s concept of soul? Plato is undoubtedly a great authority in philosophy; his work was groundbreaking and laid the foundation for Western civilization (Reale 1997). This does not mean, however, that today we are to approach his theory uncritically. Nowadays, various sciences are already so developed and detailed in the description of human personality and behavior that presenting these matters in the light of Plato’s thoughts seems anachronistic.

The most well-known psychological concept of human personality is that of Freud (*Psychologia* 2000a: 53–54; Freud 2002). Freud wrote that the lowest sphere of human personality is the id, which is governed by the “principle of pleasure”: “No matter how, just to satisfy the drive”. Even a small child has an id, but in the course of human development a second sphere of personality quickly emerges – the ego, which is gov-



erned by the "principle of reality": "You must respect the requirements of the external environment". Even a small child understands that he cannot fulfill all his desires, but must take into account, for example, the recommendations of parents or teachers. Freud also wrote about the third sphere of personality – the superego, which is governed by the "principle of perfection": "You must be an angel". This sphere also contains our conscience and moral principles that society has instilled in us. According to Freud, human behavior results from the relationship between individual spheres of personality – sometimes id, sometimes ego and sometimes superego dominates.

In Freud's theory of personality, man is understood as an "egoist" who does not have many of the qualities that Fukuyama calls *thymos*. Is Freud's concept more aligned/suitable to reality than Fukuyama's *thymos* concept? It seems that it can be so. Undoubtedly, some people, such as representatives of business, politics or science are characterized by a high level of desire for recognition (*thymos*). However, most of us do not have such a high need for recognition to define it in the new sphere of personality. Many people are conformists who enjoy small pleasures and relationships with their family and friends – and such people do not have very high ambitions, strong motivations or eminent work ethics. Most of us fit into Freud's classification of "egoists", rather than people who fight for their dignity (*thymos*) and "timeless ideas".

The author of another personality theory is Hans Eysenck, who proposes the concept of three personality super-factors (*Psychologia* 2000b: 535–546; Eysenck 1970). Eysenck claims that human personality consists of three independent factors: psychoticism (i.e. aggressiveness, impulsiveness, lack of empathy, creativity, etc.), extraversion (i.e. sociability, activity, assertiveness, seeking sensations, etc.) and neuroticism (i.e. fearfulness, depression, low self-esteem, etc.). Human behavior depends on the level of severity of each of these personality factors. This theory does not talk about the desire to be recognized (*thymos*) as a key personality feature. It follows that Eysenck did not see the need to describe the personality structure through this category. Eysenck was inclined to believe that the three personality factors are based on human biology. On the other hand, the desire for recognition (*thymos*) – as presented by Fukuyama – can be said to be more of a social need for a human being, which, to a greater or lesser extent, is shaped in us

through interpersonal relations, i.e. it is a more certain secondary need and not primary like Eysenck's three personality factors.

In any case, no matter what concept we adopt, it seems that it is impossible to derive from any such theory (or even less from the conception of Plato's soul) the principles and laws governing changes in societies and civilizations. Civilizations and societies are completely different entities than the human psyche, therefore their origin, development and transformation are subject to completely different principles than those we see in the behavior of a particular person.

The German philosopher Oswald Spengler made a similar error to Fukuyama at the beginning of the 20th century (Spengler 2001). He claimed that great cultures (such as Greek, Western, Chinese or Indian) are "biological organisms" that are subject to the laws of biology: that is, they are born, flourish, mature, age and die. However, Spengler was rightly criticized for using a biological approach to study great cultures, a practice which is unjustified. Civilizations can be destroyed by barbarians (as they used to be), i.e. death, but also in modern great civilizations such as Western or Chinese – they are not expected to be destroyed. It is true that societies and civilizations are struggling with many serious problems (such as pandemics, immigration or terrorism), but they are also able to constantly adapt to new events, evolve, change, and therefore there is no indication that they should be condemned today to "inevitable death".

Therefore, in my opinion, Fukuyama unreasonably uses the "transition" from Plato's concept of the soul (*thymos*) to interpret modern society in its light. There are, at most, distant analogies between the soul or personality of a person and changes in society or civilization. More precisely, only metaphors can be used in this way, which is why this is not the scientific explanation that is expected from philosophers and representatives of social sciences.

## Conclusions

The final conclusion of this article is therefore as follows. It is unreasonable to combine *thymos* with the development of democracy, because in this way Fukuyama mixed the psychological order (building the human mind or soul) with the social order (moving countries towards democracy). There is a whole separate science – sociology (Giddens 2005)

– that deals with society and it is separate from both psychology and political philosophy. Of course, various scientific disciplines often discuss the same issues, but, as Fukuyama does, one cannot prove purely socio-political issues from purely psychological issues. In this case, you can only use a metaphor, which is by no means a scientific method.

In the description of modern world from the point of view of political sciences – instead of the concept of “the end of history” led by the development of *thymos* – I prefer Samuel Huntington's concept of “clash of civilizations” (Huntington 2002), which says that after the fall of communism, the world today is divided into several major civilizations, and international politics is based on the relationship (consent or conflict) between them.

This does not mean that I consider Fukuyama's works worthless. This author wrote two extensive books, *The Origins of Political Order. From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (Fukuyama 2011) and *Political Order and Political Decay. From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* (Fukuyama 2014), in which he presents the development of political institutions around the world from the earliest to modern times. The axis of these books is an analysis of the development of the state, the rule of law and political responsibility (democracy). Both of these books significantly enrich the readers' knowledge of issues from the philosophy of politics, political science and history, so are important reading for those interested in these issues. More importantly, in neither of these books does Fukuyama use the concept of *thymos* and the works are written in accordance with the methodology of reliable research in social sciences, including history and philosophy.

I consider Fukuyama's concept of *thymos* to be the weakest of his views. However, this does not change the fact that thanks to the great popularity of its author – it pleases many people around the world. However, as has already been said, connecting the Platonic part of the soul – *thymos* – with modern democracy can be at most a metaphor, so it is literary and is not a deep understanding of socio-political changes.

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