

COMMENT

"I can't live in the past": this is one of the apparently meaningless clichés that reveals so much about the way we look at ourselves. Of course, it would take a time machine to enable us to live in the past and even then it would be someone else's past and not our own. What we really mean by that and similar expressions is simply that we do not wish to think about the things that have actually happened—to us and to others—because it is infinitely more pleasant to live in the future, when just about anything could happen. It is strange, after all, how words like "past" and "old" have become terms of reproach, while "new" and "up-to-date" are synonyms for good. It is always hard to explain to Latin students that *studere rebus novis*—pursue new things—does not mean "make useful innovations" but rather, "plot damnable rebellion." Popular music provides the best comment on our attitude: while "Tomorrow" was the optimistic showstopper in *Annie*, songwriters like Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder used "yesterday" to sum up all the unhappiness and futility of their existence: "I believe in yesterday"—it has a tragic ring, even in the mouth of a cynical old roué like Sinatra.

This resentment of the past is something fairly new in the world. It is bound up with our being modern—a state we have been enjoying for three centuries. The comforting thing about being modern is that one is able to live in the future, without the least regard for all those previous generations of moderns, who are cheerfully consigned to the dustbin of history. Of course, it was not always so. Once upon a time most men took it for granted that all the best things—the stuff that made life worth living—were an inheritance from their ancestors, a rich accumulated legacy from the past. The future, so they thought, was a delusion, an infinity of disappointed hopes. And the present was but a mere hypothesis, the imaginary equator between the unreal future and the solid past. If a line were to be drawn, it was between the past, which was continually being realized in the present, and the always-receding horizon of the future. Even in the last century such people may have been in the majority. The country gentlemen who listened to Burke (or at least read him: no one actually seems to have listened to him), they knew that the future was very likely to be worse than the past. Metternich, in his own way an arch-conservative, was so resistant to change that he disliked having to write the date of a new year.

There are few like Metternich around today. *Conservative* now seems to mean progressive or even modernist. The past is now virtually a closed book, the refuge of historical novelists and down-at-heels academics. It elicits all the interest of a deceased millionaire after the will has been read. Everywhere we look the symbols of former ages, our concrete links with the past, are disappearing. In one generation the face of our greatest city has been changed beyond recognition. Buildings that New Yorkers once (with New York modesty) acclaimed



as masterpieces are casually turned over to the wrecking ball. Mark Twain, that greatest of American parvenu intellectuals, used to say that most cities in Europe needed a good fire. Such sentiments are apparently being carried out, albeit with greater caution, in New York. An occasional disaster at the right time and place can provide the opportunity for a great building project, as on the Athenian Acropolis. But the people of Athens did not, after a generation or two, raze the Parthenon to make way for a more up-to-date temple, much less an expressway to Thebes.

It is not just in architecture that we display our rage against the past. Even in our families—the bastions of conservative impulses—we are losing all sense of continuity with what has gone before. Rare is the son who follows his father's vocation or runs the family business: getting ahead is now what's important. Our children grow up with so little idea of the past that it is easy for them to think the world was created only yesterday, that it is a place where things can have whatever meaning we choose to give them. They are like the savages who might use a chalice for a chamber pot or scratch in the bean-patch with an imperial scepter. Homes—once the sacred repository of family tradition—are now what the realtor arranges for us to move into every three years, and grandparents—if they are known at all—are only people to "reach out and touch" by telephone. The hero of Peter De Vries's *Madder Music* reflects on the fact that his second wife had never met his father and that he had never met her mother; "Christ," he exclaims, "what was the country coming to."

We hear so much, these days, of the sense of fragmentation and alienation which has overtaken modern life, but the problem always seems to be posed horizontally: the loneliness of the 200-odd million individuals now alive in the U.S. Perhaps we are more disturbed by a vertical alienation: the dissociation from our ancestors, an affliction that always seems to be passed down—like a family curse—to subsequent generations.

Modernity requires that everything, especially works of the mind and of the imagination, be subject to fashion. For one

reason or another, there are no more classics, no sets of books and principles that connect us—not just with each other—but with our civilized ancestors. The results of our intellectual fragmentation are far too serious to be summed up by glib superficialities like “two cultures.” In fact, there is *no* central humane culture binding the student of the *Vedas* to the interpreter of Baudelaire. The trouble does not begin with specialization or even with the failure of our public schools. It is the rejection of tradition and contempt for the past that is at work. What every specialist scholar needs—if he wants to make his work serve anything beyond self-promotion—is an integrated vision of the past. Without some philosophical tradition, some common language of discourse, his work must remain an isolated fragment. This isolation is not limited to academic monographs; it extends to nearly every book on politics, ethics, psychology, and social life published in the last 50 years. Few, if any, are likely to be read 10 years after their date of publication. Why? The most obvious answer is that, whatever their individual merits, they are fragments: like unrelated bits and pieces of a puzzle which, if it ever is put together, turns out to be a Jackson Pollack painting without form or purpose.

No individual, given this sort of isolation can work out a coherent view of even a part of life. It takes order, system, or at least a set of common prejudices—in a word, tradition. Without it, his insights go unnoticed or, at best, land him a guest shot on a television show. Wisdom, usable wisdom, requires the experience of more than one generation. As it is, one fashion succeeds another, and sects blossom and fade with the regularity of the seasons: existentialists, behaviorists, Freudians, libertarians, etc., etc. Between them are no common principles or accepted methods; they share neither a mutually intelligible vocabulary nor even a commitment to a universally accepted logic. Under such circumstances, it is no wonder that intellectuals have so little influence, even on other intellectuals.

Really useful systems—like those of Plato and Aristotle (or even of Darwin and Mendel)—are never finished. Each generation stands upon the shoulders of its ancestors. Even minor thinkers can make themselves useful by perfecting the system, while the occasional genius, an Aquinas or a Plotinus, can change the course of intellectual history. But for many moderns, all that building, all those living traditions have—outside of science—perished, and philosophy has been smashed into a thousand bright ideas. Intellectual isolation becomes as complete as social alienation. It is more than just an affair of the mind. The past is our world—or rather our world is the past. It cannot escape being diminished by this fragmentation.

—Thomas Fleming

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THE AMERICAN PROSCENIUM

The Cancer of Fanaticism

Over several months, the world's public opinion has conveyed the impression that the American government's Middle East policy concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict has been tilting markedly toward the Arab side. Wisdom and rectitude of such a bias notwithstanding, both the world and America soon had an opportunity to hear the thundering explosion of Arab/Islamic gratitude.

Still, those who call for evenhandedness in the conduct of our affairs in that part of the world continue to maintain that the bestial, cold-blooded murder of defenseless Americans in their offices cannot and should not be seen as an indictment of a nation, a religion, a culture. But is that true? Perhaps some delving into the Christian European historical experience could contribute something to America's moral musings and verdicts. For 12 centuries, there has existed in Europe a deeply ingrained apprehension about everything Islamic; it is buried in the murkiest layers of European folklore. In the vast expanses from the Urals to Gibraltar, “heathen” was synonymous with “Moslem.” Words like “Saracens,” “Tartars,” “Turks” stood for unforgivable savagery. Our entire concept of Western civilization, after centuries of evolution, rejects the idea of a collective evil determining a racial group, national entity, or social community, but this concept grew out of the fundamental belief in a God of justice, love, and mercy who

imbues humans with a free will and a respect for otherness. The Islamic ethos went in a different direction. Arab nations and states, perpetually involved in fratricidal wars, seem to be guided by only one principle: the imperative to subjugate anything that's different from the values prescribed by their own tribal selves. We have come to see fanaticism as evil; they see it as a virtue and the merciless eradication of any independent otherness as their sacrosanct mission. This is exactly what constitutes Israel's predicament; it is well known to every child in Jerusalem, but it is insouciantly ignored by ideologists of the Bechtel school of political theory. The bombing of a diplomatic compound and the atrocious slaying of American typists in Lebanon may provide some illumination in the editorial offices of New York and in the State Department's conference rooms in D.C. □

