

AGAINST NOSTALGIA

April 23, 2024

Do you want your teddy bear? If you are on the Right, you probably do. All around your enemies celebrate their endless triumphs over you. They steal your wealth, trans your children, and scream for your death. You can do nothing, because they control all the levers of power, and lust to use them violently against you. The sky darkens. You tell yourself that tomorrow might be better, but you do not see how. The natural reaction of most is to turn inward—to hug that worn stuffed animal and try to sleep. And, as you drift off, to reflect on how good it used to be, with an inchoate hope that someday we can return to those sweet days, of 1985, or 1955, or 1925. You are nostalgic!

What, exactly, is nostalgia? At the highest level of abstraction, nostalgia is simply the belief that the past was better. However, we should distinguish between two sub-types. Emotional nostalgia is a mix of feelings, made up of sweet and enjoyable memories combined with some sadness. It is not merely remembering the past; it is looking to the good that happened in the past, with a wistful feeling, but with a recognition that “you can’t go back.” Political nostalgia is a somewhat different thing. It is taking the emotion of nostalgia and translating it to a set of political desires, concluding that the future should be made more, or completely, like the past, and that one’s frame of action should be structured to make this possible. Political nostalgia is not appreciation of, or even love for, the past, but rather a belief that the past can be restored and re-lived. It is political nostalgia on which we are focusing today.

Not once in the history of mankind has nostalgia ever accomplished anything, except to lull those who suffer under its spell to a pleasant sleep. Marx was wrong that religion is the opiate of the people, but nostalgia is certainly the opiate of the Right. I can attest to this from personal experience. Many years ago, in the early 1990s, I involved myself in what was then optimistically called the “conservative movement.” For example, I attended events hosted in Mecosta, Michigan, at the home of Russell Kirk, talking of the “permanent things” and “prudence,” and structuring practical politics around those desires, believing all this would soon be made real. When I look back, I see that nostalgia suffused everything we did. We thought we were forging the future, but

we were musing about pleasing irrelevancies as our enemies, gripped by a vision of the future in which nostalgia was wholly absent, stole a march, many marches, on us. And the result has been that nothing we wanted came to pass, and everything we did not want was shoved down our throats.

Total failure will always be the final state of political action centered around nostalgia. The arrow of history points in no particular direction, but it never points backward. Attempts to recapture the past inevitably result in flailing, self-destructive political action, as we attempt to force reality into a mold that was long ago broken. At best, the result is a baroque, calcified structure that soon collapses of its incoherencies, leaving everyone worse off than before. As L. P. Hartley famously said, the past is a foreign country, they do things differently there. And they always will. All that is possible is to create a new thing for a new time. We can never recreate the past.

Yet we know we must create something, or cease to exist as a civilization, because our civilization is failing before our eyes. The fundamental resulting political problem is that history teaches, with zero exceptions, that civilizational renewal, or (more likely) the creation of a new civilization from the ashes of the old, can only come through and after suffering, the more extreme the greater the renewal needed. Those on the Right, being based in reality, understand this truth. Nonetheless, most of our strategic thinking ignores it or implicitly supposes a *deus ex machina* which will allow us to avoid it. Nostalgia is the primary mechanism of this deliberate obfuscation; it permits us to believe in "RetVrn!" as a self-executing future, requiring neither effort nor risk, but rather a warm passivity, the feeling that the world will re-order itself to what was good while we pay no present price. And therefore nostalgia cripples us in the face of our enemies, who snicker as they watch us read and minutely discuss works such as Roger Scruton's *Conservatism: An Invitation to the Great Tradition*, which is no doubt an aesthetically pleasing work, but one of negative social and political value, because it oozes and encourages nostalgia. Last I checked, you could buy it used for \$1.99 on Amazon. For that low, low price, you too can be a beautiful loser.

Political nostalgia, no doubt because it is a temptation of the Devil and therefore protean, manifests itself in different forms depending on the personality and beliefs of individuals. Scrutonism is merely one of

those. For those of a certain age, it manifests as zombie Reaganism. If only the Gipper were here! Well, there is always Ted Cruz. He will catch fire any day! For those more focused on history, it manifests as a love for the Articles of Confederation, or seeking the repeal of the 14th, or 17th, or 19th Amendments, or a desire for integralism. For those who dislike the minutiae of politics, it emerges as part of the grilling impulse, with an overlay of the 1950s suburban good life—cocktails at 5:00, and then some nice television for the whole family, never mind that the shows you watch are filled with explicit violent hatred for you and yours, and that your ten-year-old son was raped earlier today by his proudly homosexual teacher down at the local government school. Variations on nostalgia are as endless as the personalities of men and women, but each and every one is self-destructive.

If pressed, most on the Right will admit that nostalgia is and has been tremendously destructive to Right goals, which sum up to simply seeking the organic flourishing of mankind. Yet, nonetheless, at this very moment, nostalgia is still the dominant characteristic of most on the Right, because it is the easy, default path. After all, bathing in nostalgia is cost-free in this era of relentless persecution of anyone on the effective Right, because our enemies encourage it, knowing it fruitlessly dissipates our energies and can never cause them any harm or hamper them in any way. Instead of taking the easy path, however, we should remember that wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and choose to instead take the narrow path of struggle and sacrifice, not only in our spiritual lives, but in our political lives.

Of what use, then, is the past? It used to be a commonplace, before the Enlightenment sold us the myths of eternal change and rebellion against the past, that much wisdom could be found in history, and distilled to use in the present. Our aim, however, is to build a new, organic system, and that will flow primarily from the concrete circumstances of the age, not from abstractions or theory, even if grounded in past events. When in doubt, we should not privilege the past, in and of itself, when considering the future. We should instead extract what we can from the past, clear-eyed, without nostalgia.

This is, by great good chance, actually pretty easy for the Right. One unheralded advantage the Right has over the modern Left is that the latter knows no history, and if by chance they stumble across some in

something called a “book,” they reject it and its lessons as retrograde, with no relevance to their abstractly-constructed shining utopia to come. But for us, keenly aware of history, not only can the past guide strategic and tactical action, very helpful in winning the current existential conflict to control the future, but it will help us organize the future dispensation. Elements of the past will inevitably recur in, and be central pillars of, that dispensation, because they are part of human nature, and therefore part of every successful human society. We can recognize and use this without falling into nostalgia.

For example, rigid and very different sex roles for men and women are both inevitable and necessary. They will not, whatever the nostalgists say, be exactly the same as past roles. Thus, the “tradwife” is both largely a fiction and, to the extent real, something that emerged under very different circumstances, which will never arise exactly the same again, so any call for more tradwives is always a nostalgic attempt to create something artificial. But it is easy to predict, and to say that it is necessary, in any successful reality-based future society as in all successful past societies, that women will occupy primarily private-facing, family-focused roles, and will not usually be employed outside the home, nor compete directly with men outside the home, while men will occupy public-facing roles in both employment and politics. Or, to take another example, the failure of democracy, for the umpteenth time in human history, should guide and shape our future thinking about the proper political role of the common people, not make us reflexively demand the opposite because “things were better without universal suffrage.”

One matter is certain, however—in the future, nobody at all will be nostalgic for unlimited emancipation and forced equality, the twin doctrines of the so-called Enlightenment which have brought the West, and therefore the world, low. Neither emancipation nor equality featured before the Enlightenment, nor will they feature after the Enlightenment, except as a mere curiosity, viewed with the same detachment as the Plague of Justinian or mesmerism. Yet contra the nostalgists, many of the changes which came to full flower during the brief period of Enlightenment ideological dominance are here to stay. Notably this includes the scientific advancements by Europeans which have created the entirety of the modern technologically-advanced world (although those achievements had no connection whatsoever to the dying creed

of the Enlightenment). And, in fact, scientific advancement is very likely to accelerate greatly, when released from the shackles placed on it by the Left in recent decades. You cannot force primitivism. By definition this means the future will not be like the past, and technology, to be sure, carries its own risks and costs. But I expect that if we can thread the needle to a bright, if very different future, that nostalgia will once again be relegated to a niche taste. At least, that should be our goal.

We cannot go back; the way is shut. It is easy to see why nostalgia is attractive, and why many today fall into its warm embrace. The past, even in living memory, was so much better than today on every axis. It seems obvious that if one finds oneself far down the wrong path, beset by terrors, the logical response is to reverse course. But nostalgia enervates, it prevents action, it fosters passivism that leads to destruction. There is no return; all that can be done is first destroy our enemies utterly, and then build a new thing, founded both on the wisdom of the past and the needs, and limitations, of the present.