
History, the Past, and the Inner Life

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A character in Michael Crichton's scientific mystery novel *Timeline* employs the term "temporal provincials" to describe people who believe only the present time matters. In the view of these people, he says, the past has no meaning, studying history is as pointless as learning Morse Code or how to drive a horse-drawn wagon. They don't understand that everything we know and do today is derived from events and discoveries of the near and distant past.

Historical consciousness is to civilized society what memory is to individual identity.

The distinguished historian Wilfred McClay has brilliantly exposed the error in such thinking. Writing in *A Student's Guide to U.S. History*, Dr. McClay said: "We do history even when it is not particularly useful, simply because human beings are by their nature, remembering creatures. . . . History is merely the intensifying and systematizing of these basic human attributes." Historical consciousness is to civilized society what memory is to individual identity. In *Reason Is Common Sense* George Santayana wrote words that have been repeated hundreds of times: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Unfortunately, our world today is full of people with a know-nothing attitude toward the past. Hence our governments and our leaders fail to comprehend that we face the danger of reliving past mistakes.

Michael Crichton's novel contains additional important comments on the importance of the past. A character observes that many of the understandings and routines of daily life were de-

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cided “hundreds of years ago, five hundred years, a thousand years,” adding that a person “is sitting on top of a mountain that is the past . . . the invisible rule of the past, which decides nearly everything, in life, goes unquestioned For just as the present is ruled by the past, so is the future.”

In the contemporary world it is not well understood that a technologically advanced society also can be a barbarous society. The modern world is replete with examples of this. Germany in the 1930s had the most sophisticated educational and industrial system on the continent, but at the same time it adopted a savage political system and committed atrocities on a scale that no European contemplated. And Iraq was not a backward country; its population included many highly intelligent people who had been exposed to modern education. Again, this country’s technically trained people made poison gas and worked on other methods of mass destruction. The gas was used on opponents of the regime. Even in non-totalitarian societies one discovers barbarous behavior in the midst of advanced technology.

One has only to look at the “entertainment” industry media in the United States. The technology of the electronic media is unparalleled in the world, but much of the comment is hostile to the values of our inherited civilization. The tide of pornography is rising, flooding the internet, exposing the average user to the most vile images.

A considerable part of the American academic world is given over to destruction of a civilized order in the United States. Dr. McClay has pointed out that an increasing number of academic historians strive to “demonstrate that all our inherited institutions, beliefs, conventions, and normative values are arbitrary—social construction in the service of power—and therefore without legitimacy or authority.” We see this process at work in the effort to de-legitimize the institution of marriage established as a religiously ordained estate between a man and a woman. Judicial validation of “civil unions” between homosexuals undermines the most fundamental institution of our society, monogamous marriage. It opens the door to polygamy and every sort of perverted sexual activity, including bestiality.

Historians who don’t have an ideological agenda are respectful of the past. Such an historian was Sir Leonard Woolley, who excavated Ur from 1922 to 1934. Writing in *Digging Up The Past*

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(1930), Sir Leonard said, “We cannot divorce ourselves from the past; we are always conscious of precedents, not least when we flout them, and we let experience shape our views and actions; this is so much the case that where tradition is absent or crystallizes into unreasoned convention progress stops. But the past to which we appeal must in a sense be our own, precedents set by men, conditioned much as we are, the experiences of races or individuals morally akin to us; its value is proportionate to the degree of continuity by which we are linked to it.”

In this era in which leftist social doctrines prevail, it isn’t surprising that great emphasis is placed on multiculturalism in schools and colleges. The aim in promoting multiculturalism is to downgrade or disavow the culture of our nation and civilization. In many educational institutions, for instance, students are launched into the culture of India before they study the culture of the United States and the Western world. This is a deliberate process designed to underscore the point that our American and Western history and values do not have primacy. Multiculturalism leaves those exposed to it morally disoriented and rootless. Students are supposed to learn that there is nothing special about our traditions; no one is to regard them as having authority in life. A mishmash of culture is ladled out so that young people are without authoritative guidance in adopting values. Those who want to downgrade our traditions and values have what the writer Joan Didion has referred to as “preferred narratives.” These narratives have as their central theme that the United States has an oppressive society and has been that way from the start. They regard the Constitution of the United States as a conspiracy against the powerless. They choose to depict minorities as victims regardless of the particular circumstances.

If I may refer once more to Michael Crichton’s novel, he has a character say that “history is the most powerful intellectual tool society possesses The purpose is to explain the present, to say why the world around us is the way it is. History tells us what is important in our world, and how it came to be. . . .” “History,” the character adds, “is the power to define a whole society.”

Aided by historical discernment, good men and women must put their stamp on contemporary society and help to shape the order of the twenty-first century if their lives in this world are to be meaningful. We live amid great turbulence—social, economic

and cultural—and emptiness in our lives is a continuing threat. John le Carré, writing in *Our Game*, refers to such inner emptiness as “a chunk of nowhere.” P. D. James, the British novelist, has described this same condition in *Innocent Blood* as “the lost hinterland of the self.”

Much of our modern urban life is a wasteland shaped by rootlessness. In the Dark Ages, meaning the three centuries after the collapse of the Roman order, people did not live in the “nowhere” cited by le Carré. They may have lived in cities wrecked by Goths, Vandals, and Huns, but a new moral order, the Christian order, was emerging from the chaos with new strength in such institutions as monasticism. Today, except for isolated instances, there isn’t any sign of renewed moral order or way of life that brings purpose, inner strength and vision. Instead the traditional moral order continues to unravel as evidenced by the ongoing waves of divorce and the prevalence of illegitimacy in the inner cities and elsewhere.

We understand, well enough, that the story of the last century is the story of the uprooting of settled people, their dispossession, and their displacement from the land, the fragmentation of communities, and the imposition of rootless contemporary ways—even nihilist notions. This process has taken place—is taking place—virtually everywhere in the world. But we neglect consideration of the impact of this process on the human psyche; we fail to inquire into how much of the old psyche survives under adverse conditions or what new psyche is emerging.

In the decades since the end of World War II Americans have been moving off the farms and out of small towns into cities and suburban areas, losing their family ties and local associations, yielding many of the standards according to which they were reared, absorbed into urban communities in which they have only an economic place and often an uncertain one.

The uncertainty has been compounded by the massive shift of American manufacturing jobs to China by giant U.S. corporations and employment of Indians to do computer work originally performed by U.S. citizens. As people age in communities without community, loneliness and fear surely must affect them more and more. Many must feel that they are strangers in the places where they reside, places that exist within the contemporary whirl of change.

Overall, the effect of the modern transformation of society is to

de-mystify life, restrict the range of human interest to the living or to material phenomena, and to treat the past as irrelevant. This thrust of modern existence has resulted in the lowering of the emotional intensity of life, a denial of the spiritual realm, and a dismissal of the idea that past generations still speak to the living in some mysterious way. We are a world away from that of the Middle Ages, when human beings saw mystery close at hand and sought symbolic expression of it in their cathedrals. These structures continue to impress thoughtful moderns with the power of the mystery expressed in their design.

Now, in the technological age, we are losing a great part of the living patterns which existed in pre-technological times. Of course, one has to ask: Who cares? Millions of people today have lost contact with the way of life of even seventy years ago. The life of the early twentieth century may be as remote and unreal to them as the life of hundreds of years ago. What difference does it make to them? Are they impaired in any way as a result of the transformation of society? Have they any sense of loss?

Is this to be our fate in the future—a future of impaired individuals, an impaired society, an impaired civilization? Many commentators have suggested as much without reaching a comprehensive conclusion. A few years ago Elizabeth Hardwick, the novelist, remarked upon “the alienating complexity of every problem” that “bewilders and lacerates human relations in the family, in the streets, among the classes.” She added that the life of the young “is far more complicated and murky than the life of those older.”

Men and women reduced to a set of material needs and wants.

Our ancestors—even our very recent ones—lived in a world that was organic in character, where blood ties and centers of rooted life had meaning and centrality. Today, in the evolving technological bureaucratic world, the underlying, governing conception is of a society of unconnected parts. Modernity has been and is a process of de-sanctification, of dismissing the importance of bonds. It is a reductionist process that reduces man to a set of material needs and wants and economic roles and relationships, which either glorifies state determination of these roles and relationships or asserts that the great decisions of life will be made by the invisible hand of the market process, without consideration of civilized values.

The human imagination is a casualty of this process. Contem-

porary society tells us that we don't need the deep, enduring human attachments characteristic of society in earlier times, that the sundering of interpersonal relations has to be accepted as normal. To the extent that we accept that notion, we are prisoners of the beliefs of dominant intellectual elites in a small moment in time.

As we examine the world in which we live and have our being, in which we search for personal meaning, as well as in our studies and reflections on the world of the past, we desire to live as humanly as possible—aware of the possible reaches of the human spirit. In a way, fulfillment of this desire may be more difficult in the materialistic society of the West than in more oppressive societies. On a number of occasions, Pope John Paul II indicated his belief that this is so, warning that the consumer society represents an impediment for the spiritual man or woman. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn has indicated much the same thing, stressing that the spirit is strengthened through suffering in an oppressive society.

In the United States we can be thankful that we don't have an oppressive society with all its physical and psychological torments, but the rather extensive breakdown of the traditional order under the impact of technological change nevertheless poses a threat to the human spirit and makes difficult the attainment of the inner harmony that is the product of a more stable, traditional society. Hence the characteristic alienation, loneliness, and disorientation, the somewhat troubled existence in the midst of plenty and alleged progress.

Rapid pace of change poses a threat to the human spirit and to inner harmony.

The Western unity that prevailed to a considerable degree until recent times largely unraveled in the twentieth century, leaving many in a state of fear, confusion, and isolation. For all the material gains of this period in the United States, thoughtful Americans know it is very difficult to live truly human lives in this atomistic world.