



The Left, the Right, and the Wrong Side of History

It's always amusing when secularists speak of traditionalists being on the "wrong side of history." We heard this recently after the vote in North Carolina upholding marriage; liberals said that the state was on the wrong side of history.

Now, these people are circling around something that is absolutely true, and it's only charitable to help them understand exactly what it is. What they really mean is that traditionalists are on the wrong side of fashionable trends, and the polls on marriage certainly bear this out. But as G.K. Chesterton said, "A fallacy doesn't cease to be a fallacy because it becomes a fashion," and one fallacy secularists have fallen victim to is that they actually grasp history.



History isn't merely what has happened in the United States during the last century, which has certainly seen the seemingly inexorable advance of moral and intellectual decay — or, as some people like to call it, "progressivism" — through our institutions and social fabric. History isn't that same time period in the whole of the West or even the world; it is, rather, the story of Man from the very beginning of recorded time.

Now, history is invaluable because it actually is the record of a grand series of social experiments. Through it we can learn what works and what doesn't, what stood the test of time in the laboratory of life and hence is timeless, and what are merely old mistakes masquerading as new ideas. But as with science, we cannot learn from it if we, so to speak, lose our data. This is what some call forgetting history but actually is a failure to learn it in the first place. It also could be called progressive education.

There is a saying my mother used to repeat, "Life is the best teacher"; it can be because it is the schoolmarm of hard knocks. But it's the hard way to learn; it's the history we live in our own lives that teaches us what we could have learned via continual review of Man's (which includes our parents') social experiments. Life is what we have to fall back on when we refuse to learn from others' mistakes and instead have to make our own. And, just as with a child, each generation must learn life's lessons anew; this will happen through hard knocks, hard study, or not at all. If it's the last thing, that generation could usher in its civilization's degeneration, if not its last days.

The reality, though, is that very few people in any time or place learn history very well. This is where tradition steps into the breach. Enduring tradition is the distillation of history's lessons. It is the spirit people imbibe that is worth a thousand social experiments and frees them from needing a thousand hours of study, which, even if undertaken, wouldn't necessarily enable them to understand tradition in its entirety, anyway. For it is such a condensed distillation, with so much eluding the naked eye, that only the most nimble minds can grasp the logic behind even a decent portion of it. And because it is so hard to understand, because it is so misunderstood, is why it's always under attack in a time in which



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nebulous “change” is seen as the only needed constant.

Change, of course, can give one the illusion of progress (hence *progressivism*). This is true even if the change in question is actually regression — which is return to a previous state — because a person cannot know he is regressing if he knows nothing of previous states, otherwise known as ignorance of history. What comes to mind here is the fashion in which young people pierce and tattoo their bodies, sometimes to the point of grotesqueness. If they knew a bit more and thought for a moment, they might realize that it’s nothing new: Primitive pagan tribes did the same thing, defacing their bodies with piercings, scars, and other modifications. Of course, they used bones, wood, and other easily obtainable materials as opposed to metal studs and rings, but this is only a difference in technology. They were Stone Age in every sense; we’re just regressing to that mentality.

But a wise person sees beyond the fashions, knowing that they come and go. And he understands how fast they do go. He realizes that civilizations have a life mirroring a man’s: They’re born, they grow and mature, they peak and plateau, and then they decline and die. And it’s easy for someone basking in the peak’s glory to think it will last forever, just as it’s easy for a person to mistake a decline portending death for progress.

But history isn’t fooled like the foolish. The ancient Greeks birthed Western civilization but then died themselves; now we have modern Greeks, who 2,500 years later may be nearing their end. The Romans picked up where Hellenic civilization left off, honing the pagan ideal. Then Christianity was born, and the Romans would persecute members of this new faith, calling them “haters of humanity” (sound familiar?). And did these accusers ever think that this upstart religion would become the official one of the empire? It did, though. Rome then spread Christianity throughout North Africa, much of Europe, and the Middle East before the empire’s end came. What followed was that Roman decadence was replaced with medieval piety so profound that it helped Europeans withstand [the Islamic onslaught](#) that would start a few centuries later. And, in the late 11th century, after Islam had conquered two-thirds of the old Christian world, it would have been easy to consider this new faith the wave of the future; that is, until the West outpaced Dar al-Islam technologically, leaving it in the dust of deserts and fashions.

Then the “Enlightenment” came — thus named by the very modest men who birthed the movement — and Western relativism eventually became the order of the day. And now the latest enlightenment is labeled progressivism; although its name changes as often as its aims. And yet its adherents think that this movement, a 100-year-old tot of the times, is on the right side of history. It’s a fanciful idea regardless, but made even more so by the fact that the modern progressive agenda has led to plummeting birth rates; thus, Western peoples are not perpetuating themselves. And no matter how enlightened people consider their values, if they erase themselves, their values generally die with them.

This is especially true when their values are merely values and not virtues, for only Truth endures. After all, do you really think the next fashion trendsetters, be they Muslim, Chinese, or something other, will carry forth our politically correct Western fashions? Will they learn to repeat our mistakes any more than we learned not to repeat others’? Sure, they will have their stumbles, but they will probably be different old mistakes.

So the “Left,” for lack of a better term, has been winning the day in our day. Its minions are on the right side — of fashions. But history is a much slower, and more sober, judge.



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