

Princeton Prof: Why it's Dangerous to Overlook the Past

Not long ago, my colleague Daniel Lattier suggested that [a new logical fallacy](#) has been lurking around town. This fallacy, he wrote, could be labeled “*ad nostalgiam*.” A person commits this fallacy when she reflexively accuses someone of nostalgia for pointing out some particular thing was once better or superior.

Revered Princeton professor, theologian, and author, [J. Gresham Machen would agree](#). Like us, Machen lived in a time of heightened political turmoil and social upheaval. Americans and much of the world wrestled with new ideas and heavy-handed leaders which materialized in the 1920s and 30s.

And just as today, Machen experienced the condemnation of others when he looked to the past for knowledge:

“I know that there are people who tell us contemptuously that always there are croakers who look always to the past, croakers who think that the good old times are the best. But I for my part refuse to acquiesce in this relativism which refuses to take stock of the times in which we are living.”

Instead of caving to this criticism, Machen staunchly defended referencing the past in order to gain insight and future progress:

“It does seem to me that there can never be any true advance ... unless a man does pause occasionally, as on some mountain vantage ground, to try, at least, to evaluate the age in which he is living. And when I do that, I cannot for the life of me see how any man with even the slightest knowledge of

history can help recognizing the fact that we are living in a time of sad decadence...."

But as Machen went on to imply, those refusing to look at the past and make comparisons to the present are liable to be blinded by the popular political slogans of the day:

"When Mussolini makes war deliberately and openly upon democracy and freedom, and is much admired for doing so even in countries like ours; when an ignorant ruffian is dictator of Germany, until recently the most highly educated country in the world—when we contemplate these things I do not see how we can possibly help seeing that something is radically wrong. Just read the latest utterances of our own General Johnson, his cheap and vulgar abuse of a recent appointee of our President, the cheap tirades in which he develops his view that economics are bunk—and then compare that kind of thing with the state papers of a Jefferson or a Washington—and you will inevitably come to the conclusion that we are living in a time when decadence has set in on a gigantic scale."

One could argue that the refusal in Machen's day to look to the past and draw comparisons and lessons from it ushered in the travesties of the Second World War. Is our current tendency to do the same drawing us into a similar path?

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