

‘Get on the Right Side of History’: A Phrase G.K. Chesterton Would Have Understood

Sometimes, when reading G.K. Chesterton, one comes across a telling sentence buried in the middle of a very long paragraph. Here’s one from [What’s Wrong with the World](#): “The old tyrants invoked the past; the new tyrants will invoke the future.”

We’ve heard a good deal of talk in recent years about something called the “arc of progress,” which sometimes is translated as the “arc of history.” To be honest, I’m not entirely sure just what either arc is, but it surely suggests the inevitable unfolding of inevitable progress. It further suggests that those who oppose what progressives favor should cease their opposition and get out of the way of both progressives and progress.

And getting out of the way really is the order of the day, for those who see “arcs” in history are really engaging in a form of intellectual bullying. Another example of such bullying is [the call](#) to “get on the right side of history.” The message here is even clearer. It’s also more directly related to that still lingering line of Chesterton’s about tyrants and their use of the future.

A simple test is in order here. How often have you heard a proponent of same-sex marriage or single payer health care call on their opponents it to abandon the wrong side of history and get right with it? Quite a lot, I’d guess.

Now let’s ask the same question about, say, abortion or building a border wall. We may well be moving toward greater

restrictions on abortion and perhaps even a repeal of *Roe v Wade*. We may also be moving toward greater restrictions on immigration, including a border wall. Who knows for sure?

What's certainly the case is that pro-lifers hope to persuade their fellow citizens to move in their direction. But have you heard them call for pro-choicers to get on the right side of history. I haven't. And have proponents of a border wall made similar demands? Not that I have heard.

Chesterton would not be surprised by this difference between progressives and their opponents. That's because he saw something troubling about the progressives of his day—a tyrannical impulse rooted in their vision of the future, and their desire to hurry it into existence.

The same might be said of another English writer, who made his published debut in *G. K.'s Weekly* in 1927. That would be George Orwell, who had his own worries about tyrants and the future. In fact, fellow Englishman Malcolm Muggeridge once described Orwell as someone who “loved the past, hated the present, and dreaded the future.”

Of course, Chesterton loved the past as well. And while he didn't hate the present or dread the future, he did have his concerns. Some of those concerns were expressed in *What's Wrong with the World*, which he wrote a few years before the Bolshevik Revolution. In 1911 it's not likely that he would have known of Lenin or Stalin, but he surely anticipated their type. Here were tyrants bent on destroying the past—and their enemies, both real and imagined, as they used the present to herald—and hasten—the future. All sorts of terrible things can be done—and justified—in the name of the future. Just ask Orwell and Chesterton. And while you're at it, ask Lenin and Stalin as well.

All of this is not meant to suggest that modern progressives are tyrants on the order to these monsters. But it is meant

to suggest that there is a tyrannical dimension to—and potential for—progressive demands to get on the right side of history.

And all of this is not meant to suggest that both actual monsters and potential tyrants are without fears of their own. Chesterton zeroed in on one fear in particular. It was a fear of, guess what, the past, and “not merely a fear of the evil of the past, but of the good of the past” as well.

Actually, Chesterton thought that modern man generally, including tyrants specifically, were most in fear of the good of the past. By that Chesterton meant the “presence in the past of large ideals, unfulfilled and sometimes abandoned.”

More than that, modern man, including modern tyrants, were fearful of tradition, which Chesterton once defined as the democracy of the dead. On a related note, Chesterton did not regard modern man, including modern tyrants, as free-thinkers. To his way of thinking, the only true free-thinker is one “whose intellect is as much free from the future as from the past.” Therefore, such a thinker is free to think about what “ought to be”—and on the basis of what was actually good about the past, rather than what might possibly be good about the future.

It’s unlikely that Chesterton truly dreaded the future. He was not a man given to dread much of anything, save succumbing to his own weaknesses and the idea of hell. But he surely was on to something when he wrote that still lingering sentence. Yes, tyrants, actual and potential, have specialized in invoking the future. But this specialization could never prevent Chesterton from engaging in a specialty of his own. That would be having some fun at their expense, especially those “still glowing with the memory of tomorrow morning.”

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