

Who's on the Right Side of History?

It has become a commonplace in modern political polemic to talk about being on the right side of history. It is a phrase commonly employed by those who consider themselves “enlightened” or “progressive” and is used to condemn political opponents for being on the wrong side of history, or as being historically incorrect.

As usual, it is important that we define our terms. We cannot address the question of being on the right side of history until we know what we mean by “history” itself. For the “enlightened” and “progressive” person, history is an inexorable ascent from a primitive past to an enlightened future. The past is, therefore, always inferior to the present, as the present will be inferior to the future. This understanding of history was advocated by Hegel (1770-1831) who saw history as the gradual liberation of humanity from ignorance. In a similar way, Auguste Comte (1798-1857) saw history as transitioning from phases marked by relative ignorance to phases of increased enlightenment. Specifically history begins in a mystical era, marked by mysticism and superstition, progresses to a metaphysical era, in which philosophers employ the faculty of reason to try to understand the mysteries of the cosmos, and progresses finally into the scientific age, in which mystery is eradicated and materialism triumphs. Karl Marx (1818-1883) employed and politicized the progressivist understanding of history advocated by Hegel and Comte. For Marx, history should be understood in terms of political and economic determinism. History, for Marx, begins with slave-ownership and then transitions through feudalism and capitalism into the final stability to be found in communism, in which the power of the state will finally give way to some form of economic and political paradise, marked by

liberty and justice for all.

Those “progressives” who dismiss their political opponents for being on “the wrong side of history” have accepted and embraced the historical determinism of Hegel, Comte, and Marx, seeing history as a liberating mechanism, moving forward and crushing those reactionaries who get in its way. For such “progressives” the process is inevitable and inexorable and is therefore unstoppable.

The ironic consequence of such a view of history is that it blinds us to history itself, preventing us from ever learning the lessons that history teaches. If the past is inferior to the present, if it is marked by barbarism and ignorance, what can it teach the more “enlightened” present? What can the ignorant and superstitious peasants of the past teach the urbane and sophisticated dwellers in the modernist City of Man? It is no surprise, therefore, that “progressives” advocate the removal of the great works of western civilization from school and college curricula. Not only are the ideas expressed in these great works marked by the ignorance which necessarily blights the past but there is a danger that some people might take them seriously, thereby sinking into ignorance and barbarism themselves. This banning of books is akin to the burning of books, a practice which has characterized every culture in which “progressive” ideas have gained power.

For all of their talk of “tolerance,” the fact is that “progressives” have proven themselves the least tolerant of all people. The “enlightened” and “progressive” ideas that led to the French Revolution led also to the invention of the guillotine as the instrument of the Reign of Terror which followed in the Revolution’s wake. The “enlightened” and “progressive” ideas of Karl Marx led to a plethora of revolutions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, all of which descended into violence and terror, killing millions of civilians on a scale that would have been utterly unthinkable

in the "unenlightened" past. And yet those who led these revolutions had the same philosophical ideas as today's "progressives". They believed the past to be barbaric and that the future would be a paradise, built on the ideas of the self-named Enlightenment. They were on "the right side of history." As for their millions of victims, such as the Catholic peasants of the Vendée or those who believed in Russian Orthodoxy, they were sacrificed of necessity because they were on "the wrong side of history." Their deaths were necessary and inevitable because they stood in the way of "progress."

There is, however, another view of history, which sees history as being human and not as a mere mechanism. It sees history as beginning with the family, not with slavery. It believes that we can learn priceless lessons from the past which enable us to understand the present and the future. It sees the past as characterized by all that is human, by all that is good, bad, and ugly in the human condition. It believes that we have a lot to learn from all that is good, true, and beautiful in the past; from the great philosophers and the great works of art and literature; and from those whose lives were characterized by the love which is inseparable from self-sacrifice. It also believes that we have a lot to learn from the evil and ugliness in the past; from the tyrants who refused the call of love, choosing instead to sacrifice others on the altars erected to their own egos; and from the bad ideas which have had bad consequences, such as the aforementioned ideas of Hegel, Comte, and Marx. It does not believe that the past is a barbarian to be cast aside with contempt, but that it is a wizened old man, showing us the fullness of human experience, enabling us to learn from the mistakes of the past so that we are not doomed to repeat them in the present or the future, and showing us the lives of heroes who laid down their lives for their friends and enemies, inspiring us to do the same.

It can be seen, therefore, that being on the right side of

history depends on what we mean by history itself. If history is a mere mechanism of historical determinism, crushing those with “unprogressive” and “unenlightened” ideas, we can only be “right” if we genuflect before the might of the machine. If, on the other hand, it is the witness of human beings interacting with each other through time, teaching us through the consequences of their actions to avoid evil and its destructiveness, and inspiring us to live self-sacrificial lives which make the world better for our neighbours and even our enemies, we will only be on the “right” side of history if we follow the example of the saints and heroes.

To put the matter bluntly, those on the right side of history are those who live good and virtuous lives in the service of objective truth, thereby making the world a better and more beautiful place. Those who treat the past with contempt, refusing to learn its lessons and worshipping the imaginary machine of “progress,” will be the tools of tyranny today as they have been the tools of tyranny in the past. They are not only on the wrong side of history, they are on the wrong side of humanity.

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