

Why the State Seeks to Abolish Both Tradition and History

In [the opening monologue](#) of the much-beloved musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye the milkman compares life for the Jewish inhabitants of the village Anatevka to the balancing act required of a fiddler scratching out a tune on a rooftop. According to Tevya's famous allegory, the people of Anatevka are able to keep their balance thanks to their traditions. Yet as the story progresses, we see that even with tradition in place, keeping that balance is no easy task – especially when faced with rapid and unprecedented change.

Over the past century, tradition's imperfections have led to its fade from our collective consciousness. It's no longer viewed as a useful tool to help keep one's balance on the roof of life, but rather is seen as a roadblock that must be removed from the path to progress. Thanks to a highly rationalist strain of Enlightenment thought beginning with thinkers such as Hobbes and Descartes, who held that all knowledge should be discovered by conscious reasoning, and culminating with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the French Revolution, the importance of tradition has been greatly undermined. Thomas Paine summed up the anti-traditionalist creed quite nicely when he [declared](#) that "we have it in our power to begin the world over again." Guided by the power of reason, and liberated from the chains of the past, these Enlightenment rationalists promised progress and increased human happiness.

Yet, discarding tradition has not led us to the realm of happiness, as promised by the prophets of progress. Between 1999 and 2014, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) reports, the suicide rate in the U.S. increased 24 percent. In

2017 the U.S. saw the [highest suicide rate](#) in fifty years. Such tragic numbers are the exact opposite of what progressives, radical feminists, and neoconservatives, all the latter-day children of the Enlightenment rationalists, led us to believe would happen if only we cast off the binds of backwards tradition and were made free to pursue our individual self-actualization. By its very nature, tradition is extremely difficult to fully erase in practice, but there is no doubt that its decline has coincided with a decline in the conceptual understanding of tradition in favor of a belief in "progress." It is no coincidence that the weakening of the mediating institutions of civil society, the transformation of the family, an acceptance of divorce and promiscuity, all have come about during a period in which tradition and custom have come to be viewed as useless chains from the past. Understanding the role of tradition in human life may help to explain why its decline has led to so much human alienation and suffering.

Before we truly may evaluate tradition, we must first rightly define it. To many, tradition is synonymous with backwardness or an inability to embrace change. This view is rooted in the heavy societal influence of French Enlightenment thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who held that society and its institutions perverted man's natural goodness. Only through liberation from these institutions could man's innate goodness be emancipated. Yet a proper understanding of tradition is quite different.

Tradition, rightly understood, isn't an effort to freeze the world in place. Indeed, Edmund Burke, the eighteenth-century British statesman and political thinker widely considered the father of Anglo conservatism, even [said](#) that "a state without the means of some change, is without the means of its own conservation." Similarly, Oxford philologist and traditionalist author J.R.R. Tolkien attacked this static view of the world in *Lord of the Rings* in the form of his character Denethor. When asked in the midst of a crisis what he wants,

Denethor replies, "I would have things as they were in all the days of my life...as in the days of my longfathers before me...But if doom denies this to me, then I will have naught: neither life diminished, nor love halved, nor honour abated." In the end, Denethor burns himself alive rather than accepting change – hardly a ringing endorsement of the static mentality so often ascribed to tradition. Professor Claes Ryn at the Catholic University of America continues the Burkean tradition, [warning of the danger](#) posed by stagnant, unchanging tradition that turns into "a kind of fetish, which has little relevance to a world that will not conform and will not stand still." Rather, Ryn [says](#), continuing tradition "cannot be the mere imitation or repetition of old patterns. It must be a fresh, vital force in the present."

So if tradition is not merely a blind clinging to the past in an attempt to stop the future, what is it? A respect for tradition, properly understood, is simply an acknowledgment of the fact, as explained by conservative [author Russell Kirk](#), "that modern people are dwarves on the shoulders of giants, able to see farther than their ancestors only because of the great stature of those who have preceded us in time." In other words, tradition recognizes that knowledge and wisdom are accumulated through time, and not – in contrast to popular belief – able to be purely rationally derived and developed by one person or generation in time. Society itself, in all its complexity, is the result of this historical process, not the result of a single generation constructing itself on a blank slate.

The best way to think about tradition is to view it like capital accumulation in economics. The contemporary world enjoys unprecedented wealth, because, in the past, our ancestors chose to accumulate capital – or goods used to produce other goods. As the capital stock has grown, so too has the productive capacity of our economy.

Similarly, knowledge and wisdom are accumulated through

countless centuries of trial and error. Rejecting the wisdom of the past is just as foolish as each new generation seeking to start industrial society over again from scratch. This analogy is not original, but comes straight [from Burke himself](#), who wrote that “we are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and of ages.”

[Friedrich Hayek](#) argued that there are two views about the nature of society. There are the rationalist constructivists, who contend “that all the useful human institutions were, and ought to be, deliberate creations of conscious reason.” To them, tradition is irrelevant, since man is capable of structuring all of life without past experience and wisdom. Every generation, then, is capable of formulating and acting on all knowledge independently. In contrast, there are those nonconstructivist rationalists, whom Hayek identifies as “more modest and less ambitious.” This school, in the [words](#) of Professor Paul Cliteur at Leiden University, “assumes that, in all our thinking, we are guided by rules of which we are not aware, and that, therefore, our conscious reason can always take account of only some of the circumstances which determine our actions.” Because the power of human understanding is limited, it is impossible for us to account for all of the relevant knowledge when making a decision.

However, Hayek points out that we are not left to wallow completely in ignorance. Rather, our ancestors have passed down abstract rules and guides that “embody the experience of many more trials and errors than any individual mind could acquire.” Hayek, drawing upon Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume, speaks of the benefit derived from a social order in which members obey abstract rules “even without understanding their significance.” This is in contrast to one in which such rules that represent the accumulated

experience of the past are discarded in favor of seeking to base conduct on the information only immediately available to a single person or even a group.

It is quite easy to see that – for at least the past century – the rationalist constructivists, or [the New Jacobins](#), as Claes Ryn calls them (after the original Jacobins in the French Revolution, who attempted to replace traditional institutions with their rationally planned society), have been culturally ascendant. The past, if it is considered at all, is often viewed as anachronistic and unenlightened, as something to be forgotten or even purged. But the negative consequences of this Jacobin mentality range from the merely inconvenient to the disastrous.

As Tevye wisely said in *Fiddler on the Roof*, tradition is a tool that helps people maintain their balance in life. By trying to rely solely on a constructivist form of reason, individuals have abandoned and weakened many traditional institutions, such as family, religion, and community that are an important ingredient to a stable and happy life. In his work [The Quest for Community](#), sociologist Robert Nisbet chronicled the decline of community and the resulting alienation and decay of the social fabric. He directly attributes this loss to the rationalist constructivist perspective. In Nisbet's words, "the modern release of the individual from traditional ties of class, religion, and kinship has made him free; but on the testimony of innumerable works in our age, this freedom is accompanied not by the sense of creative release but by the sense of disenchantment and alienation."

The facts validate this claim. A Heritage Foundation [report](#) that compiled data from dozens of studies correlated religious practice with numerous positive outcomes. Religious practitioners experienced greater marital and familial stability, a lower risk of suicide, less likelihood of committing crimes, and longer life expectancy. Similarly, as

Professor Lauren Hall at the Rochester Institute of Technology documents in her book [*Family and the Politics of Moderation*](#), the family unit plays an important balancing role in society. It does this by restraining and moderating extreme collectivism and individualism, and by integrating the individual into a community. According to Hall, “a family consisting of a monogamous couple and two or more children” is best able to carry out the social functions of the family that promote both the well-being of the individual and the broader community. However, the Pew Research Center shockingly [reports](#) that “if current trends continue, 25 percent of young adults in the most recent cohort (ages 25 to 34 in 2010) will have never married by 2030. That would be the highest share in modern history.”

On a larger scale, a respect for tradition and the limits of human reason precludes attempts at “wiping the slate clean” and building the perfect planned society from scratch. One need only look at the horrifying results of Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and Mao’s Great Leap Forward to see what can happen when tradition and humble rationalism are abandoned.

Even if some libertarians are skeptical of the benefits of tradition on a personal level, they should be greatly concerned with its consequences on a societal level. When institutions that provide existential meaning are undermined, such as the family, atomized individuals often turn to the state and totalizing political movements for meaning. Similarly, the extermination of tradition is necessary for the triumph of totalitarian regimes. As Michael Federici of Middle Tennessee State University has [argued](#) concerning George Orwell’s *1984*, “Oceania is a society governed by a totalitarian authority that aims to create complete obedience to the state. To accomplish this objective, it is necessary to destroy historical consciousness and old ways of life. Most everyone in Oceania has lost memory of historical life.” Winston Smith is able to recognize and resist the tyrannical

regime, because he still maintains a shred of historical memory, and with that connection is able to see through the lies and propaganda. “He remembers a time when life was different, when social life was not controlled by the state.”

Today our society is wracked by germinal totalitarians eager to destroy history. Ostensibly this is in the name of justice, but this destruction and historical desecration are little more than a tactic for securing power for themselves. America is supposedly infected on the genetic level with unforgivable sins of racism and oppression and those seeking to destroy history conveniently have the solution: hand over power to them to facilitate our collective reeducation and penance. By failing to recognize the important role that tradition serves by preserving historical consciousness we aid and abet the rise of the forces currently seeking the complete overthrow of our society and the complete annihilation of our traditional rights and liberties.

Again, tradition is not mere stasis. The wisdom and knowledge it hands down to us is not fixed for all times and all places. Like all of society, it adapts and changes over time. [According to Ryn](#), “tradition has to come alive in the here and now through the creativity of individuals who recognize both humanity’s dependence on the best of the past and the needs and opportunities offered by changed circumstances.”

Our task going forward is to both revitalize the decaying and forgotten stock of reason that has been passed down to us, and to forge ahead into the future. Tradition is by no means a perfect tool, and understanding and adapting it is no easy task, but properly understood, it is the best tool we have to face and weather the constantly changing circumstances of life and to preserve our hard-won liberties.

—

This [article](#) has been republished with permission from the

Mises Institute.

Image Credit:

Meme Generator