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Why We Can't Stop Longing for the Good Old Days

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If you visit Hagley Park in the West Midlands of England and make it to the big 18th-century house of the Lyttelton family, walk another half-mile to the east and you'll come upon an exotic and impressive sight once you clear the trees. In front of you is what seems like the ruins of a Gothic castle. There are four corner towers, but only one is still standing, complete with battlements and an intersecting stair turret. The others are reduced to one or two stories and the wall connecting them has collapsed. You start thinking about the ancient history of which this place could speak, and wonder what spectacular building once stood here.

The answer is none. The ruin was constructed just like this in the mid-18th century, to give the impression that a magnificent medieval castle had fallen apart over many generations. Building ruins from scratch was the height of fashion for European aristocrats at the time, using shattered castles and crumbling abbeys to create an imaginary, romantic past. Hagley Park is a selective, artificial version of history—just like the politics of nostalgia that is so popular today.

People in many countries are longing for the good old days. When asked if life in their country is better or worse today than 50 years ago, 31% of Britons, 41% of Americans and 46% of the French say it's worse.

Psychologists say that this kind of nostalgia is natural and sometimes even useful: Anchoring our identity in the past helps give us a sense of stability and predictability. For individuals, nostalgia is especially common when we experience rapid transitions like puberty, retirement or moving to a new country. Similarly, collective nostalgia—a longing for the good old days when life was simpler and people behaved better—can also be a source of communal strength in difficult times.

But when exactly were the good old days? Podcaster Jason Feifer once devoted an episode of “Pessimists’ Archive” to this question. If you want to make America great again, he thought, you have to ask yourself when America was great. The most popular answer seemed to be the 1950s, so Mr. Feifer asked historians whether Americans in that decade thought it was particularly pleasant. Definitely not, they said. In the 1950s, American sociologists worried that rampant individualism was tearing the family apart. There were serious racial and class tensions, and everyone lived under the very real threat of instant nuclear annihilation.

In fact, many in the 1950s thought that the good old days were to be found a generation earlier, in the 1920s. But in the 1920s, the pioneering child psychologist John Watson warned that because of increasing divorce rates, the American family would soon cease to exist. Many people at the time idealized the Victorian era, when families were strong and children respected their elders. But in the late 19th century, Americans were worried that the unnatural pace of life brought on by railroads and telegraphs had given rise to a new disease, neurasthenia, which could express itself in anxiety, headaches, insomnia, back pain, constipation, impotence and chronic diarrhea.

People have been longing for the good old days at least since the invention of writing in ancient Mesopotamia, 5,000 years ago. Archaeologists have discovered Sumerian cuneiform tablets which complain that family life isn’t what it used to be. One tablet frets about “the son who spoke hatefully to his mother, the younger brother who defied his older brother, who talked back to the father.” Another, almost 4,000 years old, contains a nostalgic poem: “Once upon a time, there was no snake, there was no scorpion.../The whole world, the people in unison/To [the god] Enlil in one tongue gave praise.”

Why are human beings always so nostalgic for past eras that seemed difficult and dangerous to those who lived through them? One possibility is that we know we survived past dangers—otherwise we wouldn’t be here—so in retrospect they seem smaller. But we can never be certain we will solve the problems we are facing today. Radio didn’t end up ruining the younger generation, but maybe the smartphone will. We didn’t destroy the planet with nuclear weapons during the Cold War, but who can say for sure that we won’t do it this time around?

Another reason is that historical nostalgia is often colored by personal nostalgia. When were the good old days? Was it, by chance, the incredibly short period in human history when you happened to be young? A U.S. poll found that people born in the 1930s and 1940s thought the 1950s was America's best decade, while those born in the 1960s and 1970s preferred the 1980s. In the 1980s, the popular TV show "Happy Days" was set in a nostalgic version of the 1950s; today, the popular series "Stranger Things" fondly conjures the fashion and music of the 1980s.

This kind of nostalgia has neurological roots. Researchers have found that we encode more memories during adolescence and early adulthood than any other period of our lives, and when we think about the past, this is the period we most often return to. What's more, as we grow more distant from past events, we tend to remember them more positively. When schoolchildren returning from summer vacation are asked to list what was good and bad about it, the lists are almost equally long. When the exercise is repeated a couple of months later, the list of good things grows longer and the bad list gets shorter. By the end of the year, the good things have pushed out the bad from the students' memories completely.

Obviously, some things really were better in the past. But our instinctive nostalgia for the good old days can easily deceive us, with dangerous consequences. Longing for the past and fear of the future inhibit the experiments and innovations that drive progress, creating the marvels that the next generation will eventually feel nostalgic about. As the English inventor William Petty observed in 1679, "When a new invention is first propounded, in the beginning every man objects...not one [inventor] of a hundred outlives this torture."

Petty was right: Vaccination, anesthetics, steam engines, railroads and electricity all met with strong resistance when they were first introduced. Many people feared that bicycles would create a generation of hunchbacks, since riders leaned forward all day, and that sitting in a bicycle saddle would make women infertile. Women cyclists were also warned about developing a "bicycle face": When they clenched their jaw and focused their eyes to balance on two wheels, their features risked getting stuck in an unflattering grimace.

The point isn't to show how silly previous generations were. The same kinds of anxieties have been expressed in our own time about innovations like the internet, videogames, genetically modified organisms and stem-cell research.

And not all fears about the future are unfounded: New technologies do result in accidents, they disturb traditional cultures and habits, and they destroy old jobs while creating new ones. But the only way to learn how to make the best use of new technologies and reduce the risks is by trial and error. The future won't be a utopia—but then, neither were the good old days.

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