

The Passing of the Modern Age

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This book was a pleasant surprise to read. I have had it my library for more than forty years, confusing the author John Lukacs with the well-known literary critic, Marxist and Hungarian revolutionary Gyrgy Lukacs, known to have blood on his hands, I was a bit reluctant to read it. But John Lukacs is an entirely different animal from his namesake. He was a conservative in the true sense, even describing himself as a reactionary. Born in 1924 he only died recently (May 2019). His writing and temperament reminds me of George Kennan, and sure enough both seems to have been friends.

To be a true political conservative is a rather elitist position not amenable to a populist movement. It is in fact more cultural than political and is concerned with the elusive notion of 'Zeitgeist'. The resentment concerns the notion of modernity which is seen as not only deplorable but threatening. For this I have some deep-seated sympathies stemming from early childhood. It has to do with the breaking up of a way of life for something different, and entailing sure loss as opposed to elusive gain. It is a stand that takes a skeptical view of progress and economic development. Paradoxically it spans the political spectrum from left to right and ironically may nowadays be more prevalent on the left than the economically libertarian right. As it is more concerned with culture and the sensitivity associated to it, political views may be diverse, but subsumed under a more all encompassing conservatism. In as far as it is politically active it tends to be reactionary, because that is the only way to go. Now to reintroduce Soviet communism in Russia would be rightly seen as reactionary, a hundred years ago it was all part of the vanguard of modernity, or at least was seen as such. Another movement with which conservatism has deep connection is the environmental movement which accords to nature a more exalted position than that of human society. Man is seen as an intruder and exploiter, reducing a wonderful world of biological diversity to one of sterility.

Reading the book I find myself nodding in agreement, but more as regards the general tenor than as to details, maybe this is why that when I try to recall what it is all about, and what moved me so much, I find that my mind is a blank. Four months have gone since I read it and I have a hard time to bring it to life again. Could it be that it is a presentation of platitudes, be they ingeniously (some would say disingenuously) articulated. Is it one of those texts, such as a presentation to a jury, which, as Cicero remarked, is meant to engage for the moment, but not to withstand a scrutiny after a night of sleep. Let us go systematically through the chapter headings and try to see what it is all about. As conceptions of modernity change with time, it is useful to keep in mind that the book was published in 1970.

The first chapter deals with the question why at this present moment more and more people feel that the end of the world is coming. He contrasts the first flight back in 1903 going into the light of day and the Moon landing in 1969 when the astronauts were propelled into darkness. The first event was greeted with optimism the second with mixed

feelings, not liberation as much as escape. Back in 1093 most white people of the Western civilization thought of it as triumphant, at the end of the 60's as collapsing. True happiness lies not in the here and now but in the prospects of the future. You can indeed bear a lot as long as you are convinced that it will end well. How come such a change in seventy years? We are witnessing the evolution of the 20th century. It is an evolution of technological progress as well as an evolution of our ways of looking at it, and of the two, the latter might be more important, but it only takes place in the mind. But this sense of doom has roots that predates in time the popular conception of it. He mentions the French poet Paul Valery who contemplated on the declining rôle of Europe to played on the world scene, and then later the works by Spengler got a lot of attention in wide circles. He does not yet at this stage mention the atom bomb, which might have been the single most important factor to produce in most of the population an apocalyptic vision. And as to pessimism, truly it did permeate the Zeitgeist also in its supposedly most optimistic period, in the West often associated with Victoria. The notion of 'fin du siecle' brings associations of something coming to an end. The conservative temperament has always existed, a temperament of observation and contemplation not one of action, thoughtful rather than thoughtless, timid rather than bold. In all ages there has always been something Modern to worry about. The point is whether this worry, conscious and articulated or not, has become more widespread in our age and whether it has a more objective basis. Throughout my life the end of the world has been seen to be around the corner. When I was a child and a young man, the threat of a thermonuclear interchange between the Western and the Soviet bloc seemed imminent. Would I ever reach an adult age? It was of course a thing you feared but could not really believe. Then came Gorbachev and a period of political euphoria culminating by the fall of the wall, and then there was a lull and a profound relief. But then what should we worry about? Terrorism? Global warming? Terrorism engages the imagination, Global warming, does not. But now in 1970 there was no inkling of that. Nothing dates like predictions about the future.

Now the author stresses the imaginative aspect of the decline of a civilization or an empire, this always precedes the material decline. Spirit first, matter later. Now after the Age of Reason had replaced the Age of Faith predictions of the future became more commonplace. In fact some of those predictions were remarkably correct. And, he adds, most of the technical inventions of the 20th century were based on 19th century science and would not have greatly surprised our ancestors. They expected technical progress, but what they would not have expected, according to the author, was the misery that followed upon material comfort, and he gives a litany of the topical grievances of the late 60's. People living side to side with complete strangers in cities fraught with sleaziness, racial tensions, daylight crimes and overcrowded commuter trains, which in a sense takes the edge out of the existential despair. Wistfully he compares our times to that of the Middle Ages as formulated by Huizinga, a time when the outlines were crisper, now everything is blurred.

'Modern' used to be a word of positive connotations, the author remarks, not so anymore, in fact its meaning has profoundly changed. It used to denote something fresh and functional, airy and youthful, a breaking away from an oppressive age of constraint (he contrasts heavy Victorian furniture with what the 20's had to offer). Now the notion

of 'old-fashioned' has risen in our estimation. Of course it is all in the mind. The Atomic Bomb actually caused less casualties than the bombing of Dresden, but its potential gripped the imagination.

He draws a quick history of modern European history, the enlightenment, the French Revolution, which could have been snuffed out early by foreign powers and was not, instead we had the spectacle of Napoleon, and his eventual defeat, which was inevitable, as it was a question ultimately of numbers, caused a revival and also for the first time a political notion of Europe that had not existed before. The important even after that was the unification of Germany, which was done not by outside intervention, a typical procedure, but by an internal effort of Bismarck. It profoundly changed the nature of Europe and made France a marginal country (which, I would like to remind the reader, it still is, in spite of all illusions of grandeur). The First World War did not bring about the collapse of European civilization, it was a consequence of it. The American intervention which concluded it was far more significant than the Russian revolution, which merely removed the former empire from the European power scene, making it half-Asiatic. There was of course a sequel to the First World War, the Second, which meant once and for all the transfer of European civilization to the American shores. This culminated in the phenomenon of Kennedy, the first American President to become well-known throughout the world. It was also the californization of civilization. The Kennedys were young, vibrant, suntanned and rich. This all in the first introductory pages of the book.

The author finds modern democratic government monstrous. Elections degenerating into popularity contests. The contempt for politics. What he wants is a tolerable compound of anarchy and liberty, those times. when that is the case, coincide with the triumphs of modern civilization. Now to talk about a balance between the two is nonsense.

States have become much more powerful, yet paradoxically with increased power comes powerlessness. The atom bomb is a good example. The two super powers have acquired unprecedented power of destruction. But because of this power of destruction, which is mutual, their latitude of action has been greatly reduced, and this is the essence of powerlessness. The author seems to regret that the US, during its brief tenure of having a monopoly on nuclear arms, did not exploit it to subjugate the Soviet Union. The idea of a preventive war against the USSR was common, Bertrand Russell, as I recall, was at a time a great proponent for it, along with many other intellectuals. The American Government choose not to do it (and one wonders whether later administrations would have showed the same restraint). Now it is too late, and the author remarks ruefully, that in the past the US could easily have dealt with Castro and Cuba by dispatching a few warships. Not any longer, American military superiority does not give Castro a single sleepless night, he speculates. States are becoming more powerless, although their intervention in private lives are more extensive than before. There is also a 'democratization' of warfare, in the past wars were waged between states (in some formal and hence civilized way), but now it is between people. The riots of Hungary could so easily been escalated into a real uprising and toppling of Soviet power spreading all over Eastern Europe had the West-Germans and Americans sent radio and television appeals across the borders, which the authorities could not have stopped (one now thinks of social media and cellphones), but those governments decided not to, the Americans not wanting to risk war with the Soviet Union. One

can see the regrets of an exile. Authority and power go hand in hand, what we are seeing, the author claims, is an erosion of both in the modern state. The reason is in the mind. The governing bodies are losing their nerve.

On the separation of races, more of an acute problem in the 60's than now, he remarks that the abolishing of slavery and enforced equality has revealed that their fraternity amounted to little. Race is a strange notion, the author ruminates, but the sense of racial separation goes deep. The animosity against the Jews were not just a matter of religious intolerance. And the author is Jewish and hence to some extent not identifying himself with the notion of White supremacy. Five hundred years ago white people were mainly confined within Europe, then there was a vast colonial expansion, and one should keep in mind, I think, that colonialism did not really take off until late 18th century. I believe that the westerners who first encountered the people of India did not necessarily think of them as inferior people or inferior civilizations, after all the East showed a luxury that was stunning, and poverty they were used to at home. The attitudes may have been different as regards to the primitive and scattered societies they met in North America and Australia. Their penetration into Asia and Africa was very modest until the 19th century. Previously they had the advantage of fire power, by the 19th century they also had the advantage of material resources and technology. The scientific revolution did not bear such palpable fruits until the industrial age. The emergence of industry was indeed a significant aspect of modernity, maybe the most significant.

The abolishing of slavery was a good thing, according to the author (what else could he claim ?), it was an evil that had to be erased, no beans about it. But, he continues, one should not think that this solved the problem. The segregation became rather pronounced, emigrating to the North the Blacks lost the human contacts they had had in spite of everything in the South and were confronted with a modern industrialized society, where justice may have reigned, but it was of a cold and abstract nature. He notes that the number of mulatto children have significantly decreased, and does not give much to the liberal talk about mingling and desegregation. There is a real problem, which it may be easy for French intellectuals to expound on in Left Bank cafés, but let in millions of Blacks to Paris and problems would arise. It is the poor white who resents the Negro the most he points out. And predicts that in the future races will not integrate but turn in themselves and find common identities and create ethnically homogeneous nations. In the past the Negro wanted to emulate the White man, now he has realized that this is a doomed project, instead, following the adage, my color goes deeper than my skin, trying to forge a new identity. Bismarck once said that the most important thing about the 20th century will be that Americans speak English, the author speculates that the most important thing of the 21st century is that the Russians are white.

In one chapter the author takes issue with the notion that democracy will eventually stamp out nationalism as something outdated. The reverse is actually happening. Nationalism grew with democracy. Not too long ago most people say in eastern Europe did not have any sense of belonging to a Nation, their concerns were more narrow, involving their immediate surroundings. But nationalism has provided a new ideology even a new Ersatz religion. Nationalist feelings are much stronger today than it was in the past, despite mass tourism and increased international trade, those things are after all but rather superficial.

As he notes the first thing we notice about a fellow European is his nationality, not his profession. Language is of course a very important aspect of it, people are socially defined by their idioms, and even if there is a spread of English in scientific and business circles, that knowledge of the language is superficial and not sufficient to cater to the deeper emotional needs.

What is the purpose of life? In the past people were rooted to their places of birth (although one may remark that this did not necessarily hold true for artisans and students who roamed widely, in a sense more so than now, when students tend to stick to one university, while in the past they were ambulating picking and choosing the cherries). In fact as industrialization proceeded more people left the countryside for the urban centers. The author claims that the greatest change in the daily life for most people took place between 1870 and 1920. I would also like to add that as a result of industrialization people turned from being producers, often making their own gadgets rather than buying them which was seldom an option, to mere consumers. Needless to add, making a thing makes you have an entirely different relation to it than when you merely buy it. Still, at the time of writing, the emigration from country to city, which was accomplished in England in the 1880's in the States in the 1920's and in Soviet Union in the 1960's may still not be completed in China and India, the last bulwarks of large peasant populations. But for how much longer?

The great emigration in the West took place in the 19th century. Cities like New York increased their population by a factor of hundred, already big cities like London and Paris, naturally less, yet significantly. By the 1920's this growth has been slowed down at least in the First World, not in the Third. Now there is a tendency to blur the distinction between city and country through the emergence of the suburb. This also reflects the change of occupation, from being industrial and agricultural most people in the States are now involved in services and administrative work. But the greatest change was in terms of the social scene. People became lonely having no natural and automatic ties to others, and the ties they made had to build on effort and could easily be broken. Also the notion of aspiration, of hoping that your children would rise in the world, became impossible for people in general, and by that a very strong purpose in life was gone. Aspiration is a matter of the mind existing wholly in the imagination. One effect of this is the extension of the state of adolescence. Formerly this was a brief transitional period of preparation for adulthood which would mean liberation from childhood. Now, not only is adolescence entered earlier, more significantly is left later, if at all. Young people now, and I guess he must mean my generation, dread adulthood, they rather prefer to dwell in an indefinite adolescence. I remember that I did not feel fully adult until my forties when I finally had a job as a professor and a family of small children, and a house of my own. It felt vaguely unreal, still as if I was playing at it. (Yes as a child I remember playing, or imagining, playing at being an adult, that was forgotten during my long period of adolescence). Yes in many ways, especially for intellectuals, the state of adolescence never ends. After all Aldous Huxley's definition of an intellectual is someone with other interests besides sex and money.

Yes money meant something else in the recent past. It was solid, ultimately convertible into Gold, and if we are to believe the author, exchange rates between currencies fluctuated

but little (maybe because of the convertibility into precious metals). So especially for people who did not have an excess of it, money became much more palpable than it is now, never mind that its value is a social construction (but one nevertheless as hard and unforgiving as the material world around us). The World Wars changed all this. There was a great inflation of money and it became a commodity of speculation, and that absurd notion of the Economic man emerged. Then there were the stock exchange, speculation which involved millions of Americans, hence the effect of the crash was so far-reaching, and because, isolationist as the country professed to be, there were worldwide ties, and the repercussions could not be confined to the North American continent but caused a worldwide depression, only cured by men such as Mussolini, Hitler and Franklin Roosevelt, who, as the author adds sarcastically, knew nothing of economic laws.

Prosperity is an illusion, more of everything means that it is worth less. Other things than material goods are subjected to inflation. Learning is an example. As formal education expands, real education goes down. While in the past the uneducated classes, or at least some of them, were hungry for instruction, and they apparently thought of it as a good thing in itself. With mass-education the question of usefulness enters, education is no longer a matter of self-improvement and pure curiosity, but to get ahead. Schools no longer really teach anything, and although levels of literacy have risen, the appreciation of literature has gone down (I recall how the notably American educator John Dewey wondered what the point was to teach people to read if they only were going to read trash). And when it comes to art, it has degenerated into primitiveness very rapidly, and as a consequence become senseless. The artist, as well as the writer, are products of the Bourgeois. In the past there were no things as artists, they were all craftsmen foremost. Artistic excellence, as we have recognized in their work retroactively, was a result of their craft. Now people expect to become artists without the solid grounding in craft. And then of course we have the case of the destruction of nature. For thousand of years nature remained the same. Of course there were minor changes, villages grew roads were constructed, but then with industrialization the face of the earth, changed drastically. By the 18th century the traditional landscape of Britain was disappearing. The poet William Blake bemoaned it, and Constable tried to preserve a vanishing countryside through his paintings. As the author remarks, political revolutions are only revolutionary initially, the long term consequences are in many cases negligible; while industrialization, an initially evolutionary process but with revolutionary consequences, no one at the time could have foreseen. For most of human history nature had been seen as the enemy of man, something bigger and stronger than him, and at which he needed to struggle, often in vain. Now in the 20th century nature exists at the discretion of man. I used to think somewhat contemptuously of American National Parks as packaged nature. They were shows, not unlike Disney-lands, in which people could enjoy nature just as they may enjoy nature on the TV-screen. Being protected from it, it lost its sting. What exists because we allow it to exist, is rather different from something that exists because it has to exist regardless of our wishes. Tamed nature becomes not much more than thoughts, pleasant to dwell on, but having no real solid existence beyond our indulgence. As the author notes the romantic view of nature did not really emerge until the Industrial Revolution, whether a coincidence or not, it was in any case providential, he argues. Unbridled consumerism lies at the root of

environmental decay. Also the loss of permanence of abode, which characterizes a modern society, especially the American one, adds to this destruction, as people are not rooted they not caring either, because after all your choice of temporary quarters is also a form of consumerism. Thus in a country like the U.S. which compared to Europe is underpopulated, the environmental decay has gone the furthest. It is not the population explosion that matters as much as the explosion in consumer goods. A Westerner leaves much more of a footprint than a poor African. Had the automobile been invented before the railroads, it surely would have been on its road to extinction by now, the author muses, replaced by the railroads, a far more logical means of solving the problem of mass-transport. The great engineering feats of the 19th century are becoming obsolete by the 20th, buildings which formerly were to last a thousand years, now are torn down within a century.

Science, too, does not escape his critical gaze. First of all science is not something external to man but a human invention. Its objects existed long before we started to think about them and make theories. World 1 predates World 3, to used Popperian terminology. Also, and this is an important point, the scientific revolution did not effect the common man in the least, at least not until the Industrial Revolution. In fact the author speculates whether that revolution could not have been brought about without the scientific one. Science was initially about 'knowing', a vast systematic extension of the knowledge of an individual. Science in the German world is more extensive than in the Anglo-Saxon, where the notion of a scientist is confined to natural science. The modern scientist is thought of as an engineer, not as a philosopher as in the past. People believed in science as they had believed in God. It was true and it was bound to deliver the goods. Then by the time of the atomic bomb a disillusionment set in. This was surely one scientific invention one could have done without. I remember how in the fifties and sixties there was talk about the peaceful use of nuclear energy as if this was totally uncontroversial remedy. It would not stay so as the seventies proceeded, but that the author would not know at the time. Science is not objective he claims, scientists are but humans influenced by social factors like everyone else. Politics drives science, not the other way around. The atomic bomb would not have been developed unless there had been strong political pressure to do so. When it comes to the so called social sciences subjectivity is rampant. According to him it is more of a racket than anything else, a game to stay on top of what is fashionable. Findings may not be forged, but inconvenient truths can be ignored.

The disillusionment with science occurred when its applications became the most spectacular. He thinks of the Moon landing but observes that Charles Lindbergh's flight engaged the public imagination more, at least when measured by the turn-up at the ticker-tape parade. The intellectuals were also dismissive (had it been Castro instead than Armstrong, their enthusiasm might have been greater, he quips). He attacks the schizophrenic attitude of people. The same people who deplored the use of napalm advocated compulsory sex education in schools, preferably starting in Kindergarten [sic]. Those who despised Teller was filled with admiration for Buckminster Fuller, that New England faker. People would advocate the banishment of history from school curricula and replace it by sociology and anthropology. Quantification was pushed for the social sciences, including history, to benefit from precise terminology as a substitute for thought.

The greatest revolution in modern science was not Einsteins' relativity theory, but

the realization among the worlds foremost physicists of what the poets had known all along, namely that it is impossible to stick to the Cartesian separation between object and subject. What you find is what you set out to find (but there are of course exceptions, but let us not quarrel with the author). His ultimate vision of science is nightmarish, seeing it as reducing everything to things. This leads us of course to the issue of AI when indeed the human mind will be reduced to a mechanical thing, and thus improved beyond not only human capacity, but human notion of capacity, eventually making the whole universe a claustrophobic cave of man-made things leading to not only the destruction of humanity but also of the world as such.

After this tirade his ruminations on the faithlessness of religion and the mutations of morality may sound anti-climactic, although he is on firmer ground here. When it comes to morality, he focuses on sexual morality. He is skeptical of the so called sexual liberation. The emancipation of women is of course a good thing, reasonable and overdue, but its effects have not been as good as naively expected. In the process of trying to elevate women from being sexual objects to sexual partners, the effect has been the opposite, they are now more of sexual objects than ever before. In the past, at least in aristocratic circles, women were independent and played the rôle of partners, one thinks as a reader of the royal mistresses, who wielded influence far beyond the royal bed. Now admittedly such small elitist societies may not be a proper guide for large ones. The emancipation of women and the sexual liberation has not done away with venereal diseases, prostitution nor pornography. The nakedness now seen in public, not only on the beaches, he finds unprecedented (forgetting perhaps that at the romantic area it was socially acceptable for women to be bare-breasted). The sexual act is private, and even more intimate than mere privacy, to the author the fact then men and women now not only talk during foreplay and afterglow, but even during the act, is remarkable, that was not done in the past (how does he know?) when the act was of such deep significance that it was above the daily chit-chat. Men and women get different things out of the act, and that may very well be true, and it is unfortunate that women are now expected, and led to expect, the same kind of pleasures that men naturally derive. Women can be used as sexual objects to men, while men cannot be sexual objects to women. This may or may not be true, but it clears the author of any incipient charges of misogyny. The sexual climax takes place in the mind not in the groin he reminds the reader, which leads to the issue of homosexuality, which he disapproves of as being a perversion. It is more prevalent among men than women (that can be discussed) testifying that the sexual imagination of men being greater than that of women. Homosexuality is but rarely the result of a congenial hormone imbalance, it is, in the words of the author, not a disease of the flesh but of the spirit¹.

The last chapters are devoted to a new beginning, what comes after the passing of the Modern Age. When Hitler conquered France there was talk of the the New Dark Ages

¹ I am reminded of the remark of Auden concerning Isherwood. According to him Isherwood was basically a heterosexual with a very good taste. This anti-biological attitude to sex is of course in line with modern theories of sexual identities being but social constructs and every individual is expected to create his or her own. Sex is not biologically determined by X and Y chromosomes, but up to the discretion of the individual. Thus the spectacle of the third sex, neither man nor woman, which is taken very seriously nowadays, fifty years after The author wrote his book.

settling down. But Nazism was not medieval, although it had medieval traits; it was a strange mixture of the super-modern with the primitive, a history-less futurism with a history-laden nostalgia. Still in 1940 Western civilization was not as decayed as it was to become in 1970.

Every society has a middle class, that is just a sociological tautology. Between the upper and the lower there has to be a middle. But not every society has a bourgeoisie, not the English nor the American societies. This something much more specific, and hence something historical. Bourgeois means city-dweller. The medieval city was profoundly different from the Greek and the Roman. It was walled in for physical security, and hence made for a sharp distinction between country and city. The notion of bourgeois has been vilified throughout recent history. Artists and writers denounced its vulgar taste, Marx identified it with capitalism, but the bourgeois spirit was not only concerned with money, in fact many of the class disdained it. Basically bourgeois can be identified with the modern spirit and hence the modern age. Had the aristocracy remained in power, things would have been kept pretty much the same. But the notion of bourgeoisie is fluid and hence flexible accommodating changes. The bourgeois spirit is responsible for the modern world, for better or for worse. All those ideas of equality, civil rights, freedom of speech, are quintessential bourgeois ideas. But even more, the notion of a home of a family, and hence the central role of the child in the modern age is a bourgeois project. In the past you tended to be separated from your offspring, whether or not you were rich or poor, strangers took care of your children, all according to the author, and you consequently did not care what became of them (really?), no aspirations, no plans. But this changed in the sixteenth century. Maybe the zenith of the bourgeois age occurred around 1820, The idea of a home in that time touches us with nostalgia. The Biedemeyer furniture and the Biedemeyer Lied 'Stille Nacht' the simplest and most childlike of all songs, written and composed at about that time in a small Tyrolean village. A song that speaks to us in the same way as the sublime stillness as in Goethe's well-known 'Über Alle Gipfeln'. Intimately connected with the home is the celebration of Christmas. Traditionally in Christianity Easter is the important celebration, the Resurrection and becoming a God more important than merely being born to the Earth. And in fact, although the author does not mention that, this is still true in the Orthodox church. But Christmas more than Easter is connected to the home, it is more private, as it is centered on the child. The pampered child on which presents are bestowed. In our bourgeois culture we all tend to recall with inner joy our early Christmases, as if they were in the middle of the darkness, the high point of the year, perhaps more so in northern countries than in southern.

Thus in conclusion the bourgeois represent much of what is best in modern culture. Fairness, ambition, social mobility, responsibility, justice, the virtues can be continued; but there are also less palatable traits, such as smugness and selfishness, snobbery and stinginess; but all in all the virtues prevail and the stock of the concept is rising once freed from its narrow Marxist characterizations.

History cannot be predicted, except that the changes that the future will bring, will not be in the form which we have predicted, to quote Huizinga, the great historian of the medieval age, and something of an hero to the author. The past we know to some extent, the future not all all. Yet, he claims that even if we cannot predict what will happen

we may predict what will not. (Although from a formal logical point of view, there is no difference). The imminent end of the world is not likely he thinks but its eventual end may be closer than we think. There may be no long glorious future for mankind stretching million of years. In fact it is hard to imagine history going on as it has now for even just a few more hundred years. Is it really possible that the future of the next five hundred years will be as variegated as that of the past five hundred?

History is ultimately about memory. Memory properly interpreted. Collingwood speaks about the past being reconstructed in the present, closer we cannot get to it. All imagination, according to C.S. Lewis is based on memory, truly new things are literally unimaginable, all what we can do is to rearrange our memories. Diderot speaks about the imagination in a similar way, that it is limited and cannot go beyond that of simple rearrangement. An animal of the imagination is just a composition of real animals. Memory is essential to life, in fact our conscious life is just about remembering. This is why the subject of history is so important, this is why it is essential to any kind of human understanding. Without it there would be neither meaning nor purpose to life. But meaning and purpose are human constructs, not given to us, but created by us, and which we have at our peril to look for and cultivate. The ages which come may after all be like the ages that came, only subtly different.

So what may have been seen as a condemnation of modernity in the end turns into a singing of its praise. It may be doomed, but if so replaced by a different kind of modernity, because after all for all his grumping, the author is wedded to the idea of a tolerant and cultured civilization, embodying both meaning and purpose.

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