

Was the Past Really Better?  
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When we revere the past to the point of worship, we are saying that those who came centuries before us were smarter than we are. As a historian with little romantic illusion about the past, I think that this worship is misplaced. I checked this out with a two-part question on the final exam in the World History class that I taught: A) If you could go back in a time machine to any period in history, which would you select, and why? B) If you could not choose your gender or class, would this still be your choice, why or why not?

Imagine being a slave woman in ancient Greece or Rome. Imagine being a peasant in Medieval Europe. Imagine being a Jew living in Germany during the onset of the First Crusade in 1095. Even in our own time, class and gender (and religion) matter. Imagine being a woman living in tribal Afghanistan or the Central African Republic. Imagine being a man being the "wrong" ethnicity in any Muslim country today. The students got it! They laughed and admitted that this is the best of possible times for them.

Yet for the literalists among us, they think our ancestors knew better than we do. Such literalists are mostly found in religious sects, such as the Ultra-Orthodox Jews who harken to their 17th century origins in Poland, wearing the clothing (fur hats, caftans, wigs for married women). Some fundamentalist Protestants in the Kentucky backwoods believe the Ten Commandments should replace city ordinances. Mennonites in Pennsylvania dress and farm as their ancestors did centuries ago, even rejecting electric light or automobiles. The Vatican adheres to the ancient glories, dress, and masculine authority (no woman may apply). And with Koranic literalness, Islamists follow the model of 7th century Arab warfare with its slave markets, rapes, and decapitations.

There are others trapped in the events of the past that they cannot get past. Many in the American South who have never forgotten their defeat in the Civil War and some who cannot accept the emancipation of slaves. In Europe, Serbs remember with anger the defeat of their Eastern Orthodox ancestors by the Muslim Ottoman Empire. In Iran, Shiite Muslims mourn the death of Mohammad's grandsons 1400 years ago in a battle they never should have attempted.

Now we are reviewing (and some are mourning) the life and values of the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, a man who so worshipped our Founding Fathers and their Constitution that he believed that modernizing or changing the laws constituted errant nonsense. Brilliant as the Constitution was for its time, if we had not treated it as a living document we would still have Black slavery (the Constitution counts Black slaves as three-fifths of a person each for census purposes.) Women would not vote (not considered in the Constitution).

Yet a close reading of the Constitution's Second Amendment (yes, amendments were needed) regarding citizens and arms clearly notes that each state should have a "well-regulated militia" for protection. At that time and in the country's frontiers, there was neither national army nor a police force for protection in our ongoing wars with Native American tribes and outlaws. However, the "originalists" such as Scalia, interpreted the Second Amendment to mean that every American can be armed to the teeth.

Understanding history does not mean worshipping it. One need only consider how nasty and brief life was for most people in the past. We take for granted the benefits of civilization that we in the developed world enjoy. Few of us fear our neighbors; few of us live in daily danger from people who wish us ill; few of us know civil discord. But for those of us who do (such as in Paris today), they know that this is an aberration and with good governance and policing it can be set to rights. Modern people should not worship the past without understanding how terrible it was. A time machine trip would help convert the "originalists" from their folly.

674 words

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