

The Times Are Out of Joint: History as Consolation

By Michael Ignatieff

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'Your Royal Highness, Mr Dean, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It's an honour to give a lecture in such distinguished company and to be doing so in this setting. My theme tonight is history—whether it can console us when the times are out of joint. The idea that history can or should be consoling is controversial but, I shall argue, it is one of the functions of history that we cannot do without. On the other hand, there cannot be much doubt that the consoling power of the past itself, the magnificent inheritance rising above us at this moment, this work of centuries and of nameless craftsmen whose skill and faith still astonish us—this past will never lose its capacity to console, comfort and inspire.

My theme—history as consolation—may seem obscure so let me explain what I mean. By history, I mean, of course, the stories we tell to make sense of time. We tell these stories for very deep reasons: because we hope to unravel the hidden logic of the past, so that we can prepare for the future, or at least, be less astonished when it arrives; most of all, we study history to get our own private bearings: so

that we can understand our own tiny place in the flow of time. This kind of understanding is not always comforting. History may only remind us of how fleeting and small our own contribution or the contribution of our nation or group has been. Yet, in distinction from comfort, history can be consoling in the sense that it can replace our bafflement, anxiety and loss in the face of sudden or violent change. Great history can provide us with a frame of meaning that helps us to understand where we've come from, where we are and where we are going. What is consoling, in other words, is meaning, even when the meaning is not exactly comforting. It can become both comforting and consoling, however, when this narrative gives us confidence in the future. History after all is not only a story of human folly. It is despite everything the story of human accomplishment. Consolation, in this sense, is the opposite of resignation. It can offer us that feeling of confidence in the face of the unknown that we call hope.

These are some of the ancient impulses for consolation that remain with us today, even as we gave the custody of them in the 19th century to an emerging profession—the historians—who began to sternly tell us, in the great German historian Leopold Ranke's famous words that their job was not to judge or predict, still less to console, but only to tell us what 'actually happened.'

To say this was to bid farewell to history as consolation, to the grand narratives that once reassured us that history had a purpose, meaning and direction. These narratives were a kind of secular replacement for the ancient religious idea of Providence, the vision that God placed human time under his care and was guiding it towards a destination—the Day of Judgment, that fateful day at the end of time that would grant resurrection to the elect and consign the rest of us to eternal damnation.

In the late 18th and early 19th century, Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel replaced Providence with History—with a capital H-- and re-conceived the past as the story of the slow but inexorable emancipation of human beings from the chains of ignorance and dependency. For Kant and Hegel, the suffering and misery of real history were redeemed because, despite everything, the human story could be understood as the story of freedom, achieved through the painful yet ultimately victorious exercise of reason. This was a consoling even inspiring notion, and Kant and Hegel's ideas remain alive today in our contemporary ideas of progress.

Working separately from these German thinkers, but in line with their idea that history had a purpose and direction, the great men of the Scottish Enlightenment, Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson also re-imagined history as a story of progress. In 18th century Glasgow and Edinburgh, they taught their students to think of history as

a story of emancipation from the primitive technologies and backbreaking labor of the past. Thanks to science and the division of labor, mankind in their own time had attained the ease and comfort—at least for the middle class—of modern commercial society. In the 1840's, Karl Marx forged these German and Scottish ideas into a revolutionary synthesis. He made the proletariat the explosive new force that would dynamite commercial society and usher in the next—and final—stage of human history, Communism.

All of these stories were consoling because they not only gave time a meaning. They gave it an irresistible forward momentum: from backwardness, poverty, misery, and ignorance, towards freedom. For the Scots this process had no final destination. It promised only an endless receding horizon of improvement without end. Marx's version, on the other hand, was a secular reprise of the Providential idea of the Last Judgment. History was working towards a grand finale, towards a redeemed future in which human nature itself would be transformed, no longer acquisitive or enslaved, but generous and in harmony with nature and our fellow men and women.

What has been the fate of these magnificent ideas? History itself has not been kind to the Communist dream, of course, and historians themselves now define their profession in opposition to all teleological, purpose-driven accounts of time.

Since the days of Leopold Ranke and the mid 19th century consolidation of history as an archival, fact-based profession, the modern historian no longer tells its students these stories. They have historicized these 19th century visions as the hubristic illusions of a transient period of European self-confidence and imperial conquest, now relegated to the past. Morally speaking too, the historical profession condemns these stories of progress as sentimental narratives designed to legitimate a variety of tarnished political projects, Communism, socialism, and liberalism. The historians' job, the profession proclaims, is not to console, but on the contrary, to subject consoling visions to critical demolition.

Consolation is for children, but as for adults, historians tell us, we should grin and bear the present and face the future with stoical resilience.

By stoical, I mean, to live without historical illusions, to see through the heroic, all-forgiving narratives of our nation's glorious past, to remember, if we are Americans, that the republic was built on the edifice of slavery; to remember, if we are British, that the empire was built on violence, not just law; if we are French, that the 'mission civilisatrice' of the French was just another alibi for imperial rapaciousness.

All this work of demolition has been salutary: a necessary and overdue reckoning with inconvenient truths that faded imperial glories made it easy to ignore.

Yet, our desire for consolation keeps returning. The reason for this is simple. We need to live in hope.

What is so startling about the times we live in is the entire absence of narratives of hope that, our classical historical narratives from Kant and Hegel onwards once provided. Today, when we think about the future, dystopia is more popular than utopia, decay a more plausible scenario than progress. We find it much easier to imagine the future getting worse than better, despite the clear evidence, as we shall see, that for all the violence, disorder and anxiety of our times, most human beings are living longer and better than in any previously recorded period in human history.

In 2016, as he left office, in what feels now like the recession of the liberal hour, Barack Obama gave a speech to young black graduates at Howard University in which he did his best to rekindle faith in the liberal narrative of progress that we inherit from the Enlightenment:

“If you had to choose one moment in history in which you could be born, and you didn’t know ahead of time who you were going to be -- what nationality, what

gender, what race, whether you'd be rich or poor, gay or straight, what faith you'd be born into -- you wouldn't choose 100 years ago. You wouldn't choose the fifties, or the sixties, or the seventies. You'd choose right now."

The facts may be with the President. We are in the ninth decade of peace among the great powers. Life expectancy is up, for most of the human race. Child mortality is down. Absolute poverty is in retreat. For black Americans, for women, for gay men and women everywhere in the developed world, Barack Obama is probably right. So why is it that while the facts support his narrative, it has come to seem complacent rather than consoling?

Despite the enduring reality of human progress, despite the continuing pertinence of the narratives that first took shape in the Scottish and German Enlightenment, we no longer believe in the hope they hold out to us. Something has happened to our stories of time.

Instead of taking heart from the idea of progress, we console ourselves with the idea that at least we are freed from the 'radiant tomorrows' —Communism and fascism— that produced so much violence, misery and tyranny. This is held to be the kind of disabused and post-ideological skepticism that befits a modern person. Yet there is a price to be paid to live without political hope of any kind, to

believe that the best we can look forward to is more of the same, while the worst may be catastrophic.

I want to argue with historians who say good riddance to the story of progress. I want to respect our stubborn human impulse to seek consolation from history. I won't be able to console you with a hopeful new narrative, a grand story that revives the Enlightenment project. My aim is more limited: simply to sketch out some thoughts about why the times feel out of joint and why we should not give up on the narratives of progress that have sustained us through harder times than this.

To begin with, when we try to get to grips with our contemporary sense that our historical narratives have broken down, it's worth remembering that this feeling is not new. The metaphor we still use to describe it is more than four hundred years old.

When Hamlet realizes that his mother and stepfather had murdered his father—who now stalks the battlements of Elsinore crying out for vengeance—he exclaims:

"The time is out of joint. O cursèd spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!" (I.5.190-191).

In this Chapel at Windsor, in the presence of a royal personage, it is right to observe that for Shakespeare historical time meant royal time: the lawful succession of

monarchs. This time has been thrown out of joint by a murder most foul. Historical time, in Shakespeare's mind, is also moral time. The moral order that ought to prevail from one epoch to another has been overthrown. To restore the moral order, a son must avenge a father, and being Hamlet, anguished doubter that he is, he feels the call to action as a curse.

Hamlet's curse—"that ever I was born to set it right"—captures a contemporary sounding despair about our loss of confidence in our own historical agency. Hamlet wonders how he can possibly minister to his own disorientation and to those around him. His anguish makes him our contemporary, but Shakespeare would surely want us to understand that our times are no more out of joint than his own.

To think that modernity, late capitalism, the neo-liberal ascendancy—whatever name you want to give it-- is uniquely disorienting is a self-pitying conceit. Shakespeare's times were just as unsettling. If they weren't, he could never have devised so apt and resonant a metaphor.

So having used Shakespeare to make a consoling historical point—our times are not so out of joint as they appear—let me tack in a different direction and offer some thoughts about why the idea of progress—the old narrative that

dates back to Kant and Hegel—is now traversing a crisis of disbelief.

Let me start in what for Europe was Year Zero: 1945. Berlin is in ruins. Hamburg, London, Budapest are defaced with shell damage. The camps have just been liberated. Twenty million human beings have perished.

The very fact that the 18th century idea of progress could return after 1945, having survived two World Wars and the Holocaust—is a classic tale of the triumph of hope over experience. It was the same hope that led to the demographic explosion after World War II, that amazing surge of births, among the ruins and destruction that created the generation I belong to, the baby-boomers. Philosophy and history, you will be unsurprised to hear, had nothing to do with this surge of procreation. It was a blind, joyful, desperate rush to re-affirm life in the most important way possible, to create a generation that would inherit a world still in ruins.

The point about the post-war demographic surge is simple: hope is blind. We create the future in bed, in the dark, and it is wonderful that we do so, ignoring all the prophets of doom and enlightenment alike.

A second lesson to take from 1945 is about technology. We forget too easily how frightened we were by the technologies unleashed at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, how

nuclear Armageddon dominated the historical imagination for a generation until, in the words of Stanley Kubrick's brilliant *Dr. Strangelove*, we learned to love the bomb, or at least, to accept it as part of the strange, even frightening architecture that keeps the peace among the great powers. I don't want to sound complacent about nuclear weapons. In the hands of maniacs and dictators, they could still end life on the planet. But eighty years on, they still haven't. Indeed, they have made great power war more or less unthinkable.

It's worth remembering this as we confront the latest in a long series of episodes—stretching back to the steam engine in the Industrial Revolution—of fear, rising to panic, about the impact of technology. There is little doubt that the contemporary crisis of confidence about the future has been triggered by renewed anxiety about artificial intelligence, robotics and digitization. We are confidently told that new technology will wipe out the arena of our life where our self-worth and purpose are made: the world of work. We are confidently told to be afraid, very afraid, of the tools we have made to make work disappear. Experts in such things tell us that the new technologies will 'disrupt' everything, as if we had never seen 'disruption' before, as if it were some terrifying new departure after a long period of technological stasis. Have they forgotten the disruptions of the steam engine in the 18th century, the still more radical disruption of the electric light, the combustion engine and the invention of plastics in the late

19th century? To live since the Enlightenment is to live with disruption, and the task of politics ever since has been to develop the disciplines—of the market and the state—that keep disruption from destroying society. The point is we have been here before and we have not failed to master disruption with politics. Why give up and assume we cannot do so again?

Again, I don't want to sound complacent, merely to point out—and this is where history can be, if not consoling exactly, at least a salutary corrective—that our fearful imaginative response to disruption is itself imprisoned in the past. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, as far back as 1819, created the trope in which we have understood technological change ever since: the man-made monster who escapes human control. Without discounting the possibility that technological change will be frightening, all that I would plead for is that we understand just how deeply our fears are structured, organized and chained down by metaphors and tropes that come to us out of the past. Once we understand the grip of these metaphors, once we see just how far they foreclose on other more hopeful possibilities, then history has done its job: not consolation exactly, since the future of technology remains uncertain, but affirming something that a great historian of the 18th century, Giambattista Vico, a Neapolitan professor, almost totally ignored in his own time, once said: what human beings have made, they can understand.

What they understand, they can control. What they control, they no longer fear.

The narrative of disruption—as the self-justifying mantra of tech entrepreneurs, engineers and investors—is now applied to explain why our politics has become so savage and divisive. It is true that social media have unleashed the id of modern society, the lusts and hatreds that face-to-face civility once kept under control. Our politics once observed the forced politeness of face-to-face communication. Today, digital media enables and empowers radical disinhibition. On the Internet, as the famous cartoon has it, no one knows you're a dog. And it might be added nobody cares if you are behaving like one, either.

The old politics kept the ruthless battle for power and the explosive dynamic of popular emotion under the check of hypocritical civility, parliamentary procedure and a civilizational understanding that there was a crucial difference between an enemy—who would destroy you at any cost—and an adversary—who might be your ally tomorrow. Politics was once the competition of adversaries. It has become, thanks to social media, thanks to the inequalities and resentments on which it feeds, the politics of enemies. So we fear that the center will not hold, our institutions of representation and authority, will not be able to contain the anger that disinhibition has unleashed.

Again history here is not exactly consoling, but at least it can offer a salutary corrective to despair. Why suppose, for example, that the anger unleashed in contemporary politics are something unprecedentedly threatening? Before Brexit, to take an example on everyone's mind, there was the miners' strike of the 1980's, and before that the general strike of 1926, and before that the sometimes violent strife around Irish Home Rule, and before that the Corn Law Debates that broke parties apart, and before that the convulsive agitation around Reform Bill of 1832 and before that the Peterloo massacre of 1819, and before that. . . the English Civil War. Why despair of democracy, if this is the actual record of what British people like to think of as their unequalled and unparalleled history of political stability?

Moving our focus to another country in turmoil, why assume that the current American President is the first 'disruptive' holder of his office, or that institutions already tested by two hundred years of conflict between executive, legislature and courts, will prove incapable of holding his disruption in check? Why assume, further, that he represents no one but his own ego and greed? What if he authentically represents millions of people's anger, fear and loathing? Why not consider the possibility that he is not democracy's nemesis, but its authentic expression? It is disheartening to listen to commentators speaking as if the American republic were hurtling towards the end of

days. There have been terrible Presidents before—James Polk, James Buchanan, Warren Harding, to name but three—and we can confidently assume there will be more terrible ones in the future.

History here can raise our sights to what really matters. Historically speaking, the issue we all have to understand better is not the particular incumbent of the Oval Office, but the likelihood that the American Century is ending and a Chinese century is taking its place. Imperial transitions of this kind always awaken historical anxiety. Will the old rules of the American sponsored 'liberal international order' survive? Or will a peaceable order be replaced by a great power battle for supremacy in the Pacific, possibly leading to war?

Here in old Europe, once great powers now worry about their future place in history. Will they be able to keep up with these rivals, or will they be forced to subside into a genteel old age as a museum and heritage site for more historically confident visitors?

What is painful here is the sense, for the first time in European history since the 15th century, that this continent no longer makes history but has ceded its historical role to a new rising power, one moreover, who is indifferent to one of Europe's hard-won lessons, namely that human freedom is best preserved by a variety of combinations of democracy and free markets.

To these European anxieties about being consigned to historical irrelevance, history can only advise: get over it. The end of empire not only frees its subject peoples: it also frees their masters—or should do—from self-important fantasies of grandeur and assigns them to a humbler but still honorable role, defending what is properly seen as the great European achievement: the marriage of markets and democracy in an enduring synthesis which guarantees ordinary freedom.

Historians as far back as Thucydides have warned us that the rise of new powers and the decline of old ones is a moment of danger, in which old powers overestimate their capacity to hold on while rising powers overestimate their capacity to prevail. The German challenge to the British empire in World War I comes to mind, and we know that these miscalculations cost millions of lives.

There are those who are using the history of these past antagonisms to predict that the rise of China must end in conflict, with incalculable damage to the rest of us. Yet the astonishingly rapid rise of China, its prosperity, the way it has gained great power status within the rules of the liberal order, suggests a more peaceful possibility, in which we move from a world under a single hegemon to a plural balance of power, democracy and autocracy, American market capitalism and Chinese state capitalism, already deeply interdependent and intertwined, deciding that since they cannot defeat each other, they might as well live

with each other. These are hopeful possibilities, but history, as always, counsels prudence. Margaret MacMillan, the historian of World War I, reminds us, for example, of those thinkers of 1914 who thought war with Germany was inconceivable because the two capitalisms, German and British, were so deeply intertwined. Bearing this caution in mind, let us at least hedge our bets. History does not foreclose possibility. It reminds us that there were always alternative paths. Peaceful co-existence between China and America remains such a path.

So far I have tried to use historical examples to assuage or at least address three anxieties: about technology, politics and the future of the international order. These are the anxieties that lead us to live—I would argue wrongly—without hope.

The final anxiety I wish to discuss is more difficult to refute with historical example, because it is, in at least one sense, unprecedented. I refer, of course, to the challenge of climate change and environmental degradation.

One of the largest changes in our historical consciousness has been the realization that mankind has entered the age of the Anthropocene: the first age in which the chief forces shaping nature are the work of our own species. Some date this the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, others to 1945 and Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Whatever the dating,

we are in a new era, in which we attribute to human causation events we once attributed to God or fate.

We blame our species for everything now and the result is an upsurge of pessimism and misanthropy. It is common these days to read articles in which our species is described as a virus, an infestation, or to change metaphors, as the chief serial killer on the planet. These metaphors lead us to wonder out loud whether we deserve to survive our own undoubted destructiveness. Instead of feeling, as we have since the Renaissance, empowered by what we know, the more we know about our impact upon the planet, the worse we feel.

We have met the enemy, as the great American cartoonist Pogo used to say, and he is us.

It is impossible not to feel that we must change how we live and reduce, in small personal ways and large-scale social ways that price carbon fully and drive our economy with renewable energy, the burden we are all imposing on our planet.

But it is also important to keep faith in ourselves—in the labor, ingenuity, cunning, resilience and resourcefulness of the human species.

History tells us that in the face of a crisis like this one, there are always calls for repentance, for a bonfire of the

vanities, for violence against the guilty parties, the malign forces that have forced us into this trap. In a crisis of these dimensions, misanthropy becomes a spiritual danger we need to avoid. Radical environmentalism wants to shake us awake from fatalism, but the language of misanthropy they commonly use only breeds despair, passivity, disengagement and the very fatalism they wish to avoid. Such language—that calls for judgment, vengeance and apocalyptic change of life—has a history, and it is one that has led, in the Protestant Reformation, in the French Revolution, and in the chiliastic fervor of the Russian revolution to retributive violence. All these are impulses history would warn us to avoid.

For what real alternative is there, except to place our faith where we should have always placed it, in knowledge, reason, science, the imperfect, constantly adapting tools we have used, since the beginning of time, to gain such mastery as we have of ourselves and of our world? What real alternative is there to democratic politics? Today, democracy has become a synonym for paralysis or demagoguery: we need to remember that its fascist enemies thought so too and discovered, between 1942 and 1945, that they had made the fatal error of underestimating a democratic people's capacity to mobilize and act when truly threatened.

Here a historical perspective, while not exactly consoling, could enable us all to recover some confidence. While

environmental science has a long history, the actual political history of mass public awareness of the environmental crisis dates no further back than the 1960's. Mass awareness of the green house gas effect and the danger of CO₂ accumulation date no earlier than the 1980's. The first international climate change agreement—the Montreal Protocol on CFC's—dates to the late 1980's. Emission controls on cars, pioneered in California, come in no earlier than 40 years ago. The economics of carbon control—through carbon pricing and carbon taxes—became an academic specialty only in this century. We are closer now, in the early 21st century, to a mass politics of environmental action than at any time in history. The new politics has begun and we must give it time to have its effect.

Radical environmentalists are already warning us that this is all too little too late, but, in life as in politics, it is never too late. We have already been acting for some time: if we hadn't already reduced emissions and brought alternative energy sources on line, our situation would be worse than it is.

Already the next generation, today's teenagers, grasp that this is the cause, the political challenge they must rise to if they are to have a future to hand on to their children. Theirs is a political vision that would put our species in its place—as the servant and steward of the natural world,

not its master—but it cannot be a successful politics if its message is to hate ourselves for what we have done.

In finding the balance of activism and understanding we need, history can be a source of inspiration. We forget, at our peril, how deeply men and women have loved the natural world, portrayed it in art and music so that their fellow creatures would love it as they do. We forget that we have cultivated and made a garden of nature and not only—or not always-- destroyed it. We forget how deep a respect for nature's limits and nature's laws goes in the anthropological record. We have walked away from this wisdom, but we are already walking back to what our tribal ancestors and our peasant great grandfathers knew, before it is too late.

Let us confess that the story of progress we have told since the Enlightenment, the story we inherit from Kant and Hegel, Smith and Marx, made sense of time for us, but it was always a myth, concealing the dark side of our conquest of nature and the harm that progress has done to human beings themselves. But it was also an ennobling myth, one that taught us to believe in our capacity to become masters of our fate, rather than the slaves of gods and nature. We should be unafraid to confront the dark side of progress now, but without losing faith in what was ennobling.

History as myth is always an ambiguous basis for politics, but the human past, when seen truthfully, is the unique source of any faith we might have in our future. The material past, the remains that have been left behind, are what we need to reflect upon and draw confidence upon. When Notre Dame caught fire, a few weeks ago, a remarkable thing happened. Men and women with no tradition of attachment to the church found themselves weeping, as if they had discovered, too late, how consoling the physical presence of an eight-hundred-year old church could be. Take, finally, this extraordinary building. Built in the middle ages, over a century, by artisans who knew, as they built, that they would never live to see it completed, who labored to express, with their tools, all the skills of their forefathers, who in teaching, would have passed them on to their sons and daughters, these anonymous craftsmen who built a worthy home for the remains of kings and queens, this is a consoling place—even for those who live without the faith that inspired its creation—consoling because it reminds us, once again, what human beings, fortified by faith in themselves and in purposes larger than themselves, can accomplish.

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