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Editorial: Chronological Snobbery

Glen GoodKnight

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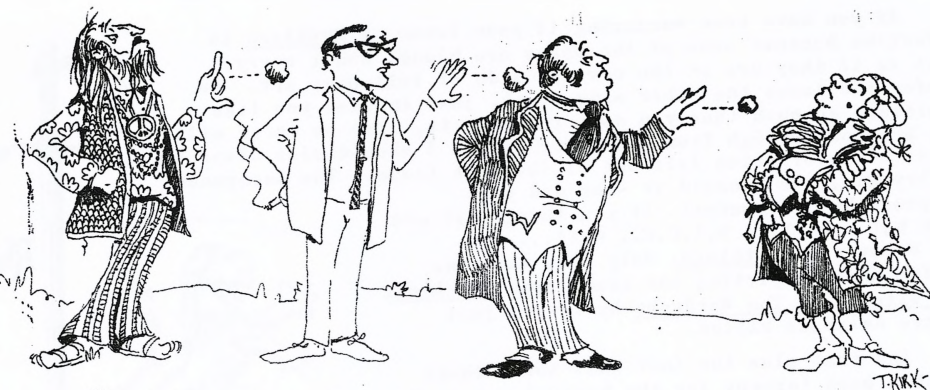
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Editorial: Chronological Snobbery



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Barfield.... made short work of what I have called my "chronological snobbery," the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited. You must find out why it went out of date; was it ever refuted (and if so by whom, where and how conclusively) or did it merely die away as fashions do? If the latter, this tells us nothing about its truth or falsehood. From seeing this one passes to the realization that our age is also "a period," and certainly has, like all periods, its own characteristic illusions. They are likeliest to lurk in those wide-spread assumptions which are so ingrained in the age that no one dares to attack or feels it necessary to defend them.

— C.S. Lewis, Surprised by Joy. London: Geoffrey Bles. 1955. p. 196.

You have just read the point and essence of this editorial; my purpose to make a contemporary comment on what Lewis described as his condition as college student.

There is an intense feeling of chronological snobbery in our culture today, just about as intense as former periods and for just the same reasons. The Age of Enlightenment was a highly snobbish one. Those who were of that Age felt truly superior to all former human history. They felt they had surpassed the wisdom of the classical world by the aid of untrammelled Reason. It was in this period that the term "Dark Ages" with a capital D was invented to describe the long and painful reorganization of the Western world.

The People of the Victorian Age knew they were superior to the Enlightenment. They had something better than abstract reason; they had verifiable and empirical reason in the form of a plethora of scientific discoveries and the industrial revolution, plus they had spread Western thought and technology to the whole world. They mistakenly assumed cultural superiority to all other civilizations they came into contact with, where the more real reason was that theirs was a civilization still growing, and had the enthusiasm with such growth, whereas it happened to work out, all other existant civilizations had already reached their golden ages and were in decline.

The so-called "Modern Western Man" of the 20th Century, seemed no longer to be nearly concerned with reason in any form or in intellectual systems of thought. They were more overwhelmed with the awareness of their own accomplishments. These

people seemed to decide that they wanted a materialistic, creature-comfort utopia. They worked hard and brought about their "golden age", but are we not seeing the hollow and bitter fruit that has resulted from neglecting or soft-peddling spiritual and ethical values to produce this material paradise?

We could say that the "Modern Western" world has had the worst snobbery of all, mainly because the harnessing of two powerful psychological and mythical forces. The first is the theory of Evolution. Here I must make my own position clear: I do not disbelieve in evolution as a working hypothesis to explain in a functional way

how organic life came to be where it is today. I understand there are some evidences to show great gaps in the theory, but am not that concerned either way, and find myself allowing my mind to use the theory of evolution as a convenient way to approach biological processes. What I am concerned about is the deification of the theory into a mystical metaphysical doctrine, which is the way it is popularly understood today. People began in the 19th Century to apply the theory to topics completely unrelated to biology; areas such as human recorded human history, music, politics, literature, human consciousness, economics, and worst of all: religion. By refusing to make a distinction between the mystical faith in the Doctrine of Evolution and the more scientific theory of biological evolution, Modern Western Man had a mighty power weapon in his arsenal to bolster his superiority, because of course this weapon had the backing of "Science", and as we all know Modern Western Man never questions "Science" as the fountainhead of Ultimate Truth.

The second weapon was the harnessing of psychological research into area of manipulating human wants and needs for commercial purposes: The Madison Avenue Approach. To make products sell and sell often Modern Western Man took the idea of the novelty and interest in something new, and expanded far beyond any previous age; they invented THE CULT OF THE NEW, as I call it. Such products as detergents, cigarettes, razor blades, and automobiles are outstanding examples of this cult. Every six months or so nearly every brand of detergent must come out with some fictitious improvement and cry "New, New, Improved!" or find their sales sharply dropping. Who knows if the admen have an scruples; they are forced by the nature of the market to continue their frantic dote of impossible claims.

This kind of thinking I find very dangerous; it implies "New is Good, Old is bad, but worse than bad, unfashionable? To me, this kind of thinking is a circular death trap. Perhaps people always need that new thing to make them feel important by identification, a sop to their deeper feelings of inferiority. If we always have to have the latest, the newest, what are we basing our values judgements on? We are denying any value in the thing itself, it is only valuable because it is new. When it has lost its Newness, it has lost its value. To me this is a denial of any true value in anything. Those who follow the Cult of the New seem to be on endless road to nowhere.

I would say, I prefer to seek value in the thing itself, and forgetting fashionability, calmly appreciate say a book for the qualities in and of itself. And isn't it ironic that many things that do seem fresh and worthy are so because they do not attempt to be the latest thing. Example: The Lord of The Rings.

In the 1960's we have seen the Post Western Man in strong reaction to the plastic glory of the former way of thinking. The reaction is mainly a rejection of, and non-involvement with what has come to be called, somewhat inaccurately, "the establishment." The 60's were a transition period, and we have seen both ways of think in clash. This transition period has seen the growth of the "generation gap" which means there is little true communication. Lewis has said that each period has defects and blind spots, and here I spot one with the "establishment" way of thinking. Modern Western Man has a fixation on the doctrine of necessary progress, (which proceeded from the Mystical Doctrine of Evolution), which is nearly the main

pillar supporting his chronological snobbery, and which tautologically proves he is bigger and better than all previous periods. But then what he says of the hippies, flower power, the yippies, the lovegeneration, and all the other manifestations of a new way of thinking? Modern Western Man, alias the Establishment, has seemed to have fallen into the trap of saying "the forces of progress has worked its mysterious destiny up till now; all those who come later are freaks and abortions of of this, up to now, perfect system." How's that for a necessary doublethink?

Change is not necessarily progress; change is merely change, and can be for good or ill. But what of the new ways of thinking that are pervading our culture with snowballing rapidity? To me the new attitudes are a result of at least a three generation situation. Let me outline it this way: generation A holds certain values and honestly tries to apply them to their culture, generation B finding out that a better and faster buck can be made by paying lip service to values while milking the system for personal gain, becomes the establishment - having the facade of cultural integrity and living the affluent life - and paying the desperate price of self respect and inner harmony. Generation C come to see the hypocrisy of B, and angrily throws the baby out with the bath water, that is they not only reject the hypocrisy of B, but also the honest values of A, which to me is a tragedy. (Here I recommend Abolition of Man by Lewis)

If the new generation "grooves" on the glories of nature, and the sensitivity of the human spirit, they also have the incredible arrogance to think that they are the first human beings to discover love, sex, awareness of beauty, and intellectual depth. In a way you almost can't blame them; the previous generation being so pre-occupied with other things. But arrogance is arrogance and needs to be rejected.

True freedom to me is to strive to escape and transcend all chronological snobbery. Up to now I have been sceptical of all four periods, speaking negatively of each period's foibles, but while the periods are all deficient, great minds have arisen in each period, which must be remembered. I identify with my brothers of all ages, understanding their limitations as I hope to be forgiven for mine.

Some would say I write purple prose. So be it. I'm saying what I think, but it has been very condensed, and does need much qualification.

To be at peace, is not only to be at peace with nature and the universe, but with your brothers, and not only those living now but also with those of former ages and of future ages (if man can survive). Aware minds are often produced in spite of the feelings of arrogance and a "hurray for our side" attitude. To me a cosmic appreciation of beauty and the human spirit is far more preferable and rewarding than to be blinded with snobbery and to feel you are the latest and most fashionable thing to come up the progressive tube.

