

HISTORY, DEMOCRACY & COCA COLA

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It seems long ago, longer even than the last millennium, when the eager theorists of the post-cold war New World Order announced the end of history. That forever after the world would drift endlessly through the ever-accumulating wealth provided to the virtuous by beneficent free markets. That Americans (and eventually the rest of the globalized world) would troop to the polls millennia after millennia to elect (sometimes with the help of the Supreme Court) an eternal stream of indistinguishable Republicans and Democrats whose sole argument would be over how big the tax cuts should be. The end of history. Although they have since had second thoughts, the fact that they actually thought that history would end—that change—time itself—would simply stop, frozen forever on the particular reality of the United States in 1989, remains one of the great confirmations of Emerson’s observation that such “communities of opinion,” as he put it, inevitably leave such “thinkers” “[wearing] one cut of face and figure, and [acquiring] by degrees the gentlest asinine expression.”

Strangely, as long as you didn’t look too closely, the assertion didn’t seem completely unreasonable. The only significant challenge to the modernity the U.S. embodied—a modernity based on free markets and the cultural and political institutions that developed over 400 years to protect and encourage them—had come from Marxism, another form of modernity. And Marxism had got its ass whipped. The Wall was down. Wall St. was up. The Soviet Union was un-united and Russia was scrambling to get on the go-go train. But even more importantly, the U.S. had come through the Cold War largely untouched by history.

But then arguably the U.S. hadn’t been touched by history since some time around 1865. History is not exactly the right word here, but we don’t have another. Let’s say the intense, often destructive events which remind us of our relation to, our place within the processes and currents of the world. Wars had come and gone. American lives had been lost. But it always had happened somewhere else. The closest it ever got

to home was Pearl Harbor and at the time, that was a colonial outpost of the still emerging Empire. There were psychic wounds, but they were individual, not the wounds of a culture profoundly damaged by violence. Turmoil had ripped through the world, uprooting and massacring tens, even hundreds of thousands, millions of people. In Rwanda, only a few years ago, over 800,000 people were murdered in a genocidal rampage. But for Americans—for whom the world is always already media-ated—it was a distant, even unreal event. Who can tally the ultimate effects of a world where reality—and history is nothing if not reality—is viewed through a tube darkly? One result was a kind numbness that might be mistaken for confidence. That numbness is the absence of history.

Schools tend to present history in terms of dates and events. That’s how we learn it. An historian, I guess, would tell you that in North America we don’t think of history at all. If you asked most North Americans when the Magna Carta was signed or the dates of the English Civil Wars, or even, for that matter, when Washington crossed the Delaware, or more importantly, why he bothered (to get to the other side?), they’d be more likely to get angry than try to answer the questions. They don’t like being made to confront their ignorance. Newspapers have picked up on this sense of history. They present history in terms of school curricula, civics lessons, and province wide exams. They run quizzes with hundreds of questions about things that happened in the past, and people sit around their kitchen tables on Saturday morning circling answers to find out how much they know, or don’t know, about history. History is measured in terms the quanta of a world of the past. But as important as knowing those events may be (and I do think it’s important), that’s not really it. That’s not history. That’s the grease left on the plate after the meat is gone.

That said, they can recall us to history. Most Europeans, surrounded by the remnants of the lives of those who preceded them, are recalled to history daily. It’s not that the Coliseum is history. It’s more

that walking past the Coliseum makes us remember the people whose lives were implicated in building and using such a structure and recalls us to the fact that we still are implicated in those events. Walking past Walmart, if it invokes thinking at all, only makes us wonder how much Coca-cola you can get for 5 bucks this week.

Those who proclaimed the end of history had more in mind than lists of past dates and events. They were after more than that, and more even than the patterns that historians since Thucydides have tried to discover and explain in terms of meaningful developments and concepts. The death of history was, on the surface supposed to be about the end of fundamental change, as if the culture and economy of the United States of America had achieved not just a high point in human endeavor, but The Pinnacle, beyond which the only new that would emerge would be kitchen gadgets or cloned organs. It meant the end of human agency and the absolute curtailing of the human imagination except for entrepreneurial undertakings within a neo-liberal economic order.

But from the beginning America was above all a break with history, not so much its end as its denial or the forgetting of it. From the moment Christopher Colombus set eyes on what later was called Venezuela and saw it as the location of King Solomon's mines, the place has always been tied up in the fantasies of another world. Emerson refers to the process as doubling or dividing. In "Experience" he proposes that "Life will be imaged, but cannot be divided or doubled." He is working up to the conclusion of his essay at this point:

I know that the world I converse with in the city and in the farms, is not the world I think. I observe that difference and shall observe it. One day, I shall know the value and law of this discrepancy. But I have not found that much was gained by manipular attempts to realize the world of thought. Many eager persons successively make an experiment in this way, and make themselves ridiculous.

If this in part is directed at his friends at Brook Farm, it also indicts a nation intoxicated with Christianity—no, an idea of Christianity—and an overwhelming belief in the apocalyptic destiny of another idea called democracy. "They acquire democratic manners," he says, with the emphasis on manners, "they foam at the mouth, they hate and deny."

History long ago gave way in the American popular imagination to what sometimes is referred to as "myth." It's not, of course. Among some of the others of civilization, the "uncivilized," the "barbarians," and even ourselves, once, myth is a mode of perception through which the world appears in a kind of terrific, godded and storied majesty. Now, the word myth as it is used in North America means the transformation of history into a secularized symbolic typology. Rooted in Puritan biblical exegesis, it is founded on the notion of a national character arising out of founding moments and persons that masquerade as history but in fact are symbolic types—the original marauding Anglo-Saxon tribe saved from starvation by the Indians, George Washington telling the truth about cutting down the cherry tree, Thomas Jefferson penning the lines, all men are created equal. In each case, the actual complexity of whatever human event occurred is displaced by the compulsion toward the most didactic moralizing. Each and every moment in American "history" thus becomes charged with intense meaning as it symbolically informs the national psyche. Ask about King Philip's War or Sally Hemmings, however, and you are likely met with a blank and/or angry stare.

Because of that there is no such thing as a casual or merely functional gesture in American civic life. Everything must mean something in the national psychodrama. Thanksgiving can't just be a fall holiday, as it is in most countries in the world which celebrate the harvest (in October—when it occurs). It has to be a Celebration of National Origins, or as my friend in Oklahoma suggests, a Celebration of National Whiteness. Thomas Jefferson can't be just a really

smart, complicated guy with some character flaws who wrote heady Enlightenment philosophical-political texts and fooled around with (maybe even loved) his (“black”) sister-in-law (slave) after his wife, her half-sister, died. He’s either a flawless, impeccably virtuous Founding Father, or a depraved, lying, hypocritical Simon Legree. Ain’t, as they say, no two ways about it in American “history.” Or, for that matter, any other aspect of American life.

But if history is not lists of events or stories that organize them, what is it? The poet Charles Olson, in *The Special View of History*, called history a function and a condition, a condition he named the penetralium after Keats, who derived it from architectural usage (the inner most recess of a building or shrine). It is then an awareness of and relation to what’s happening that locates us as part of what Olson called an intensity. The idea of an innerness here is not about hiddenness or something occult, but about that life which is ours if we grasp it where it rises within us to propel us into the world.

For Keats, who was arguing about meaning and language and taking a little shot at Coleridge in passing, the penetralium came up in conjunction with the “Mystery.” Negative capability, he famously said, “is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge.” Bringing in Keats, Olson went on to suggest that “[t]he rhyme is still ‘mystery,’” though he shifted the sense slightly with his lower case ‘m.’

By history I mean to know, to really know. The rhyme is still ‘mystery.’ We can’t stand it. Nothing must be left undone. We have to run up against the wall. There is nothing which happens to us which we don’t have the right to know what the — goes on. Even to know that one can’t know. Which is the hooker.

Following Keats, Olson was after that tendency of those who use “history” as if it told a “true story” that not only ties up all the loose ends, but in the process, justifies any cruelty, any brutality that seemingly flows from it. As if our condition could be explained by reference to history as an answer. As if we could know it all. And as if everyone must be persuaded to accept that answer. Olson’s name for that was Thucydides, and its alternative he identified with Herodotus. The one told a single story, the other many, many stories collected from many, many people.

For Olson, who always moved back toward the specificity of each life, that life itself was “the historical function,” an echo of Emerson’s proposal that there is no history, only biography. I take Olson (and Emerson) to mean that history is a living relation, not a chronicle of events or a particular narrative interpretation of them. It’s what we do, simply put, and it has no end, no determination other than what we bring to it, with guts, care, intelligence, and above all, imagination.

Every once in a while, history demands that Americans pay attention in spite of their cultural denial. The flaming collapse of the World Trade Centre was such a recent moment, and while it bore all the hallmarks of a celluloid event, it escaped that death in life at least momentarily by the actual havoc it unleashed. While two thousand lives are not much in a world where people armed only with machetes can kill 800,000, or a wave can kill 250,000, it was still more than Americans are used to. It was “historic” in a way that, say, the Oklahoma bombing wasn’t.

The Oklahoma City bombing killed 168 people, most of them either children or government employees, many of them black. Perhaps that lack of social oomph, combined with the fact that the building had no place in the national psyche (except to remind everyone briefly and guiltily of countless interminable queues) undermined any sense of history at work. It wasn’t that people weren’t shocked and saddened and outraged. It’s just that it never became “4/19.” The U.S. government did not declare war on anyone. The best

military in the world was not dispatched to Montana to take out various militia encampments. The militias that nurtured McVeigh and the radio/television commentators whose irresponsible, vicious rhetoric inflamed him continued unchallenged and unchanged without a single Guantanamo being created for them by Congress.

What was seen as historic, even in the midst of the demise of history, about the attack on the World Trade Center, remains elusive. Everyone knows it's historic. No one is quite sure why, other than some vague sense it was an act of war. Perhaps that's where the difference lies between Oklahoma City and Manhattan. McVeigh and his cohort thought they were committing an act of war (against the State), but everyone else thought they were a bunch of loonies. More importantly, they had names like McVeigh and Nichols. That's not history. That's criminal behaviour.

Ambrose Bierce once said that war was God's way of teaching Americans geography. More sadly, it is also their connection to any sense of history as something outside remote text books. War is history. Some disaffected ex-GI white guys with a hard-on for the government in the name of the sanctity of the Constitution, however naughty they are, cannot, by definition, declare war on America. All they can do is break the law.

We only find ourselves at war when the attack on the government (which now strangely becomes identified with "our way of life") is carried out by brown guys with a hard-on for the government in the name of Islam. Certainly in Olson's sense, they understood themselves to be in history, to be acting with the intensity of history. And if in no other sense, it opened America to history at that moment. That may have been part of the shock of the moment, the sudden realization that history, in the intensity of those men, and the men who sent them, was not dead.

It could have gone any number of ways at that point. Olson, immersed in history, found himself during the Second World War, working at the Office

of War Information in the Roosevelt administration, charged with building support for the war among a reluctant population. Olson, believing that democracy, as a process, was worth fighting for, proposed to use the occasion of the war to renew that process among the American people. That is, he saw democracy not as a set of bureaucratic, organizational functions, much less as a "brand," but as a historical intensity that arose from people fiercely engaged with making a particular world for themselves. It was not something you "got." It was something you fought for over and over.

It's not that what I'm calling "the idea of democracy"—democracy as a commodity, a brand to be bought, sold, exported—is without some virtues. A stable, relatively benign autocratic system in which those with enormous amounts of money allow others without money the right to choose which one of the rich will rule every four years (as democracy is currently constituted in the U.S.) has certain benefits, the most important being that it has so far prevented the outbreak of large scale political violence for over 150 years. I, at least, think that's a virtue. Others will disagree. But it's not democracy, which presumably has to do with the education and mobilization of the people to actively, daily, participate in the governing of their collective civic condition. What happened to Olson was perhaps all too predictable. After producing one pamphlet, "Spanish Speaking Americans in the War: The Southwest," he was shunted aside and replaced by Madison Avenue Guys with orders to sell democracy as a product, a commodity worth having and worth fighting for, whatever it was. Like Coca-Cola, Olson said.

The historical opening the attack on the World Trade Center momentarily provided had a half life of less than a second. What could have been an opportunity to confront the complexities of history and the agency of Americans in relation to that, what could have been a chance to renew democracy, became instead the chance to further sell the "idea of democracy," and especially the apocalyptic destiny of

democracy, the idea of democracy as the end of history.

Americans know what they believe, and have never allowed themselves to be confused by facts, especially when their sense of national virtue is at stake. Nearly three years after George W. Bush himself renounced his delusions about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, more Americans than ever continued to believe in them. People (or at least Americans) will fight for cheap Coca-cola, especially if it is somehow associated in a vague way with virtue, and the idea of democracy (cheap Coke for everyone!) is nothing if not reeking with virtue—something history never does.

So rather than a sense of renewal and the opening of history, we are witness to the resuscitation of Truth in all its singular glory and the further evasion of history. *E pluribus unum*, it seems, is the current destiny of the United States just as manifest destiny once was. The *unum*, which historically expressed the intensity of the drive of diverse, alienated, colonial British subjects to forge a new nation out their unique, unprecedented experiences, has become the Imperial compulsion to protect themselves from diversity by converting the rest of the world to their Truth, much as Christian missionaries set out to do in the 18th and 19th centuries. That Truth now is the idea of democracy. No, not even the idea of democracy, but the “belief” in it, where the idea, such as it is, remains the stuff of vague sentiments and easily regulated functions.