

The Roots of Our Cultural Rot

by David A. Eisenberg

The End of Modernism: Towards a Scientific Theory of Where We Are and How We Got There, Matthias Gisslar, independent, 2024, pp. 175, \$14.00 paperback.

The War Against the Past: Why the West Must Fight for Its History, 1st Edition, Frank Furedi, Polity, 2024, pp. 272, \$23.50 hardcover.

Perhaps in the rot beneath their feet, right and left can find common ground. Consensus regarding the reasons for that rot, to say nothing of the remedies to it, will be more difficult to reach.

For those inclined to conserve the past, much of the rot is rooted somewhere in modernity, some tracing it back to the notorious 1960s, others to seminal thinkers like Marx or seminal events like the French Revolution. For those bent on overcoming the past, the rot runs much deeper, stretching all the way back to the very foundations of civilization, the Western one in particular. The dispassionate observer cannot but think it odd that of all the world's civilizations—extinguished and extant alike—the West alone is singled out for rebuke. What is also queer is that those

who find so little in the historical record worth salvaging squander so much of their time rummaging through it. But therein lies the rub. The principle that guides those who plunder the past is a contortion of Santayana's celebrated dictum: those who do not condemn the past are condemned to repeat it.

To a swelling spate of books that seek to diagnose the cultural moment, two more have been tossed in. Matthias Gisslar's self-published *The End of Modernism* takes the short view, attributing much of the cultural rot to recent developments. In *The War Against the Past*, the indefatigable Frank Furedi takes the long view, surveying the left's use and abuse of history—ancient and modern alike—in a work that (at times) reads like a farce, but heralds a tragedy.

Gisslar is nothing if not ambitious. In a relatively slim volume, he sets out to provide what he calls an Anthropology of the West. It sounds neat and impressive, though it is not entirely clear what it amounts to. What is clear is that in Gisslar's eyes, recent attempts to explain the cultural decay of the West have come up short, in part because they have been affected in a piecemeal manner by a hodgepodge of authors who lack the competence to carry out so complicated an endeavor (15). The boldness of Gisslar's claim is hammered home when one considers the authors who make up the hodgepodge: Douglas Murray, Victor Davis Hanson, Joanna Williams, and Jonathan Haidt, to name but a few. Gisslar then presents himself as a grand systematizer, albeit one who, in the end, does not provide much in the way of a grand system.

The impetus for this undertaking is that history did not unfold as Gisslar anticipated it would. Without stating it expressly, Gisslar appears to have imbibed Francis Fukuyama's much ballyhooed *End of History* thesis. "As late as 2018 I thought I knew where the world was at and how it had got there" (11). It is interesting that Gisslar's faith in this narrative was not shaken sooner. In the quarter century that elapsed between the publication of Fukuyama's book and Gisslar's awakening, a torrent of history that would seem largely incongruous with the notion that history had reached its terminus was unleashed. Even if radical Islam's rise, the Twin Towers' fall, China's meteoric ascent,

and Russia's resurgence from the ash heap of, well, history did not prove fatal to Fukuyama's thesis (as Fukuyama doggedly maintains), such events seriously called into question the notion that the West had proved triumphant or that liberal democracy was the most satisfying political dispensation ever conceived and hence, pointed to nothing beyond itself. What troubled Gisslar is that the left, which had been so roundly defeated, was not only still standing, but was pressing forward with unbridled audacity.

How to square the sickle? According to Gisslar, the concept of modernity is "highly confused." (31) In an attempt to dispel that confusion, he proposes a periodicity of modernity akin to that of the Middle Ages, with its early, high, and late eras. Why modernity should be classified in a like manner or follow a similar unfolding is never really elucidated. Whatever the reason, the reader is informed that the West finds itself on the cusp of high modernity, stumbling blindly through the twilight of early modernity. The conceptualization is not terribly compelling nor is it shown why any of it much matters. The rationale may be that if modernity's trajectory mirrors that of the Middle Ages, then knowing where we are, we can predict whither we are headed. And perhaps not just predict, but determine? (It is unclear if man is the maker of history or the plaything of it.)

Gisslar posits an important distinction—important to his argument—between modernity and modernism. The

former refers to a historical period, the latter to the spirit that animates that period. As the latter is given pride of place in the title of his book, it safely may be assumed that that is Gisslar's central concern. Modernity in some ways has only just begun, but the animating spirit of it (modernism) has effectively run its course. Here it might have been helpful for Gisslar to draw parallels to the Middle Ages. If Christianity was the animating spirit of the Middle Ages, then by this analogy, that spirit would have been exhausted by 1000 AD, when the Early Middle Ages gave way to the High. Seeing that the High Middle Ages comprehends marvels that were born of that putatively exhausted spirit—Aquinas, Dante, gothic cathedrals, and the founding of universities (as fundamentally religious institutions)—is one to hope that commensurate glories await the West in the period of high modernity that it is now entering? The tenor of Gisslar's book suggests no.

The cornerstones of modernism are rationality, equality, and individualism. These are important elements to draw attention to, but Gisslar's treatment of them is largely unsatisfying. Rationality, for example, is, according to Gisslar, reified in the separation of church and state and modern science. Tabling the fact that neither of these reifications indicates *what* rationality is, Gisslar's account fails to explain why rationality effloresced in the West in a manner or to a degree that was exceptional. Why did church and state separate? When church and state separated, was it really

reason that impelled the divide? Is the state truly an embodiment of rationality? All states? What of those states that did not only separate themselves from church, but actively sought to destroy it? Is that rationalism in action; reason incarnate?

As for science, Gisslar contends that science has in effect stalled; its grand discoveries belong to the past, not the future. His basis for this claim is a book published in 1996 by a staff writer for *Scientific American*. It is curious that while the twenty-first century wrested Gisslar from his dogmatic slumber regarding the end of history, a similar awakening did not occur with respect to the end of science. The mere promise and peril of AI ought to underscore one of the underlying paradoxes of modern science: though it prides itself on its predictive abilities, modern science relies on discoveries that, by their very nature, cannot be predicted. That aside, it can be argued that nothing commands modern man's respect and obedience as thoroughly as does modern science. If one wishes to preserve the analogy, science is to the people of modernity what the Church was to the people of Middle Ages: an authority scarcely understood and never to be gainsaid. "Trust the science" may be a vacuous mantra, but the mere fact that it could be peddled so extensively and adopted so enthusiastically attests to enduring eminence of modern science.

Whatever the future of science may be, on Gisslar's telling, modernism is spent. The argument seems to be that

the three pillars of modernism have begun to cave in on themselves: rationality has devolved into an irrational, interpretivist subjectivism; equality expands to subsume ever more fringe marginalities that spring up unbidden only to be brought into the fold, necessitating an ever-expanding and increasingly unsustainable administrative state (no longer rational, one supposes) predicated on the promise of equality and justice for all; and individualism has engendered a pervasive sense of despair that has fostered in turn a recrudescence of tribalism in the form of identity politics, as individuals futilely search for solace in an atomistic age bereft of meaning and purpose.

How we got here is not entirely clear. Unsurprisingly, the left bears the brunt of the blame for the devolution of modernity. (If the West finds itself on the cusp of *High Modernity*, is it really a devolution? Does not the rise go *before* the fall?) Gisslar's indictment of the left is downright damning. As he frames it, the left not only is wrong, but dead wrong; harms the very people they purport to help; and is tantamount to a cult, and a demonic or satanic one at that (73). This sounds like hyperbole, but one gathers it is not meant to be. Regardless, charges of this sort are hardly in keeping with a so-called Anthropology of the West. An anthropology of religion that characterized religion as being incurably idiotic, injurious, and iniquitous would be self-invalidating; it would flout the very objectivity that it is obliged to embrace. In Gisslar's de-

fense, he is laying the groundwork for an Anthropology of the West, not of the left. But the left is such an abiding part of the West that a judicious assessment of it would seem warranted.

The persistence of the left is not lost on Gisslar who advances a theory that every thirty years (going back to the French Revolution) there is a resurgence of leftist radicalism. It feels contrived and is neither convincing nor well supported, but if it were true, that periodic resurgence would be portentous, not just in terms of the left, but with regard to the West itself. Why is radical leftism such a fixed feature of the West? This question is particularly pressing and perplexing in view of Gisslar's damning indictment. Perhaps leftist dreams and delusions speak to a need or longing that inheres, if not in human nature, then in the nature of Western man. Perhaps the underpinnings of the West—rationality, equality, and individualism—are collapsing, not because they have been co-opted by the left, but because they are intrinsically hollow. Perhaps without being grounded in something deeper or transcendent, those principles incline man to nothingness—to “a penetrating sense of his own nothingness” [Nietzsche].

The question of human nature is an important one, as Gisslar himself recognizes, in spite of never adequately delving into it. A more constructive analysis of the left might begin with *their* conception of human nature—implicit or otherwise. Since the French Revolution is effectively made the dawn

of modernity in Gisslar's framework, it would be fitting to turn to its progenitor, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in trying to make sense of the left's approach to human nature. (Rousseau did not arise ex nihilo any more than modernity did, but one must start somewhere.) For Rousseau, what distinguishes man from beast is free will and perfectibility. Alone amongst earth's creatures, man is at liberty to defy his instincts and man alone is capable of transforming himself into something substantively distinct from what he once was. A crocodile is today what it was 100 million years ago, but a homo sapiens today is profoundly different from what a homo sapiens was 100 millennia ago. What the left takes away from this is that human nature is malleable; that man can will himself to be whatever he wants to be. That such Faustian efforts have consistently faltered, often with devastating consequences, suggests that there is something stubborn in man that refuses to bend. But given the transformative potential of science (which it is safe to assume is far from being expended) and given the decline of traditional norms and constraints that might serve to temper man's ambitions (a decline precipitated not by the radical left, but woven into the very fabric of modernity), it is hardly any wonder that Western man continues to stumble as he unremittingly labors to remake the world in his own image. Rationality, equality, and individualism may be values worth sustaining, but they do little to provide guidance in man's perennial search for

answers. Alas, neither does Gisslar, who trumpets the importance of a science of human nature without ever pointing in the direction of one.

A deeper and more penetrating insight into the present is born from a deeper and more penetrating exploration of the past in Frank Furedi's latest book, *The War Against the Past*. Furedi's ambitions may be modest in comparison—an Anthropology of the West is nowhere adverted to—but in exposing the magnitude of the crisis at hand, he succeeds where Gisslar does not. The war against the past imperils not only the past, but the future as well. One could say that what is at stake is nothing less than the soul of the West.

Souls, be they individual or cultural, can be reoriented. Man, the in-between animal, can prioritize his higher nature at the expense of the lower—by seeking and honoring what is noble, sublime, divine—or his lower at the expense of the higher—by consecrating his material pleasures and giving in to his carnal desires. Insofar as cultures are but reflections and manifestations of the longings of those who (mis)direct them, cultures too can be (re)oriented in such fashion. With the left's deconstruction of Western Civilization proceeding apace, the soul of the West, once deserving of reverence and gratitude, increasingly becomes an object of contempt and condemnation. It is a soul irredeemably tarnished by sin, not towards the divine or what is loftier in man, but towards those who proclaim to have been harmed by the West—vic-

tims of progress who rapaciously reap the advantages of the civilization they impudently traduce.

Healthy cultures maintain healthy connections to their pasts. The reasons for this might be appreciated intuitively. If the past is suffused with noble deeds and heroic triumphs, the splendor of those achievements will radiate far into the future, nurturing those who have the privilege of belonging to that heritage. If the past is little more than a repository of misery and oppression, then the present born from it is likely to be blighted as a result. Unless history can be purged and, as needed, expunged.

A once radical but increasingly quotidian tenet of the left is its adherence to what Furedi refers to as the Ideology of Year Zero. The principal aim is to wipe the slate clean and start anew. Furedi is astute in noting that the goal here is not simply to disjoin the present (and future) from the past. The futility of driving out history with a pitchfork has been well established. Recalibrating calendars and renaming cities and razing monuments may all be worthwhile exercises, but one must go further. The key to wiping out the past is not simply to bury it, but to delegitimize it. Thus, for example, Aristotle is not to be taken up in the impartial spirit of philosophy, but is to be taken down per the partisan pieties of the modern left. What matter Aristotle's analytical errors when the man's teachings, and thereby the man himself, are reprehensible. His logical fallacies may be forgiven, but not his moral ones. In this manner, a towering

sage venerated by Christian, Jewish, and Muslim thinkers alike, who loomed so large in the medieval mind that he was referred to as *the* Philosopher, has become "the father of scientific racism" (69), an Epimethean peripatetic who let loose upon the world the evils of racism that bedevil mankind to this day. For those who wish to start the world anew, denigration proves more efficacious than refutation.

One of the pleasures and successes of this book is that Furedi takes the left at their word and allows them to speak for themselves. In doing so, the absurdity of their reasoning is laid bare. By way of example, Furedi highlights an exhibit at the Mary Rose Museum in Portsmouth, England, featuring objects retrieved from Henry VIII's battleship. Among the items on display were nit combs and mirrors, used by sailors to extract lice eggs from their hair, as the curators, in their role as historians, noted. In their role as ideologues, the curators went on to note that such objects suggest that sixteenth-century sailors may in fact have been gay, because a central pillar of Queer identity is how Queer people wear their hair (95). In other contexts, stereotyping of this sort would constitute a veritable microaggression. It would seem that even heinous peccadillos can be pardoned, so long as one leaves no room for doubt about which team and which side of history one is on. Since the father of racism is also the father of logic, the curators displayed their bona fides by mercilessly offending logic. The enemy

of my enemies (racism and logic) is my friend.

These sorts of anachronistic machinations with which the book is rife betray the incoherence that inheres in the left's war on the past. While legions of leftists labor to delegitimize the past, they also toil tirelessly (and tiresomely) to (mis)appropriate the past with an eye to legitimizing the present. If history is a vast repository of sin, racism, misogyny and the like, who cares about the sexual predilections of the miscreants who litter it? Because precedent strengthens one's position. By combing through the annals of history, allies can be extracted to lend support to the day's pet cause. Yesterday's misfits paved the way for today's pseudo-mavericks who, unlike genuine mavericks, find strength in numbers and comfort in conformity.

Of course, if the past can be used to sanction the capricious ways of the woke, presumably it can be used to sanction slavery, torture, and human sacrifice. The left's tendentious treatment of the past leaves little room for doubt regarding their true objective. Whether Aristotle is being lambasted for racism or Emperor Elagabalus is being lauded for transgenderism, history only has value to the extent that it serves to vindicate the values of the left. The narcissism and sheer hubris that animates such an undertaking is rather astounding. The entirety of the past, including "the best that has been said and thought [and done]," is put on trial where arbiters who make no pretense to neutrality render judgements

that rest on nothing firmer (nor fairer) than their own arbitrary proclivities and solipsistic conceits. Transman is the measure of all things.

While much of this pillaging of the past appears risible, Furedi makes it clear that the war against the past is no laughing or trifling matter. Those who treat it as such fail to apprehend what hangs in the balance, which is not so much the fate of the past, but that of the future. In this regard, consider the left's fixation with language, which on the face of it may seem extraneous to the left's war on the past. But when that war is viewed as a means to controlling or shaping the future, the manipulation of language becomes a crucial component of that larger effort. It signifies the constructive side of their destructive project, presaging the establishment of new norms and transvaluation of old values. Thus, for example, to call someone fat or overweight or obese is no longer acceptable. Such words convey negative connotations; they stigmatize people for their life choices or for the life that afforded them no choice. To right such wrongs, it is not enough to decry them; one must carve a path forward, the wider, the better. Enter people of size! Of course, all people are *of size*, which in part is the point. Newspeak not only destigmatizes certain behaviors; it also conceals or obliterates the distinctions upon which the longstanding norms that governed such behaviors once reposed.

Furedi appreciates what is lost on Gisslar, which is that far from be-

ing roundly defeated, the left is winning. Gisslar's too narrow focus on the failures of sovietism or welfarism or whateverism, distracts him from the resounding victories that the left continues to amass in a scorched earth offensive that shows no signs of abating—from the rewriting of history to the revision of language to the deracination of today's youth, whose ignorance of the past is exceeded by their hatred for it. Each of these tactics is an integral part of a campaign to reengineer Western culture, monumental in its scope and staggering in its success. By way of a testament to that success, those born in the twenty-first century grow up in a day where same-sex marriage, a social institution that existed nowhere the world over in any century prior, has become so conventional that they never think to question it and summarily excoriate anyone who does. Those who would be quick to equate that with progress would do well to bear in mind that that same spirit of progress begets a growing number of people who earnestly entertain the notion that men can give birth and no less earnestly labor to answer the question, what is a woman? With the cultural foundations of the West being so prodigiously and effortlessly upheaved, it is too plain for dispute that in the war against the past, the advantage belongs to those who, with Orwellian bravado, proclaim to be on the right side of history—the very history they implacably struggle to destroy.

David A. Eisenberg is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Eureka College and the author of *Nietzsche and Tocqueville on the Democratization of Humanity* (2022)
