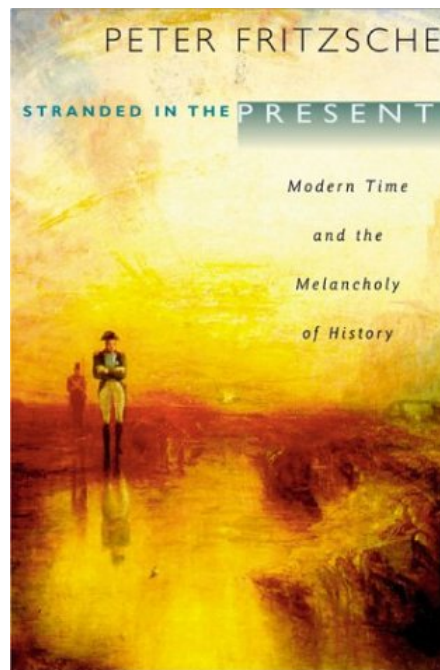




Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History

Peter Fritzsche

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In this inventive book, Peter Fritzsche explores how Europeans and Americans saw themselves in the drama of history, how they took possession of a past thought to be slipping away, and how they generated countless stories about the sorrowful, eventful paths they chose to follow. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, contemporaries saw themselves as occupants of an utterly new period. Increasingly disconnected from an irretrievable past, worried about an unknown and dangerous future, they described themselves as indisputably modern. To be cast in the new time of the nineteenth century was to recognise the weird shapes of historical change, to see landscapes scattered with ruins, and to mourn the remains of a bygone era. Tracing the scars of history, writers and painters, revolutionaries and exiles, soldiers and widows, and ordinary home dwellers took a passionate, even flamboyant, interest in the past. antiques, all the time charting their private paths against the tremors of public life. These nostalgic histories take place on battlefields trampled by Napoleon, along bucolic English hedges, against the fairytale silhouettes of the Grimms' beloved Germany, and in the newly constructed parlours of America's western territories. This eloquent book takes a surprising, completely original look at the modern age: our possessions, our heritage, and our newly considered selves.

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Gaylord Dold says

Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History by Peter Fritzsche (Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2004)

Hegel, from his vantage point as professional philosopher in Germany, perceived the Emperor Napoleon on his white horse, followed in close step by the French post-revolutionary army, as history on the move, a distinctly modern conception that was not Hegel's alone, but one that was shared by almost every person in the European battle zone. History emerged, as metaphor, in the guise of Napoleon; history, in its concrete social reality, revealed itself suddenly as disjunction, restlessness, change and total war, then finally, as nostalgia for the past, a past seen as irretrievably cut off from both the present and the future, a state of affairs which itself was experienced as an unknowable quantum of possibility. In the view of Peter Fritzsche, in his enormously incisive and engaging book, "Stranded in the Present", the people of Europe, after the French Revolution, became "contemporaries" just as historical time became "synchronized" according to epochs, ages, and periods. At the same time, as contemporaries, Europeans adopted a special consciousness of history as a "mass medium" in which indeterminacy and transition claimed a place unique to culture.

The French Revolution threw out the living past with the dishwater of the ancient regime. "In one stroke, it deadened and immobilized history prior to 1789; the Middle Ages, the Dark Ages, the dead ages." Enlightenment thinkers conceived of the present as the most forward point of a "great continuum of progress that pushed on and on". Not so after the Revolution, when the present was conceived of as a great jumping off place into the unknown, while the past became an object for nostalgia, cut loose from the operations of nature. The restless disruption that so impressed Marx in his critique of early capitalism, the roads filled with vagabonds, drifters, army deserters, refugees, travelers, casual tourists, homeless veterans, thieves, bandits—all the burly refuse of war and change, these snapshots of life dominated the cities and countryside both. Never before had men and women lived so alone, noted Alexis de Tocqueville of his contemporaries in the 1820s and 1830s: "They do not resemble their fathers; nay, they perpetually differ from themselves, for they live in a state of incessant change of place, feelings, and fortunes." Tocqueville sensed that the burden of modern identity was to "live amidst this appropriated unrest and this newly acquired strangeness." In Fritzsche's view—"Thanks to the mass medium of history, we recognize these nomads as ourselves."

Fritzsche's book focuses on a number of distinct personalities. One of the most interesting is Francois Rene de Chateaubriand, born in 1768, whose diaries and memoirs, written amidst the chaos and change of the revolutionary period, documented this displacement. Before his very eyes, strangers and refugees, utterly disconnected from their past lives and thus conspicuously aware of the losses they had endured, found a life of wandering and dispossession as the natural state of the present and became, thereby, "a different race", estranged from their own time, yet cut off from continuity itself, and thus "stranded in the present". In Chateaubriand's view, the feeling of exile "was not a temporary condition, but a distinctively modern fate."

The émigré became a prominent feature of European life. European "ruins", which before the revolution had been seen as simply rubble created by the forces of nature, suddenly became points of reference for a common nostalgia, later represented in Gothic novels and romances (penned by Walter Scott or Brockton Brown eg.), eventually gaining status as features of a fixed past, which they remain today. An entire émigré literature developed that became frankly nostalgic, though at the same time this literature (its many memoirs) defined a new "temporal cosmos". Alienation allowed the émigré to develop new kinds of knowledge in "complex and mottled" ways. According to Fritzsche, "the dramas and elegies of the emigration played themselves out in an increasingly incoherent universe." The disposed, the wanderer, the refugee, each

became a kind of “correspondent for the modern era, well placed to tell about the violence of displacement, the unsettling of once unassailable certainties and the contingencies of identity, community, and historical narrative.”

How to construct an identity became the burning question both for individuals and “peoples.” Heretofore, the past had defined one’s self and one’s neighbors in the village. After the revolution, the present heralded chaos. For artists, politicians, statesmen and the émigré, answers emerged slowly. The art of the novel arose, emphasizing a close reading of personality; visual art relentlessly pressed both forward and back, casting about for “ways of the new”. Nationalism rose to answer the rootlessness of populations and give them something to worship. Chroniclers like the Grimm brothers in Germany and William Cobbett in England, “recognized private losses in more comprehensive historical terms and, subsequently, redirected local customs and parochial resentments toward a resistant national politics.” It was writers like Cobbett and Goldsmith “who developed an emphatically national optics by which the fresh ruins and displaced people came prominently into view, and it was Cobbett who signposted a totally mobilized landscape that had to be understood historically.” Thus, the “English countryside” came to be another realm of nostalgia.

Fritzsche’s wonderful book “historicizes” the historical age and its preoccupation with the past, a preoccupation born of rootlessness, disjunction, war, revolution, capitalism (and its depredations of family, countryside and village), an historical age that created “contemporaries” and endowed them with sense of loss and confusion. In the nineteenth century rose, not without cause, all the fairy tales, haunted houses, landscape paintings, memoirs, novels, diaries and “attics” of the modern age, a modern age that created a past “increasingly regarded in terms of its incongruences with the present and approached as a separate place in time, bounded, distant, and opaque.” Increasingly, self-hood “depended on the recognition and exploration of loss, which should be considered one of the sources of the self and a constituent part of ‘modern history.’” “Stranded in the Present” is filled with generous insights and peopled by unique actors—Chateaubriand, Goethe, Tocqueville, Madame de Stael, Cobbett, Goldsmith, Marx, Stendhal (and a host of other wanderers of the nineteenth century).

A must-read book, just like “The Age of Anger” by Pankaj Mishra.
