

The Arc of History
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As a historian, I share with former President Obama the idea that there is such a thing as "the arc of history." What is meant by this is that human beings have very gradually changed over the centuries from small clans and tribes who had to fight tooth and claw to survive to a global society, much of which has common (and largely American) values.

We no longer throw our adolescent girls into a volcano to calm the rage of the volcano god. Most of us no longer regard women as property or the handicapped or insane as objects of ridicule. We choose our leaders by election, and our leaders are constrained by law from wielding total power. We debate our differences in public, hopefully without violence. And we value reason and the scientific method for explaining the mysteries of life, not superstition. Usually.

When I asked my students of World History to imagine where they would like a time machine to take them, they chose some of the best golden societies: ancient Athens, the Renaissance, the founding of the United States in 1776. But I asked if they would still select those eras if they could not also choose their race, class, and gender. They got it. Being a female slave in ancient Greece was no picnic. For me, as a 21st century American woman, it is no contest.

But we must not assume that this arc has stopped moving. The world is not yet a place with a common set of values or one culture. That is why there is no world government, one that we imagine in Star Trek, a fictional future in which all human beings share the same earthly culture.

Large swaths of our world detest modern values, as we can see in the proliferation of dictatorships and the revolt of religious fanatics against everyone. Many, even within our own democracy, do not like where the arc of history has taken them. The global chasm between urban and rural people is growing. Science and technology have been gifts as well as threats to the old order of how we live. Robots help us but also take away jobs that do not require advanced education. Proliferating media gives us news and knowledge, but also give us vulgarity and coarseness offensive to the manners of the educated and unceasing sexual license offensive to ordinary families.

French farmers resent rules from the EU that they cannot oppose. The British are resisting becoming European; they are British. Conservative Americans are in revolt against the intrusiveness of government and multiculturalism, fearing a loss of their identity as Americans. They want to slow down the arc of history, at least for a while.

The taste for globalization by the educated and urban elites is a step too far for those who revere their national culture. Our election's populist outcome is an in-your-face assault on the educated elites, whom they think look down on them. America last saw such a revolt when Andrew Jackson became president, which led to universal white male suffrage. For the next 30 years, men voted for the best candidates that liquor and bribes could buy. "Know-nothings" became a political party, proud of their ignorance.

Progress is never in a straight line and "Progressives" are not always right either. Regulations, for example, give us clean water and air, safe food and drugs, but too many regulations defy common sense. There should be no "forgotten people." We need periodic correctives to overreach.

And the uneducated are not the only ones to ignore history. Many university elites scorn the "dead White men" in ancient Greece who gave us science and reason, the Romans for law, the Enlightenment for the American participatory democracy. And many are more interested in "diversity" than in excellence, the most important quality that has made our nation the enlightened place it is today. Will it take a war to remind both the educated and ordinary that we are all American? We really have more in common than divides us. E Pluribus Unum: out of many, one.

681 words

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