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Activism and the Rejection of History*

We are a society bemused in its purposes and yet secretly homesick for a lost world of inward tranquility. The thirst for illimitable knowledge now conflicts directly with the search for a serenity obtainable nowhere upon earth. Knowledge, or at least what the twentieth century acclaims as knowledge, has not led to happiness.

Ours is the most time-conscious generation that has ever lived. Our cameras, our television, our archaeological probings, our C¹⁴ datings, pollen counts, underwater researches, magnetometer readings, have resurrected lost cities, placing them accurately in stratigraphic succession. Each Christmas season the art of Ice Age Lascaux is placed beside that of Rembrandt on our coffee tables. Views of Pompeii share honors with Chichen Itza upon the television screen in the living room. We unearth obscure ancestral primates and, in the motion picture "2001," watch a struck fragment of bone fly into the air and become a space ship drifting among the stars, thus telescoping in an instant the whole technological history of man. We expect the average onlooker to comprehend the symbolism; such a civilization, one must assume, should show a deep veneration for the past.

Strangely, the results are quite otherwise. We appear to exist, instead, amidst a meaningless mosaic of fragments. From ape skull to Mayan temple we contemplate the miscellaneous debris of time like sightseers to whom these mighty fragments, fallen gateways, and sunken galleries convey no present instruction.

In our streets and on our campuses riots an extremist minority dedicated to the now, to the moment, however absurd, degrading, or irrelevant the moment may be. It is an activism that deliberately rejects the past and is determined to start life anew—indeed to reject the very institutions that feed, clothe, and sustain our swarming millions.

A yearning for a life of noble savagery without the accumulated burdens of history seems in danger of engulfing a whole generation, as it did the French *philosophes* and their 18th-century followers. Those individuals who persist in pursuing the mind-destroying drug of constant action have not alone confined themselves to an increasingly chaotic present—they are also, by the deliberate abandonment of their past, destroying the conceptual tools and values that are the means of introducing the rational into the oncoming future.

Their world, therefore, becomes increasingly the violent, unpredictable world of the first men simply because, in losing faith in the past, one is inevitably forsaking all that enables man to be a planning animal. For man's story, in brief, is essentially that of a creature who has abandoned instinct and replaced it with cultural tradition and the hard-won increments of contemplative thought. The lessons of the past have been found to be a reasonably secure instruction for proceeding against the unknown future. To hurl oneself recklessly, without method, upon a future that we ourselves have complicated is a sheer nihilistic rejection of all that history, including the classical world, can teach us.—LOREN EISELEY, *Benjamin Franklin Professor of Anthropology and the History of Science, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia*

* This is an excerpt from *The Unexpected Universe*, which will be published in October by Harcourt, Brace & World. Copyright © 1969 by Loren Eiseley.