Preface

Reconsiderations of the Idea of Nostalgia in Contemporary Historical Writing

Patrick H. Hutton

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Professor of History (emeritus), University of Vermont

Scholarly interest in the topic of nostalgia has come late to discussions of the workings of memory, a popular topic in contemporary historiography, but its moment may at last have arrived, bringing with it perspectives unappreciated a generation ago. As an emotional response to time's passage, nostalgia has long been viewed with suspicion. From the dawn of the modern age, critics have explained that it plays into life's illusions, drifting into sentimental idealization of a past on the fast track to obsolescence. From the earliest critical commentaries on its nature in the late seventeenth century, nostalgia has been equated with homesickness, futile longing for lost places, lost times, and lost causes. For the most part, it was diagnosed as a psychological disorder that immobilized individuals susceptible to the tug of its emotions. It was in this guise that discussion of its nature entered the lexicon of medical discourse during the nineteenth century. The impairments of those who suffered from its sadness were real. The remedy was to awaken them to life's present realities, and so to teach them to adapt with vigor to their own times.¹

Such clinical reductionism suggests why historians were slow to take up this topic in the now long-running scholarly discourse about collective memory.² But today, in the early twenty-first century, the workings of nostalgia, notably in their modern social and cultural settings, are receiving new critical attention. Nostalgia, some scholars contend, is an emotion that may be understood historically and collectively, not just psychologically and individually.³ What is more, some scholars investigating nostalgia in the modern era—roughly the period from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century—comment on its distinguishing traits. Modern nostalgia may be a response to time's passage that for all its melancholy is reflective, self-revealing, even creative.

Significant in this respect is the pioneering study by the American sociologist Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday* (1979). Davis shows how the topic of nostalgia over the course of the nineteenth century escaped its once-exclusive identification with medical discourse and came to be appreciated as one emotion among many in the everyday lives of ordinary people. In time, the wistful sadness of nostalgia was acknowledged to be a normal if reluctant acceptance of loss attending the irreversibility of historical change. Nostalgia, he argues, served as a safety valve for those who wanted to maintain a sense of continuity between past and present in their private memories, particularly as it became more difficult to do so in the public sphere. As he explains, nostalgia is a “crepuscular emotion,” permitting the emotional survival of an idealized image of a past whose complex realities conflate into iconic simplicity as their memory begins to fade.⁴

Davis also remarks on the changing nature of modern nostalgia in light of the emergence of new technologies of communication that drew the imagined past more openly into the public sphere. Nostalgia may have been experienced privately, but increasingly it was cued publicly by the image-makers of journalism, advertising, and politics. Gradually but inexorably, these modes of representing the past at large shaped the ways in which individuals integrated images of the past into their private recollections. Over the course of the modern era, he notes, this blending of personal experience and collective representation came to be so thoroughly interlaced as to be indistinguishable. In this way, private memories were absorbed into a common culture. To exemplify his argument, Davis alludes to the emergence of the notion of “generational memory”—as in memories of the cohort coming of age during the 1950s as opposed to that of the 1960s—that shared reminiscences of signal events or songs everyone loved.⁵

By the first decade of the twenty-first century, scholars were prepared to place Davis’s notion of modern nostalgia in better-developed historical contexts. Among the most important for our present project on nostalgia in modern France is that offered by historian Peter Fritzsche. In a series of studies that culminated in his book, *Stranded in the Present* (2005), he proposes that nostalgia is an essential ingredient in the emergence of modern historical consciousness. His key point is that for the generation of Europeans coming of age in the late eighteenth century and thereafter, nostalgia as a response to rapid historical change emerged as the reverse side of the ideologically driven discourse about progress. So conceived, nostalgia may be interpreted as a modern sensibility. Its emotions, experienced personally and privately, underpinned a visceral awareness of the unpredictable, sometimes menacing realities of rapid and transforming historical change in an age whose public discourse favored rising expectations for the coming of a better world.⁶

Fritzsche’s point of departure for his discussion of the modernity of nostalgia is the French Revolution, with its socially disruptive, life-transforming consequences for people in all walks of life across Europe. Whatever the

reforms promised and in some measure accomplished by statesmen sympathetic to the Revolution, its civil conflicts unleashed a reign of terror. The mass exodus of its opponents, together with the random death and destruction that were legacies of the Europe-wide wars of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras, created an ideal matrix for nostalgia-based thought.⁷

Fritzsche invokes the model of German philosopher Reinhart Koselleck, whose *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* deals with the assumptions of the historical writing of the Enlightenment.⁸ Koselleck posits an inverse relationship between respect for experience out of the receding past and hope for the possibilities of the beckoning future. In light of the great expectations of the *philosophes* for social and political reform, the past of the *ancien régime* was discarded with few regrets. Fritzsche, by contrast, sets this relationship in reverse mode as he approaches the nineteenth century. As prospects for the future became uncertain amidst the turmoil of the Revolutionary era, the past waxed larger in a culture of retrospection on severed ties with a cherished world reduced to ruins.⁹

Fritzsche argues that such precipitous change aroused popular longing for the halcyon days of the *ancien régime*. The irony, he explains, is that such nostalgia was the seedbed of an emerging historical consciousness—by which he means not critical historical interpretation by scholars, but rather an emotionally empowered recognition of the historicity of the human condition on the part of ordinary people. That stance on the past concerns the way singular events can and often do disrupt continuities between past and present, redirecting human affairs in unanticipated ways. The incentive to think historically about the human predicament, Fritzsche contends, is incited by these contingencies. Herein ordinary people became personally aware of larger historical forces at play, as change beyond their control forever altered their private lives. The rapid succession of life-transforming events conveyed a sense that time was accelerating.¹⁰ Fritzsche's argument conveys an irony. Nostalgia, once judged a psychological malady, was reconceived as an emotion that sensitized exiled or displaced people to an understanding of the realities of historical change. Stories of their adventures and migrations became the folklore of the nineteenth century, a recompense for their misfortunes in the face of larger historical forces that had redirected the course of their lives.¹¹

It is instructive to juxtapose Fritzsche's interpretation of the nostalgic nineteenth century to the one advanced by left-wing French historians of the Revolution, from Jules Michelet to Michel Vovelle. Their interpretations were informed by progressive ideologies born of the Revolution, and, at a deeper remove, by the expectant assumptions of the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment about what the future held. Fritzsche offers an alternative way of framing nineteenth-century history. History neither follows an anticipated pattern based on human projects for reform, nor reifies a "direction of moral intention," as Georges Lefebvre, dean of historians of the French Revolution, once interpreted the course of modern French history.¹² Like

these historians, some of the Revolution's statesmen might have forecast the future of history, but their perceptions were rarely congruent with those rising out of the lived experience of ordinary people coping with difficulties in their newfound situation.

Catastrophes in Europe on such a scale might predate the French Revolution. One thinks of the Thirty Years War (1618–1648) as an example of life-changing havoc across Europe, to be accepted with fateful resignation. By the early nineteenth century, however, those buffeted by precipitous misfortune sought compensation as never before in private worlds of sentimental consolation. In such circumstances, the modern bourgeois family became a sanctuary of nostalgia. The lost past that people remembered was idealized as heritage and nested within the domestic interiors of their households. Emotions nurtured in the midst of family intimacy waxed large in their lives. The interior of homes became places for cultivating personal memory. People collected souvenirs with a sense of purpose and furnished their homes with such memorabilia. The bourgeoisie, fashioners of a new urban and industrial culture in the public sphere, cultivated personal memories of the private one closer to their everyday lives, as portrayed in their memoirs, autobiographies, diaries, and letters. In these myriad ways, they deepened what might be characterized as the privatization of memory.¹³

Noteworthy, too, for our project is the influential study by the Russian-American critic Svetlana Boym, who takes up the theme of nostalgia's reflective side in *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001). Whereas Fritzsche writes of nostalgia born of historical contingencies, Boym recasts the idea of nostalgia in light of worthy yet missed opportunities for human betterment recovered from a discarded past. A voluntary exile from her native Russia, by then a graveyard of Bolshevik dreams, she immigrated to the United States, where she became a novelist and professor of comparative literature at Harvard. Yet for all her success in making a fulfilling life in the new world, Boym remained intellectually engaged with the memory of the one she had left behind. Despite its theoretical complexity and high literary motifs, her *Future of Nostalgia* is a rather personal book, giving expression to ambiguous feelings about her relationship with her native land.¹⁴ One among that cohort of the Russian intelligentsia that departed for foreign shores during the 1970s and 1980s, Boym's interest in nostalgia was born of exile, now examined critically for its positive as well as its negative effects. The workings of nostalgia, like other expressions of collective memory, she explains, are caught up in a dynamic process of remodeling, sometimes remaking the old world creatively in the new, localizing its unrealized yearnings amidst present realities. "One is nostalgic not for the past the way it was," she remarks, "but for the past the way it could have been. It is the past perfect that one strives to realize in the future."¹⁵ Her interest in nostalgia is less about loss, more about reinvigoration.

As with Fritzsche, Boym's point of departure is a political revolution—in her case that of 1989 in Eastern Europe, a prelude to the collapse of the

Soviet Union two years later. But it was not just the demise of the old regime that intrigued her. It was the particular experience of Russia between its twentieth-century revolutions. The Soviet Union was born of a vision of bringing into being an egalitarian society. That vision was dispelled amidst the realities of ongoing Bolshevik rigidity and oppression over the course of its seventy-year history. Conceptions of what that revolution might have been nevertheless coalesced from time to time in resistance movements conjured up along the way. Bolshevism may have destroyed or intimidated all of them. The demise of the Soviet regime in 1991, however, opened for examination the memorable remains of alternative conceptions of what the good Russian society might have been. The imaginary landscape of the erstwhile Soviet Union was littered with discarded architectural and literary artifacts, now open for reinterpretation. Boym went in search of them as mementos of lost causes, to be found in such places as the theme parks of Moscow and St. Petersburg, as well as the domestic interiors of Russian exiles in America.¹⁶

Boym takes seriously the proposition that there need be no contradiction between emotional longing and critical thinking. She makes her case by formulating a distinction between two kinds of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. Restorative nostalgia is the one with which we are more familiar. Those captured by its emotions long for the perceived simplicity and harmony of an earlier age with which they are determined to maintain continuity. They want to keep that past “forever young” and so give themselves to illusions about the way it was. Reflective nostalgia, by contrast, accepts the disruptions, ambiguities, and complexities of the past as well as its place on an irreversible timeline. For Boym, such nostalgia is ironic, inconclusive, and fragmentary. It seeks not a cure for its disappointments, but rather meditation on the possibilities of dealing with them by refashioning old dreams in new settings. Reflective nostalgia values the past for its futurist speculations—dissident ideas discarded along the way, but now retrieved to be woven into the fabric of a different time in history. She treats such reflections as cross-grains in Russia’s cultural heritage during the Soviet era. This latter notion was her original formulation of the way in which nostalgia might be conceived.¹⁷

In revisiting the Soviet experience from her twenty-first-century vantage point, Boym recounts how both kinds of nostalgia were operative during the early days of the post-Soviet era, because life in the Russian Federation of the 1990s never measured up to expectations. For some there was a longing for the material and psychological security of life under the Soviet regime, but others preferred to remember the resistance movements of that regime’s later years. Ironically, the countercultural liberation movements that emerged to challenge the Soviet regime (much as did like societies in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary) lost their momentum, and one might say the immediacy of their meaning, once the revolution of 1989–1991 had taken place. Reflective nostalgia, therefore, was a way to revisit and assess

the meaning of the dreamwork that lay behind the projects of oppositional movements during the Soviet era. Over time they had become more revealing of subtle cultural defiance than of openly subversive opposition.¹⁸

Conceptions of nostalgia have evolved with the times, giving rise to what might be characterized as postmodern nostalgia. Such nostalgia treats the past less reverently. In a noteworthy article that appeared in 2005, University of Toronto professor Linda Hutcheon reflects on the irony implicit in today's expressions of nostalgia. Nostalgia in our times, she explains, must be understood in terms of its interplay with irony, a perspective that puts experience of the past at a critical distance while simultaneously integrating its feelings within the imagination of the present in inventive ways. She allows that she had just published a book about postmodern irony, only to note—not without her own irony—that nostalgia was being drawn into its sphere of influence. She therefore remarks upon an historical transition in the understanding of nostalgia, for her critical perspective complicates and departs from assessment of its nature in earlier times and places. She discusses the implications of the shift, arguing that nostalgia in our times has been reconceived to suit a postmodern mentality, one conveying the ambiguity of a present-mindedness uncertain about its relationship to both past and future. Both irony and nostalgia may inform literary tropes, she explains, the former dispelling sentimentality, the latter luxuriating in it. As a subjective response to life's fortunes, neither perspective lives in the experience of the past, but rather inheres in the mind of the observer seeking to appreciate it. One woman's irony may be another's nostalgia. Much depends on the meaning one invests in the past, she notes, and that is a matter of personal expectation. Still, she concludes, any expression of nostalgia in our present-minded times is likely to be tinged with irony.¹⁹

Fred Davis, too, sketches an interpretation of this postmodern remodeling of collective nostalgia in our contemporary age, as these emotions have come under the sway of the ever more imposing power of mass media to take control of the public representation of the past. The agency of this change, he argues, is postmodern consumerism. Increasingly, media in the interest of commercial profit appropriates and redeploys images of the past calculated to inspire collective feelings of nostalgia. Nostalgia in the contemporary age has fallen prey to the wiles of advertising, upsetting the earlier balance between its public and private expression. It has come to serve an acquisitive way of life, in which private emotions are manipulated for commercial advantage with the willing participation of its clients. Here it is not the individual idealizing the experience of the past but rather the image-makers of Madison Avenue simplifying and sanitizing its representation in ways that promote a self-indulgent culture of materialist desire.²⁰

Davis's analysis of contemporary nostalgia resonates with that of literary critic Fredric Jameson, who addressed the topic at roughly the same time. Jameson, instrumental in defining the concept of the postmodern in the late twentieth century, coined the provocative notion of "nostalgia for the

present," a perspective emanating from the paradoxes of late capitalism in its quest to promote an economy of desire over one of need. Late capitalism redirects attention to consumption, and nostalgia has been pressed into the service of commerce as a marketing tool. One fabricates fantasies of the past with which today's consumers can be enticed into vicarious emotional identification. Jameson references novelists and film makers of the 1980s who reinvigorated a fading memory of America of the 1950s by setting forth in high relief alluring yet distorting images of lifestyles back then. The effect is to reduce the cultural complexities of the era to extravagantly manufactured stereotypes. "Eisenhower's America," he allows, is reproduced as a "Potemkin Village" to satisfy the audience's wish to re-enchant that world. For Jameson, the mode of postmodern nostalgia is irony, considered less as critique and more as bemused detachment. In this guise, it expresses longing not for the past that was but paradoxically for one recast in imagery that satisfies present-minded consumerist expectations. Nostalgia in this guise is "retro," more appealing for its aesthetic gloss than for deeper currents of emotions that coursed through nostalgic imagery a century ago.²¹

Reaction to postmodern nostalgia so conceived—manipulative in its present-mindedness and shallow in its ironical turn—may in some measure account for the historians' newfound interest in the nostalgia of the modern era as a different and distinctive state of mind. Such nostalgia conveyed a longing to hold onto memories of the past that, for all their idealization, still managed to evoke authentic feelings of loss or regret that issued from the depths of time. One might argue that the transit of nostalgia from immobilizing homesickness to wistful remembrance signifies a taming of emotions, much in the manner that sociologist Norbert Elias explained the binding of emotions to social conventions in the civilizing process over the course of the modern era.²² The exploration of that transit within the history of emotions is a motivation for the articles in this special issue.

The authors in this issue weave their topical narratives in and around theories advanced in such landmark studies as those noted above. The modern French experience in both its politics and its culture provides apt settings for applying their interpretative possibilities. The topics addressed here are wide-ranging. The first three articles deal with France itself: memories of old Paris among its denizens, the reflections of immigrant Russian writers, the French Revolution remembered. The last four are directed toward France's once vast overseas empire, and consider in inventive ways the varieties of nostalgia experienced by colonizers, writers, settlers, and natives.

We offer variations on a theme, with no pretensions to having canvassed all of its possibilities. There are so many routes into the topical landscape of nostalgia in modern France (and elsewhere) that might be traveled. The scholarly interest in the changing understanding of nostalgia in modern times lies at that juncture between the history of collective memory and that of collective emotions, both of which are currently attracting so much scholarly attention. We hope that our readers find intriguing our joining of

these perspectives on the sometimes melancholy, always idealized meanings the past held for the present in those days.

Notes

1. Michael S. Roth has investigated the clinical literature of the nineteenth century on nostalgia considered as pathology (as has Thomas Dodman in this issue). See Roth, "Dying of the Past: Medical Studies of Nostalgia in Nineteenth-Century France," *History and Memory* 3, no. 1 (1991): 5–29; "Remembering Forgetting: *Maladies de la Mémoire* in Nineteenth-Century France," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 49–68.
2. It is true that scholarship on the history of commemoration, a central interest in memory studies dating from the late 1970s, provided an avenue toward understanding nostalgia as regret for a cherished past. But such studies emphasized the politics of contested identities, the interpretative strategy underpinning the notion of the "invented tradition." See Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition Revisited," in *Legitimacy and the State in Africa*, ed. Terence Ranger and Megan Vaughan (London: Palgrave, 1993), 62–82. Even Pierre Nora's interpretative essays framing his monumental *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984–1992), are mainly concerned with France's identity crisis on the eve of the bicentennial of the French Revolution. Though his prose strikes an elegiac tone now and then, his project might better be characterized as an autopsy of the French heritage. See Steven Englund, "The Ghost of Nation Past," *Journal of Modern History* 64, no. 2 (1992): 299–320.
3. On the transition, see Michael S. Roth, "The Time of Nostalgia: Medicine, History and Normality in 19th-Century France," *Time and Society* 1, no. 2 (1992): 281–284; Janelle L. Wilson, *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning* (Lewisberg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2005), 21–24.
4. Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 1–29, 110. From a historiographical standpoint, Davis's discussion of the collective nature of nostalgia invites comparison with that of Maurice Halbwachs on the larger topic of collective memory; so too in their reception. At the time of their respective publications, their theories received little scholarly attention, only to come into play decades later. Like Halbwachs, Davis expounds on the relationship between social power and collective memory. Both explain how personal memories are localized within social contexts.
5. Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 111–116.
6. Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 45, 49, 142, 201–202, as well as his preliminary studies, "How Nostalgia Narrates Modernity," in *The Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture*, ed. Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 64–65, and "Specters of History: On Nostalgia, Exile, and Modernity," *American Historical Review* 106, no. 5 (December 2001): 1589, 1592.
7. Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present*, 11–54, 201–218; "How Nostalgia Narrates Modernity," 66–68; "Specters of History," 1594–1600.

8. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (NY: Columbia University Press, 2004 [1985]), 267–276.
9. Fritzsche, “How Nostalgia Narrates Modernity,” 67, 76–77; “Specters of History,” 1589–1591, 1602.
10. Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present*, 7, 77, 88, 154, 159. Here, we might say, Fritzsche introduces an historiographical interest in the quickening tempo of time in the modern historical era that contrasts dramatically with that of the once-popular Annales school of historiography, which placed its accent on the inertial pace of time, that is, time as immobilized in the pre-industrial societies of early modern Europe. See Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s essay, “L’Histoire immobile” in his *Le Territoire de l’historien*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 2: 7–34.
11. Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present*, 80–83, 87, 90, 128; “Specters of History,” 1607–1609.
12. Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, trans. Robert R. Palmer (New York: Random House, [1947] 1957), 184.
13. Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present*, 9, 79, 160–200; “Specters of History,” 1600–1601, 1605, 1616; “How Nostalgia Narrates Modernity,” 79.
14. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), xiv–xv; her website, titled “Media Art,” can be found at <http://www.svetlanaboym.com> (accessed 24 June 2013). Biographical material can be found at http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Svetlana_Boym (accessed 20 May 2013).
15. Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 351.
16. *Ibid.*, 57–71, 83–91, 327–336.
17. Boym: *Future of Nostalgia*, 41–55; “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” *Hedgehog Review* 9, no. 2 (2007): 7–18.
18. Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 61, 149–156.
19. Linda Hutcheon, “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern,” University of Toronto English Department, 19 January 1998, accessed 20 May 2013, <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html>.
20. Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 118–142. See also David Gross, *The Past in Ruins* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 75–76.
21. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 19–20, 156; “Nostalgia for the Present,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (1989): 517–537.
22. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (New York: Urizen Books, [1939] 1978), 134–143.