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Dear Colleague:

If you can live in another period other than the present, which will it be? The eighteenth century is popular with some people--the Age of Enlightenment and a time when, as Jacquetta Hawkes puts it (speaking of England), "man and earth reached its greatest intimacy and most sensitive pitch: they enjoyed a moment of balance before the Industrial Revolution unfortunately tipped the scale in man's favor." Some people favor the Middle Ages--the period of craftsmanship, exaltation (viz. cathedrals), and chivalry. I don't have a favorite period in the past myself--at least, not favorite enough so that I would want to live in it in preference to my own time. Let me qualify that again. I don't mind moving back into the past, but my skepticism of the past shows when I add that the further back I go the higher the social status I must have. In eighteenth-century England I would have to be at least a country squire, in the Middle Ages a baron, in imperial Rome a senator, and in the Egypt of the Pharaohs I don't think I would feel comfortable unless I am the top dog himself.

Take George Orwell, socialist and great anti-Imperialist. Which is his favorite period of history? He does not care for the Middle Ages; and he decries those who do as sentimentalists unaware of the poverty, the sickness, the pain, the suffering, and the dirt of those times. No, Orwell's favorite time and place is late Victorian and Edwardian England--the greatest imperialist power that the world has ever seen. What he likes about late Victorian England, for all its social and environmental horrors, is the retention of a certain amount of decency and comeliness, a lingering belief in the nonarbitrary nature of good and evil, and an ability to say "no" to certain deeds however appealing because "it is not cricket." What Orwell wants is more "decency and comeliness" (his favorite words) without the props of a transcendental faith. And what Orwell fears is that that may well be impossible. In his own age, he sees everywhere signs of a disintegration of human trust, human patience (if a work is worth doing it's worth taking time over it, for what is a life-time when human destiny is eternal?), and some bottom line of honor below which no self-respecting person would go. Orwell sees a brittleness and shrillness in modern men and women, a deep insecurity despite all the material possessions that is shown by mistrust, for which the remedies appear to be increasingly legal--for instance, contractual accountability, spelling out all that one is willing to offer and all that one expects to receive, and an impatience that is more poignantly expressed in daily life by an unwillingness to listen or to read with ego-suppressing care--to be deaf and blind to other voices and minds--than by the ubiquity of shoddy manufactures. (George Woodstock, The Crystal Spirit, 1984). By the way, which is the most modern country in the world? Answer: USA, because it has more lawyers spelling things out in black-and-white in proportion to its population than (probably) any other country.

Best wishes,

