

February 15, 1992 (Vol. 7, no. 12)

Dear Colleague:

Whenever I feel a little depressed about the world, I read history. But the reason why I am consoled by history is the opposite of the reason why many people nowadays feel consoled. It is neither the glory nor the purity of the past, but rather the amount of fear and injustice in it, that perks me up now, for, however dark and anxious society is today, the past (as recorded by reputable historians) always seems to me worse. I reflect: I consider myself fortunate to be a middle-class professional in this century, but if I had lived in ancient Egypt I would have to be the pharaoh himself to feel comparably secure. That's progress.

What about the past? Surely people felt less anxious then because of the strength of human support? Real caring communities existed in pre-modern times. So we think. Maybe so. But the historical evidence can be ambivalent. Consider the following letter written on October, 1518, by a knight, with landed property, to his humanist friend, explaining to him that life as an aristocrat was not quite as comforted as advertized.

"Do not envy me my life as compared to yours. Such is the lot of the knight that even though my patrimony were ample for my support, disturbances remain which give me no quiet. We live in fields and forests. Those by whose labors we exist are poverty-stricken peasants. The return is exceedingly sparse in proportion to the labor expended...[Nature is undependable and niggardly. As for society,] I must attach myself to some prince in the hope of protection. Otherwise every one will look upon me as fair plunder. But even if I do make such an attachment hope is beclouded by danger and daily anxiety (underlining added)... The country itself is unsafe. We cannot go unarmed beyond two yokes of land. On that account we must have a large equipage of horses, arms, and followers, and all at great expense. We cannot visit a neighboring village or go hunting or fishing save in iron."

What is striking in the account (too long to reproduce here) is that, even more than the uncertainty of nature, the fickleness of social relations was the source of anxiety. People were always seeking to exploit weaknesses in others. If you showed pluck in defending your interest, you risked provoking war; if you showed weakness, you would almost certainly find yourself fair game for extortion. Extortion by whom? "Not among strangers, my friend, but among neighbors, relatives, and those of the same household, even brothers." (Ulrich Von Hutten and the German Reformation, trans. R. H. Bainton, 1937, pp. 18-19).

Disgusted with living in recession-ridden 1992? Care to be an aristocrat in 1518?

Best wishes,

