

REVIEWS

Frank Furedi, *Mythical Past, Elusive Future: History and Society in an Anxious Age* (London: Pluto Press 1992).

Mythical Past, Elusive Future was evidently instigated by the rise of the New Right to power on both sides of the Atlantic and the incessant use and abuse of history and “the past” which were foremost features of their efforts to undo the post-Second World War liberal and social-democratic compacts, and to make Thatcherism and Reaganism into hegemonic ideologies and the bases for new national conservative consensuses. Yet, the book is not specifically a study in the political sociology or cultural politics of Thatcherism and Reaganism. Rather, it is an intellectual history of the twentieth-century denigration and demise of Enlightenment thought which Furedi finds not only among conservative thinkers, who in any case were never too fond of ideas which proposed human progress through the mutual development and extension of reason and freedom, but also among liberals — and even Marxists — who were the original standard-bearers of Enlightenment values and ideals. In short, as a consequence of the historical tragedies bound up in what historian Arno Mayer has called the “Thirty Years War” of the twentieth century (i.e. 1914-45), there has been a retreat from Enlightenment understandings and aspirations; a retreat which has gone so far that we now find that the anti-historical Nietzsche (unfortunately) has become as influential among Left intellectuals caught up in poststructuralism, deconstruction and the “new historicism,” as among reactionary ones!

There may be a lot of demand for, and talk about, “the past” today, Furedi observes, but there has been a definite decline in “historical thinking,” that is, the kind of thinking which recognizes possibilities in history, embraces “change and progress,” and directs thought and action to the *future*, to the making of history and the extension of reason and freedom. Furedi’s apparent objective is to call

Marxists and others *back* to the Enlightenment project.

Raised and educated in Canada, Furedi teaches sociology and development studies at the University of Kent in England. His previous scholarship has been in African Studies; he is the author of work on the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya. He is also a leading figure in the British political group which publishes the monthly magazine *Living Marxism* (not to be confused with the now-deceased Communist Party magazine *Marxism Today*), whose contents, I must add, waver between the stupid and the smart. Furedi himself is smart, and whatever its flaws and my disagreements with it, *Mythical Past, Elusive Future* is a smartly-written book. His study takes in a broad array of intellectual figures and he writes in a clear and engaging way — most especially when he treats those who have been so influential in the intellectual denial of history and historical thinking (including such diverse types as F.A. Hayek, Daniel Bell, Raymond Aron and Francis Fukuyama).

A personal note is in order here: My own recent book, *The Powers of the Past: Reflections on the Crisis and the Promise of History* (University of Minnesota Press, 1991), clearly intersects with that of Furedi. When I first saw an announcement of the publication of his new work I wrote and suggested that we exchange books. Accompanying his was a letter to me saying that although he had not seen *The Powers of the Past* at the time of his book-writing, my original “article in *Socialist Register* 1987...helped to focus [his] thoughts and it stimulated [him] to write in the first place.” I was pleased and complimented, but then I discovered that he had included me among those “Marxists” who had supposedly turned “romantic” and “conservative” and were reducing the purpose of historical study and thought to “identity creation.” I am not accused of “postmodernism,” but — along with Antonio Gramsci and Walter Benjamin (I keep only the best company!) — of turning away from Marx and the Enlightenment.

Furedi is doubly wrong. First, it is true that

I am prepared to stand with Gramsci and Benjamin regarding the necessity of critical history; however, Füredi himself misconstrues and misrepresents their arguments about critical history and historical thinking, the task of intellectuals, and the radical-democratic possibilities of working-class consciousness and struggle. Second, though I make them critically, I am not prepared to give up claims on either Marx or the Enlightenment. The point seems to be that Füredi's Marx is that of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* where the Old Man writes that "the social revolution of the nineteenth century can only create its poetry from the future, not from the past." The Marx I know distinguished between ruling-class ideology and popular consciousness, having earlier observed that "The world has long possessed the dream of a thing which it need only to possess the consciousness in order to really possess it. It will be clear that the problem is not some great gap between the thoughts of the past and those of the future, but the completion of the thoughts of the past." (a correspondence, 1843)

Füredi's work takes in the modern "West" as a whole, Britain and the USA, and also Germany, France, and Japan. He finds the turn to the past dominating life and thought in all these states. Whereas I argued that the "crisis of history" (along with the rise of the New Right and its renewed pursuit of "class war from above") was a consequence of the dramatic political and economic crises of the 1970s, Füredi contends that the cultural anxieties and conservative campaigns *and* the intellectual crisis of the Enlightenment project which we are witnessing are actually a delayed reaction to the collapse of confidence in "progress" engendered by the crises of the 1930s. Quite possibly we differ here because I write from North America, viz. the "United Kingdom," but I think he underestimates the degree of confidence, belief in progress, and strength of the postwar consensus, engendered by the postwar economic boom of 1947-74 and "Pax Americana." In other words, the crisis of the 70s is a postponed confrontation with the 30s only to the extent that capitalism itself is subject to persistent contradictions and periodic crises and such contradictions and crises, thus far, have never been fully and finally resolved. (Contrary to the claims of Fukuyama and his ilk, we are *not* at the "end

of history" — and this is a point on which Füredi and I stand together!)

Again, and more important, *contra* the irrationalisms of conservatives, neo-conservatives and postmodernists, Füredi is eager to reinvigorate the Enlightenment project in order to make a radically-different future. Especially, he seeks a "restoration of the consciousness of *reason*, the *human potential* and the possibility of *change*." Fair enough. But, when approached critically, I find these possibilities not, at the outset, beyond the temporal horizon but in history — in E.H. Carr's memorable words, in "the dialogue between present and past." In other words, historical *memory*. Füredi's critiques of conservatives, liberals and postmodernists are well presented, but he never explains why he is willing to cede the past to them. Apparently, he fails to realize that the "historical thinking/critique of history" he urges means more than rationally looking at possibilities for the future and determining how to realize them. Crucially, it also entails wielding "the powers of the past: perspective, critique, consciousness, remembrance, and imagination" in favor of "the education of desire" (a practice Füredi would apparently reject), or, as Gramsci himself insisted, working towards the development of "an historical, dialectical conception of the world which understands movement and change, which appreciates the sum of effort and sacrifice which the present has cost the past and which the future is costing the present, and which conceives the contemporary world as a synthesis of the past, of all past generations, which projects itself into the future."

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Olwen Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1991).

Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution, a collection of lectures given at the University of Toronto in 1989, examines the relationship between "the people" and authority during the French Revolution. The people, as one might guess from the title, are specifically women and it turns out