A Better World

Don’t be such a timesist, or eraist, or some other term to describe bigotry directed towards people of particular era of history. Sounds silly doesn’t it. After all, historical people are in the past so you can hardly call them the victims of bigotry. But the thing is that bigotry not only affects the alleged victim but also the perpetrator. His mind is closed to possibilities because he is blinded by his prejudices. I will freely admit that at first glance this seems silly and irrelevant, but to libertarians it is a critical hurdle.

Libertarianism is the modern version of Classical Liberalism, the dominant political ideology of the Romantic Era (1776-1929), so libertarians are essentially calling for a return to Victorian political and social institutions. If the very notion of such a return invokes a knee-jerk revulsion, then perhaps you are being a timesist. It’s understandable considering that the Nineteenth Century has been largely misrepresented and the Victorians are not here to defend themselves or mount protests.

Saying that black people are “stupid, lazy, and thieves” is a racist statement because it lumps an entire race into a negative basket. You might ask me on what evidence I base my opinion or if I really know any black people. I might answer, “I don’t know any black people, but I know I am right.” That mentality is an example of prejudice and bigotry.

Strangely enough, I meet people who have a negative view of Victorian society. They say that Victorians were racists, cruel to the poor, enforced child labour, and restricted women. I might ask if they had studied Victorian society. They may answer, “No I haven’t, but I know that I am right.” Again, this is an example of prejudice and bigotry.

If I wanted to prove that black people were stupid, lazy, and thieves, then I am sure that I would have no problem finding examples, however that does not prove that all black people are stupid, lazy, and thieves. Likewise, someone setting out to create or prove negative stereotypes of the Victorians would have no trouble either, but that is not the big picture.

Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown openly apologized for the role Great Britain played in the slave trade. This is true. Britain did participate in the lucrative global slave industry. What he failed to acknowledge was that after 1800 Britain repented of its sins. Throughout the Nineteenth Century the British people and government fought to end the global slave trade and largely succeeded. They patrolled the shores of Africa and even sent gunboats to Brazil and Zanzibar to force the passage of anti-slavery laws. In the big picture, Britain freed the slaves.

Looking at the big picture gives us a very different image of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. In Britain in 1800 most people were illiterate, by 1900 Britain had almost full literacy, and by 2000 one in five Britons were deemed to be functionally illiterate. Where the Nineteenth Century saw the rise of the middle-class the Twentieth saw its decline. Where the Nineteenth Century was one of the most peaceful in world history, the Twentieth was the most deadly.

According to most social indicators the Nineteenth Century saw a rise in standards while the Twentieth saw either a decline or stagnation. In 1900 Britain was the world’s banker, but a century later in 2010 it was £4.8 trillion in debt. In 1870 private industry accounted for 90% of the UK workforce and in 2010 it was 47%. As late as 1950, those needing poverty assistance was 4% of the UK population and today it is nearly a third. Looking at the big picture, the Twentieth Century was an utter failure compared with the Nineteenth.

When extolling the Nineteenth Century virtues of competition, libertarians are accused of being Social Darwinists, a phrase made popular by the American Communist Richard Hofstadter in 1944. When supporting the Nineteenth Century virtues of the free market, libertarians are accused of defending robber barons, a phrase made popular by the American Marxist Matthew Josephson in 1938. Despite these two pejoratives coming from the extreme American Left, both have entered common usage regarding the Twentieth Century perception of the Nineteenth century. Isn’t that rather like taking cues from the KKK on African-American culture?

It is easy to sit back in front of our computers while speaking on our mobile phones or watching our televisions and feel smugly superior to our less technologically advanced ancestors, that is until we realise that the first computers, phones, and televisions were conceived and created by Victorians.

As libertarians we are selling a new vision of the world, a better world, but it is just a vision. It’s a dream and it’s a dream beyond the grasp of many people. When a libertarian sees the Nineteenth Century we say, “Look, the Classical Liberal approach that we advocate worked better, it wasn’t perfect, but it was better.” This is when we hit the stonewall of prejudice built brick by brick throughout the Twentieth Century by those seeking to discredit Classical Liberalism in favour of their socialist utopian dream and it is a view that most people take for granted as fact.

I recall watching Peter Schiff, the libertarian economist, speaking with a man at the Occupy Wall Street rally. Schiff said that he wanted to take society back to a time of greater economic freedom. The black man listening to him accused Schiff of wanting to re-institute slavery. That seems like a huge leap in reasoning until you consider the anti-Nineteenth Century prejudices held by people who are unaware that the Nineteenth Century was an era of freeing slaves, not enslaving them.

The cover of Newsweek magazine in America declared in February 2009, “We Are All Socialists Now”. Many people cringed at that, but the outcry was not enough to cause the publication much damage. Generally it was accepted, whereas twenty years ago people might have been lighting their torches.

Perhaps when the libertarian dream becomes more widely accepted some publication may declare, “We Are All Victorians Now” to announce the re-ascendency of Classical Liberalism without fear of negative stereotyping and a bigoted backlash.

It may seem silly to defend a people long dead against prejudice, bigotry, and misrepresentation. But if we want to convince people that Classical Liberalism in the form of Libertarianism is the way forward, then we have to reclaim the past from the false assumptions perpetuated by the academic left over the past century. Only then can we reclaim a better world – a world that combines the best of both centuries.