

Republican Perspective
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The Ministry of Truth---one more time

In 18th century France, a very popular form of entertainment and celebration was cat burning. Cats were bundled together and roasted alive over a bonfire. The audiences included peasants and nobility alike. They delighted at the cats howling and screaming in agony. The practice was abolished in the 1760s.

The revulsion you are now feeling after reading that paragraph illustrates a point. Just as human societies evolve, so do morality, manners, good taste, and common decency. First century Romans believed theirs to be the pinnacle of civilization and culture. But what was then considered civilized behavior in Rome's coliseum is abhorrent today.

Slavery and public hangings were accepted in our country well into the 19th century. Today they are considered so vile that we are tempted to wish them out of our history. Today we cringe when we think of the labor conditions of one or two centuries ago. In the last few decades, smokers and litterers have become social pariahs.

Just a few decades ago, homosexuality, illegitimacy, and abortion were considered shameful and were scarcely spoken of---let alone admitted to. Tattooed women could be seen only in circus "freak shows." Today these things are commonplace and, in some cases, celebrated.

What behaviors and customs of our evolved, civilized society will our descendants consider barbaric or disgusting? Perhaps capital punishment, abortion, boxing, football, cosmetic surgery, game hunting, sport fishing, meat eating, spanking, booze---who knows?

The point, of course, is that morality and common decency evolve as do societies. If you had lived in Paris three centuries ago, you yourself would have attended cat burnings instead of walking to end breast cancer or world hunger. That would not have made you a bad person. Your behavior would have reflected the morality of the era and the location in which you lived.

It is important to cut our ancestors some slack for having engaged in activities now seen as repugnant. All the way from the high crimes of slavery and cat burning to social faux pas like smoking and littering.

All of which brings us back to the effort now in vogue to expunge the unpleasant from our past. Orwell's Ministry of Truth changed history. We should not.

Slavery, the Confederacy, and the Civil War all happened. Almost 700,000 were killed. This is all part of our history. Live with it.