

VLADIMIR LUKIC

**THE PROBLEM OF THE PAST: BERNARD WILLIAMS ON
ETHICAL NOSTALGIA**

Vladimir Lukic

University of Pardubice, Centre for Ethics as Study in Human Value, Serbia;

University of Antwerp, Belgium

E-mail: vl.lukic.96@gmail.com

Abstract: Contemporary populist rhetoric is often filled with elements that invoke nostalgia. This invocation serves as a powerful tool for affirming the status quo, while simultaneously ensuring the efficiency of the rhetoric itself. This paper seeks to provide a critique of the politically induced nostalgia that mediates social opinions, which we shall refer to as the "Golden Age Fallacy" in reference to the famous movie *Midnight in Paris*. We shall draw from Bernard Williams' work *In the Beginning there was the Deed* to consider four arguments that form the basis of our criticism: the argument of moral and political regression, temporal desynchronicity, subjective experience, and reactivity. Together, these arguments will provide the foundation for our critique of the Golden Age Fallacy.

Keywords: Bernard Williams, ethical nostalgia, politics of reactivity, moral regress, Golden Age fallacy, political rhetoric, past, status quo, sentiment, deliberation.

PROBLEMA TRECUTULUI: BERNARD WILLIAMS DESPRE NOSTALGIA ETICĂ

Rezumat: Retorica populistă contemporană este plină de elemente care invocă nostalgia. Această invocare devine o armă redutabilă, pe de o parte pentru afirmarea status quo-ului, în timp ce, pe de altă parte, status quo-ul afirmat asigură eficiența acestei retorici. Acestea fiind spuse, această lucrare își propune să ofere o critică a nostalgiei induse politic care mediază opiniile sociale. Aceasta va fi numită, după celebrul film *Midnight in Paris*, o eroare de tip "Epoca de Aur". Având în vedere acest lucru, aceasta este o propunere de critică a erorii de tip "Epoca de Aur" care decurge din celebra lucrare a lui Bernard Williams – *La început a fost fapta*. În această lucrare, vom lua în considerare patru argumente care pot fi derivate din cartea sa, care sunt următoarele: argumentul regresiei morale și politice, al desincronității temporale, al experienței subiective și al reactivității. Aceste patru argumente vor oferi o bază pentru critica care va fi adusă față de eroarea de tip "Epoca de Aur".

Cuvinte-cheie: Bernard Williams, nostalgie etică, politica reactivității, regres moral, eroare de tip "Epoca de Aur", retorica politică, trecut, status quo, sentiment, deliberare.

1. The aim of the paper

The aim of this paper is fairly modest. While Bernard Williams is one of the most cited philosophers when it comes to the questions of the political theory and ethics, it seems that the philosophers who were concerned with studying Williams have often disregarded his arguments against the notion of ethical nostalgia. It is true, however, that Williams did not do much to systematically elaborate his criticism, as well as putting more importance on it.¹ Thus, the goal of this paper gains some importance. By taking into the account what Williams write on the notion of ethical nostalgia, this paper tends to decipher the beginning of the fourth chapter, *Modernity and the Substance of Ethical Life* from the book *In the Beginning There Was the Deed*. By doing so, it proposes four arguments which can be found within Williams' thought. Therefore, a methodology should be proposed. Firstly, there is a need to stress the importance of this subject, that is to say, why is ethical nostalgia an interesting issue for the current political discourse. This shall be elaborated in the first part of this paper. The second part is a direct criticism based on four arguments offered to us by Williams, which is also a main goal of this paper. The final part will consider, in the shorter regards, the possible problems, expansions and possibilities of this critique.

2. Nostalgic mediation of thought as a political problem

It seems that the current trend in the populist politics is the constant exploitation of the past sentiments. It is true, however, that this exploitation has always went hand in hand with the nationalist rhetoric which can be traced back through numerous historical examples. After the 70s and the 80s, the story of the beautiful cosmopolitan world begins to be questioned and people who doubt the idea of cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, or all in all, contemporary liberalism, have began to invoke nostalgic tendencies. The reaction to the unfavorable situation in the current state of affairs

could also be the following – invoking the past as a means to bear with reality. One might ask – bearing with the reality in which way? Firstly, we might find rationalization for the situation in which we are in. If a person X does not occupy the preferable place in a social hierarchy, he might escape from it by bringing a new hierarchy with different governing principles into play. A person X might say: “Well, even though I am not in a preferable situation in this defected society, I would definitely be in a better situation within a past society which was much more just, as well as healthier!”. Another coping mechanism that is using nostalgia as a tool, is to answer to the individual inability to lead a “good” (if it is perceived as such) social life. Let us consider the following – “I would be much happier if I lived in a Medieval social context!”; “I am a hopeless romantic, my prime would definitely be achieved during the renaissance!”, “I was born to be a warrior! The Viking era was the best era to live in!” etc. There is clearly something unsettling in this constatation. Alvin Toffler, a futurist novelist gives a rather interesting notice in this regard. He sees nostalgia as an irrational view that is influenced by the overwhelming confusion that we see all around us.² It, however, should be noted that this is not a criticism of the people holding a nostalgic sentiment. On the contrary, this sentiment arises as a necessity more often than not. Having that in mind, this criticism is directed at the banality of holding nostalgia to be a valid stance, not at the people holding it in the first place.

To my understanding, it would be worth noting two issues right away. One issue is concerned with the psychological sphere of an individual, while another issue is concerned with the political picture. One might notice, and rightfully so, that these two things are dependent on one another. Psychological necessity for nostalgia, as mentioned, arises from one’s position in the political hierarchy and, in return, the political hierarchy thrives on this feeling of nostalgia. In which way? By affirming the status quo. We shall return to this briefly. On the other hand, the dependency between the psychological and the political is very well illustrated in the paper written by Marcos Piason Natali. Namely, nostalgia was the concept used primarily as a psychological problem of recreating a new world, or, as it states – *a new way of feeling or a new way of thinking about an old feeling was*

entering the world^{3,4} The concept of nostalgia, at this instance was used as a psychological issue that is linked with an individual who is recreating one “old” world in order to escape the current one. It is only recently, Natali writes, that we use this concept to talk about political issues⁵ which have many similarities with what the concept originally represented. When expanding this concept into the political realm, the holders of nostalgia tend to recreate an old world and judge the current events from that standpoint.

The current analysis gains a lot of explanatory power if we introduce the notion of the power struggle. However, it shall only be mentioned briefly, since the main point of this paper is not criticizing nostalgia through the mentioned notion. Brief mention has a lot to deal with the following – nostalgia used in the political rhetoric takes people from the point of powerlessness into the “old” world which is, as we mentioned earlier, constructed as a need for an escape. In this “old” world, the holders of nostalgia have the power which they are lacking in the “current” one. Sadly, this “old” world has different power structure which can be very discriminatory of the marginalized groups and brings a tendency for exclusivity with it. Such an example can be seen in the ambiguous phrase “*Make America great again*”. Donna M. Goldstein and Kira Hall have analyzed this phenomenon in the following regard. This phrase that should bring forth the nationalist sentiments is also encoded with the discriminatory ones such as racism⁶, and I argue, also sexism, anti-LGBTQ+ wave, nationalist exclusivity etc. This implicit stratification, paradoxically, is in the service of the stagnation of the social change. Fabio B. DaSilva and Jim Faught, in the line of this thought, note that *since nostalgia appeals to an undifferentiated emotion generated by an unreal, synthetic, universal image of the past it becomes, ironically, an ahistorical defense of the status quo*.⁷ It affirms the status quo by halting the future progress while trying to revive the past which cannot be revived. The criticism of this, however, will be given in the second part of this paper.

Now, we should note that this is portrayed very broadly, and that the emphasis is on the negative effects which nostalgia produces. Taken as it is, we should consider this line of thought as a fallacy. From

this point, this fallacy should be given a name. Luckily enough, we need not be creative in this regard, for I believe that the perfect name was given in Woody Allen's movie *Midnight in Paris*.⁸ In short, the main character of this movie idealizes Paris, or to be more precise, idealizes one specific era in Paris. I shall quote the instance of the movie from which we can acquire the name for the phenomenon we have on our hands: "Nostalgia is denial. Denial of the painful present. The name for this denial is Golden Age thinking — the erroneous notion that a different time period is better than the one one's living in — it's a flaw in the romantic imagination of those people who find it difficult to cope with the present."⁹

Quote mentioned above is in line with what is argued in this paper. Therefore, we shall say that the holders of nostalgia are making a Golden Age fallacy.

3. Williamsian critique: arguments and ethical nostalgia

Bernard Williams is one of the most cited academic philosophers when it comes to the topics of moral philosophy and politics. However, strangely enough, one rather important critique has been put under the radar. This critique is, as one might imagine, a critique of nostalgia which is offered in his book *In the Beginning there was the Deed*. To be fair, the critique of nostalgia is not Williams's primary focus; not in his book, and not even in the chapter in which he has given this critique. Be it as it may, Williams does offer us substance to work with and his criticism of what he calls ethical nostalgia will be split into four arguments. Therefore, this chapter will incorporate Williamsian critique of the Golden Age fallacy by showing which arguments are given by those who hold nostalgia to be a relevant source of political deliberation, after which a counter argument will be provided.

The first argument that Williams puts on the table shall be called the argument of moral and political regression. We are aware that there are many theories of progress, both moral and political.¹⁰ The ones who are making a Golden Age fallacy¹¹ would, according to Williams, need an inverse theory.¹² If the theory of progress

presupposes that we are going forward when it comes to the questions of morality and politics, a theory of regress would have to show why that is not the case. To make the matters worse for those who are making a Golden Age fallacy, this is only the starting point. Not only do they have to show why we are not making any moral and political progress, they need to show that we are, in fact, regressing.

The second argument shall be considered under the label of temporal desynchronicity. This is a fancy way of saying that the Golden Age fallacy does not only have a hard time locating the specifics within one metric historical time period but does not do so at all. As Williams lucidly observes, Golden Age fallacy is not tied to the notions such as “earlier” and “later”, but to the notions such as “now” and “then”.¹³ By doing so, this negates that the “later” is dependent on the “earlier”; it provides an illusion that there was a certain “then” when “them” lived in a better social order than “we” do “now”.

Argument number three is concerning the experience of the nostalgia and we can, therefore, call it the argument of subjective experience. Why subjective? This is, I admit, derived from Williams’s criticism of the traditionalist Golden Age fallacy. Namely, according to him, those who endorse traditionalist nostalgia blame the modern period for the decline of traditionalist values and the rise of the secular ones. It is to their belief that this secularization is the key culprit of everything that is wrong with the current situation. However, as Williams notes: „Those people are not necessarily wrong. But if their repertoire is notably the same as the traditional repertoire, we have no particular reason to think that they are right; in particular, we have no reason to think that they are right because we share, if only in certain moods, their experience of nostalgia.”¹⁴

It follows from this that each one of us feels nostalgia towards a certain glorification of the past event. However, this glorification is a subjective form of longing, we can even find it as an aesthetic category.

Final argument can be named as an argument of reactivity. Williams’s claim about the Golden Age fallacy in one regard is rather extreme in one sense, however, if we were to think about the political implications of it, we can say that it is in many ways justified. He states - *all that ethical nostalgia can generate from its own resources is,*

*literally, reaction.*¹⁵ This goes hand in hand with Marx's criticism of nostalgia which he concludes that nostalgia is *always* reactionary sentiment in opposition to the progressive politics and that, through it, the dead bury the dead.¹⁶

It is from this, and from everything that has been stated in the chapter one, nostalgia, or a Golden Age fallacy, is always a reaction. If we are, let us say, unhappy with the institution X, we are invoking the past version of that institution in order to criticize the institution X. For example, a person X is unhappy with how the institution Y works. Institution Y happens to be law enforcement institution. Let us also say that the person X thinks that the institution Y has "gone soft". Person X can, on this note, state something as "They used to cut the hands of thieves back in the Medieval ages and you didn't see many thieves running around! Now you can steal, and nothing bad will happen to you!" This is a reactionary statement following from X's dissatisfaction with the institution Y.

4. Williamsian critique: problems concerning ethical nostalgia

Having stated four arguments that Williams notes, we can bring forth a critique of the Golden Age fallacy. Let us start of with the first two arguments that we have put forward. First, we shall consider the argument on moral and political regression and of the temporal desynchronicity. Stating that we are going backwards in the moral and political sense would, in the words of Williams, undermine the authority of experience.¹⁷ If we consider our history as being built by past events and as moving in the forward direction, rather than fragment it under the notions of "then" and "now", it will negate all the past events, battles and conversations that have contributed to the modern society. The social context is, indeed, different, however, different because of the events that have unfolded. Conceiving the history as "earlier" and "later" sheds light on the historical narrative that has taken shape to bring the situation in which we are in now.

When it comes to the third argument, it was mentioned that it can be considered as an aesthetic category. Let us consider the following historical periods – Medieval ages, the Renaissance, Victorian Britain, Yugoslavia, Roaring Twenties etc. Each of these mentioned periods have a certain portrayal that correlates with the emotional longing for it to “come back”. One might learn of these periods from the history books, novels, documentaries etc. And it is certainly the case that we tend to sympathize with some periods more than with others. However, the social interactions and the social context was far different than the one we have now. As Williams puts it in his far more famous book, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* - *many outlooks that human beings have had are not real options for us now. The life of a Bronze Age chief or a medieval samurai are not real options for us: there is no way of living them.*¹⁸ At the end of the day, these categories remain aesthetic ones also because we were never a part of that social narrative. The outlook on those periods is done through the lenses of the present and this outlook can be either aesthetic or reactive.

Which brings us to the fourth and final argument. Golden Age fallacy is, if it wants to have a practical pretension, a reactive stance. There are many reactive politics these days and many tend to correct the injustice on both the social and the institutional level. However, are those with this Golden Age fallacy doing that? Again, Williams is very elegant in his explanation – let us consider a ship which is traveling to a certain destination. Reactive politics tends to change the course of that ship in a specific direction; however, nostalgia tends to try to turn the whole ship around¹⁹ *and no solution could be conjured merely from the sense that things are not as they used to be.*²⁰

Now, let us consider some possible problems and possibilities that arise from this criticism. First argument that comes to mind is – is every nostalgic feeling inherently bad? We have, and for a good reason, focused solely on the exploitation of this political sentiment. There have been multiple examples throughout the history in which the movements that have brought major changes to the social system have been influenced by the past ideas. The first example that comes to mind is the movement of the Italian Renaissance. The whole

humanistic approach and movement would not be possible if the intellectuals did not revive Greek philosophy and culture.²¹ Another issue that this conception might encounter is the fact that nostalgic feeling might have a realistic designated target. Namely, consider the following example – a person X has lived in a society Y1 and has continued to do so till his/her elderly days. The social structure has changed drastically, and we can consider the current social structure to be Y2. Let us also suppose that the general political principles of justice have been regressed and that the society Y2 is far less just than the society Y1. Would it be unreasonable for X to hold a nostalgic view? Could we use this nostalgia for the acts of, for example, civil disobedience? Following Dirk Klopper's question - *who is to say that this kind of thinking, part reverie and part appraisal, lacks value, this thinking about what kind of thinking we doing about what kind of experience?*²² And it is an interesting question because it invokes the debate of the personal and the public realm. The third point that would have to be made is the usefulness of Williams' criticism. If we take the last example as a valid one and if there can be a nostalgia which can be legitimized, then the picture becomes a bit more complex. One proposal that can be made is using these arguments as a methodological procedure. Seemingly, Williams' arguments target the sentiment of nostalgia which is instrumentalized for the goal of anti-progressivism. If we can differentiate between nostalgias, then this procedure could be used to determine which nostalgia is legitimate and which one is not. That is, however, outside of the scope of this paper and arguing for that opens a door for a further discussion and a new project.

5. Conclusion

The time has come for us to summarize everything that has been said. The problem of nostalgia is a phenomenon that characterizes contemporary politics. Many citizens hold the notion that it was better before than it is now. If that is the case, I argue, they are making a Golden Age fallacy. In order to criticize this, we have turned to

Bernard Williams's critique of ethical nostalgia. From this criticism, we could have derived four arguments on why Golden Age fallacy is rather problematic and could be considered only as an aesthetic category and not a political one. If we were to criticize this approach, a new discussion would open, and the goal of this paper is to initiate this discussion.

Notes:

¹ Williams has written but a few pages on this topic; and even so, it is a topic which only has an instrumental value for Williams' further argument.

² Alvin Toffler, 1970, *Future Shock*. (London: Pan): 312.

³ The author wants to show the origin of this concept through the historical conceptual analysis. When the author takes this concept into consideration at this passage, it is worth to note that this concept is illustrated by showing us in which way Johannes Hofer, a swiss doctor who has developed this concept in 1688., used it.

⁴ Marcos Piason Natali, 2004, „History and the Politics of Nostalgia”. *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* vol. 5, issue 1, 9-25: 10.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 11.

⁶ Donna M., Goldstein & Kira Hall, 2017, „Postelection surrealism and nostalgic racism in the hands of Donald Trump”. *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7: 402.

⁷ Fabio B. DaSilva, & Jim Faught, 1982, „Nostalgia: A sphere and process of contemporary ideology”. *Qualitative Sociology* 5: 49.

⁸ Woody Allen, (Director), 2011, *Midnight In Paris* [Motion Picture].

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Of course, we can insert many other practices and the first that comes to mind is science, however, this paper shall only be interested in moral and political progress, although many other fields directly contribute to it.

¹¹ As noted, Williams uses the term *ethical nostalgia*, however, I will persist using the term *Golden Age fallacy* because it is much more inclusive of the phenomena that were described in the first chapter.

¹² Bernard Williams, 2005, *In the Beginning there was the Deed* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press): 41.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 41.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 42.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 43.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, 1852, „The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”. In Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 11 (London: Lawrence and Wishart): 106.

¹⁷ Bernard Williams, 2005, *In the Beginning there was the Deed* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press): 41.

¹⁸ Bernard Williams, 2006, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Abingdon: Routledge): 161.

¹⁹ Bernard Williams, 2005, *In the Beginning there was the Deed* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press): 44.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 43.

²¹ Timothy J. Bergen, 1994, „The Greeks and the Education of Humanity”. *The Journal of General Education*, vol. 43: 41.

²² Dirk Klopper, 2016, „Introduction: The Problem of Nostalgia”, *English in Africa* vol. 43, No. 3: 12.

References:

Allen, Woody. (Director). 2011. *Midnight In Paris* [Motion Picture].

Bergen, Timothy J. 1994. “The Greeks and the Education of Humanity”. *The Journal of General Education*, vol. 43: 32-43.

DaSilva, Fabio B., & Faught, Jim. 1982. “Nostalgia: A sphere and process of contemporary ideology”. *Qualitative Sociology* (5): 47–61.

Goldstein, Donna M., & Hall, Kira. 2017. “Postelection surrealism and nostalgic racism in the hands of Donald Trump”. *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* (7): 397-406.

Klopper, Dirk. 2016. “Introduction: The Problem of Nostalgia”. *English in Africa*, vol. 43, (3): 9-17.

Marx, Karl. 1852. “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”. In K. Marx, & F. Engels, *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 11. (London: Lawrence and Wishart) : 99-197.

Natali, Marcos Piason. 2004. "History and the Politics of Nostalgia". *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* vol. 5, (1): 9-25.

Toffler, Alvin. 1970. *Future Shock*. (London: Pan).

Williams, Bernard. 2005. *In the Beginning there was the Deed*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press).

Williams, Bernard. 2006. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. (Abingdon: Routledge).