

The Elderly as an Inconvenient Reminder

Reflections on Public Memory in the Age of Total Capitalism and Artificial Intelligence

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This essay is not about ageing. Nor is it primarily about museums. It is about memory, responsibility and the increasingly uncertain future of humanity. Every civilisation entrusts its experience to someone: once to its elders, later to its institutions, and perhaps tomorrow to artificial intelligence. Whether any of these can transform memory into wisdom has become one of the decisive questions of our time.

We live in topsy-turvy times. No one expected them. Computer scientists offer an elegant explanation for this social decline, describing it as a "*redefinition of the system at a lower level.*" Peasant armies conquer cities and then proceed to "peasantise" them: they destroy refinement, neglect virtues, dismiss good taste, and erode the civilisational achievements of the conquered. Mediocrities and the uneducated flood the system, seize positions of power, corrupt society, and subordinate it to organised criminal interests disguised as respectable citizens. Babylon, if we simplify history, succumbed only after the third wave of "hill tribes." The first two invasions still allowed it to preserve at least the appearance of civilisation and to recover its institutions. After the third, it disappeared altogether. Babylon is merely a paradigm. Zagreb, it is said, has undergone similar "reforestations."

Older people have watched the same play unfold repeatedly throughout their lives. Only the directors and actors have changed. That is why they readily say that things are worse than they used to be. A few perceptive professors may know this intellectually, but senior citizens know it from experience. Somehow, that is considered improper. We have grown accustomed to expecting that the world either becomes better or is just about to.

Experience, whether embodied in individuals or in institutions, becomes an uncomfortable witness for those who currently hold power. It reminds them of the value of both experience itself and the lessons it carries.

As they grow older, life itself often comes to resent elderly people, turning them into poor company. They become irritated and unable to understand much of what younger generations allow themselves, or at least tolerate. Small,

peripheral, provincial societies, especially those that have succumbed to social involution as ours has, are a kind of hell for both young and old. The elderly, however, see this more clearly. They know what life used to be like: what was better and what was worse. Under ordinary circumstances, this would simply be dismissed as the familiar nostalgia of old age, the longing for youth and for "the good old days." The elderly would, as convention dictates, be considered mistaken, because for them, as for countless generations before, the "good old days" are merely another name for their own youth. And every youth is preferable to old age.

Yet those among the elderly who have remained young in spirit know that one should never leave the world in a worse condition than one found it. The best among them realise something even more disturbing. Within what would otherwise be the ordinary cycles of history, humanity has entered an unprecedented moment. For the first time, we stand before the prospect not merely of decline but of self-annihilation, of collective suicide. Not as Babylon, Egypt, Greece or Rome disappeared, not as empires, but as humanity itself.

It is impossible to grow old with integrity without feeling both guilty and resentful, towards oneself and towards all preceding generations. Can it really be that bad old people will finally succeed in bringing about the deluge they have always been warned against? Even the word *deluge* is a strangely poetic and cynical description of a catastrophe that has in fact been unfolding over decades. Humanity is accumulating an ever-growing number of scenarios of self-destruction, encoded in everything that unrestrained total capitalism can extract from new technologies—from artificial intelligence to bioengineering, as well as from natural disasters that increasingly reveal themselves to be the consequences of a warming planet.

(I shall add one observation, whatever anyone may think of it. I recently took my car for its mandatory technical inspection and watched as exhaust emissions were measured to determine whether they remained within the legally permitted limits. At that very moment it occurred to me that, during those few minutes alone, humanity's military machinery had probably heated and polluted the atmosphere several times more than all the cars in the world had done throughout the previous year.)

Yes, we are better fed, but what kind of food do we consume? Yes, we are better informed—but about anything that truly matters? Can you name a single journalist in today's media who matches the professional stature of people like Ive Mihovilović or Tomislav Jakić, to mention only one profession that has been devastated? Yes, we live in democracy and choose our own representatives, but do we still govern our own minds and our own judgement? We are beaten less

often, but how many forms of abuse exist besides physical violence? There is more money, but it is spent more easily and with less satisfaction. Older people will often agree that we now inhabit a world in which quality steadily retreats before appearances.

And since, without even intending to, I find myself defending the perspective of old age, let me ask one question: are young people today happier than earlier generations were? Perhaps youth is, by definition, a privileged state. Young people lack the experience that might disturb the uniqueness of the moment in which they happen to live. True, there were periods in history that were objectively worse. Humanity has endured epic suffering, most of it needless or wildly disproportionate to any benefit. Yet there is no greater suffering than the one that arrives precisely when people believed it would never return. We had begun to believe in Progress just at the moment when it quietly lost its capital letter, when it ceased to be an aspiration and was expected to become a permanent condition. The only thing that truly continues to progress is technology.

Experience as an Inconvenient Witness

Those of us who are older grew up in a linear and analogue world. It seemed natural to believe that everything develops, advances, that our knowledge continually expands, and that we therefore become happier. It could indeed have been so, had established science not failed to recognise one fundamental truth. Neither the world, nor time, nor development, nor even science itself is linear.

Reality is more like a kaleidoscope, constantly rearranging itself. Different epochs coexist within the same present. Depending on where we stand, our shared reality is inhabited simultaneously by primitive societies, ancient civilisations, the Middle Ages, and ghosts we believed history had long laid to rest.

Total capitalism is itself a grotesque version of medievalism. A new aristocracy is emerging, while devastation has become part of a spiritual darkness concealed beneath a planet that is brilliantly illuminated, ostentatious and deafeningly loud. For the first time in history, fully aware that we all inhabit a mere grain of cosmic dust, humanity finds itself confronted not with a noble consciousness of shared destiny but with several plausible scenarios of collective suicide. Technology has overtaken us, and with it the very paradigm of civilisation is changing.

There was once a future that embodied hope and represented a worthy objective. Today, even that future is being taken away from us. In that sense, it is almost

convenient that old people are tired or confined to nursing homes, for they have become unwelcome witnesses. Old age becomes wisdom only when it has been ennobled by virtue. Truly wise people have always been rare.

Museums and the other institutions of public memory are largely occupied with scientifically neutral subjects or with socially acceptable, politically harmless themes. For reasons that are difficult to explain, they do not consider themselves responsible for the destiny of humanity. Against such a background, the resignation and fatigue of old age acquire an even stronger excuse.

Collective social memory is therefore left almost entirely in the hands of politicians, officially sanctioned intellectuals, compliant media, and corporations that would be perfectly content if people eventually became biological robots, stripped of collective consciousness and collective conscience alike.

Manipulating entire populations in order to sustain the illusion of democracy is a long, expensive and never entirely reliable undertaking. Elderly people are too powerless to present any real obstacle. Yet, paradoxically, political cliques are equally prepared to dispose of those among the young who might acquire more social experience than the masters of reality wish them to possess. The smaller the country and the more fragile its culture—and Croatia, regrettably, might recognise itself in this description, the easier it becomes to sacrifice long-term social memory in favour of the short-term interests of those who wield power.

Officially, those proverbial elders have already been replaced. Their role has been transferred first to archives, then to libraries, and finally to museums. Museums emerged in most cultures little more than a century ago as evidence of the need for reliable knowledge and as demonstrations of its value. They became the institutional equivalent of the elderly: repositories of accumulated experience, entrusted with the responsibility of preserving and transmitting it.

Curated public experience—drawn from personal, collective, social, technical and cultural memory—was intended to become a source of knowledge and inspiration. Around a century ago, the finest museums in the world still recognised this accumulated experience as a force capable of advancing society. Some seventy years ago its strategic importance was acknowledged more explicitly: it was understood as an instrument for the emancipation of the human spirit and, consequently, for building better communities and a better society.

Yet the virus of power has always inhabited institutions of public memory. Existing on the margins of social development, museums in particular gradually became secure havens for a comfortable middle class and for the reassuring

certainties of Cartesian science. During the past half century, however, political and corporate manipulation has intensified in many parts of the world.

Put simply, those in power prefer museum directors who are loyal to governments and curators who remain loyal to traditional notions of scholarship. A curator who travels to Africa in search of three additional butterfly specimens for an entomological collection—of which eighty per cent will remain forever hidden in storage—is considered more desirable than one who might request the same funding in order to create an exhibition explaining that humanity itself cannot survive on this planet without butterflies.

Museums as Institutional Elders

Officially, the proverbial elders of society have long since been replaced. Their role has gradually been assumed by archives, expanded through libraries and, ultimately, embodied in museums.

Museums emerged in most modern societies little more than a century ago as tangible proof of the value of reliable knowledge and as public demonstrations of the importance of preserving experience. In that sense, they became society's institutional elders.

They were conceived as carefully selected and thoughtfully interpreted repositories of public experience. Personal, collective, social, technical and cultural memories were to be transformed into knowledge, and knowledge into inspiration for the future.

In the finest museums of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this accumulated experience was recognised as a genuine force for social progress. Some seventy years ago, its strategic importance became even clearer. Museums were increasingly understood as institutions capable of contributing to the emancipation of the human spirit and, consequently, to the creation of better communities and a better society.

Yet the institutions of public memory have never been immune to the ambitions of those who hold power.

Remaining largely on the margins of social development, museums gradually settled into the comfortable role of respectable middle-class institutions, protected by the reassuring certainties of Cartesian science. Depending on the political and cultural environment, however, the past half-century has witnessed an ever stronger encroachment of political and corporate influence.

The logic is disarmingly simple. Those in power prefer museum directors who are loyal to governments and curators who remain safely confined within conventional academic scholarship.

A curator who travels to Africa in search of three additional butterfly specimens for an entomological collection—although eighty per cent of that collection will spend its existence hidden in storage—is considered less troublesome than a curator who asks for the same funding to create an exhibition explaining that, without butterflies, humanity itself cannot survive on this planet.

The first curator enlarges a collection. The second enlarges public consciousness. It is hardly surprising which of the two is more likely to receive institutional approval.

Museums were never intended merely to preserve objects. They were created to preserve society's capacity to learn from itself.

Whenever they abandon that responsibility, they cease to be institutions of public memory in the fullest sense. They become little more than professionally managed repositories of the past.

Public memory, however, is not an archive. It is a living conversation between yesterday and tomorrow. And museums were meant to be among its most articulate participants.

Controlling Memory, Controlling Society

If, through subtle or overt control, you prevent this sector from becoming professionalised and genuinely independent, you control the past. If, by strategically selecting and interpreting the past, you prevent it from exerting any influence upon the present, you control the present. And if you prevent these institutions and their professions from integrating into a single, strong and self-aware community of practice, you extend that control far into the future.

Without the curation of the past, selective forgetting becomes effortless. You may choose to forget colonialism, for example, while your museums remain filled with treasures plundered from other cultures. You may remember only what suits you. You may even breathe new life into the spectres of war once you discover that warfare has become the most profitable business on earth.

Chaos, accepted as a legitimate and "normal" condition, abolishes every noble social ambition and arbitrarily assigns new meanings according to the interests it serves.

Institutions of public memory can thus become instruments of persuasion and factories of mythology. If corrupted politics so requires, mythology may easily degenerate into mythomania.

Never before have the times been so perilous, nor leadership so often entrusted to self-appointed leaders and the insatiably greedy. Ever since Confucius, perhaps the most concise and practical of philosophers, the elderly have symbolised experience and wisdom. It was largely this symbolic role that gave rise to the very idea of institutions devoted to public memory.

Yet in the contemporary West such wise elders have become strangely unwelcome.

As if trapped in a hypnotic dream, we inhabit what is commonly described as the age of post-truth, post-humanism and post-factuality, an age of deception and manipulation on a monstrous scale. We are led by bad old men: men who either wish to live forever or to leave behind them a deluge.

Their institutional substitutes, the institutions of noble memory—have, by and large, failed us.

Hope and the ideal of progress have been replaced by a kind of collective stupor accompanied by an almost orgiastic fascination with trivialities. Triviality has become both an escape from reality and, increasingly, a substitute for reality itself.

Empathy, social order and justice, merely three among the long catalogue of virtues recognised by every civilisation throughout history, would, for a beginning, already represent enormous progress.

Professional curators, the institutional elders of our societies, and the institutions they serve must cease to be mere producers of knowledge. They must become alchemists, capable of extracting wisdom from knowledge.

I see no force other than artificial intelligence that might make such a transformation possible.

If the civilisational paradigm is ever to change for the better, I believe that the decisive transformation will occur precisely here.

Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Wisdom

It is not my intention, in an essay of this kind, to develop this optimistic proposition to its conclusion. However much we simplify it, the world will

always remain complex and difficult to comprehend. It is governed by paradoxes and by the perpetual tension of opposing forces.

Personally, I still hope for a kind of *quantum leap*, a transformation that would alter, or, to remain optimistic, elevate our collective consciousness, at least among those who own and govern the world.

Museums have always served as a revealing indicator of the condition of humanity. To a considerable extent, however, they have also become evidence that warehouses overflowing with testimonies of the past mean very little in themselves.

Many years ago, I reproached museums for what I called **hypermnesia**: an extraordinary capacity for remembering without any genuine sense of purpose. How almost romantic that criticism now seems.

Artificial intelligence remembers everything. More importantly, it is increasingly demonstrating that it remembers **more intelligently** than museums themselves.

The sheer scale of AI's memory has rendered museums either unnecessary—unless they begin to act publicly and courageously as social advocates, or merely attractive destinations for a fetishised experience, places of cultural pilgrimage where authenticity itself becomes the object of consumption.

Truth—the kind of truth capable of advancing humanity, does not reside in the quantity of information, nor in the fetish of original objects.

It resides in the system of values that society embraces and in the virtues it proposes, cultivates or, where necessary, insists upon as the foundations of a good life and of our collective survival.

Perhaps the inability of institutions of collective memory to make a decisive contribution to the recovery of our faltering civilisation will ultimately become the very reason why artificial intelligence is used wisely and for genuinely noble purposes.

Museums must never become museums of themselves.

Meanwhile, the first museums devoted to artificial intelligence, MOCO, Dataland, National Geographic and others, have already begun their work as though the older museums scarcely existed.

From now on, memory, and even intelligence, will exist in abundance. Wisdom will not. And without wisdom, humanity has little reason to believe in its own future.

We have entered an age in which remembering is no longer difficult. Understanding is. And wisdom has perhaps never been rarer. If museums once represented humanity's organised memory, their future task can no longer be merely to preserve. It must be to help civilisation remember what is worth becoming.