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## American Biedermeier



Am Fronleichnamsmorgen, by Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller (1857) is an example of Biedermeier paintings evoking harmony, belief, and tradition.

If we apply Mark Twain's observation that "history does not repeat itself but it often rhymes," then at this moment in time we may well be inhabiting the American Biedermeier. The data are coming in. The public is tuning out. Vanity Fair called it *The Great Tune-Out of 2024*.

The PEW Research Center was definitely interested in finding out how Americans feel about US politics. It surveyed adults in depth. Its study *Americans' Dismal Views of the Nation's Politics* was published in September of 2023. It uncovered that 65 percent felt exhausted just by considering our political blessings.

But to start, what is the Biedermeier? It was the central European period from 1815 to 1848, wedged between the finishing forever wars and the onset of revolutions.

Most people living in the anglosphere know of Napoleon but fewer have heard the term Biedermeier. Those who have may just remember furniture in the Biedermeier style. Nowadays they are desirable and expensive while back then, arriving after the curvaceous exuberance of the Baroque and the classicist glamour of the French Empire, the Biedermeier offered clean, elegant lines. The 2006 first major show of the style in North America was presented by the Milwaukee Art Museum and titled *Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity*. The furniture makers didn't use expensive exotic timber imported from the colonies, but instead worked with local woods like elm, walnut, cherry, ash and pine. Later the designs inspired the modern Art Deco and the Bauhaus.

Simplicity is clearly one characteristic of this short but significant phase when middle class citizens massively tuned out, spurned political engagement, discarded much of the redundant baggage of living, and focused entirely on domestic affairs, the family, a small intimate circle of friends if available, nature, art, and tranquil pleasures.

These days, many Americans are apparently doing similar things. They avoid the topic of politics in daily conversations. There is a new mood, a different count-me-out and circle-the-wagons attitude everywhere you look across the land. The pandemic provided extra fuel for it. People spend more time alone or away from crowds. They focus on local events. All kinds of research, studies, explanations are given but they tend to skirt around the deeper issues and meanings. For example, how could behavioral health professionals (which are in short supply to begin with) possibly remedy the loss of faith in the affairs and the future of the country, and even the wider world with its climate turmoil, among veterans or the young? Their efforts might barely put a band aid on a large festering laceration.

Consider the continental situation in the early 1800's. The middle classes had evolved from the "city air makes free" milieu of the vigorous urban centers, laboratories of civil rights and proto-democratic experimentation for centuries. These citizens then opened their minds to the ideas of the Enlightenment and its spin-offs, paid sympathetic attention to the American and French Revolutions, noted that in the newly independent United States all men were supposed to be equal while many, and women, remained unequal, witnessed how royal heads rolled in France while the country descended into bloody terror, and endured the new emperor Napoleon with his forever wars and occupations of their home countries. During the wars of liberation they fought long and hard until the conquering genius was finally defeated. Next, they waited for a peace to be concocted.

Just before the end of the struggle the Congress of Vienna was convened. This grand gathering toiled in 1814 -1815 to reassemble and reorganize the shards of Europe for the construction of a peace. It worked diligently to restore the former conservative order, a balance of power, and a political stability advantageous for the old rulers □ kings and long-established elites. It ended with the formation of the Concert of Europe, a protocol and process for conflict resolution designed to maintain the customary power of major countries and to diminish the energies for autonomy and dissent. Any Mark Twain-style history rhyming comparable with the contemporary U.N. Security Council is in the eye of the beholder.

Lasting peace was accomplished at a high price. After proclaiming the Rights of Man and the dawning of freedoms, an era of reaction began. The revolutionary and the Napoleonic worldviews were terminated, freedom of speech and academic freedoms were curtailed, censorship and surveillance proliferated, revolutionary forces had to be contained at all costs. Napoleon won forty battles and all was lost at Waterloo. Yet while he conquered and occupied much of Europe, his forward-looking “Civil Code” or Code Napoleon travelled with him, was introduced to various countries, and spread the main principles of the French Revolution. This 1804 legal code had modernized French law; it endorsed equality and individual rights (but not for women), abolished feudal privileges, protected property rights of citizens, and made everyone □ regardless of legal status □ equal before the law. No more sweetheart deals for nobility or clergy. The code was Napoleon’s lasting legacy and as Bedell Cristin points out, it is one of the most influential legal documents in the world: It was adapted and is now found and partly made use of in approximately 120 countries worldwide. It has influenced the legal system of Louisiana, USA.

All of this created a profoundly awkward situation. While antagonistic against the conqueror, the defeated populations had appreciated the lawgiver’s *Code Napoleon*. At the same time, their need for an end to decades of war and for tranquility was great. However, when the Congress of Vienna made a peace that erased the new legal reforms and rights by replacing them with law & order repressions, the ironies became overwhelming. The populations hanging on to the spirit of the “Civil Code” were liberated from the imperial Napoleon, and then caged again by the peace-making of their own traditional autocrats. At this point, neither side had anything to offer to the citizens. They saw no place to go to. So they turned away, tuned out, and strictly minded their own private businesses.

But you can hardly ever silence dissent completely. Some middle-class individuals, working people, and many university students refused to accept the roll-back of rights. For that reason,

and parallel to the calm and idyllic surface of the Biedermeier, the radical-democratic *Vormärz* (*Before March*) movement evolved and embodied the opposition. Writers and dramatists like Heinrich Heine (*Winterreise*) and Georg Büchner (*Dantons Tod*) contributed. Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* with Schiller's *Ode to Joy* and freedom was first performed in May of 1824 during the repressive Metternich era in Vienna.

Forced to operate mostly underground, the passion of the dissenters erupted into the open during the start of the March 1848 revolutions. In Berlin, an aged Alexander von Humboldt marched in front of the funeral procession for those who had died in the city's uprising.

But this happened two centuries ago over there, so what is it to us? Conditions are altogether different now □ except for three things we have in common: a strong disillusion about politics, fatigue for wars, and an opposition to the return of kings.

As the appalling conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza grind on, the US Supreme Court has decided 6-3 to give absolute immunity to official acts of presidents. Dissenting Justice Sonia Sotomayor had this to say: "The relationship between the president and the people he serves has shifted irrevocably. In every use of official power, the president is now a king above the law."

Ironically, in his follow-up July 5 interview on ABC with George Stephanopoulos, which happened days after the debate debacle, the President said, "I am running the world." He confirmed what people all over the planet have already experienced: US presidents act abroad as if they are entitled to be the world's emperors. During his NATO summit press conference on July 11 the President reinforced his July 5 statement by insisting that the US is indispensable.

Long ago Americans fought a revolutionary war to get rid of kings. The new country embraced the rule of law: no one, not even a monarch or a president, was above it. But now, in its wisdom, the US Supreme Court has undermined this constitutional component. Before the recent ruling it was unofficial and de facto □ yet at once it became official: The US can have imperial presidents.

The imperial angle in our history is nothing new, we have enjoyed that one for many years. One, two, or three generations of Americans grew up being breastfed with the exceedingly nutritious narrative that they are the good guys. It was uncontested. They wore the white hats. They were exceptional. Indispensable. They lived in the greatest nation the world had ever known. That nation defended freedom and democracy at home and across the globe. It was the land of milk and honey, the land of the brave and the free. And it was the place where justice and human rights felt at home.

But then, starting in the 60s and 70s, at first hesitantly and then persistently, proud Americans had to hear, see, and read that the white hat narrative had been a bombastic invention. Now the white hats were out and black hats were in. The bad-mouthing particulars rained down on the public and rarely stopped. With effort it was still possible to avoid some of them and stick to the customary red, white, and blue, but it became harder and harder to do so.

In due course, as the 21st century marched on, the whole wonderful edifice of American Greatness and Goodness began to crumble. Pieces fell off or disintegrated like the old infrastructures of rusting bridges or potholed roads. No matter where you scratched a surface, almost unfailingly something rotten became visible underneath. The business of governing a country for its people slowed down and could come precariously close to a standstill. Yes, wrong doings and bad things had to be investigated. That was a practical way to remove them from the news cycle and push them in to the congested machinery of government. Too many necessary investigations, and a never-ending flow of new ones soon clogged the circulatory systems of administrations and caused organizational arteriosclerosis. A government that is forced to spend too much time, money, and brains shining a light on corruption, lawbreaking, and assorted dysfunctions is dealing with severely unhealthy conditions. No wonder the United States became trapped in a state of paralyzation by investigation. (The proper term is paralysis, but the casual incorrect one rhymes better).

Among the many other challenges facing the US are major discrepancies in perception. In March, during his State of the Union address, President Biden said “I inherited an economy at the brink. Now, our economy is literally the envy of the world”

Yet amazingly, more than half of Americans are living elsewhere in the multiverse. A Harris poll done in May found that 56 percent believed that the “US economy is in a recession.” Based on fact that was wrong. Based on perception it shows how it feels to make ends meet out there on the battlegrounds of life in America. The two perceptions belong to different mental and emotional languages.

The country has serious trust issues. The public must deal with a constant diet of damaging news and the progressing erosion of the imperial narrative on the one hand, and with a government deluge of positive toxicity on the other. Everything that now comes from a reigning administration is wildly positive. It’s so positive it may elevate blood sugars to noxious levels. The excessive sweetness becomes indigestible

Furthermore, it was not and it isn’t pleasant to be subjected to a metamorphosis that twists a proud if inflated worldview into something deeply negative. That’s a turn-things-on-its-head shock therapy. It can produce an acute sense of disillusionment. But it may also lead to the

realization that both the white hat and the black hat chronicles are inadequate. They don't tell the real story. They are overflowing with hyperboles and misrepresentations. And most importantly, they have little to do with the people who actually live here from coast to coast.

In *A Man Without a Country*, Kurt Vonnegut told us that “a saint is a person who behaves decently in a shockingly indecent society.”

That's a wonderful insight. There must be many inconspicuous saints in the United States. Then as now. They don't make a fuss, they do decent things, and they keep the whole lot running day in and day out. Perhaps these are some of the people who participate in the big tune-out of 2024?

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