

On being a retro-progressive

It's a term normally used for music, but it can also mean drawing on the 'best practices' of yesterday to make the world better today. The problem is persuading others that it's not just a nostalgic trip down memory lane

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I've recently discovered the joy of baking cookies. Although Hillary Clinton famously does not want to make them, I do.

Producing homemade snacks may not bring world peace but it has brought an unexpected degree of empowerment to my domestic life: Knowing the ingredients that go into them, smelling the home-baked aromas wafting through the house and hearing the appreciation expressed by my family are all reason enough for me to put in the extra time it takes to make them.

So, if the most famous feminist in the world doesn't want to bake cookies and I do, does that relegate me to the status of fifties housewife? No. I'm just being "retro-progressive."

The term is most often used to define a category of music, but it can just as easily apply to any behaviour that draws from past "best practices" to create a better life in the world we inhabit now: a retrieving of the baby from the proverbial bathwater, if you will.



The problem, though, with reclaiming anything from the past is that it takes a lot of work to persuade others that it really is "back to the future" - emphasis on future - and not just a nostalgic trip down memory lane.

Take laundry and the return of the humble clothesline. You know there's a trend afoot when a movement has sprung up to promote it. The Right to Dry campaign - also known as Project Laundry - emerged after dust-ups between homeowners trying to conserve energy and municipalities that enforce bylaws protecting citizens from the sight of their neighbours' skivvies.

I recently bumped into an acquaintance reading a book in front of a local laundromat. When her dryer broke down several months ago, she simply decided not to replace it; although cost was not an issue, she opted instead to put her family's clothes "on the line."

Her visit to the laundromat that day was because truckloads of sheets needed a wash after a recent family vacation.

While she gets points for being a clothesline user, points for reading a book (how retro-progressive is that?) and even more points for using a laundromat powered by - of all things - solar energy, it was another, different retro-progressive action that pushed her into the vanguard of this movement.

After I asked where her kids were - standard greeting for anyone with children under 12 - she told me they were playing at the nearby park on their own.

This was followed by the "parent glance" - that little look one parent gives another when the first parent feels she may have gone too far out on a parenting limb and is seeking affirmation from the other. Not only did she not go too far, I envied her confidence in knowing that her kids would, in all likelihood, return unscathed and happier for the experience.

It was nice to see a bit of activity from *The Dangerous Book for Boys* in my own corner of the woods, and equally appealing and retro-progressive to see that when her kids returned - in high spirits from their adventures at the park - they pitched in to help fold the laundry.

There's a lot more than homemade cookies, air-dried clothes and free-range children that are making comebacks. Farmers' markets, car-free days, 100-mile diets and counter-consumer movements have all grown in popularity.

Perhaps no trend illustrates the retro-progressive ethos of going to the source more than Britain's fastest-growing hobby, that of keeping laying hens. Yes, hens - for eggs!

Weekend hen-keeping courses are all the rage in England and even Madonna is rumoured to be in on the act. Cholesterol concerns and fox frustrations aside, it is an illustration of just how far (or in this case just how close, considering the hens live in people's backyards) city dwellers will go to reclaim a practice from the past that gives them some control over their lives in the present.

Like all complex and nuanced labels, there is an element of subjectivity that prevails when deciding if something is retro-progressive. What is considered progressive by one person may be reactionary to another, and what is retro to some may never have been discarded by others. It is a thinking person's term, one that compels people to reflect on the value and validity of actions in their own lives.

As with Jews for Jesus, Catholics for a Free Choice, Feminists for Life, Crunchy Cons and the Libertarian Left, retro-progressive, with its counterintuitive paired words qualifying each other, creates a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. These terms also serve as powerful examples of the maxim that quite often, "the truth lies somewhere in between."

Getting back to my cookies: I was recently shown up by a friend of the family less than half my age (less than a third if truth be told), who, although I'm reluctant to admit it, makes better chocolate chip cookies than I do.

Can it get any more retro-progressive than a teenaged boy making homemade cookies? I wonder how he is at building root cellars.

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