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**Peter Fritzsche**, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004. 268pp. Index. \$27.95 U.S (cl). ISBN 0-674-01339-5.

Review by Harold Mah, Queen's University, Canada.

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Peter Fritzsche's *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* traverses the cultural history of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe and America to offer an unconventional view of the origin of modern historical awareness. According to Fritzsche, in the eighteenth century, as in the rest of the early modern period, people thought of history as unproblematically part of a comprehensive order of things that encompassed all societies and in which past, present, and future formed an unbroken continuum. In "universal history," as this view was then called, the past, served as a "counselor and teacher" (p. 6) offering lessons to the present and future, reminding one, for example, of human limitation and folly or suggesting how all things ultimately decay and return to nature. Those who saw in history some progressive development, such as some *philosophes* of the Enlightenment, still thought of such change in gradualist and universal terms, as the advance of human civilization in general.

This long-standing conception of history, Fritzsche argues, came to crashing end with the French Revolution. The unprecedented changes and extended turmoil of the Revolution and subsequent wars overturned assumptions about continuity and order, so that "the new appeared to contemporaries as an unmistakable if unknowable force, which upended, uplifted, and destroyed. Inconstancy was the new constant..." (p. 30) Fritzsche draws apt testimony and vivid examples from writings, letters, and memoirs to show how people in this period came to feel themselves cut off from a predictable past, "stranded," as Fritzsche's title puts it, in a chaotic present that rendered the future unknowable and fearful. The separated past was now invested with a deep sense of melancholy, but for the first time, Fritzsche emphasizes, perceived in recognizable modern historical terms, as the result of specific and contingent historical events and as having distinctive characters that made them very remote from the present. Under the shock of the French Revolution, universal history thus gave way to what was in effect a widely shared relativist, historicist appreciation of historical difference.

This melancholy historicization of the past showed itself in a variety of ways--in Chateaubriand's reflections on the despoiled tomb of French kings at Saint-Denis, for example, or in the new interest in the ruins of castles and churches in the Rhine valley. The Revolution's creation of a melancholy historical awareness spilled over, Fritzsche tells us, into how others conceived of further historical developments. The same sentiment permeates William Cobbett's account of the English countryside devastated by enclosures and appears in how American settlers heading westward looked on New England as a ruined past and how they sympathized, surprisingly, with the eradication of American natives.

The focus on the historical specificity of the past and its strangeness made people more conscious of alternative trajectories of history that were lost. The past, as Fritzsche nicely puts it, was considered to contain "half-lives," and the desire to recover those inspired, among other projects, Sulpiz Boisserée's devotion to the rebuilding of the Cologne cathedral and the obsessive collecting of folk tales of the brothers Grimm. In this new view of history, great public events were intertwined with deeply personal fates and private, domestic experiences. Signature quilting in early America thus recorded the patchwork of personal travails and tragedies that came with the splitting up of families in the westward

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movement of Americans. The shared sense of historical loss and the recognition of contingency, the appreciation of particularity and difference, and the fusing of public and private—these aspects of a new historical awareness, Fritzsche tells, led people to construct the subjectivities and national identities of the nineteenth century and that period's distinctive melancholic recognition of the unsettled, "nomadic" character of modern life.

*Stranded in the Present* is immensely likable. Deeply humane and sympathetic, the author describes people's fates and feelings in often moving characterization. Many of the book's observations are arresting and its arguments about the role of loss and suffering in the formation of modern historical awareness, selfhood, and national identity are important considerations connected to recent cultural and literary theory. But notwithstanding the book's virtues, there remain many questions about how far one should take the book's argument and how it overreaches its evidence to skew the nineteenth century.

Some of the underlying terms of the book are extremely vague. Fritzsche cites many writers but his concern is not to write an intellectual history; there are no extensive or intensive analyses of works of history or of philosophy of history. Fritzsche is more interested in personal reflections in letters and memoirs, in attitudes and moods, and of a wide range of people, including American women who quilted or those ordinary Germans who read the Grimm's fairy tales. At times, I thought that without calling it by name, Fritzsche was constructing a new, emerging historical *mentalité*, a generalized set of beliefs common to a broad spectrum of people. But the argument in fact is never this clear in its intentions. Although Fritzsche refers to different persons and groups, those references do not add up to a discernible general subject who held the new historical awareness. Fritzsche writes in the plural; he speaks of "contemporaries" and "people" (and I have taken over that mannerism in the description above), but these ambiguous terms are only placeholders and not clear identifications. Is Fritzsche speaking only of some scattered persons or groups or something larger, as Fritzsche seems to presume? A disclaimer in the conclusion adds to the uncertainty about whom in general Fritzsche is writing and suggests that he is himself somewhat aware of this uncertainty, yet offers no help: "It would be silly to argue that suddenly the vast majority of Europeans and Americans consciously upheld the new historical consciousness...." (p. 216). Does Fritzsche mean that it was held by a "majority," but not a "vast" one, and what then would that be telling us? Or was that view held by just "some" people and what would that mean?

Fritzsche is onto something in focusing on a deep sense of loss that is associated with this period's social and political dislocations, but he exaggerates the role of the French Revolution as an all-determining "moment of innovation" (p. 8) in formulating all of a sudden a new historical awareness. The most thoroughgoing, explicit statement of relativist and historicist awareness came well before the Revolution in Johann Gottfried Herder's essay "Auch einer Philosophen der Geschichte" published in 1774. This tract on historical awareness was closely connected to an anti-Enlightenment sense of the loss of local culture, leading Herder in the same period to collect German folk songs (that is, well before the efforts of the brothers Grimm) and to imagine himself as a savior of the submerged indigenous population of Riga, an outpost of the Russian empire where he served as pastor in a German Church. When Herder met Goethe in Strasbourg in 1770, they were drawn together by, among other things, a melancholic admiration for the physical remnants of medieval society, an appreciation that issued in Goethe's famous essay on the Strasbourg cathedral.

A melancholic, historicist, relativist, folkloristic appreciation of cultural difference preceded the Revolution and this sentimentalist and *Sturm und Drang* sensibility fed the largely Romantic response to the Revolution that Fritzsche. That response—in its fundamental principles—did not suddenly spring whole from the French Revolution; Fritzsche would be on firmer ground arguing that the Revolution extends and popularizes that view. But how far it does we are again uncertain, because of the ambiguity

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of the group of people Fritzsche is dealing with. His assertion that the response to the Revolution oriented reactions to other significant developments of the period, such as the enclosures movement in Britain, the westward movement of Americans, far exceeds what he enlists as evidence. A reference to Napoleon in a poem by John Clare on the devastation of enclosures does not indicate, as Fritzsche suggests, that Clare's response is caused by his response to the Revolution but only that Clare is making, rhetorically, an analogy. To conclude anything causal, such as, for example, that Clare could think in this particular melancholic and historical fashion only because of Napoleon, requires much more demonstration.

Fritzsche tends to draw conclusions that, though striking in what they suggest, are left empty of content. He tells us repeatedly that the new historical awareness and its associated changes in thinking were critical in producing new subjectivities and national identities. In their collection of fairy tales, the "Grimms," for example, "offer a distinctly German past to a German audience.... The local knowledge they championed formed the foundations of a specifically national tradition that resisted common denominators" (p. 157). But though Fritzsche establishes how well-read and well-loved these stories became, he does not identify the content of the "local knowledge" or of the new "national tradition" it purportedly help establishes. Given that those fairy tales (like Darnton's French folk tales in *The Great Cat Massacre*) teach very simple messages (don't be mean, don't be foolish, don't be greedy, etc) and come to be read and loved by many people in other countries, how they function to generate specific national characteristics remains very uncertain indeed.

Fritzsche tells us that in sending Germaine de Staël into exile and travel in other countries, including England and Italy, the Revolution and Napoleon inspired her to think in an innovative fashion about national differences, a consideration that shows up in her famous novel of 1807, *Corinne*. Fritzsche leaves us with this general point and says nothing about what those differences are, about what Staël actually shows in her "sustained exploration of national identity" (p. 75). A look at the characterization of Italian and "English" identity (she calls her Scottish protagonist English) in *Corinne* shows in fact not a new recognition but the reiteration of stereotypes of national character found in the belletristic, so-called "anthropology" of the eighteenth century, including Kant's early book of 1763 *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. For both Staël and Kant, Italy represents a version of the "south"—sensuous, pleasure-loving, feminine, beautiful; England is a version of the "north"—austere, dutiful and grave, masculine, sublime. In this case as well the Revolution does not bring up a new thinking about cultural difference; nor is that difference so remarkable and strange as Fritzsche repeatedly asserts. In its content, it can be rather trite even by eighteenth-century standards. Staël's achievement, like that of many writers, is to make artful use of society's clichés.

Fritzsche cites an impressive array of modern and contemporary theorists—among them, Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, Joan Scott, and Susan Stewart. Commendably, Fritzsche wants to give us easy access to these complex theorists in clear prose and fluidly integrated into his narrative. From the point of view of fidelity to the theory, the results of his invocations are very uneven. Sometimes an idea is aptly used (Foucault's observation, for example, about the turn to tropes of depth in the nineteenth century) (p. 106), but often the references are rather glib and confused. In discussing Chateaubriand's characteristic exile experiences, Fritzsche calls on Joan Scott's well-known essay on experience, which, as Fritzsche rightly puts it, "has persuasively argued" that "the evidence of experience could only be brought forward once a general frame of meaning—in this case the narrative of the Revolution and the movement of modern time—had been constructed to constitute and absorb and circulate such evidence" (p. 63). The general point is indeed Scott's but Fritzsche's application makes little sense. The narrative of Revolution, Fritzsche is saying, precedes the experience of the Revolution, but where exactly does the narrative come from? It derives, he shows us, from people's experience of the destruction of institutions, their flight for their lives, armies marching through one's town and country, the feeling that all this chaos will not end. In Fritzsche's account, the

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narrative is not a given analytic framework that precedes experience, but the direct result of dramatically described traumatic experience.

The invocation of Scott and the priority of an analytic frame are misleading in that the book's effectiveness stems largely from the moving description of loss—in other words, from its ability to make the reader identify in the most direct, affecting manner with presented experiences. In this sense the book takes over as its organizing trope the characteristic mode of appeal of the sentimental Romantics that it likes to quote—Chateaubriand, Wordsworth, Rahel Varnhagen, Germaine de Staël, and others—who in their prose sought to summon up intense, presumably unmediated and hence authentic experiences. The Romantic sentimentalizing of experience which Fritzsche uses uncritically, as if under the influence of some kind of historical “transference” from the Romantics, is one of the elements of a “frame of experience” that should be questioned. Instead, he presents us with experience directly resulting from an event, the Revolution, but that experience is indeed framed—by earlier thinking, by sentimentalizing rhetoric, and by political orientation.

Although Fritzsche notes that the writers who exemplify the new historical awareness are Romantics, he does not make much of that association. What he does not even note is the other obvious category most of these writers fit into: they are also political conservatives of different sorts, from the idiosyncratic royalism of Chateaubriand to Wordsworth and Friedrich Gentz disillusioned with the Revolution of 1789 to Tocqueville disillusioned with 1848. Their sense of loss is inseparable from their political position and their appreciation of “otherness” refers to social orders that are anti-republican and anti-liberal. Fritzsche prefers to leave his view of a new historical awareness oddly pristine, nonideological, and rooted in our compassion of human beings and ignoring the politics of the period.

Even more strangely, to turn this particular conservative-Romantic view of the past into our general “modern” view, he must ignore the most common view of nineteenth-century thinking about history. There is no mention of the familiar teleologies of the period—whether liberal, Hegelian, or Marxist. Fritzsche may wish to offer a dissenting view that emphasizes the views of nineteenth-century Romanticism and conservatism, but a case should at least be made in a discussion of historiography (which is entirely absent) for why his emphasis is superior to the conventional view.

The reference in the book's subtitle (“modern time”) is I think inaccurate in relation to what the book actually offers. In the focus on loss and cultural difference, on memory, on the private over the public, on recent theorists, on the “nomadic” and “hybrid” sense of exile that characterizes globalization (in Fritzsche's book this is a globalizing historical awareness), and on the final reference to how this sense of history is necessary for political agency (how so is never explained), combined with the elisions mentioned above, Fritzsche sees in the early nineteenth century not a “modern” but a distinctly “postmodern” condition. The more conventional “modern” conception of history remains to be found in the teleological views of nineteenth century that Fritzsche ignores. These too have a place for historical loss and suffering but they interpret that loss as something that serves other purposes and leads to new developments. Hegel's experience of the Revolutionary period left him with the recognition that history is a “slaughter-bench” but remained nonetheless the development of world spirit. Marx's own conflation of the French and industrial revolution (reading the former ultimately in terms of the latter rather than vice versa in Fritzsche's case) looked on the unrelenting destruction of modern economies and the immiseration of large populations but sees them as all leading to greater material productivity and a harmonious world community. Mill, learning from the gloomy Tocqueville, the instabilities of democracy, could still write in *On Liberty*: “We are the most progressive people who ever lived.” This trumping of melancholy with optimism seems more characteristic as well, in an on-again, off-again manner, of popular middle-class sensibility for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Fritzsche's *Stranded in the Present* is a symptom of the disrepair into which has fallen the “modern” view,

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that view of history as ultimately progressive, as a theodicy of state, class, and nation, the great abstract subjectivities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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