



LESSON 9.1.9 | READ | The Best Decade Ever? The 1990s, Obviously¹ — Kurt Andersen

New York Times, February 6, 2015

BACK in the late 1980s, when I was a co-editor of *Spy* magazine, we published a cover story about the 1970s. *Spy* being *Spy*, it was a grand feast of love-hate celebration: “A Return to the Decade of Mood Rings, Ultrasuede, Sideburns and Disco Sex-Machine Tony Orlando.” One of its implicit premises was the silliness of the pandemic of American nostalgia, especially for a culturally dubious decade that had ended less than a decade earlier. Over the last half century, we Americans have come to create and consume automatically and continuously a kind of recent-past wistfulness.

But what about the 1990s? Nostalgia for the era in which you were young is almost inevitable, so people born between 1970 and 1990 feel a natural fetishistic fondness for that decade. But even for the rest of us, the '90s provoke a unique species of *recherche du temps perdu*, not mere bittersweet reveling in the passage of time. No, looking back at the final 10 years of the 20th century is grounds for genuine mourning: It was simply the happiest decade of our American lifetimes.

This isn't (mainly) fogeishness on my part. No. It is empirically, objectively, broadly true. I am not now nor have I ever been a Clintonite, but when

Jeb Bush reportedly said a few weeks ago, apropos of 2016 and the probable Democratic presidential

nominee, that “if someone wants to run a campaign about '90s nostalgia, it's not going to be very successful,” I think he was being wishful.

Let's begin with the quantifiable bits. America at large was prospering in the '90s. The United States economy grew by an average of 4 percent per year between 1992 and 1999. (Since 2001, it's never grown by as much as 4 percent, and since 2005 not even by 3 percent for a whole year.) An average of 1.7 million jobs a year were added to the American work force, versus around 850,000 a year during this century so far. The unemployment rate dropped from nearly 8 percent in 1992 to 4 percent — that is, effectively zero — at the end of the decade. Plus, if you were a man and worked in an office, starting in the '90s you could get away with never wearing a necktie.

From 1990 to 1999, the median American household income grew by 10 percent; since 2000 it's shrunk by nearly 9 percent. The poverty rate peaked at over 15 percent in 1993, then fell to nearly 11 percent in 2000, more or less its postwar low. During the '90s, stocks quadrupled in value — the Dow Jones industrial average increased by 309 ▶

1 Andersen, Kurt. “The Best Decade Ever? The 1990s, Obviously.” *New York Times*. The New York Times Company, 6 Feb. 2015. Web. 1 May 2017.



percent. You could still buy a beautiful Brooklyn townhouse for \$500,000 or less. And so on.

By the end of the decade, in fact, there was so much good news — a federal budget surplus, dramatic reductions in violent crime (the murder rate in the United States declined by 41 percent) and in deaths from H.I.V./AIDS — that each astounding new achievement didn't quite register as miraculous. After all, the decade had begun with a fantastically joyful and previously unimaginable development: The Soviet empire collapsed, global nuclear Armageddon ceased to be a thing that worried anyone very much, and the nations of Eastern Europe were mostly unchained.

A tide of progress and good sense seemed to be sweeping the whole world. According to the annual count by Freedom House, the tally of the world's free countries climbed from 65 at the beginning of the decade to 85 at the end. Since then, the total number of certified-free countries has increased by only four.

Between 1990 and 1994 South Africa dismantled apartheid surprisingly peacefully. With the Oslo Accords, Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization had come together at last to negotiate a framework for coexistence and eventual peace. The civil wars in the former Yugoslavia ended and an enduring peace was restored. China became normal, reforming its economy, tripling its gross domestic product and easing its way into the world order.

During the '90s, the only American-led war in the Middle East was the one that drove Saddam

Hussein's invading army out of Kuwait with a ground campaign that lasted a mere 100 hours. Peace, prosperity, order — and American culture was vibrant and healthy as well. There were both shockingly excellent versions of what had come before and distinctly new, original forms. Wasn't the release of Nirvana's "Nevermind," in 1991, pretty much the last time a new rock 'n' roll band truly, deeply mattered, the way rock 'n' roll did in the '60s and '70s? Wasn't hip-hop, which achieved its mass-market breakthrough and dominance in the '90s, the last genuinely new and consequential invention of American pop culture?

What is the most remarkably successful literary creation of the last several decades? The Harry Potter novels, the first three of which appeared in the '90s. Supertalented literary youngsters appeared — David Foster Wallace ("Infinite Jest"), Donna Tartt ("The Secret History"), Jonathan Lethem ("Motherless Brooklyn") and Dave Eggers (McSweeney's). And supertalented literary geezers — Philip Roth ("American Pastoral"), John Updike ("Rabbit at Rest"), Alice Munro ("The Love of a Good Woman"), Don DeLillo ("Underworld") — produced some of their best and most successful work as well.

The quality of television radically improved. "Seinfeld" and "The Simpsons" had their premieres in 1989, and in the '90s they blew up, along with "Friends" and "NYPD Blue" — all of them broadcast network series, none of them reality shows. HBO, before the '90s a channel for movies, boxing and soft-core pornography, decided to swing for the fences. First with "The Larry Sanders Show" and



then with “The Sopranos,” it proved that episodic television could accommodate major ambition and actual brilliance, ushering in an enduring new (cable) TV era.

In feature films, it was the decade of “Pulp Fiction” and the indie movement, thanks to which idiosyncratic, more-commercial-than-art-house masterpieces like those by Wes Anderson, Alexander Payne and Richard Linklater became plausible. It was also the decade in which traditional Disney animation came back from the dead and in which Pixar, with the first two “Toy Story” movies, reinvented the form magnificently.

The digital age, of course, got fully underway in the '90s. At the beginning of the decade almost none of us had heard of the web, and we didn't have browsers, search engines, digital cellphone networks, fully 3-D games or affordable and powerful laptops. By the end of the decade we had them all. Steve Jobs returned to Apple and conjured its rebirth.

And it was just the right amount of technology. By the end of the decade we all had cellphones, but not smartphones; we were not overconnected or tyrannized by our devices. Social media had not yet made social life both manically nonstop and attenuated. The digital revolution hadn't brutally “disrupted” whole economic sectors and made their work forces permanently insecure. Recorded music sales nearly doubled during the decade. Newspapers and magazines were thriving. Even Y2K, our terrifying end-of-the-millennium technological comeuppance, was a nonevent.

Indeed, the '90s were a decade of catastrophes that didn't happen. The Clinton tax increases did not trigger a recession. Welfare reform did not ravage the poor. Compared with Sandy, every hurricane that touched New York — Bob! Bertha! Danny! Dennis! Floyd! — was a dud.

Were there real problems in the '90s? Of course. But they weren't obvious, so ... we were blissfully ignorant! Almost none of us were suitably alarmed by carbon emissions and the warming planet. According to a 1995 article in this newspaper about climate change, “most scientists say the amount of warming so far, about one degree Fahrenheit in the last century, is still too small to be distinguished from the climate system's natural fluctuations.” So why worry?

When the House and Senate passed by overwhelming bipartisan majorities and President Clinton signed the Financial Services Modernization Act of 1999, doing away with the firewalls between investment banks and commercial banks, the change seemed inevitable, sensible, modern — not a precursor of the 2008 Wall Street crash. When a jihadist truck bomb detonated in the parking garage below the north tower of the World Trade Center in 1993, we were alarmed only briefly, figuring it for a crazy one-off rather than a first strike in a long struggle.

Americans have never much liked paying attention to foreign countries and their problems (see Rwanda, 1994), so the decade between the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the war on terror was very much our cup of tea. ▶



No: I mean our cup of coffee. You can't talk about the '90s without talking about the sudden availability of excellent coffee — espresso in Idaho! — all over America. This was thanks to Starbucks, of course, which went from nearly 100 outlets in the United States at the start of the decade to 2,000 at the end. But as it goes with so many good things in America — easier credit and financial innovation and electronic connection and all the rest — that just wasn't enough.

Today there are more than 13,000 Starbucks in the United States. And each of them, to my eye, looks exactly as it did when the rollout began — 13,000 ubiquitous and faintly melancholic time-capsule museums of the last best American decade.