

Humans are supposed to mature as they age – but the giant human I live in has been getting more childish each year. Tribalism and political division are on the rise. False narratives and outlandish conspiracy theories are flourishing. Major institutions are floundering. Medieval-style public shaming is suddenly back in fashion. Trust, the critical currency of a healthy society, is disintegrating. And these trends seem to be happening in lots of societies, not just my own.

So what's the problem? Why, in a time so prosperous, with the stakes so high, would we be going backward in wisdom?

This wouldn't be the first time. In 1905, George Santayana issued a warning to humanity:

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

— George Santayana

The worrying thing about that quote is that the philosopher Edmund Burke issued the same warning over a century earlier, in 1790:

People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors.

— Edmund Burke

We seem to be having trouble learning an important lesson here. When we learn a technology lesson, we tend not to forget it. The invention of the integrated circuit in 1959 was a breakthrough that launched a new paradigm in modern computing. This isn't the kind of thing we forget, finding ourselves accidentally going back to making computers with vacuum tubes. But wisdom lessons don't always seem to stick. Unlike technological growth, wisdom seems to oscillate up and down, leading societies to repeat age-old mistakes.