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History Roars Back

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By Richard Cohen
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Last weekend's book section of the Financial Times contained a [capsule review](#) of Stefan Zweig's "The Post Office Girl," a novel written in the aftermath of World War I and just recently translated into English. This is an immensely good thing, but really why I mention Zweig comes at the end of the review, when the critic says that the book "is a fascinating depiction of the effects of history on individual lives" -- in other words, what is happening to most of us today. History, like an animal escaped from the zoo, is again out of its cage.

Zweig's own life was illustrative of history's immense force. He was a rich Viennese, born in the 19th century, and a famous writer at a young age. He was conversant in all the usual European languages and traveled throughout that continent, as one could at the time, without so much as a passport. It was his world, and he enjoyed it enormously.

Then Zweig experienced a stark loss of control over his life. He went from being at home anywhere in Europe to being on the lam, a Jew fleeing the Nazis. He wound up in Brazil where, in the depth of both despair and hideous reality, he killed himself. His world -- "The World of Yesterday," as he called his memoir -- had vanished.

Zweig's story is extreme, yet it contains elements of the current economic calamity. The term economic "depression" has now been uttered. This means not that things are suddenly worse but that we have recognized them for what they are. We give power to words or terms -- which is why it was news in itself when the media chose to label what was happening in Iraq a "civil war."

So now, at least in Saturday's New York Times, we are in a depression -- maybe not a "great" one, but one that will do for now. This means that unemployment could go over 10 percent and that the housing catastrophe will deepen and that some major banks will become wards of the government. Europe is scared, Japan is sullen, and Russia, which needs \$70 oil to break even, is hurting at near \$40. This is a very bad time.

A depression, if it amounts to that, is not just an economic crisis. It's a historical mugging. Those of us who have been accustomed to exercising control over our lives are about to undergo an awfully frightening experience. This will hit the young particularly hard. If you asked almost any of them over the past 20 years or so why they did not read a newspaper or, really, care about the news at all, the answer was that news was irrelevant to their lives. It did not matter to them what was happening in Washington or London or even Baghdad.

An older generation still had a residual appreciation for the linkage of things -- how an event there could affect an event here and a job would disappear or a war erupt. It mattered because history mattered. One had the feeling that what with wars and famines, disease and ruthless economic cycles, one could never really control one's own life.

But generations that followed came to feel that they had mastered history and that it was, like polio, no longer a threat. The great exception in my lifetime was the Vietnam War and its suffocating draft. Rage was the result. The campuses exploded.

The rage that is coming will change the politics of our time. Barack Obama will either figure out how to channel it, as Franklin D. Roosevelt did, or he will be flattened by it, as Lyndon Johnson was. Obama's challenge might even be greater than FDR's. The people of the 1920s and '30s were tough, hard. They did not expect all that much from life, and they had learned to expect next to nothing from government.

In contrast, we are soft, coddled. We actually thought that we could have a house we could not afford and a mortgage that we could not pay and that it would all somehow work out. This keeps being called the American dream. It was actually the American delusion.

Zweig fled Austria in 1934 and made his way to England and then to America and finally, for some reason, to Brazil. He was as safe there as he had been in America, but his world -- once so comfy and secure -- was gone. He became a castaway, a Viennese writer deposited roughly on a Brazilian beach. History had come roaring out of Germany and flattened everything.

The beast is loose again.

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