

EPISODE 7

IS EVERYBODY HAPPY?

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is episode number seven of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Now in our last episode I freely admitted that the modern era is indeed the healthiest and wealthiest and most technologically advanced period of any time in human history. But then I pointed out that in actuality there is absolutely zero evidence that this has anything at all to do with the adoption of that belief system which we refer to as liberal democracy. That in fact the vast majority of the changes which led to our advancement, such as the elimination of childhood diseases and the worldwide adoption of electricity and modern industrial processes, all happened in the latter part of the 19th Century, long before virtually anyone in most of the world had even heard of liberal democracy.

And the same goes with the whole concept of free markets, which, as we shall see, derives from the exact same foundational assumptions as does liberal democracy. No matter how much your ideological upbringing wants you to believe that unfettered free markets are somehow magically the best economic system, the evidence is just not there. China, Japan, Germany, they have all created advanced, vibrant economies by breaking all sorts of 'free market' rules. Honduras, Haiti, the Congo, they are all unfettered free markets. How are they doing?

Because even if, like most economists, you say that efficiency, not morality, should be the main determinant when evaluating economic systems, then, as I pointed out last time, you can make a strong argument that the most efficient economic system ever was Nazi slave labor.

But today we're not going to be talking about Stuff. Instead we're going to be talking about Happiness.

Now in just a little bit we'll be going over how squishy and hard to define a term like 'happiness' is. Here at the outset, though, I think that we can agree that, at least on a very basic level, self-reported happiness is at least a first level of approximation proxy for the real thing.

And this is important for our purposes because, if you think about it for a minute, every ideology, religion, or economic system, diet, exercise plan, or just about anything out there claims that

if only people were to follow it, that they then would be happy.

For instance, take Marxism. Supposedly, under its theory, once the workers gain control over the means of production, and once state socialism replaces Capitalism and the entire class structure is destroyed, then the result will be that the people—basically everyone—will be happy.

In practice, of course, once regimes like the Soviet Union took over, and so many of their citizens weren't exactly tickled by the results, other markers were substituted. State socialism became a goal in itself. Social justice and class equality were seen as signs that the plan was unfolding properly. As I've already mentioned, under Marxism the greater good of the wider society was still seen as more important than individuality or personal fulfillment or happiness. So true believers could still legitimately kid themselves that Marxism was working as planned. And, as I've already pointed out, many of those true believers actually were genuinely happy that they were now living in a worker's paradise.

Or take Religion. Now many of you out there who hate the idea of religion might not like to hear the following, but it's not just my opinion. It is quite established anthropological/sociological fact. Namely: Not only does each and every religion claim that you will be happy by following it, but it turns out that in fact the more religious people are, the higher they score on all kinds of traits that are commonly associated with happiness: better health, longer life, better marriages, more and closer friends.

And you can counter that these people are caught up in delusional thinking. And you can counter that the benefits which accrue arise solely from the positive sociological effects of having a strong group bond with one's congregation in an age of otherwise atomized individualism. And in response I would point out that, first, the charge of 'delusional thinking' can certainly cut both ways. I mean, what I am trying to prove in this podcast is that the whole postmodern world's belief system is entirely delusional. Anyway, second, without getting into the argument as to whether Religion is ultimately 'real' or not, I will readily agree that most normal people's reasons for joining a religion are not theological, but anthropological. That is, not that many people out there have the intellectual firepower, not to mention even the desire, to wrestle with the question of, for say, whether the Godhead is dualistic in nature or whether the Trinitarian dogma as established by the Council of Nicea is correct. They just want the fellowship of a group of others who are at least vaguely traveling along the same path as they are.

But the point here is that Religion claims that it will make you happy. And the anthropological

data does show that to a large extent indeed it does.

Even for those religious followers, however, who aren't particularly happy, there is a legitimate answer. And this is that although righteousness is supposed to lead to happiness, righteousness is also a virtue in and of itself. So that if you are miserable by being righteous, then this is still the right thing to do. To make an analogy that, to me at least, seems pretty good, if after several weeks of going to the gym you are still tired and sweaty, this does not mean that exercise is bad for you. Rather, you just have to double down and work harder. And keep the faith that in the end, sooner or later, you will be radiating health and happiness.

Added to all of this, of course, whether it is a religion or any other set of beliefs, is the normal human tendency towards inertia, drudgery, and habitual behavior. You show up at the gym because it's on your schedule every day. Or you don't eat meat on Friday because the priests told you not to, and you have a nagging fear that failing to do this will send you to Hell. You do what the commissars tell you to do just like you used to do what the factory owners told you to do. You've totally forgotten what the end purpose was supposed to be when you started out.

Still, whether it's physical fitness, religion, or Marxism, none of these regimens ever claimed that you would have instant happiness. They always said that they were a process to be undertaken, a road to be traveled down. And you could always track your progress by, say, measuring your cardiovascular fitness or by engaging in less sin or by seeing that communitarian progress was actually going on around you.

But here utilitarianism/liberal democracy *is* qualitatively different. Because it claims that if we adopt its principles then happiness will indeed be instantaneous. Remember Bentham's claim that his whole point was to generate the greatest amount of happiness (which he made synonymous with pleasure) for the greatest number of people. No intermediate phase of greater justice or greater righteousness or better heart rate. Immediate happiness.

So now it's been around a half a century since this mindset of liberal democracy has basically been in charge in North America and Western Europe. In our media and in our culture we've had more sex and more imaginary violence than anyone could have ever imagined even fifty years earlier. We eat all that delicious food, bathe in all those bubble baths, drive all those sleek cars which hardly ever break down. Even the word 'decadent' is used as a positive, desirable trait in so much of our advertising.

So how are we doing with that happiness thing?

Well, as I've already pointed out, people like Steven Pinker can throw all the statistics at us that they want, and then call us idiots for not being happy as a result of those statistics. But efforts like this aren't moving the needle one bit. Ever since 1990, no matter who the President or what the economy, majorities of Americans have told pollsters that they think that this country is on the wrong track. Indicators of social trust are collapsing. Faith in social institutions has collapsed. Incidences of chronic depression, even suicide, are steadily rising. The suicide rate is up some 30%. In fact, sometimes it seems as if every person one knows is on antidepressants of some kind. And the working classes and out of working classes are hooked on alcohol and opioids. Diseases of an overworked brain or nervous system, such as ADHD, autism, chronic fatigue, and fibromyalgia, many of which used to be so rare that they didn't even have names attached to them, are almost epidemic. All of this is happiness???

I mean, the degree of head-in-the-sandness of some of these defenders of the current system is almost beyond laughable. It's like, for all their supposed belief in 'facts' and 'science', they seem totally ignorant of some of the most basic, well established social science that there is.

Because we're still in the introductory stage of this podcast, and I don't want to jump the gun too much by getting into all the relevant research, but one of the clearest findings of both behavioral economics and social psychology is that one's happiness has little or nothing to do with the absolute amount of stuff that someone has, but rather how said stuff amount is relative to everyone else's. In other words, having 2.3 refrigerators means nothing by itself. Because if everyone else has 4.7 refrigerators, then you feel poor and unhappy. On the other hand, if everyone else only has 1.1 refrigerators, then you feel happy and on top of the world.

Which brings us to the utterly undeniable fact that this half century of liberal democratic dominance also is entirely and precisely correlated with the rise of income inequality and concurrent social inequality. And not just here in America, but in the entire world. So the fact that you can hold a smart phone in your hand that has the computing power of 1000 Univacs from 1960 doesn't mean squat if those above you on the social ladder are meanwhile luxuriating in their oceans of privilege and bling.

And no matter how much Steven Pinker knows this or likes this, that is what science has actually found out about real human nature. As opposed to 18th Century fantasies about human nature.

Or primate nature in general. For instance, take baboons. In many species the troops have extremely strict hierarchies. And it turns out that the out of luck male baboons at the bottom of the totem pole produce stress hormones in staggering amounts. Which of course destroys their health. And the ones at the top? Hardly any stress hormones at all. That is, while they're at the top. And until

they are deposited. Then it's back to permanent stress.

And science has also shown this to be true in human societies. Now I lived in Canada for several years, and I personally find single payer health systems to make perfect sense. But the argument that lower class people here in the States die more because of lack of health care just isn't true. Because research has clearly shown that even in countries where the government fully covers everybody, and even after you've statistically adjusted for wealth, education, and bad habits, people of low social status still die far sooner than the rich do. In other words, social status is the single determining factor in ultimate health outcomes.

Now let me interject here one of those remembrances of my own times past. I grew up in Allentown, PA, a city of around 100,000 people. And the father of one of the girls in my little social group just happened to be the richest man in town. He owned a trucking company and a pretty famous department store. He was also an art collector and they literally had a Picasso in one of their bathrooms. But the house that they lived in was on a normal city street. And it was far more modest than it could have been. And he himself was a really down to earth, friendly guy.

And when I was accepted by Yale my mother was making \$75 a week. And I was a little concerned that I would be surrounded by a bunch of von Snottenburgs. After all, up until a year or so earlier Yale had still felt it necessary to include a rule that you weren't allowed to have servants on campus. But once I got there it turned out that, except for a few old style preppie slackers, everybody else was unselfconsciously egalitarian. In fact, there was one really low key kid that hung out with us who we knew was from a family of millionaires. And sophomore year he did have a car. But it was a beat up old Volkswagen. And it wasn't until around 1990 that I found out that his family actually turned out to be billionaires.

Anyway, that was social stratification and how the 1% lived back then. Compare and contrast that with today.

Now a few minutes ago I noted that the ridiculous increase in income and social inequality of the past fifty years, which science unequivocally says makes the majority of people unhappier, correlates exactly with our adoption of liberal democratic 'values', which supposedly were going to make the majority of people much happier. And it might have sounded jarring to you for someone to make that connection, since probably no one else ever has. And I am more than well aware that correlation does not prove causation. But it is highly suggestive. And think about this for a moment: What else except stratification would you expect when a society's *ideals* are that every single person

maximize their own pleasure, goods, services, and resources? After all, as I'll keep pointing out, that is the foundational assumption underlying both utilitarianism and liberal democracy.

(By the way, in saying this, am I also suggesting that the real, everyday world of today is one in which all are against all and every single one of us is ruthlessly engaged in accumulating wealth? No, of course not. Most of us, no matter where we are on the socioeconomic ladder, still think of ourselves as nice people trying to be honorable. As I've already said, we're going to be finding out that our true human nature is to be cooperative and optimistic. And to a large extent, even at this point in the game, each of us is still trying to stay sane and human.

But what you have to realize is that, if you had gone to Nazi Germany in the 1930s, most of the everyday people you would have met there, the butchers and bakers and doctors and lawyers, would have also been trying to remain sane and human in their everyday encounters. But that didn't stop the larger society from becoming one of sadism and brutality.)

And I can give you a much more detailed proof of all this. But you're going to have to wait until much further down the line. Because, like I said, I'm getting ahead of myself. And the topic for today is more generally about what really constitutes happiness.

For, like I've also been mentioning, happiness is a pretty slippery concept to define. In the first place, grading your own report card in general, but especially on such a central emotion as this, will always be problematic. More importantly, though, what exactly are we trying to get at with the word? Is happiness referring to lack of fear and insecurity? Or that heightened place on the social ladder? Does it refer to somebody who is at peace with themselves? Or, most importantly, someone who is actually actively putting out positive energy? Because the four concepts are not at all the same.

And you can see how this plays out when you read about these happiness surveys that they're always doing. You know, ranking different countries on how supposedly 'happy' they are.

Because, first of all, you have all the implicit and explicit biases of the people conducting the survey. Now as a 'for instance' I was going to pull out of the air the example of the idea of gender equality. As in 'What actual evidence is there that gender equality makes people happy?' But all I had to do was a small amount of research to find out that this was a beyond perfect example of observer bias. Because it turns out that the very concept of gender equality as we presently understand and practice it was invented by none other than John Stuart Mill. And he explicitly forecast that gender equality would make everyone, especially women, happier. Further, when I looked at some of the standard social science research, it is constantly assumed that gender equality will make women

happier and has made women happier.

However, when you look at the actual data you find out that from 1970 to the present, when the gains of gender equality have supposedly been the greatest, the level of women's self-reported happiness has been consistently going down. And this is true not only in America, but also in the countries of Western Europe. Not only that, but women in more traditional cultures actually report themselves as being happier than those in the gender equal societies.

Now true believers in the ideology of John Stuart Mill's liberal democracy can no doubt come up with all sorts of ways to tap dance around this inconvenient truth. And now isn't the time or place for me to make an argument one way or another. But this curious fact does serve two useful purposes right at the moment.

Because, first, it gives you an introduction to just how difficult it is for the social sciences to be neutral and objective. After all, one of the first things I learned in the field was that 90% of all studies confirm the preexisting political beliefs of the person doing the study. And it's hard to believe that this is just coincidence. But it's almost always not that the researcher is being intentionally dishonest. No, the problem is that, unlike the natural sciences, it's almost impossible to control for just one variable in, say, psychology or sociology. So that if the researcher doesn't get the results that they consciously or unconsciously wanted, then it's relatively easy for their minds to come up with those convoluted reasons that still keep their original belief system intact. And, since the researcher's peers almost always share the same original belief system, then they are not going to see what's really going on, either.

And this doesn't happen just with the value system of liberal democracy. A Marxist social scientist would rate a Communist country as being innately happier. Same thing with a Nazi social scientist (and, yes, they had them) judging a highly authoritarian country.

Which brings us back to that happiness survey. Because a survey taker who is a true believer in gender equality will naturally rate a more gender equal country as 'happier' and better than one that isn't. To them the truth of the matter is self evident.

So it's probably no surprise that the countries which usually top the happiness survey lists are those like Denmark or the Netherlands, which not so coincidentally are also the furthest along the journey to liberal democracy.

Not that I have anything against Denmark per se. It's rich, at peace, and has a terrific social safety net. So that, especially if you are using that first definition of happiness, namely as a lack of fear

and insecurity, Denmark certainly would rank right up there.

But, again, is this really due to the ideology of liberal democracy? Because Denmark, like the rest of Scandinavia, is also highly egalitarian. Which, as we've just been discussing, does greatly diminish stress. And most sociologists agree that the egalitarianism of the Nordic region is a function of the culture which developed centuries ago, back when these countries were poor, hardscrabble, religious places. And that therefore cultural egalitarianism, not liberal democracy, explains that wonderful safety net.

And here's something else. Denmark is a small homogenous place, held together by its unique language and sense of 'Danish-ness'. And, as we'll see further on, an ethnic sense of belonging, a feeling that you are an accepted part of the group, is also something which greatly reduces stress. But this ethnic sense of belonging is actually the direct opposite of what liberal democracy teaches to be a virtue.

In fact, that's why, with the recent waves of immigration, those previously homogenous countries like Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands, don't feel quite so safe and happy as before. And it's why new nationalistic political parties which specifically repudiate everything about liberal democracy are all the rage in those places.

So one can readily conclude that the country's relatively recent adoption of liberal democracy had or has little or nothing to do with the happiness of Denmark.

Finally, remember those other definitions of happiness. Because if you went down to the bottom of the list on one of those happiness surveys, you'd no doubt find a lot of African countries. And unless you've been there you can have little understanding of the depth of poverty, the lack of infrastructure, and the no objective reason for hope that pervades so much of the continent. So of course people who live there will tell the survey takers that they are unhappy.

But if you're not hanging out in refugee camps, (and you should understand that the vast majority of Africans are not in refugee camps), in other words when you're in the real world of the rest of the continent, and the most basic, basic needs are being met, and even sometimes when they're not, then very often you feel a weirdly positive energy. The work ethic is strong. The women are singing. People are hoping anyway in the face of all that poverty. I've even met people who are almost starving who still have a sweet, friendly disposition and who are always ready to help.

So try this some time. Stand on a street corner in Copenhagen and flash a big smile at the strangers walking by. See how many smile back. Then do the same thing in most places in Africa.

Then ask yourself: Which people, the rich northern Europeans or the dirt poor Africans, are really the happiest?

But when it comes down to it, it doesn't really matter what definition of 'happiness' you use. Because whatever definition it is, it's pretty transparent that pretty much no one is happy in the West these days. Like I said, all those social indicators, from suicide rate to the degree of social trust, are all in the toilet. And what's true in the microcosm is also true in the macrocosm. I mean, of all the various theories on how and why someone like Donald Trump could get elected, not a single one of them says that it's because people were happy and satisfied.

And the Progressives are just as unhappy as the Trump supporters. If not more so. For instance, take racism. Because I can remember my brief encounters with the South way back when. If you were remotely different you could almost literally cut the hostility of the whites with a knife. And you could still meet rural blacks with the 'Yes, Massa, no, Massa' kind of attitude. Nowadays, compared to then, America, especially the South, is virtually prejudice free. And I don't think that back then anyone would have even predicted that the future could be so bright.

Now is everything perfect these days? Of course not. On the other hand, I'm not aware of anything at any time in history that was perfect. Yet instead of being thankful and optimistic because of the progress, almost any good Progressive is over the top angry at whatever vestiges of injustice remain. Why is that?

And I can go on and on with other examples of how totally dissatisfied almost everybody is. But I'm trying to keep all this positive. And I'm reminded about something I read once where historians went over reams of personal memoirs and remembrances of people who had grown up in the towns and small cities of 1890s America. You know, back when GDP was probably a tenth of what it is now. When children were still dying of those childhood diseases. When, objectively speaking, problems of race and just about everything else were far greater than today. And the historians were hard pressed to find anyone from back then who *didn't* have happy and fond memories.

Okay. So we have a situation where the theory of liberal democracy unequivocally stated that adoption of same would make everybody happy. And the result is that everyone feels alienated, alone, and generally freaked out about everything. So does this mean that anyone even has the suggestion that maybe the theory is wrong? Once again: Of course not. After all, remember my little dictum that

Ideology will always trump common sense. No, liberal democracy must be correct. We must be doing something wrong.

Or as it presents itself these days: *They* must be screwing it up for the rest of us. Which takes us back to the putative divide between Democrats and Republicans. As I've said, though, it really doesn't have anything to do with political thought any more. It's more like we've divided into Shirts and Skins, and we vitally need that other side so that we can have someone to blame. After all, it's impossible that the problem could be with liberal democracy itself, now isn't it?

And here's the weirdest part of our situation. Because both liberal democracy and the free market economic system which it champions base their legitimacy not on Virtue or Natural Law or any other such high falutin concept. No, it is all based on how people vote, either politically or in the marketplace. If Ajax toothpaste sells better than Acme toothpaste, then Ajax toothpaste must be better.

So how bad has it gotten in the political marketplace that people are so unhappy and unsatisfied that even 10% of them would vote for someone like Donald Trump? Yet, as I've mentioned, no pundit of any political stripe has ever come out and said, 'Well, I guess that this means that the whole idea of liberal democracy sucks'.

It's kind of like someone keeps telling you how ultra-delicious their new sugar soaked mustard and mayonnaise pie is. So you try some and you almost throw up. So then they stand there and endlessly berate you for what a moron you are for not loving their sugar soaked mustard and mayonnaise pie. After all, they've already told you how ultra-delicious it is.

So what's next? Do they pull out a gun and force you to eat more of it? Or are you enough of a true believer that you willingly fight back the gag reflex and chow right on down? I suppose that we're finding all that out right now.

So, anyway, I hope that I've proven by now that that portion of our world today which still is wonderful is not a function of liberal democracy and is not a function of 'Enlightenment values'. So what *is* it a function of? Okay, we'll be getting to that in the very next episode.

In the meantime, though, thanks again for so far having listened.

