

## **EPISODE 9**

# **THE BOX THAT YOU CAN'T THINK OUTSIDE OF**

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is episode number nine of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. And now we're finally getting to the end of the beginning, as it were. Because, believe it or not, until now I've more or less just been getting you ready for the main part of this endeavor. And what I mean by that is that shortly I will be taking apart our supposed shared historical reality piece by piece. And after that I will try, by using what we now really know from science, to reconstruct a true reality that we can all agree to and that we can all live with.

Yes, I know, these are not exactly humble aims and humble claims. Which is why I have been carefully attempting to lay the foundation with my discussions of rationality, legitimacy, propaganda, and, well, those foundational assumptions. But I also know from experience how hard it is, even when someone is nodding in agreement, for anyone to really and fully get outside of whatever belief system that has been both in the foreground and in the background of their consciousness ever since they first became aware that they had a consciousness.

Because of that, therefore, I thought it important to make one more attempt to flesh out the problem. And to do that I thought that I'd start off with a travel story.

Now I don't know how many of you have been to Dubai. But if China is like regular economic growth on steroids, then Dubai sometimes seems like China on steroids. New glass and steel skyscrapers constantly going up. Incessant highways tying it all together. No grass or parkland anywhere. Hotter than hell throughout almost the entire year. Outside of work nothing to do except go to one of their humongous malls. It makes places like Houston or Atlanta seem almost homespun in comparison.

But a few hours away by bus from Dubai is Muscat, the capital of the country of Oman. And partly out of necessity, due to Oman's much more modest oil reserves, and partly out of having better taste, the absolute ruler there has created a city with a far better look and feel to it. The buildings are all white, and seem to have a height limit of around eight stories. Highways have median strips with actual growing grass. And whereas Dubai is surrounded by flat, ugly, brown sand, Muscat has knife

edged, dark red mountains cutting right through it and marching into the sea.

What's more, as opposed to everywhere else in the Gulf, the native born Omanis still work for a living. And when you interact with them you can still experience the clear cut, straightforward honesty that many desert Arabs everywhere used to be famous for.

So it's a great place to visit. And, if you like the bare bones of nature and of desert solitude, as I do, then it's even better to rent a car and to drive around the back country. For those same mountains, the Hiraz, also march inland from the sea, and as you drive up the modern highway into the interior, only the occasional tiny green jewel of an oasis interferes with the endless panorama of red mountain and blue sky.

So there I was, about 150 miles from Muscat, at the turnoff for the highest point in the country, the mountain called Jebel Shams. But after driving another 30 miles or so up and up and up to its 10,000 foot 'summit' I realized that it wasn't so much a mountain top as it was a giant, flat, almost lifeless plateau in the middle of nowhere.

But I wasn't there to enjoy alpine scenery anyway. Because the main reason people go to Jebel Shams is that all of a sudden, in the middle of this plateau, is a sheer drop of around 6,000 feet. It's a canyon of sorts, but more accurately it is a true cleft in the Earth. So at the end of the dirt road I pulled over, parked, and made my way along a short rocky path to the edge.

Jebel Shams is called 'Oman's Grand Canyon'. But when you're at the real Grand Canyon you are presented with a neat, orderly layer cake of geological strata. Not to mention ponderosa pines, cute bushy tailed Abert squirrels, other tourists, and a nice reassuring wide open horizon.

This, however, wasn't that.

Instead, not only was everything in shadows, and not only was I the only living creature standing at that 6,000 foot drop, but the other side of the cleft seemed to be only about a mile or so away. What's more, that other side rose at a weird, sharp angle, which made the tiny stream way, way down at the bottom seem like the focal point of some strange vortex of energy. And not only that, but the rock faces were no longer dull red but rather dead black, especially towards the bottom where the sun really didn't shine. And the only sound that I heard was that of an eerie wind which constantly blew.

Now usually I don't have any problem with heights. So, especially since I had gone to all the trouble to get there, I thought that I should spend at least fifteen minutes or so contemplating the empty grandeur around me. So I sat down cross-legged a foot or so from the edge to take it all in.

In less than a minute I was feeling very uncomfortable. No matter how many times I rationally told myself that I was in no more danger than if I had been sitting in the middle of a room, some weird ass occult force seemed to keep *begging* me to join it down at the bottom of that gorge. '*Come join us*', or something like that. I shuffled back a few feet. The incredibly uneasy feeling went away. So I shuffled forward. There it was again. Now the observer in me was fascinated by the phenomenon. But in the end self preservation took over. And, shaking a bit, I had to retreat. Walking back to my car, I realized that I had just quite literally stared into the Abyss.

But here's the point of the story. Because as I drove back about a mile along my route, I noticed that coming up I had missed a more or less official observation point. Actually it was only about a twenty foot long stretch of rickety four foot high chain link fence. Right at the edge of the exact same chasm. But here I could see my car. Across the road there were a couple of preteen tribal girls trying to sell handicrafts. And I now had a fence, even if a rickety one, to stand behind. All of a sudden I was back at the Grand Canyon. There was no vertigo, no uncertainty, no occult forces urging me on to irrational self-destruction.

I was even closer to the edge than I had been before. But now I had a fence to stand behind.

Now one of the kind of sardonic lines that I tell people is that I have spent a lifetime staring into the void so that they don't have to. Although of course I am being figurative. But, although even though it is true that I probably have more of a capacity to examine first causes and the like than do other folks, even I can't do that anywhere close to 24/7. I mean, for the practicalities of everyday life, even I have my fences which I stand behind.

And, let's face it, most of us are not well suited for abyss staring, literally or figuratively. It's just too genuinely scary. So instead we stand behind fences. Or at least we understand that everyone who doesn't agree with our particular set of beliefs is standing behind a fence. We, on the other hand, see ourselves as out there in the open in the full glory of the true Truth. Unless someone else questions our fences. In which case we can get really defensive.

And this isn't just limited to people who we consider to be religious fundamentalists or political ideologues. I mean, atheism is also a fence that some people stand behind. After all, there are fundamental questions about existence and about meaning that the smartest and most evolved of humans have wrestled with over the centuries. And to blithely pretend that those questions don't exist because you are standing behind a fence of atheism in the end only fools yourself. Which is why an

atheist whose belief system is being effectively attacked can get just as emotionally ugly and irrational as can the worst religious fundamentalist.

And if you don't think that atheists in power can't end up as ultraviolent and as anti-science and anti-rational as, say ISIS in Iraq, then you are completely unfamiliar with everything from the French Revolution to the Russian Revolution.

Although I really don't want to dwell on that subject right now. Right now I'm just trying to remind you that, given the necessities of everyday life, we all have to stand behind fences. In fact, forget fences. We all need to be standing on some foundation. Otherwise we would be falling through that abyss which has no bottom.

And of course the ultimate aim of this podcast is to ensure that you are standing upon the 'correct' foundation and behind the 'correct' fence. Although I suspect that I might probably still have a long way to go to even convince you that there is a correct fence or foundation, and that everything isn't all relative and/or equally right or wrong.

In the meantime, though, let's one more time go over the theory and practice of Legitimacy. In other words, why is it that you accept a certain 90 year old lady named Elizabeth as a queen, whereas if I were to proclaim and/or believe myself to be a king you would think of me as a fool, an egomaniac, and/or totally insane? More specifically, how is it that the mental noodlings of one man, whether that man was Karl Marx, Jeremy Bentham, or L Ron Hubbard, once such noodlings become an ideology, come to be seen as entirely legitimate by any number of people?

Well, one way that I keep mentioning is to demonize the past. That is, present all of the pre-ideology history as being hopelessly oppressive. You know, horrible Dark Ages. That way however bad the present is it still has got to be better than that.

But another way to create legitimacy, and this might at least superficially seen paradoxical, is to invoke the past. For instance, take the ACLU. Now like most of you I grew up thinking that the ACLU was a wonderful defender of our sacred right to free speech. But it turns out that in this instance those Christians and right wingers who say that our modern understanding of the First Amendment isn't what the Founding Fathers intended are actually right. Because back then it was considered perfectly reasonable, even necessary, to censor speech which went beyond the pale, such as treason, blasphemy, or pornography. And this idea that saying anything short of shouting 'Fire' in a theater was not only permissible, but was some sort of basic human right wasn't even formulated until Oliver Wendell Holmes, Louis Brandeis, and a few other liberal judges came up with it around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup>

Century.

But to hear the ACLU tell it, our current understanding of the First Amendment and Freedom of Speech is somehow a sacred covenant laid down in the dim mists of time.

Nor is it any different with the NRA and the Second Amendment. Somehow a statement to the effect that citizens need to be armed so that state militias can call them up for service is transmogrified into a sacred obligation for the government to protect everyone's right to arm themselves to the teeth.

And this idea of the need for historical justification in order to justify every crazy idea out there is really weird in the light of the fact that we claim to be so modern and scientific. After all, each and every one of us makes mistakes. And it certainly follows that people two hundred years ago also made mistakes. So: So what if, say, James Madison wouldn't have had a problem with internet pornography? So what if, say, Ben Franklin, wouldn't have had a problem with assault rifles? How does that make either position 'right'?

But, as we shall see further along in our discussion of science, to human brains it does. Authority, it turns out, is the principal justification for Legitimacy. And this turns out to be the case not only whether it is genuinely true, as in the tradition of common law, but also when it turns out that ideological gatekeepers are just making things up.

Which brings us to the topic of Fake Truth. And so as to introduce you to this particular realm, let me tell you the story of Co-optation.

Now you may not know this, but around a hundred years ago the idea that the Federal Government should be involved with any sort of industrial enterprise wasn't even on the table. But because of the necessity brought about by its entrance into the First World War, in 1917 the United States found itself building two nitrate plants and a giant electricity producing dam on the Tennessee River in the small northern Alabama town of Mussel Shoals. So that after the war was over no one in Washington had the slightest ideas about what to do about this new fact that the Feds were now in the business of actually producing stuff.

Then in 1933, at the very beginning of Franklin Roosevelt's administration, the Progressive Republican Senator George Norris of Nebraska, who had held a lifelong grudge against power utilities, came up with a bright idea. Why not use this dam as the centerpiece, and then build a network of other dams in the mid South region, bypass those hated utilities, and generate power directly to the people?

Thus the Tennessee Valley Authority, or TVA, was born.

Of all the New Deal proposals, this was one of the most controversial. Conservatives were aghast at what appeared to be blatant Socialism. Progressives agreed with them about the Socialism part, but they interpreted this all to be a wonderful victory. Beyond just government ownership of dams, however, they wanted to take the concept a giant step further. Because here in one fell swoop was an opportunity to get rid of all the stifling bureaucracy implicit in such a large government project and replace it with something that the Progressives called Democratic Planning.

You see, going back to at least de Toqueville, political theorists had struggled with the tension between a government's need for central *authority* and the obvious problems that central *management* (in other words that bureaucracy), which was divorced from the reality of different local conditions and customs, necessarily created. Here now was a golden opportunity to institute what was called 'grass roots' theory. To have the locals who were going to benefit from the TVA also have a genuine say in actually running the TVA.

This may or may not have been a good idea in theory. But the practical problem was that none of the people in the mid South had ever even remotely *asked* for the TVA. What's more, they were highly traditional, very conservative rural people who didn't much cotton to outsiders. Let alone the Federal Government. Not to mention that they were still pretty annoyed about how said Federal Government had treated them less than eighty years earlier at the end of the Civil War.

To make it worse, many of the people swarming into the South from Washington and the Northeast were young, wet behind the ears, idealistic 'experts' whose love for 'the people' in general made them oblivious to the actual people who they were dealing with. And the other government workers setting up the system tended to be the very bureaucrats that grass roots theory was trying to circumvent.

So what happened? Since the whole reason the TVA had come about in the first place was Senator Norris' hatred of electric utilities, a plan quickly developed to set up local power co-operatives in the various counties and regions.

Now the co-operative movement has a long and interesting history. Starting with a group of weavers in Rochdale, England in 1844, by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century co-operatives had spread throughout the U.K. and North America, and they were one of the alternative economic systems that serious thinkers back then thought would have a good chance of replacing Capitalism. Many Savings and Loans institutions started that way. And, although much fewer in number now than then, present day co-ops include the large sporting goods store REI, Harvard's book store, the Coop, and any number

of natural food co-ops in places like Santa Monica and Boulder.

But the whole point and rationale of co-operatives was that people *voluntarily* banded together, both in order to solve their problems and to have personal control over the structure that they were creating. Here the Federal Government, the most powerful and impersonal of institutions, was ordering them to form a co-operative. Or else.

In other words, for the New Deal true believers the concepts of 'democracy' and 'the people' mattered so much in the long run that in the short run they didn't matter at all. So 'self government committees' and the like were set up, heads of committees duly reported to the proper government official, reams of reports were written, and everyone involved with implementing the TVA congratulated themselves for doing a wonderful job.

And here's the kicker: It worked. By 1949, when a sociologist named Philip Selznick wrote about all of this, the people in the mid South region had fully accepted the TVA and the phony co-operatives the government had created as legitimate parts and parcels of their lives.

Selznick had a term for this: Co-optation. And although he went out of his way to stress how all of these outside government implementers had sincerely believed that they were doing a great and noble service, in 1949 another book was also published. And this one had not taken such a benign view of such manipulation.

I'm referring to the novel '1984', written by George Orwell.

Now I know that our minds don't want to equate idealistic New Dealers with Orwell's totalitarian paranoia, but it is certainly plausible to see parallels here: Words being twisted to mean their opposite. An amorphous mindless bureaucracy supposedly dedicated to 'the people'. A seemingly benevolent Big Brother who cares about your welfare even more than you do yourself. It's easy to see how such ideas can cut both ways.

And, superficially at least, '1984' was about a science fiction future. But really Orwell was writing about trends which he had perceived had already started. For instance, just two years before, in 1947, our government's Department of War, which had been the Department of War ever since the founding of the country, was suddenly now the Department of Defense. Implying, of course, that from now on we would only ever, ever be defending ourselves, and never attacking anyone. As Orwell wrote about the fictional countries 'Oceania' and 'Eurasia' shifting from sworn enemies to trusted allies on a day's notice, Japan and Germany, who we had fought to the death three years earlier, were

suddenly our friends. And the Soviet Union, which had been our trusted ally, was now of course our mortal enemy.

And it didn't take long for our own American brand of Newspeak to permeate our lives. Soon used cars would become pre-owned cars. Margarine would become a buttery spread. Old people would become senior citizens. By the present day it sometimes seems like nothing means anything any more. You're not fired from your job; you're downsized. Someone who is into same sex encounters is automatically happy; ie gay. Prostitutes are sex workers. Illegal aliens are now undocumented migrants. And the word police are there to make sure that we all stay in line.

And this rampant renaming, excuse me, rebranding, is not confined to the right or the left. It's everywhere and everything. In fact, by now even the word 'co-optation' has been co-opted. Nowadays it simply means to assimilate or to appropriate something. As in the phrase 'The Democrats have co-opted Bernie Sanders slogan of 'Medicare For All'. But Selznick's original formulation of the idea envisioned something both more subtle and much scarier. As I said in episode 1, it's kind of like the pod people in 'Invasion of the Body Snatchers'. Because a co-opted enterprise looked and even sort of acted like the original, but was essentially devoid of any soul or meaning.

And if that definition is at all confusing, try this example. Imagine that your high school mascot was 'The Rebels'. All the football players were Rebels. All the cheerleaders and popular kids were Rebels. Even all the 70 year old alumni were Rebels.

But let's say that you never felt right trying to fit in. You hated being a conformist. You wanted to take a stand against everything that your high school stood for. Then what would you be? Because one thing that is for sure is that you couldn't be a Rebel.

Now you might say that I'm just having fun and games with words. But now let me tell you another story. It all has to do, of all people, with the nephew of Sigmund Freud. I mean, you can't make this stuff up.

Edward Bernays was born in 1891, grew up in New York City, and graduated from Cornell. Soon after that, however, he more or less invented the field of public relations. Or, as he preferred to see it, the intentional manipulation of public opinion.

Now you need to understand that in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century what advertising there was was straightforward and descriptive. You know, something like: Oak box. Sturdy construction. Beveled edges. 2 feet by 3 feet by 2 feet. And then there would be a little line drawing of a box.

But to Bernays the masses would always be just ignorant rubes being pushed around by those

primitive ids and libidos described by his Uncle Sigmund. And it was therefore the duty of the educated professionals in a liberal democracy to use psychological tactics to push said masses in the proper direction. In fact, he wrote a book in 1929 that was straightforwardly titled 'Propaganda'. And here is a direct quote from it:

'The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.'

Gee, I couldn't have said it better myself.

Now let's see a few of the ways that Bernays swayed opinion for the liberal democratic public good. In the 1920s cigarette companies were having a hard time getting women to smoke. So Bernays appealed to feminist sensibilities by creating an ad campaign where cigarettes were sold as, quote, 'torches of freedom'. Then, to counter the social embarrassment that women still felt when smoking in public, he hired a bunch of good looking—but not too good looking—young ladies to light up on their way out of Church on Sunday morning and then along the Easter Parade route.

Americans used to eat a sensible, light breakfast of coffee and maybe a roll. Bernays, who worked for the bacon industry, successfully pushed the idea that a heavy breakfast, bacon and eggs and the works, was far healthier. He promoted bananas for the United Fruit Company. And in 1954, when Guatemala legally elected a sort of leftist president, he got the CIA to overthrow the guy in a coup.

Bernays was quite proud that Hitler's chief of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, had read all of Bernays' book. But, let's face it, compared to the leaps and bounds of psychological manipulation that have happened since, the Nazis were nothing but amateur pikers.

Because let's jump forward to the present.

Now about 15 years ago the columnist David Brooks wrote a book called 'Bobos in Paradise'. And in it he coined the word Bobo, which was an amalgamation of 'Bourgeois' and 'Bohemian', words whose meaning originally had been pretty much mutually exclusive. After all, the term Bourgeois had always referred to those petty materialistic middle class people who had little understanding or appreciation for true art or culture. Whereas Bohemians were those non-conformist artist types who lived in garrets and who rejected middle class mores and money in their search for a truly uncorrupted artistic experience.

But Brooks had noticed that as the 21<sup>st</sup> Century was dawning the two ideas were now merging into one. Now people who worked in highly paid corporate jobs and who drove fancy cars also wore

turtlenecks and the like and had a self image of being truly discerning creative types. They sipped lattes and discussed art and books and spirituality. But they also bought \$5000 refrigerators and \$9000 sofas, and didn't think anything of it.

I suppose the best example of this was Steve Jobs. He dressed like a 50s Beat poet and talked about organic food and Buddhism and dropping acid. But he was also a ruthless monopolistic businessman who got literally billions of people glued to the outer world of his iPhones and iPads and such. Which is of course the direct opposite of anything even remotely Buddhist.

So that, in short, not only has the present era seen the intellectual elite become one with the socioeconomic elite, but the artist, the poet, the writer, and, yes, the rebel have also all been totally co-opted into the mix. Subsumed into the culture. And virtually no even semi-educated person is left standing outside to raise the question of whether or not any or all of it actually means anything.

Or how about all the fake virtue out there. I've already pointed out the very real danger that you faced if you were pro-integration in the South in the 1950s. Today, however, people proudly wear this badge of being anti-racist as though there was some huge contingent of pro-racism activists out there that they were standing up to. And if you say, 'What about Charlottesville?', let me point out that most of the marchers there went out of their way to say that they may have been right wing, but that they weren't racist. And even if they were all lying, still, the highest estimate I've seen for the number of Alt-Right people out there is around 30,000. And that number isn't 1% of the U.S. population. It's not 1/10th of a percent. It's not even 1/100th of a percent. Which means that 99.99% of Americans are not Alt-Right. So why the outrage? Because it turns out that even righteous indignation has been co-opted.

So, given how good the theory and practice of psychological manipulation has become, given the lack of any genuine artistic or intellectual alternative to the mainstream liberal democracy regime that has developed, what real hope could I possibly have that anyone anywhere can really think outside of *that* box? Well, one never knows.

But for right now I'm going to be leaving that depressing thought for what it is. And next time I'm going to revisit the question as to why it is that I am on this possible fool's mission. After that we'll be done with the introductory phase. And I will have the extremely interesting job of getting into all the nuts and bolts of all the history, and then all the science.

For now, though, once again many thanks for so far having listened.