

EPISODE 2A

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz, and this is Episode number 2 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Now last time, as I said, I was setting the table. Today, however, we're going to be starting in on, as it were, the meat and potatoes.

To be specific, today we're going to be attempting to define the term 'liberal', the term 'democracy', and the term 'liberal democracy'. And at first glance this might not seem to be enough food for an entire episode. Because you may think that you already know what these terms mean. But this isn't necessarily the case. And in fact this episode might turn out to be one of the most critical ones of the entire series.

So let's begin. With Democracy.

Now when I was first growing up back in the Fifties it was drummed into us that, first and foremost, America was the land of Democracy. So much so that no other alternative was ever even presented. Democracy. It was our heritage, founded by the Founding Fathers. And it was what made America great. It distinguished us from places like England, where they strangely worshiped a queen. It distinguished us even more from horrible places like our enemies from ten years previously, Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, and from our current enemies, the Soviet Union and China. In fact, one of the scariest TV shows of the early Fifties was something called 'I Led Three Lives', which was about a dark paranoid world inhabited by an American pretending to spy for Russia. Everyone wore fedoras, everything was gray and secretive, and all the bad guys kept saying 'Comrade' to each other. All of which made a skinny six year old really glad that he lived in a Democracy.

But what exactly was a Democracy? Here everything got kind of vague. Because Democracy was kind of analogous to mom and apple pie. It was just sort of synonymous with America. With baseball and fair play and a forty hour work week and block parties and helping out your neighbors. It was just the System that we were all glad that we lived in.

But if you had gone to the trouble of asking one of the public intellectuals of the day, you would have probably gotten an answer similar to the one given by Woodrow Wilson back around 1915:

Democracy was the process whereby we more or less got to choose the people who would rule over us.

Now you'll notice a couple of clear implications implicit in such a statement. First there was a recognition that in any society it was necessary to have certain head honchos, as it were, calling the shots for the rest of us. The rulers and the ruled. Second, the 'more or less' qualification meant that there was a recognition that there probably would never be absolute fairness in this all too human endeavor. The best that could be hoped for was some kind of approximation.

Well, that was then. And, as I just said, in practice not too many people ever thought all that hard or deeply about what the word 'Democracy' meant. It was just the way we did things here in America, and absolutely everyone felt that it was a legitimate way to do things.

Legitimacy. Because if you later went to college and took a political science course, you found out that 'legitimacy' was kind of like our faith that a piece of paper which was printed up to look like a \$100 bill was 'real' money. So long as everyone accepted it as money, then it was. Likewise in the political world. So long as everyone in Britain accepted that a certain woman was Queen, then she was. So long as everyone in Saudi Arabia accepted that the King's power was absolute, then it was. So long as people in Germany accepted that Hitler was the legitimate Fuhrer, then he was.

But this new, more sophisticated understanding that political legitimacy, like a belief in paper money, was on some very basic level a psychological con game also led us to at best an ironic detachment about the whole thing. And what made the situation worse was that, once you looked behind the curtain of legitimacy, you found that the 'more or less' aspect of that earlier definition of democracy all too often fell way short on the 'less' side. So that soon the System no longer felt inarguably fair.

The result of all this as the Sixties and Seventies progressed is that the naive faith that we had all shared in that nebulous term 'Democracy' in the end gave way to a jaded cynicism, and the term 'Democracy' lost its sacred connotations. Blind patriotism was no longer automatic, and America became just the country that you happened to live in. As an example, I clearly remember as a boy back in 1959 looking ahead to the oh so distant future of 1976, and imagining the great celebration that the American Bicentennial would be. But by the time that year rolled around, it was a humongous nothing. For instance, the city of Denver was awarded the 1976 Winter Olympics, which a few years earlier would have been a great honor, and then the people of Colorado actually voted it down. Who cared about that stuff any more? Especially if it was going to cost money? And the few lame attempts which ended up being made at celebrating the Bicentennial were roundly mocked and belittled by all sides.

But this podcast isn't about revisiting the Sixties and Seventies. It is about the present day. And the only reason I brought all that up is to point out that, once again, after all this time, everyone everywhere, right, left, and center, is praising the virtues of liberal democracy. Telling us how liberal democracy is the sacred heritage which we have inherited from our Founding Fathers. How it is a special gift bestowed on us by the brilliant independent thinkers of the Age of Enlightenment. And how it is under attack from all of our newly found enemies: Vladimir Putin and the Russians; the Chinese government; those people who voted for Brexit; even the people who voted for Trump. Visions of authoritarianism, which these days has almost become synonymous with totalitarianism, are constantly invoked so as to scare us as to what will inevitably happen should those Enlightenment values of liberal democracy ever be abandoned.

But have you noticed something? Sixty years ago our patriotic fervor was supposed to be for Democracy. But nowadays, sixty years later, we are supposed to want to live and die for liberal democracy.

But aren't they the same thing? Isn't democracy democracy? And wouldn't liberal democracy just be a more, well, liberal, as in expanded, version of the democracy of the 1950s? (After all, even political conservatives presumably prefer liberal helpings of pie or ice cream.)

But here we have one of the most important points that this podcast is going to try to make. And it is really essential that you understand this and internalize this. Because just as Grape Nuts doesn't contain any grapes and doesn't contain any nuts, so, too, liberal democracy in reality doesn't have anything to do with what we commonly think of as 'liberal' or with what we traditionally thought of as 'democracy'.

Got that? Because what I'm about to discuss isn't anything strange or controversial or out of left field. It isn't some paranoid theory that you'd hear on late night radio. It is all knowledge that is readily available if you study history and/or political science. And here is something else which is really central to all this: Whereas Grape Nuts in practice is a pretty tasty, though somewhat crunchy, breakfast cereal, liberal democracy is most definitely not the delicious sounding political system that you think that you believe it to be.

But before we get into that, let's briefly deal with one of the most basic present day untruths about liberal democracy: That it is somehow connected to or derived from the America that was founded by the Founding Fathers.

Because here is another essential, incredible point: Namely that, unlike the amorphously

defined 'democracy' of sixty years ago, liberal democracy is in reality a clearly defined political ideology with clearly defined foundational assumptions. Further, although we will see that it certainly built upon various beliefs and thoughts of the latter 18th Century, liberal democracy itself wasn't even formulated until the middle of the 19th Century. So that it is literally impossible that the American founding fathers could have believed in it in any way, shape or form.

(Now later on, when we examine the American revolutionary era, you'll find out the really surprising fact that the political thinking of the North American colonies at the end of the 18th Century was in actuality about a hundred years out of step with the political thinking of Europe. That's right, the Founding Fathers were hopelessly behind the times, as it were. In point of fact, the main inspiration for the American Revolutionaries was the philosopher John Locke, who did most of his writing in the 1680s, and many of whose thoughts were profoundly out of step with the thoughts of 1780.)

But for right now here's another thing that you need to know about the foundation of the United States: It was never meant to be a democracy as that term had been classically understood.

You see, in the mid 18th Century 'Democracy' referred to a weird system of government which had been practiced off and on for about a century in the ancient Greek city-state of Athens. For starters, in Athens you needed a quorum, that is a minimum number, of 6000 citizens just in order to have a meeting. Which meant that almost every citizen's day was consumed with giant meetings, without microphones, and with endless giant arguments. Which meant that there wasn't any time left over for said citizens to actually do any productive work. Which meant that a huge proportion of the population consisted of slaves, far more so than in other city-states. And for that matter, women in democratic Athens ended up having far fewer rights than did the women in the other Greek city-states.

Further, the decisions that these huge meetings came up with were usually terrible. Democratic Athens was viciously aggressive towards all the other city-states, and was the party responsible for starting the hugely destructive Peloponnesian wars. Which it lost. Democratic Athens voted to force Socrates to commit suicide simply because he bothered the others citizens with his endless questions about the more meaningful issues of life. No wonder that most of the deep thinkers of Ancient Greece, including Plato, Aristotle, Aristophanes, and Thucydides, positively hated the idea of democracy.

Nor had the concept had many backers in the two thousand years since then. As we shall see, even the radical French philosophes of the 18th Century Age of Enlightenment didn't believe in it. No, their ideal system was to find an enlightened despot who would autocratically institute the changes in

society that they desired.

In fact, in 1776 Greece itself didn't even exist any more. By this time the entire area had long been a neglected backwater of the Ottoman Empire. Athens had degenerated into a small rural town. Goats grazed amidst the ruins of the Parthenon and the Acropolis.

So the Founding Fathers had no wish at all for the democracy of ancient Athens. Instead the image that they all had in their heads was an idealized version of the early Roman Republic.

Now the republic model did make a lot of intuitive sense. After all, asking hundreds of people of vastly varying levels of ability to somehow collectively solve a complex problem is kind of like trying to get a bunch of stoned hippies to order a pizza. Only on a much larger scale. But it is reasonable to expect a crowd of several hundred people who are somewhat socially familiar with each other to be able to agree upon who amongst them has shown themselves to have the best intelligence and judgment. And it is also reasonable to expect that such a representative could then represent the original group in some larger deliberative body.

So it was representative government. Not a democracy of the ignorant masses, but the best and brightest, chosen by their fellow citizens, to then get together in order to collectively solve the political problems of the larger commonwealth. And even though in practice Rome quickly strayed from that perfect ideal, still this republican form of government was the shining star that the Founding Fathers were trying to follow.

And most definitely not democracy. Rome, not Athens. Which is why those of you who are familiar with American history will remember that originally senators (who were consciously named after their Roman counterparts) were not directly elected. That the Electoral College was created as a means to protect the public from itself. That the Capitol building and so much of the rest of Washington, D.C., were expressly designed to mimic the look and feel of Rome.

Now some apologists for today will agree that this was indeed the case. That the Founding Fathers only wanted a very limited form of democracy as the term is currently understood. But then these apologists will go on to declare that our present system was implicit in that early system. And that the early system naturally evolved into the present day order. That, given the ideals of the Founding Fathers, the present day order was inevitable.

Don't believe it for a second. Because, as we shall see, these are the means by which every ideology tries to make itself seem legitimate. First, you pretend to somehow link your ideology to the noble men and noble ideas of the past. Second, you pretend that it was inevitable. After all, we're here.

We couldn't have gotten anywhere else, now could we have? Therefore, it must be legitimate.

In point of fact, however, although liberal democracy itself wasn't really formulated until the mid 19th Century, its precursors were definitely in the air around 1780. And the Founding Fathers very consciously rejected those precursors. They had absolutely no faith that there was some magical 'will of the people' that somehow always arrived at the truth. They were only trying to find a way for villages and towns to get together and choose the wisest people to represent them in a larger setting.

But 'liberal democracy' does imagine a magical 'will of the people'. Further, it specifically presupposes that the opinion of the stupidest lout in a society is worth exactly the same amount as the opinion of the wisest genius. Not as a practical matter, but as a philosophical truth. And this is one of its foundational assumptions.

Please. Think about this for a second. In liberal democracy the opinion of the stupidest lout *by definition* is worth exactly the same as that of the wisest genius.

So, yes, as the years went by women in America got the vote. And blacks did get both citizenship and the vote. But this was in order to enhance representational republicanism. Not because anyone believed in the ideology of liberal democracy.

And, therefore, if you take away only one thing from this episode, please never forget that the word 'democracy' in the term 'liberal democracy' means almost absolutely nothing like what the word 'democracy' meant to Americans in either 1790 or 1860 or 1950.

(By the way, how did we get from there to here? How did Democracy transmogrify into Liberal Democracy in everyone's minds? Well, it took around a hundred years. And what's involved is a sociological process called co-optation. And all of that will be duly discussed in future episodes. For right now, though, think of the Invasion of the Body Snatchers and those pod people. They may *look* like your neighbors...)

Anyway, now that we've dealt with Democracy, let's talk a little about the word Liberal in its connection to the term 'liberal democracy'.

Because if you're an American who considers yourself a liberal, you very probably also think that one of your main positive traits is that you are a compassionate person. That you genuinely care about others. Especially the poor and downtrodden. And that this is why you support government programs that help the poor with food stamps and health care and the like.

Not only that, but you care about social justice. After all, there but for fortune... Because when

it's all said and done: We're all in this together, right?

Now if you consider yourself a conservative, you might cynically point out that it is pretty easy for a liberal to be compassionate with other people's money. You might also point out that most of that government money which is supposedly going to the poor instead creates giant soulless bureaucracies that control everyone's lives. And you might certainly take issue with the implication that you, as a conservative, are somehow therefore an uncompassionate person. After all, you yourself give to your church, etc. You would go out of your way to help an actual person in need. And you would even gladly pay all those taxes if you thought for a minute that the government was spending the money wisely or efficiently.

Now this argument can go back and forth. And it does. And there have been dueling studies on the matter of which side is in practice more compassionate. Although the honest conclusion in these studies has been that if there is any difference in actual displayed altruism between liberals and conservatives, it is a small one. Nonetheless, there is little argument that, in their self-image at least, American liberals really value altruism and compassion.

But here's something that might really shock you if you're not already a student of political science: Classically the word 'liberal' has meant the exact opposite of altruism and compassion. Because classically liberalism rested upon a foundational assumption that real altruism simply does not exist. That in reality we are all just in it for ourselves. And that further that this is actually a good thing. And that therefore the best way to run an economy, and indeed an entire society, is through free markets where everyone is free to pursue their selfish desires with the least bit of government interference. Therefore, in the 18th and 19th Century a liberal was someone who denied that compassion even existed, was someone who claimed that self advantage and the pursuit of profit were the only true human motivations.

Now if you've studied economics you probably know that this is also one of the foundational assumptions that underlie that subject. And indeed, historically speaking, the field of economics is a direct descendent of classical liberalism. Which is why the almost fanatical belief in the magic of free markets during the past thirty years or so has been called neoliberal economics.

Further, to completely confuse everything, the word 'liberal' in Britain today still has that 18th Century connotation of self maximization and free markets. In other words, the closest we have here in America to the British Liberal party is our rather unpopular Libertarian Party.

So this is what the word 'liberal' refers to in the phrase liberal democracy: The exact opposite of

caring for others. And when we get more into it further down the line I'll explain how the founders of liberal democracy tried to square the particular circle of how totally selfish people are somehow going to happily coexist.

So if you're only going to take away two things from this episode, then I want the second one to be this: if you consider yourself a liberal in the modern American sense then in a very central way you are the actual direct opposite of what the word 'liberal' means in the term liberal democracy. And you're just going to have to get used to the fact that from now on when I say 'liberal' I will only be referring to its original libertarian meaning and *not* to Nancy Pelosi or to people who watch MSNBC. For those people I will try to always use the word left wing or Progressive. Although, to confuse you even more, it will also turn out that a lot of our present day so-called Progressive ideas have absolutely nothing to do with the original Progressives from around 1910, and instead are simply the logical conclusions that one arrives at from following through on the foundational assumptions of liberal democracy.

Got it?

And, again, I am not making this stuff up. There's nothing hidden or obscure in any of this. It's just your basic history and political science.

While we're on the subject, though, here's something else which is one of the foundational assumptions underlying said ideology. Because, as we shall see in Episode 5, the principal theorists behind liberal democracy were out and out atheists. And while it is true that at least some of these men did say that one should be tolerant of those who were still believers, very importantly, it was the tolerance that one has for a doddering old fool, not the tolerance that one has for somebody whose opinion one respects. And you can guess what happens to such 'tolerance' once the ideologues gain the majority.

So, as I said, the label of 'liberal democracy' does indeed sound wonderful. Those words sure *sound* like something that you and I would both like. Those words certainly sound like something which is copasetic with American history and values. But what if we labeled this ideology a little differently? What if we applied a label that was in fact more honest? What if instead of calling it liberal democracy we called the system that all of the present day pundits are so strenuously defending Atheistic Selfishness? Would that seem very appealing to you? Well, to most of you, probably not.

Or how about this: According to the foundational assumptions of liberal democracy *you* do not have an essence. What *you* basically are is a soulless, genderless consumption unit, distinguishable

from other consumption units solely in the distinctive way that you pile up your desires, goods and services. This is you.

So how warm and fuzzy does that make you feel?

Again, I'm not just playing word games here. Or playing with the fact that sometimes definitions change over time. Because these are in fact the basic core concepts upon which liberal democracy was built.

Anyway, by now your mind is probably having one of two reactions. The first is: I don't care how much history or political science this guy quotes. But if he's dissing liberal democracy, he's also dissing everything that's good about the modern world. The progress of women. The fight against bigotry and racism. Anyway, what's his alternative? Putin's Russia? Some sort of Nazi dictatorship?

Well... If your mind is going on like that, then the short answer is that *they*, you know, the pod people, have done their job well. If you really believe that the only alternative to the craziness of today is some horrible dictatorship, then of course you're not going to closely examine the current system. But in point of fact just a few minutes ago I did give you an example of a viable alternative. Namely the United States of fifty or sixty or a hundred and fifty years ago. After all, that system certainly was far from perfect. But it also didn't think of you only as a soulless, genderless consumption unit. And it didn't think that the only meaning in your life consisted of nothing more than accumulating goods and services.

But don't feel bad if you're not getting it yet about liberal democracy. Because it turns out that most present day social conservatives, people who are otherwise totally appalled by the direction our society has headed, are also convinced that liberal democracy must have at least started out as a wonderful idea. And that all we have to do is to get back to that beautiful original pure meaning.

No, it wasn't and it isn't and it never will be. Liberal democracy has absolutely nothing to do with representational republicanism. Once again, if you think that it does, this is only because everyone and everything has been co-opted into believing that.

On the other hand, your mind might have the second reaction. Namely, it might be going something like, Okay, say I buy into his premise. So why doesn't he just come out with a list of what liberal democracy believes and how it is wrong.

Well, I will be getting to that. But, like I keep saying, it's complicated. Because the larger issue is what we might call the modern mindset. You see, and again there's nothing obscure about any of this, historians agree that, culminating around the end of the 18th Century, during a period of intellectual

history that is usually called the Age of Enlightenment, the entire moral and mental framework of the Western World underwent a huge qualitative realignment, as it were.

And it will only be by us understanding what civilization's original mindset was, and then seeing how it was radically changed, that we can appreciate how the theory of liberal democracy came about.

The Age of Enlightenment. For here is another difference between now and fifty or sixty years ago. Because back then, and for the previous century and a half, the Age of Enlightenment wasn't held in all that high a regard. Back then it was mostly seen as a time of intellectual foolishness, when an almost childish cult of 'rationality' and 'science' in effect threw the baby out with the bath water, and preached a so-called 'humanism' which in reality specifically denied human warmth, human relationships, and the human need for Meaning.

Kind of like today.

Indeed, we shall see that in many ways the present postmodern world is simply being a rerun of the 18th Century. In fact, we'll appreciate the irony that for the past 250 years to be 'modern' has meant in reality to ape the thoughts of certain men from around 1770. Forgetting the plain fact that the 19th Century was a specific repudiation of those ideas. Because they didn't work. So that nowadays if you think like someone from, say, 1870, then you are considered hopelessly old fashioned. Backwards. Repressed. Thinking like someone from 1770, on the other hand, now that's *modern*. Progressive. Open minded.

So kindly contemplate that for a moment. Because it's all very weird. I'll even go so far as to say it's insane. And it's also why this is probably going to take all those episodes in order to sort it all out for you.

Anyway, let's shift gears a bit and cut back for a moment to our present day reality. What we think we have today is an endless polarization between right and left, Republican and Democrat. But you may be surprised to learn that polls have shown that in reality only about 20% of Republicans and Democrats even mostly agree with the various political positions of the party that they identify with. Seriously. So what is really going on?

May I suggest that a better way to think about it is that, on the one hand, we have a certain group of people who, whether they are consciously aware or not that a program exists, are nonetheless down with the program. And these people honestly think that being with the program equates with

being intelligent and progressive and evolved. They really believe that if everyone just gets with the program then everyone will be happy and fulfilled.

Then there is another group, most of whom also aren't even aware that there is a specific program to be down with. No, they are just really uncomfortable, at either a conscious or unconscious level, with how the Western world is turning out. Now some of them may be left wing, and think that the problem is Capitalism or income inequality or whatever. And some of them may be right wing, and think that the problem is social decay or lack of religion or lack of nationalism or whatever. But the main thing is that all of them at some level just *know* that this is not adding up.

And here is why the gulf between these two groups is just going to get wider. Because, like blind devotees of any ideology or religion, the people in the first group are absolutely convinced that if the people in the other group were just sufficiently educated, that they would then immediately see the blinding goodness of getting with the program. And the unfortunate corollary of that belief is that those who do not get reprogrammed to get with the program and do not see the blinding goodness of it must therefore be pure evil. They must be racist. Bigots. Misogynists. Or whatever other bad, naughty names that the first group can come up with.

The people in the second group, however, again whether this is conscious or unconscious, and whether or not they have been browbeaten into accepting some or many of the beliefs and behaviors foisted on them by the first group, still just *know* in an intuitive way that the program itself is what is messing everything up. And even if they can't quite put their finger on it, they are also afraid that were they to completely surrender to it then that spark of humanity which they also intuitively know to be inside them will be snuffed out forever.

So it comes down to a battle between Good and Evil. Except that each side necessarily sees themselves as pure good and the other side as pure evil.

Oh, and one other small detail. The people in the first group just happen to be running the entire cultural show.

Anyway, this takes us to the end of this episode. Except that I suspect that some of you at least might be a bit confused about my continued use of the term 'foundational assumptions' and my continued implying of how critical they are. After all, it sounds like something out of a class in logic or philosophy. And what could be more boring than that?

Well, it just so happens that foundational assumptions are the topic of the next episode.

Although I do promise to try and make it not seem so dry. So I also hope that you can join me for that. And, in the meantime, thanks again for so far having listened.