

EPISODE 51

UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is Episode number 51 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. So with this episode we're going to make another one of our, as it were, phase shifts. And toggle back from Science to History. Specifically to the history of the 20th Century.

Now as opposed to some of the historical periods which I have discussed, I'm assuming that most of us believe that we have at least a half decent working knowledge of 20th Century history. Two world wars. A great depression. Tremendous social change. Tremendous technological change. But weaving through all of this an overarching theme of both ever expanding human rights and racial and gender equality. Most importantly, the replacement of authoritarian and totalitarian governments with the shining beacons of Democracy and personal liberty.

Okay. Well, perhaps needless to say, the history which I am about to present isn't going to have quite the same tilt to it.

Although, since it has now been 19 episodes since we were dealing with the subject, let me start off by briefly reminding you of what the situation looked like in the year 1900.

Now the first point that I'd like to remind you of is that, as opposed to there being a direct line between the Age of Enlightenment and the 20th Century, the reality is that to a large extent the 19th Century had been a direct refutation of those 18th Century ideas. Politically speaking, given the chaos which the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars had generated, this made perfect sense. But this rejection of the Age of Enlightenment might have been even truer in the intellectual realm. After all, the Romantic movement, with its emphasis of the contemplation of Beauty and of oneness with Nature, was about as direct a contrast that you could have with the sterile Deism, the simplistic 'rationality', and the even more simplistic Scientism of Enlightenment thought.

The second point to remember is that even though Scientism itself was rejected, the march of Science continued on at an ever expanding rate. In fact, a good argument can be made that not only

was there more absolute technological change in the 19th Century than in the 20th, but that both more significant and more basic scientific principles were first discovered back then. And the reality is that most of the ‘game changing’ innovations which laid the foundations for our present day prosperity and long lives, from indoor plumbing to public sanitation to elevators and skyscrapers to planes, trains, and automobiles, all took place at around this time.

The third major point is that, notwithstanding a few disgruntled Anarchists and Communists and the like, the large majority of citizens in Western Europe and the United States really liked the comfortable, middle class, bourgeois life which had taken hold by the end of the 19th Century. Indeed it is difficult to find another period in history when so large a percentage of the population had such a positive opinion about not just the present day, but also about the future which was on the horizon. And as the new 20th Century was dawning there was a palpable optimism, even a sense of somewhat imminent Utopianism, in the air. There was a widely held sense among the intellectual elite of the era that ongoing social problems would soon be addressed and solved, that the economic system would become ever gentler and ever more egalitarian, and that the stable Peace which had largely held throughout the past century would continue and become even more solidified in the new one.

Now clearly, whether you buy into the idea of the Glorious March of Liberal Democracy or not, none of this remotely happened. Instead in 1914 there broke out by far the deadliest and most destructive war since the Thirty Years War of the 17th Century. This was followed by a highly non-egalitarian economic boom during the Twenties. Which was followed by wrenching economic dislocation and the rise of Fascism and Communism and plain old fashioned vanilla dictatorships throughout the world. Which was followed by the even more destructive World War II. Which was followed by the Cold War with upwards of fifty thousand nuclear weapons aimed at just about every spot on Earth. Which was followed by Neoliberalism, increasing income inequality, and ever increasing environmental degradation. And throughout the century there was a rise in the ongoing collapse of tradition and culture, a decade by decade rise in chronic depression and personal alienation, you name it.

No wonder that by 1920 the vision of the future that most of the knowledge elite held for the future was not of Utopia, but rather of Dystopia. And this vision, as exemplified in the movie *Modern Times* by Charlie Chaplin, or in novels like ‘*Brave New World*’ or ‘*1984*’, has mostly only seemed to have gotten darker in the intervening hundred years.

Now in general apologists for the theory of the Glorious March of Liberal Democracy do not deny any of this reality. But in their telling none of it has anything to do with that Glorious March. In their telling World War I had been inevitable. In their telling Adolf Hitler was just a uniquely evil man. In their telling, given unrelenting Soviet aggression, the Cold War with its thousands of thermonuclear devices was unfortunate but, again, inevitable.

Well, that's in their telling.

Now in my telling Liberal Democracy was not just an innocent bystander to all this. In fact, in my telling Liberal Democracy was pretty much the cause of all this. And of course I don't expect that you've ever heard anything close to my telling before. On the other hand, since you have gotten this far in the podcast, I would hope that by this point you will trust me enough to be at least open to my telling.

But before we start with my telling it's probably necessary to first deal with a question which to me at least would appear to be obvious. Namely: If my contention that the 19th Century was so wonderful and hunky dory is true, and if in fact the 19th Century was a high point of Civilization, and if, further, I am right that in general humanity had learned its lesson after the Age of Enlightenment and the horrors of the French Revolution, how and why is it that everything then fell apart so completely and thoroughly in the 20th Century?

Okay, that is an excellent question. After all, usually when a civilization collapses historians can find specific causes for it. Plague. Drought. Barbarian invasions. As you'll recall from the discussion of Medieval times, it is now clear that the unexpected collapse of the period known as the High Middle Ages can be attributed to the simultaneous start of the climactic era which is now known as the Little Ice Age. Therefore, with all that in mind, it does challenge us to examine why, if the whole theory behind Liberalism had been thoroughly so discredited, all of a sudden it should come roaring back and then thoroughly dominate the next hundred years.

Well, the first relevant point is one that I kept making during all of those episodes on the Age of Enlightenment. History may well talk about different Ages and Eras, with the implication that at one moment in time everyone was 'Liberal', and then at another moment everyone was 'Conservative'. But the reality is that at almost all moments in time you have big chunks of humanity in one camp and other big chunks in the other. For instance, even at the end of the American Revolution you had a huge proportion of American settlers who were still fiercely loyal to Britain. Even at the height of the

French Revolution there were millions of French people who still revered their cultural traditions, who still considered themselves to be devoted Catholics.

And, as I hope that I made clear in my relatively short discussion of the 19th Century, even after the French Revolution, etc., there were still many people who kept on believing in the theories of the Age of Enlightenment and of Liberalism in general. It's just that now they were no longer ascendant.

Further, as I also hope that I made clear, there were all sorts of fringe movements, such as Marxism and Anarchism, which could also trace their roots back to those foundational assumptions of the Age of Enlightenment. And compared to these movements the Liberal Democracy of John Stuart Mill seemed relatively benign and doable. What's more, both Mill and his fellow liberal theorists such as Herbert Spencer came across in their writings as respectable, reasonable Middle Class people. And as such, since they were playing along with Victorian standards of calm debate and Free Speech, even dyed in the wool Conservatives and traditionalists didn't see them as threatening.

So that's one point. And a second major point concerns a resurgence of what I have been calling Scientism.

Now just as the Scientism of the 18th Century was preceded by an actual burst of new knowledge in the so-called Scientific Revolution of the 17th Century, so, too, did what we could call the New Scientism at the turn of the 20th Century follow a significant leap forward of genuinely important science in the 19th. Maxwell's laws showed that not only were electricity and magnetism intimately related, but that light itself was a form of electromagnetic energy. Although not yet fully proved, there was more and more evidence to support the theory that ultimately all matter was composed of atoms. Most importantly, Darwin's theory of evolution seemed to support the idea that there was no longer any reason to invoke God or any other supernatural forces in explaining the existence of Life itself.

And there's no need here to go into a detailed discussion of Darwinian evolution. Although you should be aware that modern arguments against it are more sophisticated than we are generally led to believe. After all, a *hypothesis* of evolution long predated Darwin. All that he did was to claim that Natural Selection explains all of it. The argument goes, however, that just as the idea of planets traveling in circular orbits was approximately correct, yet not in the end true, it is also plausible that the premise that Natural Selection explains everything might be incomplete. And, whatever the case on that front, it is undeniable that many of Darwin's specific ideas and speculations have been invalidated in the past century and a half.

Nonetheless, and maybe even because of the seeming simplicity of Natural Selection being an explanation of everything, the publication of 'The Origin of Species' immediately gave rise to several other ideas, which at the time seemed just as genuinely 'scientific', but which are now seen, at best, as the worst sort of pseudo-science.

The first of these was the Social Darwinism of Darwin's fellow Liberal Herbert Spencer: If Natural Selection was the sole determinant for the physical survival for individual animals and species, then it logically followed that it should also apply to human individuals, human groups, nations, and... races. And as a result of this line of thinking 'Scientific Racism' was born. And besides becoming the seed from which Nazi ideology would later be born, this idea was soon the principal justification for the so-called Scramble For Africa, in which European countries carved up the so-called dark continent. Not to mention the rest of the incredible expansion of Colonialism in the latter part of the 19th Century.

A second offshoot of acceptance of Darwinian Evolution was the strong Liberal embrace of the belief in eugenics. Again, as with planets traveling in circles, this idea seemed to be so obvious as to be beyond debate. After all, humans had been deliberately breeding both plants and animals for thousands of years so as to promote desirable traits and to 'improve' those species. Surely, then, it could only be a positive practice to apply those same selective breeding techniques to us humans, both within races and between races. In fact, at the time eugenics appeared to be both the most positive and progressive of ideas, not to mention the cutting edge of Science.

Anyway, as previously mentioned, and contrary to the actual empirical evidence, as the 19th Century was drawing to a close Liberalism, even though in retrospect it was just as much a political ideology as was Marxism and the rest, slowly came to be identified with Creativity itself, as in with writers and artists and the like. And the same process was also happening with Science itself. As with the 18th Century, Conservatives were being presented as not just political rivals, but as people who were blindly and stupidly holding on to religion and superstition, who were anti-Science, indeed who were against all of the economic, technological, and every other sort of Progress which the 19th Century had undeniably produced.

And a really bizarre example of how this New Scientism seemingly aped real science, but instead created a strange realm of fake science, is the story of Sigmund Freud and his single handed creation of Psychoanalysis.

Now Freud's specific political beliefs are mostly unknown. But his basic mental outlook, his foundational assumptions, were pretty much a direct copy of those 18th Century Age of Enlightenment

ones. A fierce and assertive Atheism and philosophical Materialism. A belief in an innate Individualism and innate Selfishness. Most importantly, a fixation on sexual thoughts and on a default condition of promiscuity.

Further, the so-called science of psychiatry which he created was not only simplistic and naive, but it broke basically every rule of real science and of the scientific method. First and foremost, the only 'evidence' which was considered were case studies conducted by Freud himself. (And he has been accused of faking and/or massaging the results of those.) Second, there was no practical way to actually test the hypotheses of id, superego, Oedipus Complex, etc. Third, as with a religious or political cult, there was no allowance for debate or for the presentation of alternative evidence or theory. And finally it is pretty obvious in retrospect that Freud's insights were pretty much a function of the particular neuroses of a particular time and a particular place and a particular socioeconomic group: Namely the Upper Middle Class German/Jewish bourgeoisie of late 19th Century Vienna.

Nonetheless somehow Freudian thought not only became accepted as 'scientific', but by the middle of the 20th Century it had become the dominant, and totally socially accepted, way to view the workings of the human mind.

In fact, in many ways the story is just as strange and just as bizarre as the story that I've been pounding into your heads about Jeremy Bentham and his Utilitarianism.

Which of course was also in effect a direct function of the earlier Scientism.

But back to the causes of the resurgence of the belief in Age of Enlightenment ideas as the 20th Century dawned. Because a good argument can also be made that the 19th Century turned out to be a victim of its own success.

And hopefully I can explain this through the use of an analogy. Because most of us, at least at some point of our lives, have successfully gone on a diet. And most of us have also gone through periods where we've worked out and gotten ourselves in shape. But most of us have also experienced what happens when we've gone off the discipline of the diet or we've stopped working out. For the human condition appears to be that it's a lot easier, indeed it's usually a lot more 'fun', when we aren't forcing ourselves to be disciplined. Unfortunately, however, that's also when we get fat and out of shape.

And as you'll recall from my history of the 18th Century, the beginning of the 1700's was essentially the first time in the history of humanity that a substantial middle class had been created. But instead of using all of their new leisure time in the study of art or mathematics, most people partied

at the new resorts such as Bath. And in fact the mid 18th Century was when most of what had always been considered the ‘higher’ pursuits, from poetry to philosophy, now became largely trivialized. What’s more, this was also the time when the idea of having sex outside of the holy bonds of matrimony first entered the mainstream.

Further, as I keep telling you, the 19th Century can be seen as a horrified reaction to that 18th Century. And the Romantic movement, with its pursuit of Truth and Beauty and all, not to mention those Victorian sensibilities, can be seen as analogous a renewed commitment to lose weight, to get in shape, to focus on self-improvement in order to realize social improvement.

All of which certainly contributed to the reality that the 19th Century is the time when economists agree that technological change and economic growth started their almost logarithmic growth, which continues on to this day. So that if the relatively minor expansion in wealth and leisure in the early 18th Century was to a great extent responsible for the mental sloppiness and moral failings of the latter half, then it makes sense that the discipline of the early and middle part of the 19th Century would be harder and harder to maintain as middle class life kept getting easier and easier.

And whatever one thinks about the sincerity or philosophical depth of Jeremy Bentham or John Stuart Mill, it also seems pretty clear that the foundational assumptions of liberal democracy were tailor made for intellectual, moral, and physical laziness. Wrestling with the questions of the workings of God and the meaning of life? No need for that, since God doesn’t exist and life is for maximizing pleasure. Why go to the trouble of becoming a well informed citizen when *by definition* the opinion and the vote of a drunken fool are worth exactly the same as yours? And struggling to understand math or dressing up to go to some cultural event? Why do that when push pin is the same as poetry?

Anyway, those are three plausible major reasons why previously failed 18th Century belief systems would and could re-assert themselves. And there are no doubt more. Most specifically one can point to all of the new machines, from the typewriter to the elevator to the mechanical harvester to the telephone to the electric light bulb, all of which made life for all economic classes easier and easier. But let’s return now to the main subject of this section, which is an outline of the actual history of the 20th Century.

Now the first decade of the new century certainly seemed to confirm the optimistic predictions at the end of the last one. Usually referred to as the Edwardian Era, after Britain’s new king, to a large

extent the West at least outwardly continued with the propriety and the stability of Victorian times. Like a calm stream before a waterfall, most people didn't have a clue as to what was about to come.

(Which, by the way, is why the whole Titanic story has always been such a powerful metaphor. Because, popular movies to the contrary, lifeboat seats were automatically given to women and children first. John Jacob Astor, the richest man in the world, willingly gave up his seat. Because that's what men did. His wife, the richest woman in the world, gave up her seat so that she could remain with her husband. Because they had been joined together by God.

Because people also still believed that some things were more important than life itself.)

Anyway, metaphors aside, though, as the new century dawned there were a few developments, especially in the arts, which, if anyone was paying attention, would have been considered horribly decadent and depraved just a few years earlier. For instance, both Picasso and Matisse, who had started out as what would today be called conventional painters, were now openly and pointedly producing works which, especially from the vantage point back then, deliberately twisted and distorted all common conceptions of art and beauty. In Paris the Ballet Russes, created by the openly gay impresario Sergei Diaghilev and starring the openly gay dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, was all the rage. Meanwhile, back in Russia itself, the monk Rasputin was busily worming his way into the higher reaches of the St. Petersburg aristocracy.

And of course, as always throughout human history, the early 1900's were filled with all of the usual, and unusual, political problems and political debates.

Still, when considered in its entirety, and especially when compared to what came afterwards, the Edwardian Era is remembered as a time of graciousness and leisure. In fact, if asked in 1913, most intellectuals of the time would have replied that, what with ever loosening borders, ever expanding world trade, and now with weapons so deadly that they would be too dangerous to actually use, war itself had become outdated and passe.

And then came 1914.

Now when you study history you find that most of it is not all that cut and dried. Ideas and movements usually take decades to flower and to then die off. Seemingly dramatic events have all sorts of distant antecedents. And, as I've been pointing out throughout this podcast, whatever group is ever in control, there is usually an almost as large a group which is opposed.

But the year 1914 comes about as close as possible to being a line in the sand, where there actually is an extremely clear cut Before and a clear cut After. And here I do not mean just in military or political terms, but also in cultural ones. Because, as we shall see, in ten short years the straight laced Edwardian mentality would morph into the anything goes mentality of the 1920's. In fact, there were probably far larger changes in social outlook, sexual mores, you name it, between, say, 1910, and the 1920's than there were between the 50's and the 60's, or for that matter at any other time during the 20th Century.

As I've already said, though, nobody saw it coming. And what is really weird about that, though, is that for the longest time the common explanation when one studied it in high school was that World War I had also been so inevitable that everyone should have seen it coming.

Well, what definitely can be said about this particular war is that, more than most wars, it did certainly seem to hinge upon a lot of flukes and a lot of 'what ifs'. The precipitating cause, the plot to assassinate Archduke Ferdinand, was a comedy of errors. Which of course turned into a tragedy of errors. Further, most historians agree that the two principal monarchs who more or less backed everyone else into the war, Kaiser Wilhelm II and Czar Nicholas II, both possessed, given the situation, just about the worst personality attributes possible. The Kaiser was bullheaded and none too bright. The Czar was sincere, but none too bright, either. (Interestingly, the Czar's wife Alexandra, Kaiser Wilhelm, and King George V, all being grandchildren of Queen Victoria, were also all first cousins to each other. Even stranger, King George and Czar Nicholas were dead ringers for each other.)

Anyway, once the war started the implicit Internationalism which had seemed to hold Edwardian life together all of a sudden fell apart. The world's scientists, with all of their advanced degrees, immediately became rabid nationalists, with British chemists and German physicists feverishly trying to outdo each other in coming up with new weapons, poison gases, etc. More prosaically, young men everywhere, on both sides, rushed to enlist in what they saw as their big chance at adventure and glory. After all, as with the American Civil War fifty years earlier, everyone assumed that this one would only last a few weeks. And, hey, all those decades of peace had made it impossible for young men to even attempt to live out their fantasies of manly action.

In another major 'what if', it turned out that the war was almost over in a few weeks. By following its Schlieffen Plan, within a month the German Army was basically at the outskirts of Paris. And if it had continued going forward the war would have been basically over, France would have probably had to give over a few of its colonies, and Edwardian life would have picked up where it had

left off. Instead a previously retired French general, one Joseph Gallieni, heroically rallied his troops, even going to the extent of commandeering all of Paris' taxicabs so as to get men up to the front. And at the ensuing Battle of the Marne Germany was defeated. Which then led to four years of horrible, muddy, pointless trench warfare, millions upon millions of battlefield deaths, and the collapse of all of that carefully constructed 19th Century civilization.

So much for the fruits of heroism.

Now what does any of this have to do with my particular thesis? At first glance, not much. And as such it's a good reminder that, even in the absence of ideology and isms and all that, dumb people are going to do dumb things. And that, even in the best of all possible paradises, events can have a way of ricocheting out of control.

But I don't think that historians would argue with the idea that underlying all of the horrors of World War I was Nationalism pure and simple. This is what made all of those millions of young men almost jump at the chance to enlist. This is what made those British chemists work so hard to figure out ways to kill the German chemists who had been their friends and colleagues just a couple of years earlier.

Now I agree that at first glance Liberalism and Nationalism would seem to be going in opposite directions. And that would certainly be true of Jeremy Bentham's original Utilitarianism. After all, this didn't even recognize the bonds of a nuclear or extended family, let alone those of a tribe or a nation state.

Of course, also remember that one of the major tweaks which John Stuart Mill made when he developed his theory of liberal democracy was that personal bonds and cultural bonds and tribal bonds do matter. And this is how, by the end of the 19th Century, Liberalism now saw empires as intrinsically bad, but saw splitting up empires so as to create ethnically homogeneous nation states as intrinsically good.

Now also remember that according to John Stuart Mill this only applied to white people. He had no problem at all with Britain lording it over brown and black people. He even had no problem with Britain lording it over India and China, countries which had had rich, sophisticated cultures long before England was even literate. In fact, his entire working career was spent being an agent for imperialism with the East India Company.

And according to Liberal thought it was bad enough if you had an empire where white people ruled other white people. And what made the Ottoman Empire especially evil in European eyes was

that—horror of horrors—Christians were being ruled by Muslims. (Never to mind that, for all of its faults, the Ottoman Empire did very effectively practice religious tolerance.)

Now the situation here is complicated. Because it is also true that the Ottoman Empire had been on a very long and steady decline. Although that story is properly for someone else's podcast.

What it all means for the present story, though, is that, as the 19th Century was turning into the 20th, and egged on by Western liberals and their belief in the innate goodness of Nationalism, all sorts of new hitherto non-existent countries now started existing. Which of course led to all of them fighting each other so as to regain imaginary boundaries from some mythical kingdom from five hundred years earlier.

And in the midst of all of these Balkan wars was Serbia.

And Gavrilo Princip, the 19 year old terrorist who shot Archduke Ferdinand and precipitated World War I, was not a lone gunman. No, he and a whole host of other assassins had been trained by a shadowy organization called The Black Hand. Who were not only ultra-nationalist Serbs, but who also to a large extent ran the country.

Now if this assassination had happened in, say, 1874, the reaction in Europe would have been swift and sure. All countries would have massed together against the pipsqueak Serbia, would have marched in and overthrown the government, and would have then installed some compliant monarch as head of state.

Problem solved.

But in 1914 the situation was different. Now both Britain and France prided themselves on their liberalism and their belief in so-called 'human rights'. Because now Serbia not only had an innate right to exist, but it also had an innate right to self determination. And so, given the politics of the day, the crisis devolved into which countries had formed previous alliances with which other countries. And, far worse, everything now hinged upon the particular personalities of a certain Kaiser and a certain Czar.

Okay. I don't want to take this too far. Because, first, as I said, there were so many strange circumstances surrounding World War I that it could well have happened absent any ideology or ism. Further, I can't rerun history to prove that I am right. Finally, since I'm such a history geek myself, if I got really hard core on all of this history the podcast would be hundreds of episodes long.

So I'll leave it at that.

But if it is difficult to definitively prove that the thinking behind Liberal Democracy was the cause of the First World War, I think that I can make a pretty strong case that this mentality was what was behind all of the failures of the rest of the 20th Century.

Starting with the end of the First World War.

Which we'll be getting to next episode.

Because once again it has come time for this episode to end.

Nonetheless once again I would like to thank you for so far having listened.