

EPISODE 52

BETWEEN THE WARS

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is Episode number 52 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Now last episode we once again took up the study of history. And the purpose in that was to show how the re-emergence of 18th Century thinking in the beginning of the 20th Century led us into the postmodern world that we find ourselves in today.

And the reason that I had stopped with the history lessons way back in Episode 32, and then spent all of that time on science, is because I was hoping that at this point, now that we have somewhat of a grounding in real science and in what our real human nature is, it will be clearer to you how the last hundred years or so have alienated us more and more from what that real human nature is.

(And, of course, if it is not clear to you, I will, as usual, continue to be pointing it out.)

Anyway, when we left off last time we were in the middle of World War I. And now we're going to take up that narrative once again. Except that for the next few episodes I'm going to kind of split everything in half. That is to say, first I'm going to cover the period from approximately 1915-1960 from what we could call a political historian point of view. And then I'm going to cover it all from the cultural historian point of view. Sort of.

Anyway, so now let's get back in the trenches—both figuratively and literally—and once again take up our ever so stately march through history.

Now as you'll recall from the last episode, I made at least a half-hearted attempt to argue that, absent the thinking behind Liberalism, and Liberal Democracy in particular, World War I might never have happened. But, especially since we can't rerun history to find out whether I am right or not, I'm not really going to push that point.

Nor am I going to dwell on all of the particular ins and outs and ups and downs of the First World War. Except maybe to point out that in the Spring of 1918 Germany put every last bit of its resources into one final push on the Western Front. That the push came this close to succeeding. And

that, if it had, the ensuing eighty years wouldn't have become known as the American Century, but rather as the German one.

But that instead it failed. And as a result this caused both the exhausted German army and the exhausted German economy to collapse. And that what with chaos in the streets and desertions in the ranks, by November the German government had no choice but to sue for peace.

Because, as virtually all historians agree, what with America's late entry into the war, and what with our country's both fresh and almost inexhaustible quantities of both men and supplies, that this was the only way that the whole horribly tragic event could end.

So, no, we're not going to discuss the war per se. Rather we're going to discuss what happened immediately after the war. The official peace, as it were.

Now hopefully you'll remember from back in Episode 31 that the 19th Century also started out with a pretty intense, and even longer, armed conflict. Namely, what are referred to as the Napoleonic Wars. And that in 1814, when it finally appeared that Napoleon had been decisively defeated, all of the leaders of Europe, both great and small, from Britain in the West to Russia in the East, met together in Austria for the Congress of Vienna.

I also pointed out back then that the standard liberal historian depiction of that Congress of Vienna is that all in all it was a regressive reactionary Conservative reaction which ended up setting the cause of Progress and Freedom, etc., back a hundred years. But you might also recall that I more or less posed the rhetorical question of: What would you have done after all of the terror both of the French Revolution and of Napoleon? Continue to believe in the unproven theories of Liberalism and/or some other new Ism? Or would you have reverted to the tried and the true, to the system which, whatever its flaws and whatever your personal beliefs, had not only more or less worked for centuries, but was also what the vast majority of citizens both were used to and were comfortable with?

And the plain fact is that the stability which the Congress of Vienna both sought to attain, and also to a large extent did attain, resulted in a 19th Century which was a more peaceful period of time than the West had experienced since at least the 13th Century.

So now let's go forward again to the year 1919 and that Paris Peace Conference—which is also known as the Versailles Peace Conference—which, a hundred and five years after Vienna, once again to a large extent determined the course of history for the rest of the upcoming century.

Only this time the results weren't nearly so stable or peaceful.

Now historians generally agree that one of the principal blunders at Versailles was not only to blame Germany for the entire war, when in reality there was plenty of blame to go around for all sides, but to then also demand huge monetary reparations from Germany. And I have no argument with that argument. Especially since it reinforces the idea that, as opposed to the Congress of Vienna, the future stability of Europe wasn't very high on the agenda of the victorious powers.

But before I get to the part of the Versailles Peace Conference which I find most important, let's do a quick thought experiment about what might have resulted in 1919 if the participants had continued with the same approach that had been used in Vienna a century earlier.

First, some more intelligent and more compliant member of the Kaiser's royal family would have been found. And some kind of quasi-constitutional monarchy would have been established in Germany. Next a much stronger expeditionary force would have been sent to Russia to aid the Whites, which was the name given to the forces engaged in that brutal civil war with the Bolsheviks.

Most importantly, there would have been no automatic dismembering of empires. After all, as for Austria/Hungary, except for the fact that it had just lost a war, otherwise it had had a long history of stability. Moreover, it had already successfully integrated a pretty broad range of ethnic groups. And as for the Ottoman Empire, even though in many ways it was indeed the 'sick man of Europe', it was also, due to its long history and its well established religious tolerance, still far better than any obvious alternative.

And if the Versailles Peace Conference had proceeded along the lines of the Congress of Vienna, then one could, with some confidence, have then predicted the following: First, Adolf Hitler and other right wing Germans would not have been so infuriated over a government which they perceived to have been forced upon them from without and therefore illegitimate that the Nazi Party would have never formed. Next, not only Bolshevism but also worldwide Communism in general would have been nipped in the bud. Third—and this fact is hardly ever mentioned in our histories—but every single new country in Eastern Europe which was created at Versailles, from Estonia down through Poland down through Yugoslavia, was an absolute failure in representative government. And what's more, by 1939 most of them had dictators who were far to the right of Hitler. So none of that would have happened. Finally, it is highly probable that none of the 20th Century conflicts in the Middle East, which historians agree were mostly a result of the West arbitrarily drawing borders to its liking, would have occurred.

In short, there would have likely followed another century of peace and prosperity.

And here's the important point about this. For although they were the cause of the unjustified vengeance against Germany, if left to themselves Britain and France probably would have been okay with not dismembering empires. After all, they had empires of their own which they didn't want touched. No, the one man responsible both for the disaster of creating countries out of nothing and for then imposing his particular political vision upon all of the losers was an American. Our President Woodrow Wilson.

Because Wilson was the first prominent American to also be a loyal disciple to the thoughts and ideas of John Stuart Mill.

Although before I get into that, let me first give you a quick review of 19th Century American 'democracy'.

For, as I pointed out way back in the beginning, the system which Americans called 'democracy' had actually started out as an intentional copy of an idealized version of the early Roman Republic, with well defined restriction on how to choose representatives. What's more, even the idea of a secret ballot was never considered. Instead people were expected to declare their vote in front of their fellow neighbors and townsmen. And, unfortunately, from the very beginning the whole process broke down into angry party politics and sleazy accusations.

Nonetheless, most historians agree that the first five Presidents were indeed among the cream of the crop.

In 1828, however, when voting suddenly became widespread, the person chosen was Andrew Jackson, an uneducated frontier yahoo who had a penchant for killing Indians and who also was entirely ignorant as to how finance or government worked.

And it kind of went downhill from there, with the rest of the century producing a slew of, at best, mediocrities. The notable exception was Abraham Lincoln, and he was only elected (with 40% of the vote) due to a triple splitting of the Democratic Party. And although we revere him today, at the time he was widely ridiculed as an ugly, ignorant ape from the frontier.

Further, as Americans we like to think that our system has always been admired by others. But the reality is that very many European observers found our politics tacky and corrupt, and found American culture to be, although energetic and creative, also uncouth and lacking in manners.

In particular, by the end of the 19th Century the entire system had gotten so bad that entire industries were quickly being consolidated into trusts and monopolies, and entire cities were being run by mafia-like organizations such as Tammany Hall in New York.

Enter, starting in the 1890's, the Progressives.

Now it is important to know that there was nothing necessarily ideological about the original Progressive movement. Rather it was a pragmatic Populist attempt to clean up both the economic and the political spheres. Which is why even a stalwart Republican such as Theodore Roosevelt would become a Progressive hero.

Which brings us back to Woodrow Wilson. Because although he, too, is classified as a Progressive, in reality his 'progressive' ideas were much less a function of pragmatism and much more a function of ideology. Or to put it another way, since we've now just come out of the Science section, Theodore Roosevelt type Progressives were implicitly coming from an understanding that, as hypersocial animals we needed a basic sense of fairness and equality in order to maintain our social glue. Whereas Woodrow Wilson Progressives pursued fairness and equality because the theory of Utilitarianism demanded that, in order for it to work each consumption unit—excuse me, person—was required to start out with equal resources, so that the ensuing pursuit of individual selfishness would therefore be 'fair'.

Anyway, Wilson was born in 1856. As an undergraduate at Princeton, in 1876 he started a liberal debating society. In 1886 he received a PhD in Political Science. All of which means that he was forming his liberal political views right at the high point of the influence of John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, and the like. He then became a highly regarded academic, and wrote several widely adopted textbooks. However, he had absolutely no practical experience of governing until 1910, when he was elected governor of New Jersey. Two years later he was nominated for President.

This meant that he had far more claim to being a pointy headed ivory tower intellectual than anyone else who ever became President. What's more, the only reason he won in 1912 (with 40% of the vote) was because William Taft and Theodore Roosevelt were running against each other and had split the Republican vote. Which means that back then Liberalism of any stripe was still rather unpopular with most Americans.

Nonetheless, once he became President the pursuit of Progressive goals because of his ideological beliefs would end up changing the entire dynamics and direction of the Democratic Party.

Wait a minute, you might say. Hasn't the Democratic Party always been associated with Liberalism of some sort?

Well, yes and no.

You see, as I also mentioned back in the beginning, in many ways the 19th Century Republican and Democratic Parties were polar opposites of what they are today. For instance, the Republican Party was a direct outgrowth of anti-slavery forces. Further, not only did it believe that the government had a duty to help out the poor and disadvantaged, but Republicans were also responsible for all sorts of government interventions which today we associate with the term ‘Industrial Policy’. For instance, besides freeing the slaves, Republicans were the ones behind the Homestead Act, which gave away free land and also established state universities. They subsidized the first transcontinental railroad. They instituted high tariffs, specifically so as to protect the American commonwealth in general.

On the other hand, Democrats were descended from the coalition which first elected Andrew Jackson, and they were basically composed of groups of ‘get the government off my back’ types. These included segregationist Southerners, who detested Republicans over the fact that they were the ones who had pushed for the Civil War in the first place. There were also all the farmers, small town residents, and workingmen who were alienated from all of the new booming industrial cities, and of the wealth that these cities were generating. Finally, in those booming cities were all of the recently arrived immigrants, who had little interest in democracy or forms of government, and who were thus easily manipulated by political bosses and the organizations which they ran.

The main overriding point here, though, is that neither party had anything to do—one way or another—with Age of Enlightenment ideas.

So, yes, the election of Woodrow Wilson was a big deal as regards political realignment. And it was even a bigger deal when one considers the effects that Wilson had on the conduct and the results of the First World War.

Because even though he won re-election in 1916 with the slogan ‘He kept us out of war’ (and he only won because he carried California by 3,000 votes), one month after his inauguration he asked Congress to declare war. But even though Theodore Roosevelt had long been agitating to enter the war (because, let’s face it, he loved wars), Wilson’s motivation was entirely different. For, once again, he was primarily interested for ideological reasons. To him a successful conclusion to the war would give him a golden opportunity to remake the world as a paradise of Liberal Democracy.

To that end, on January 8, 1918, he delivered a speech outlining his soon to be famous Fourteen Points. Now some of these were innocuous yearnings for peace and brotherhood. And one of them proposed creating a League of Nations. But they also called for the breakup of both the Austro-

Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire, and for the creation of smaller countries whose borders would be a direct function of self-determination.

Self-determination. The idea, having started as an outgrowth of John Stuart Mill's tweaking of Utilitarianism, had now become, for true believers, some sort of magical, self evident cure all. Somehow masses of people who had never known or practiced any kind of representative government would not only become automatically drawn to Liberal Democracy, but would also become immediately adept at it. Nor does it ever seem to have occurred to Wilson that his supposed 'self-determination' in reality not only involved Wilson and others drawing the boundaries of these new countries, but then also having Wilson impose the value system derived from the ideology of Liberal Democracy onto these alien populations.

So, when the war was finally over, Wilson would spend most of the next six months over there in Paris himself, with only personal and ideological allies making up the American delegation. But besides his main objective of pushing for his League of Nations, which he was convinced would bring lasting peace, his secondary objective was to press for that self-determination. Although in the end he conceded to Britain and France that Germany's pre-war colonies and the new imaginary countries sliced out of the Ottoman Empire could become temporary mandates.

Britain and France said 'thank you', and then proceeded to immediately divide all of those bits and pieces between themselves. And of course never let go. Which, as I've already stated, then set the stage for a hundred years of Middle Eastern wars and dictators.

Meanwhile, Wilson went back home, and within a few weeks suffered a massive stroke which not only immobilized him but also pretty much destroyed his mental capacities. The result of this was that for the next year and a half his wife, who he had just recently married, then secretly ran the government. And his now senile inability to make even perfectly reasonable compromises with anyone then doomed his precious League of Nations.

But enough about Woodrow Wilson and the mistakes at Versailles. It's time now to return to our history of the 20th Century.

In the United States the year immediately following the war included a brief period of irrational fright over the supposed menace of Communism. It also included a brief period of economic collapse, which wasn't surprising considering all of the soldiers returning from the war, and also considering how much, what with agricultural and industrial exports, the American economy had boomed during its

years of neutrality. But in 1920, 1924, and 1928 the Wilsonian vision was thoroughly rejected with landslide victories for the Republican Party. And throughout the 1920's the American economy greatly expanded.

In Europe, however, the situation wasn't quite so rosy. And the greatest cause of this in most countries was what was at the time perceived of as a life and death struggle between the 'left' and the 'right'. And how bad was it? In the early 1920's the European public's fear of a leftist takeover was far greater than its fear of any right wing coup.

Now the left was generally made up of groups identifying with various forms of Socialism, from believers in a democratically elected Socialism all the way to outright Communists. And although today we make clear differences between what we say was the benign idealism of the first groups and the evil totalitarianism of the latter, and even though there are indeed real and critical differences, for the purposes of this discussion I would like to draw attention to the similarities.

And in doing this I am not suggesting that all forms of Socialism are necessarily evil or wrong. After all, even here in the U.S. we have long had government run 'socialist' organizations such as the military and public education. Indeed in Europe back then there were very popular Christian Socialist parties who drew their inspiration from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. But just as the Progressivism of Teddy Roosevelt sprang from different motivations than did the Progressivism of Woodrow Wilson, so, too, the critical issue here is determining the foundational assumptions behind the various Socialist movements of the early 20th Century.

And here, as I've noted earlier, it turns out that the principal difference between Marxism and the other left wing visions was whether or not violence was a necessary precursor to the implementation of the various isms. Otherwise they were all more or less drawn from the foundational assumptions of that Age of Enlightenment, which, again, mainstream 19th Century thought had thoroughly repudiated. In other words, as with Liberal Democracy, these isms were all essentially atheistic and all denied any larger meaning or higher purpose to human life. Thus, although Liberal Democracy primarily saw humans as consumption units, and Marxism primarily saw humans as production units, both in the end saw humanity mostly in purely economic terms. Finally, all of these isms shared the Enlightenment belief that the default condition of humanity was individualism. Therefore, as with Hobbes, the state would be the only institution with any real authority. This meant that traditional social groups that had traditionally mediated between an individual and the state, such

as social clubs or interest groups, were now trivialized. And as for religious beliefs and organizations, well that was just so much useless superstition at best.

So hold that thought for a moment.

Because when we look at the motivations behind the various right wing parties which then arose, especially now that we know that humans are hypersocial animals in desperate need of social glue and social norms so as to give them both a sense of identity and a sense of belonging, we can see that what is commonly labeled as ‘nationalism’ or ‘populism’ is in reality an undefined longing to return to all of those social and cultural bonds which those left wing visions were so assiduously trying to destroy.

Now were those right wing parties actually conscious that they were trying to reconstruct and reconnect with our hypersocial needs? No, probably not. And definitely not any more than the left wing parties were aware that their ideologies were destroying social glue and social norms.

Nor can we let the fact that some of these nationalist and populist yearnings ended up with the ugliness of the Fascists and the Nazis lead us to conclude that social and cultural bonds are therefore bad in themselves. After all, the fact that history is replete with examples of fanatical religious sects doesn’t mean that prayer and meditation, or leading a righteous life, are bad things to do.

Anyway, over in Europe, save for Britain and a few other places, the gulf between left and right quickly grew so wide, and the dispute got so intense, that pretty soon there was no middle any more. There was just an extreme right and an extreme left. And everyone had to then choose a side.

Italy, Spain, and Germany are all obvious examples of this almost Hegelian dialectic. But, since we’ve all been taught that in these instances the left were the obvious good guys and the right were the obvious bad guys, let’s instead start off with how the dynamic expressed itself in the lesser known history of Hungary.

Now before World War I the Kingdom of Hungary was a co-equal monarchy with that of Austria. And the country of Hungary was far larger than it is today. What’s more, even at the end of the war Hungary had an army of 1.4 million men. But right at the end of the war there was a civilian revolution of sorts, and a government of Social Democrats took over. And these men then took Woodrow Wilson’s words to heart, and as good pacifists proceeded to disband their entire army. Which led the other countries sliced from the previous empire—Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia—to immediately attack from three sides, and to then appropriate for themselves 71% of Hungary’s

previous territory. Meanwhile, in March 1919, as had happened in Russia, the ineffectiveness of the Social Democrats led to a violent takeover by the Communists.

Unlike in Russia, however, in Hungary the rightist counter-revolution succeeded. And for the next two decades the right not only dominated politics, but became ever more and more Fascist and Nationalist.

So that, yes, by the end of the 1930's Italy, Spain, and Germany—among others—had all ended up with extreme right wing governments. Which I totally agree turned out to be, to put it lightly, really negative affairs. But there are two things that you need to keep in mind about all of it. The first is that, especially before the start of the Second World War these governments had been by and large extremely popular with their citizens. The second point is that a large reason for the shift to the extreme right is because these right wing movements were reactionary precisely because they were *reacting* to left wing movements which the masses had found to be even more disturbing.

Because it wasn't just that the leftists were ineffective, or that they downplayed local customs and traditions in favor of some vague internationalist vision. For they, too, were capable of the worst kind of terror and lawlessness.

For instance, we think that because the left wing in Spain was called the Republicans, and because Germany and Italy sent support to General Franco, that there was a clear cut good side and a clear cut bad one. But the truth is that the left was just as capable of violence brought on by their dogma, as evidenced (to give just one example) by their burning down of innumerable churches and their murdering of innumerable priests.

And the brown shirts of the Nazis arose as a reaction to the violence instigated by the German Communists, who, at least in the mid 1920's, were far more numerous. And the reason why the Nazis captured the largest vote in the election of 1932 was because of, you guessed it, the ineffectiveness of the Weimar Republic.

Again, though, none of this is meant to justify the actions and direction of Hitler, Mussolini, or Franco. Rather it is to point out that none of these men or movements would have probably happened if there hadn't been secular socialists and dogmatic Marxists who had been allowed in, as it were, due to the decisions made at the end of World War I.

And in retrospect, when one looks at the various monarchies which had existed before World War I, their so-called authoritarianism looks pretty low key compared to what happened afterwards.

Now in making these points I am not ignoring the fact that, especially in Germany, the Great Depression was a huge factor in all that happened politically. But, first, the Great Depression was also the cause of France briefly having an extreme left wing government supported by the Communists in the late 1930's. Second, the world's various economies had suffered all kinds of crashes in the hundred years prior to 1929. Yet none of them involved radical changes in government. Finally, in Hungary and Italy, among other places, the right came to power in the early 1920's, when economies were relatively strong. So it should be clear that the strong popular longings to keep or to restore deeply held cultural or religious traditions in the end were far more important than what was happening in the economy.

Okay, so now let's quickly look at what was happening in America in the 1930's. Although, once again, I don't want to dwell on the nuts and bolts on what caused our Great Depression, or on the various economic ideas and economic fixes which were used to address it. After all, and contrary to the views of many Republicans at the time, FDR was neither particularly leftist nor particularly ideological. Like his fifth cousin Teddy Roosevelt, his motivations were primarily pragmatic.

However, many of his advisers were indeed true believers in the ideology of Liberal Democracy. Even more important for our purposes, they were believers in technocracy, the idea, descended from Scientism, that 'experts in the field' were better in directing society than people who were merely wise, or those who only possessed abundant common sense.

Now if you are designing or building, say, a suspension bridge, you certainly want someone who is an expert in that field. But human behavior had not gotten any simpler than it was in the 18th Century; if anything, it was now more complicated. Nor had the understanding of human behavior gotten all that much better. Witness, for instance, the pure baloney that was Freudian psychology.

And I agree that the Great Depression was without question a great crisis calling for great solutions. But although historians generally agree that it was the outbreak of World War II which really put an end to it, and not technocratic interventions and fixes, nonetheless the result of all this was that a new class of academic technocrats now became part and parcel of our entire system of government. And the 'professional expert' who—whether he was a Freudian psychiatrist or a Keynesian or a New Deal sociologist—was working off of those false Age of Enlightenment foundational assumptions, now became the accepted authority on life itself.

Anyway, as often happens with this, there is so much more that I could say. But we are more or less up to 1939 now, and we're also running up against that dreaded forty minute time limit. So regrettfully I'll have to leave it at that.

But I would once again like to take the opportunity once again to thank you once again for so far having listened.