

EPISODE 53

FROM WE TO ME

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is Episode number 53 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Now last episode we ended up in the year 1939. And if this were a normal history we would now talk about World War II, maybe the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences, certainly the Cold War, and most definitely the post war economies, the rise of suburbia, cool jazz, rock and roll, and yada, yada, yada. But as I've already pointed out, we all pretty much already know that story. Nor do I want to recreate another version of the song, 'We Didn't Start The Fire'. Instead I'd rather start off by taking this in a slightly different direction.

Because, since we're getting more and more into the realm of what is regarded as recent history, this means that we're also getting to a time when more and more of us will have had personal memories and personal experiences of what to others only counts as 'history'.

Which is interesting. Because there does seem to be a strong qualitative difference between the history that we have experienced second- or third-hand—through talking to older people or through reading—and that which we have experienced first hand. Not that my being nine years old during the Suez Crisis of 1956 relates in any real way to the actual history of that crisis. But there is that huge qualitative difference of first hand experience nonetheless.

And that difference becomes even more important when we take into account the considerable amount of rewritten history that seems to be part and parcel of our postmodern world. Which we'll be getting to soon enough. Right now, though, I'd like to share with you a little exercise which I engage in from time to time so as to both remind myself just how long I've lived, and to also attempt to objectively place my own little existence into its unique tiny slot within the vast expanse of all of history.

What I do is to take the present time and my present age—at this moment the year 2020 and 72—and then take the year I was born—in my case 1947—and count backwards the same number of

years. So 1947 minus 72 equals 1875. Which means that at present I have been on this Earth for the same amount of time as someone who had been born in 1875 would have been in 1947.

And what does this mental exercise accomplish?

Well, for me the result is usually somewhere between surprising and shocking. After all, even though I have studied a lot of history, still 1875 seems to be at best long, long ago and far, far away. And all that I really have to go by in my understanding of 1875 are stories and historical analyses that I have read, and black and white photographs that I have looked at. I fully understand, of course, that the people back then were also humans just like me. And that they also had hopes and dreams and successes and failures. And that of course they also went through the long cycle of life, from birth to death. But they also appear to me as, at best, characters in some historical pageant. Their world both appears to have been, and actually was, totally different from mine. And I'm not sure that they and I could even really begin to understand one another. In short, my understanding of 1875 is in the end totally a function of other people's stories about it. And to me 1875 is some imaginary fantasy world perpetually relegated to unreality.

Whereas it is the easiest thing in the world for me to relate to 1947. (Okay. My memories actually start kicking in around 1951.) For instance, I can quite vividly remember walking down the street to the corner store at the age of seven to buy a few pennies worth of candy, while cars from the 40's rolled by. I can remember Queen Elizabeth's coronation and Dwight Eisenhower's first inauguration each playing on that tiny television screen. And I can kind of remember news stories in 1956 about some Suez Crisis. But those memories also exist alongside memories of chores I had to do, books I was reading, dumb television shows I was watching. Yes, I was living through history, but history was only a small part of the totality that I was living through.

And so it goes throughout the trajectory of my life. Which is a long, continuous memory of a three dimensional technicolor world that is fully formed, and that is totally different from the two dimensional black and white world which I know existed before I was born, but which will always remain a narrative which is somehow cut off from the rest of me.

And I agree that it is beyond trite to point out that each one of us is our own little story. Or in this case historical drama. And I know that your particular starting point, your no doubt just as interesting historical drama, is going to be different from mine. But, whatever your starting point, what I am saying about the qualitative difference between the history we've read and the history we've experienced applies to all of us. After all, even in those truly dramatic historical moments which occur

people always remember where *they* were when President Kennedy was assassinated, where *they* were on 9/11. Because even those seemingly earth shaking events end up just being a subjective subset of our just-walking-down-the-street, just-showing-up-for-work everyday lives.

So what can we conclude from this little exercise? Well, if you're doing it right, then I would hope that it serves to kind of reverse the subjective/objective viewpoint, and you can then better appreciate how, say, 1990 is just as much a moment in objective history as was 1875. Second, although there is a certain truth to the old saying that the only thing that is constant is change, still, no matter how short your particular 'reverse history' is, I think that you will agree that in the past thirty years or so changes in human behavior and human mentality have been both intense and accelerating.

The largest issue, though, and as I mentioned at the beginning of this podcast, one of the reasons why it is so hard for us to truly recognize how bizarre the world of the present has become is that to a large extent we—that subjective, walking-down-the-street we—were born into the middle of it all. And the changes, even though they have indeed accelerated, had started in long before any of us were born.

After all, as I went over in those episodes way back in the beginning, in almost any way that you want to slice it, when you look at the whole parade of human history, the present postmodern world which we are living and breathing in is actually the unreal version.

All of which is a long preamble to this observation: That in the future—assuming, of course, that there is a future—historians will see the wars and depressions, etc., of the middle part of the 20th Century, even with all of their deaths and all of the physical and economic destruction, in the larger sweep of things as more or less distractions from the main event. Much more important to these historians will be the fact that this was the time when humanity, which, despite all of the ruminations and theories of the 18th Century, had still continued to remain primarily communitarian, now all of a sudden did start to become that agglomeration of primarily selfish and atomized individuals that Jeremy Bentham had so devoutly wished it to be.

Now by this stage of the podcast I would hope that I have drummed it into your heads that one of the critical aspects of the human condition, if not *the* critical one, is that, unlike chimps or howler monkeys or wolves or elephants or any other social animal, we are unique in the animal kingdom in that we are conscious, intelligent, hypersocial animals. Which means that, without resorting to any sort of herd instinct, we can comfortably interact with a far, far larger number of fellow humans than would

be suggested by the Dunbar number (which, just to remind you, is a function of our brain's cranial capacity, and which is around 150).

And the question of why we humans should have this hypersocial ability has never really been asked, let alone answered. So it remains sort of a mystery. What is not a mystery, however, is that our hypersocial nature is not automatic to all people at all times. Or, to return to the metaphor of our being in the midst of a Cambrian moment, in an evolutionary sense we are only part way there. So that in the meantime, or until we finally get all the way to 'there', we humans require social norms and the social glue that they create so as to ensure that we don't regress into being purely tribal, and merely social, animals such as chimpanzees or howler monkeys.

And included in the terms social norms and social glue is the full range of those often somewhat undefined, yet widely shared, semi-ritualized behaviors and traditions which usually organically arose over the ages, and which provided a sort of continuing loose tribal identity for those original clans, which had then expanded into common cultures, which had then expanded into distinct nations, which had then expanded into empires.

And in a certain sense it didn't even matter what those behaviors and traditions were. Just so that everyone accepted them and followed them.

Nor did this apply solely to common behaviors such as shaking hands or bowing at the waist. It also applied to social order.

Now you'll recall that one of the biggest complaints during the Age of Enlightenment was this: Why in the world *should* anyone, simply by right of birth, have higher social status or more inherent opportunity than any other person in society?

And as good all-men-are-equal Americans, this one does seem like a no brainer. Moreover, the common sociological explanation for the appearance of class and status as society got more complex—that it is simply a function of our innate selfishness and/or of basic economic forces—certainly does make a lot of common sense.

On the other hand... Remember the equality bias? When a six year old is asked to divide, say, seven treats between two other children, they will give each of them three and then throw the seventh treat away. So that equality, not selfishness, does seem to be the human default position. Also: Why is it that the British, who are just as smart and just as educated as we are, love their royal family so much?

So, without starting an argument with the sociologists and all of their ideas about how kings and so forth came about, let me offer this additional idea. Namely, that since humans learn and understand

best through stories and images, and not from long lists of rules and regulations, then having such a head of state is a way to codify the personification of that social glue.

And when you look at it that way, then an aristocracy is also sort of like those shared behaviors and traditions that define a culture, in that to a large extent it doesn't even matter if said aristocracy is 'worthy', or even if it makes any logical sense. Because—and especially if it exhibits even a rudimentary sense of noblesse oblige—then this upper class acts as sort of a real imaginary family structure for everybody else.

(And if you think that we democratic Americans are beyond such things, then try to explain why we—and every other pop culture in the entire world—spend so much of our time obsessing over our celebrities, their likes and dislikes, their families, etc.)

Anyway, in that roundabout way let's finally return to 1939.

Because, what with the wholesale de-legitimizing of empires, countries, royal families, etc., after World War I, and given our seeming human need for our cultures to have some sort of symbolic family in place so as to give everyone a larger sense of structure, then it is not at all surprising that all of these new manufactured 'democracies', from tiny Estonia up to giant Germany, when given their free choice, would end up rejecting liberal democracy, and opt for so-called strongmen instead. And in saying that I am not in any way implying that any of those strongmen turned out to be positive solutions to the problem of lost social glue.

To make an analogy though: When someone gets cancer, in their desperation they often turn to some quack cure. With tragic results. But after they die we never then conclude that they never had cancer in the first place. Nor do we continue telling others to do whatever it was that had caused the cancer in the first place.

And so, yes, the Nazis, for example, were a terrible, quack solution to the 20th Century problems of both the loss of a collective sense of being and of increasing social isolation and atomization. But the fact of their being the wrong solution doesn't mean that there wasn't a real problem going on.

Now way back in Episode 2 I noted that one way in which to understand the present polarization of society is to imagine everyone in the world as in one of two camps. On the one side are the true believers in liberal democracy, the folks who have drunk the kool aid, the people who are convinced that increasing individualism and/or personal freedom are purely good things. And then on

the other side you have those people who can't quite put their fingers on it, but nonetheless know deep down that something ain't right. Well, now that we know about both our hypersocial nature and the need for social norms and social glue so that we don't regress back out of that hypersocial state into some primitive tribal condition, we now also know what that something that ain't right is.

Although, interestingly, even many true believers in liberal democracy and 'personal freedom' are starting to have second thoughts about all the atomization which has occurred.

But so far the common explanation from these folks has been that, however unfortunate, the reasons behind this breakdown of stable social structure were more or less beyond our control. First there was the increasing urbanization of humanity. After all, tight social controls which serve to both monitor behavior and to create a sense of community in small towns and villages no longer tend to work in large cities. Second, there is no doubt the factor of increasing wealth and personal comfort. Once people have greater physical and economic space, personal preferences become much more dominant.

Third and most important, or so the argument goes, has been the inexorable advance of technology. And this has been going on for well over a century by now. For instance, use of the telephone meant that we no longer had to meet people face to face. The internal combustion engine meant that everyone could now travel to wherever they wanted all by themselves. And more recently the arrival of the internet allowed people to follow their hearts' desires, no matter how weird or violent or perverted, from the privacy of their own PC.

And I agree that the people who make this argument do have a point. But it only goes so far. Because let me remind you that science and technology are two totally different creatures. For science indeed does go where it goes. I mean, who would have thought that certain isotopes of certain elements would be unstable, and would then become radioactive as a result? So that this knowledge just sort of happened. On the other hand, however, it took conscious thought and conscious decision making to technologically use that knowledge and then fashion a thermonuclear device.

And although our justification for making atomic bombs had to do with the fear that somebody else might do it first, when you look at the true history of the past couple of centuries, from the invention of the steamboat through Thomas Edison and on up to Silicon Valley today, the overwhelming reason for technological innovation has not been for the love of science or the love of invention or to make the world a better place. No, it has been the profit motive pure and simple.

And if you want to turn that thought around, then you can also say that the primary intellectual justification for any new technology has not been whether it is good or moral or beneficial. Rather it has been that someone can make a profit from it in the marketplace.

And where does this sort of thinking come from? From seeing people as being nothing more than economic actors. Which derives from Utilitarianism. Which derives from John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. Which in the end is nothing more than some ideological belief.

So that the reality is that we are not helpless victims of technological wonders which operate independently of us. In reality, even though it may well be technologically possible to offer guns which fire at a hundred rounds a second, that doesn't mean that in the name of 'individual freedom' as a society we have to sell them. In reality, even though it may be technologically possible to make extremely hard core pornography available on the internet, that doesn't mean that in the name of 'individual freedom' as a society we have to provide it.

In other words, if people still prized social cohesion, then at worst technological changes would have been minor hurdles to overcome. After all, technology has long ago made it redundant for most of us to exercise strenuously, or for that matter to even walk from one place to another. But that doesn't stop those of us who care about our health from going to gyms, riding exercise bicycles, swimming back and forth in pools, etc.

In conclusion then, yes, the chicken and egg question of whether sociological and technological forces are behind the collapse in social norms and the dissolution of social glue, or whether the root cause is actually ideological, like all chicken and egg questions is not completely cut and dried. But any society's underlying ideology is almost always a much greater component than is usually acknowledged.

So now let's go back to our history lesson, and recap what we learned in the last episode.

When the Titanic went down in 1912, as real a life and death situation as you can get, the moral imperative held, the communal automatically trumped the individual, and it was women and children first. A few years later Woodrow Wilson entered World War I specifically to 'make the world safe for democracy'. And then at Versailles he helped create artificial entities of countries, which were then more or less forced to adopt an artificial ideology called liberal democracy, which, as we now know, was based upon the supremacy of individualism. Twenty years later virtually all of these artificial

attempts had failed and had resulted in dictatorships far worse than the much milder authoritarian regimes that had existed at the beginning of the century.

Which resulted in World War II.

Meanwhile, and to a large extent because of the Great Depression, it had become more and more taken for granted that society should be run not by religious leaders or business leaders or political leaders, but rather by technological experts, whether they be sociologists or psychiatrists or economists. And these so-called social scientists derived their legitimacy from the same Age of Enlightenment foundational assumptions that had produced both Scientism and Utilitarianism back in the 18th Century.

So... How did the post World War II era work out?

Well, for one thing this time the losers, Germany and Japan, had submitted to unconditional surrender, so that they were at the complete mercy of the victors. Further, the economies and infrastructures of three of the victors—Britain, France, and the Soviet Union—were, to put it mildly, not in the best of shape. Which meant that the United States, with all of its legions of newly minted technocratic experts, was now in the driver's seat.

By the way, here are some facts about the end of World War II that you might not be aware of. Over eight million German civilians, mostly women and children, were forcefully expelled from Eastern Europe, resulting in the deaths of an estimated two million or more. As many as two million women were raped, some of them 70 or 80 times, and with an estimated 200,000 raped by American soldiers. The U.S. confiscated all German scientific and technological patents, to the benefit of U.S. corporations, and thousands of German scientists and engineers were taken to the United States and forced to work there. When the Vatican tried to bring in food supplies for German infants, the U.S. State Department forbade it.

And here's something else about the end of World War II. The Soviet Union, which had suffered the most, now also had the world's largest and most powerful army. So that Britain and the U.S. readily agreed that all of those Eastern European countries would have to trade their right wing dictators for Communist ones. And although we in the West grew up utterly believing that it was the Soviet Union that started the Cold War, the reality was quite different. After all, not only was post-war Russia consumed with licking its wounds, but Stalin had always been firmly against exporting his revolution. And when we look at the next forty years or so it was the Americans who were always deploying the new weapons systems, and the Russians who were always desperately trying to catch up.

Speaking of which, most Americans of today are unaware that before World War II the U.S. had never had much of a standing army. For instance, between the wars our total armed forces averaged around 250,000 men. Since World War II, however, the average has always been well over two million. What's more, the formerly appropriately named Department of War now became the Orwellian Department of Defense, implying that we Americans were perpetual victims in world affairs who only acted in self-defense. And meantime, of course, the Military Industrial Complex became one of the largest sectors of our economy.

Anyway, when it came to postwar Europe, what was considered most important now was for West Germany to immediately re-arm so as to help fight the Cold War. So America instituted a German 'democracy' which was largely in name only, and until 1963 that country in reality was mostly ruled by an 87-year-old quasi-dictatorial leader named Konrad Adenauer.

And I haven't mentioned Japan all that much. But—and to simplify matters greatly—in the 20's and 30's it, too, followed a pattern of semi-ineffectual 'democracy', followed by a fear of the rise of Socialist and Communist parties, followed by a right wing reaction to Westernization and the destruction of traditional social norms, followed by World War II.

And in the case of Japan the United States didn't even have other victors to argue with. So we wrote for Japan a constitution to our liking, installed another quote/unquote 'democracy', and made it our primary mission that Japan remain anti-Communist. And for the past seventy-five years Japan has basically been a one party state.

So on the surface at least it would look like America was no longer foisting the particular ideas of liberal democracy onto the rest of the world. Nor immediately after the war did that many Americans themselves, if any, believe in such ideas. I mean, I don't think that any GI who hit the beaches of Normandy was motivated by the hope that in sixty years his great grandchildren could get gay married.

But the technocrats putting the New World Order together? Now they were coming from a different mental construct. As were the mid-century modern architects with their sterile concrete and glass buildings. As were the newly minted social science PhD's who would be teaching the next generations. As were, over the next decade, the buttoned down, three martini lunch Madison Avenue types who were pushing planned obsolescence and having secret affairs on the side.

Because just as there was a huge cultural and sociological chasm between the world of 1910 and the world of 1925, so, too, was the post 1945 mental construct substantively different from the pre-1939 one. And I'm not just talking about our new militaristic mindset.

For instance, it's highly doubtful that even in the depths of the Depression people would have appreciated the brightly colored tacky-tacky suburban developments which sprang up after the war. After all, they still thought in terms of relatives and neighbors and neighborhoods. Giant useless fins on automobiles? I don't think so. Most definitely even the most avant garde thinkers of the Thirties would have been shocked by the publication of Playboy Magazine or the promotion of Marilyn Monroe as mainstream entertainment.

And today the Fifties are supposedly exemplified by the warm television show 'Father Knows Best'. But that show, from its white house on a tree lined street to its easily solved small bore family problems, was itself a nostalgic throwback to the Thirties. And it bore little or no relationship to the Levittowns and the steadily eroding family structures going on within them, which were the real signs of the times. In fact, far more telling was the movie 'Rebel Without A Cause', where James Dean's father is wearing a frilly apron and spouting psychological nonsense while his son is desperately trying to find some meaning to his existence.

But what with Socialism now being identified with Marxism, and traditional values being seen as inherently repressive, and maybe even Fascist, now the Ism of Liberal Democracy was the only game in town. Because even though defending the Motherland, the nation, the group, the communal, had been the only real motivating force which had worked for any of the armies on both sides of the war, somehow America's victory, which (as in World War I) had happened mostly as a result of its geographic isolation from invading armies, was now spun as the triumph of Individualism. After all, thinking in terms of group welfare was something that Godless Communists did. Or sacrificing one's own desires for the supposed good of others? Why, that's exactly the sort of mindlessness that the Nazis preached!

And—speaking of psychological nonsense—even though Liberal Democracy was premised upon both Atheism and the denial of anything 'spiritual', there appeared in 1954, right on schedule, a book entitled 'Motivation and Personality', written by a psychologist named Abraham Maslow. And in it he envisioned a hierarchical pyramid of needs (note: not wants, but needs) that supposedly each individual had.

At the bottom of the pyramid were physical needs, such as food, shelter, clothing. Above that were safety needs, such as financial security and emotional security. Above that was social belonging, which included family and friends. Above that was self esteem, which included the need for status, recognition, and attention, and which then seamlessly merged into the need for self-respect, courage, honor, etc. Finally, once all of these other needs were met, the tippy top of the pyramid would be the state of self-actualization. Or, in other words, a person would now automatically have the desire to be all that they could be. And would then so manifest.

Now in a certain sense we can see all of this as well meaning humanistic psychology. But at the same time it was a breathtaking denial of all of the previously accumulated wisdom of human culture. Because remember that both Buddhism and Stoicism, not to mention Hinduism and the legend of Faust, were all premised on the idea that desires can't really be fulfilled, and that therefore happiness can never be a result of desire. What's more, as we've gone over, virtually every civilization which had ever existed had concluded that true happiness came from self abnegation and from putting the Other first. Finally, I would hope that the Science section proved to you that, as naturally evolved hypersocial animals, humans are almost genetically predetermined not to be primarily individualistic.

But there was something else going on that would make Maslow's heirarchy of needs resonate. Because from the very beginning of our history Americans in general have been a weird amalgam of small 'm' materialism and genuine religiosity. So that although the Deism and outright atheism of the Age of Enlightenment had found willing followers in relatively secular Europe, large 'M' philosophical Materialism had always conflicted with America's belief in the spiritual.

Now, however, with formulations such as Maslow's, it certainly seemed as though that particular circle had indeed been successfully squared. Fulfillment of desires—excuse me, hierarchy of needs—would now inevitably lead to self-actualization. In other words, an endless consumer society would also bring us to spiritual Enlightenment. Faust really could become God-like. The inherent paradox at the center of Americana would be resolved.

And onward we would now all march towards Tomorrowland!

Well, that was the theory anyway.

And when I put it in this way you might wonder how as a society we got so dumb that we would accept such drivel as deep wisdom.

On the other hand, as I've been intimating, it was a long way coming. And we were all born into the middle of it. So next episode I'll spend a little time in highlighting that ever so accelerating descent into the modern.

But that's for next episode. For this episode, once again, I'd like to thank you once again for so far having listened.