

EPISODE 54

FAKE EVERYTHING

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is Episode number 54 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Now right now we're in the middle of trying to explain the 20th Century. And one of my problems in doing this is that we all think that we know what the 20th Century was all about. Another problem is that I don't want to come across as either too obvious or too negative. The largest problem, though, is that what I consider to be the most important issues of the 20th Century were pretty much going on throughout the entire century. And, yes, the arc of the curve tended to get more and more intense as the century progressed. But it was also there more or less at the very beginning.

And to show you what I mean, let's start this episode with the story of Robert Edwin Peary. Because, just as the story of the Titanic is such a great metaphor for the end of the Edwardian Era, so, too, is what I am about to relate an almost perfect metaphor for the strange change in mentality between the 19th Century and the 20th.

But first a little background.

Starting in the mid 18th Century the exploration of the world's surface had morphed from being simply an exercise in planting a country's flag into also becoming an exercise in scientific discovery, as exemplified by the voyages of Captain James Cook in the North and South Pacific. And these government expeditions were supplemented by private scientist/adventurers such as Alexander von Humboldt, who then became immensely famous during their lifetimes. After all, their tales of unknown lands and peoples, and their descriptions of new plant and animal species, not to mention the very real dangers which they had faced, were genuinely exciting.

In fact, by the mid 19th Century world explorers were some of that era's greatest heroes and celebrities.

But this celebrity status was based upon the fact that the men involved were also conducting real and useful research of the unknown. Some of the motivation which had been behind their journeys

was no doubt due to their desire for fame and adulation. But the justification for obtaining such fame would always be that they had genuinely contributed to the greater knowledge of humanity.

Further, since such people would become role models not just for their fellow citizens but also—and most importantly—for all the children and young adults who would idolize them, it was considered incumbent upon them that, whatever their original socioeconomic origin, they be gentlemen of the highest integrity and character.

And I mentioned a long time ago that we tend to mock those Southerners back then who were consumed with protecting their ‘honor’. And we tend to regard with pity and disgust those aristocrats who would duel to the death over some imagined slight. And I’ll agree with that old observation that just about any virtue which is carried too far tends to end up as vice. But let me remind you that, as Civilization became more complex, and as those small towns and villages no longer served to both enforce social norms and to shun those individuals who broke them, then a man’s reputation and his sense of honor were indeed the only real means to make sure that the person whom you just met was actually a real gentleman, and not some impostor or scoundrel.

All of which meant that these various world explorers, who were some of the most revered people of the 19th Century, were not only held to the highest moral standard, but also their word was their bond. Yes, they were supposed to take comprehensive notes of all their journeys and discoveries, as any good scientist would. But when it came down to it, if they said that they had found the source of the Nile or had climbed a particular mountain, you took their word for it. After all, that’s what you did with a gentleman.

Now by the middle of the 19th Century the prospect of unknown lands and life-and-death adventure was not limited to just Africa or Central Asia. Because one of the most exciting, and dangerous, areas for young Americans to fantasize about was due north of them in the Canadian Arctic.

After all, and going back to the 16th Century, the search for a Northwest Passage had been one of the primary motivating forces behind the European exploration of the New World. For if there had been such a northern route around the top of North America, it would have then been a neat solution to the problem of there being no easy southern route around the Americas.

But none had ever been found. Instead North America seemed to end in a maze of very large islands. And this maze was made even more confounding by large areas of the Arctic Ocean which never seemed to melt. All of which meant that the early part of the 19th Century was filled with

innumerable expeditions, mostly by the British, and all with the purpose of figuring out what was really going on up there.

This culminated in 1845 with the Franklin Expedition, which, although not well remembered today, ended up becoming one of the biggest and most notorious stories of the Victorian Era. Consisting of two well built ships, equipped with many modern innovations, and with a total crew of 129, this was about as professional and as well financed an expedition as possible. In July of 1845, as they were making their way into the Canadian archipelago, they were seen by a whaling ship. And that was the last that any white person ever saw of them.

Over the next twenty years or so, and egged on by John Franklin's widow and her friends in the British aristocracy, any number of expeditions set out to find what had happened. Which incidentally resulted in more ships and men being lost than from the original expedition. But soon the outlines of a tale which spanned everything from frozen misery to starvation to cannibalism fully occupied the Victorian mind, which was trying to reconcile such a story with the need to see Sir Franklin and his men as unadulterated heroes. Anyway, the result of all of these stories of the cruel and unforgiving Arctic naturally also served to inflame the spirits of young men everywhere seeking manly adventure.

Robert Peary was born in 1856, which would certainly seem to make him a creature of the 19th Century. Having in his youth read every book ever written on the subject of the Far North, in 1885, even though he was currently working in the tropical heat of Nicaragua, he determined that he would make his name by becoming the first person to reach the North Pole. And so in 1886 he made his first trip up north, intending to cross Greenland by dogsled. This he failed to do. But at least it was a start.

Now by this time it was becoming more and more apparent that there was no land mass that stretched up to the North Pole, and that in fact there would be around six hundred miles of (probably) frozen over ocean water to cross. Which meant that any person who reached the pole would not be advancing science or discovering anything new or interesting or beneficial to mankind. Which meant that any fame which would redound to such a person would be totally a function of that person having achieved a totally imaginary and artificial goal.

But this was more than enough for Robert Peary, who probably had enough ambition for ten men. And over the next twenty years, by being meticulous and professional, and by actively learning from the native Eskimos, he became more and more proficient at living in and moving through the North. He was also, by the way, a rather unpleasant fellow.

Twenty years later, in 1906, Peary had accomplished quite a lot, including reaching 86 and a half degrees North. But he was now also fifty years old, which was beyond ancient for someone mushing sled dogs across a frozen Arctic Ocean. After all, it was not like the ice was a smooth surface. Not only were there numerous crevices, not to mention sudden stretches of open water, but, worse, there were any number of pressure ridges, which would throw up perpendicular ice cliffs up to twenty feet high, which then somehow had to be crossed.

So Peary decided that he had maybe one more expedition left within him, and went about soliciting funds for that last attempt. But his methodical system of planning, which required food caches, advance teams, and innumerable dogs (which would be eaten along the way), was also incredibly expensive. And rich industrialists, who were his usual backers, were getting tired of expeditions which never quite made it to the North Pole. So that it took him over a year to secure sufficient funding.

In July, 1908, though, after a personal visit from President Theodore Roosevelt, Peary departed for the North. And after wintering on Ellesmere Island, essentially the northernmost point of land, he set out for the Pole on February 28. By April 1, when he sent back his last support team, he had made it no further than 87 degrees, 45 minutes. And even with all of his meticulous planning and provisioning he was now running out of food, dogs, and time.

So what to do? No publisher would advance money on a book about someone who hadn't reached the Pole. Marketing opportunities, which by the beginning of the 20th Century now consisted of everything from children's toys to ivory handled snowshoes, would evaporate. Worst of all, he had received, and already spent, a \$30,000 loan from the New York Times on the condition that it would be forgiven only if he reached the Pole and then wrote a suitably thrilling exclusive account of it.

Now a 19th Century explorer would have never accepted such a loan, let alone already spent it, under such conditions. A 19th Century explorer would have reluctantly realized that there was no way he could cover the remaining 150 miles and then make it back to base camp alive, and would have stoically accepted his fate. But this was now the 20th Century, so Peary came up with an appropriate 20th Century solution.

He faked it. He lied. He claimed that, even though previously he had only been averaging thirteen miles a day, over the next seven days, since he claimed that there were zero pressure ridges and no zigzagging necessary, he was able to cover well over 300 miles. What's more, since neither he nor

anyone else in the final group were trained in navigation, whatever notes he did take during that time were flaky at best.

Nonetheless, given his friendship with the rich and powerful, given that he was regarded as a genuine explorer, and given that 19th Century attitudes still mostly held, when he got back to civilization and made his claim to have reached the pole, no one even thought to question this claim.

Except for one small problem.

And here the story takes a weird turn. Because there was also another Arctic explorer, this one named Dr. Frederick Cook, who incidentally, as opposed to the jerk Peary, was widely regarded as the nicest guy in the world. And a year earlier Dr. Cook, almost on a whim, had set off across the Arctic Ocean ice with a couple of Eskimo companions in search of the Pole. Assumed dead after a few months, instead he showed up eighteen months later after having gotten lost and then enduring a truly horrendous journey back to Greenland. And now Dr. Cook claimed that he, too, had reached the Pole. Except that he had done it a year earlier than Peary.

Which naturally infuriated Peary. Who ridiculed the distances which Dr. Cook had claimed he had covered, and who demanded that Dr. Cook show some proof that he had really reached the North Pole. Which Dr. Cook couldn't do and never did. Of course, Peary couldn't do it, and never did, either.

All of which, at the time, made the story even bigger and more notorious than the Franklin Expedition had been sixty years earlier. And at first, since he was such a nice and seemingly transparent guy, most people believed Dr. Cook.

But a few years earlier Cook had gained some fame by claiming that he had been the first person to climb Mt. McKinley in Alaska. And now some new intrepid reporting produced some pretty damning evidence that this claim had been a fake. Which pretty much immediately evaporated Dr. Cook's reputation.

Which then left Robert Peary as the last man standing. Although, remember, his 'evidence' for having reached the North Pole was just as unbelievable and non-existent as Cook's. Never to mind. It was the 20th Century now. A winner had to be declared. And so fame and fortune naturally followed. Peary's name went down in the history books. And Cook would live for another thirty years, but all of them in total ignominy.

And the irony in all of this fakeness is that Cook's return from becoming lost on the Arctic Ocean is one of the most amazing survival stories ever. And Peary? Even over a hundred years later,

with all of our advances in fitness, technology, and survival training, no one else has, unmotorized, ever come close to successfully making it to within 150 miles of the North Pole and returning. Which Peary, at the age of 52, undeniably did do.

Okay. Throughout this podcast I've been going on and on about the central importance of ideology, ideology, ideology. But now I'd like to change the focus somewhat and talk instead about honesty. Because we tend to think of honesty as connected to an individual's personal morality (or lack thereof). And it is so connected. However, honesty also performs a critical social function.

You see, as I've gone over, once our species started entering the hypersocial state, and once strict tribal codes and bounds no longer applied, then the only way that the new larger societies could really function is if there was social glue. And the only way that you can get social glue is through high levels of social trust. And the only way that you can get high levels of social trust is through high levels of personal honesty. After all, someone who consistently lies or cheats within the context of a tribe is instantly identified, and presumably ostracized. But larger societies, where there are any number of people who we don't know and/or can't vouch for, can only work if we can trust that the stranger who we meet is not going to lie or cheat.

And the good news in this is that, as gone over in the Science section, any number of experiments have shown that honesty does tend to be humanity's default position. The not so good news, though, is that we all know from personal experience that some people do indeed lie and cheat. So that, again, it appears that we are caught within that Cambrian Moment, when evolution has still not sorted everything out.

Which is why, whatever you think about the ultimate existence of God, the role of Religion becomes so important. Because by investing the need for honesty with the imprimatur of God Itself, religions serve the useful sociological function of reinforcing both our natural human tendency towards honesty and our natural human tendency—which also has an evolutionary function—to feel guilty when we are dishonest.

Although Religion, though certainly helpful, is in the end not really necessary. For instance, the Romans, who in general were not known for being all that spiritually or philosophically deep, succeeded anyway due to their drumming the idea of Civic Virtue into the heads of their upper classes. And we in the West may think of Japan as the semi-mystical land of Zen Buddhism. But in reality that culture was always one of the world's least religious. On the other hand, Japan's extreme standards of

social conformity and personal integrity served to ensure that honesty was paramount and social glue was thus both widespread and particularly sticky.

So a strong functioning society requires social glue, which requires social trust, which requires personal honesty. And when standards of personal honesty degenerate, then the trust degenerates and the glue disintegrates. And none of this has necessarily anything to do with ideology.

Except that in our case it does.

Although to better show you what I mean by that, let's return to my favorite ideological foil, Marxism. Because as I hope that I have instilled in you by now, the vast majority of people in the Soviet Union believed in the truth and inevitability of Marxism just as much as we in the West believe in Liberal Democracy.

And I've never been much of a fan of Karl Marx. All the same, though, I don't for a moment believe that he thought of himself as even remotely evil. I mean, when you do the research, you find that even people like Saddam Hussein or Adolf Hitler never considered that they themselves might be in any way be bad. No, they saw themselves as white knights who had humbly marshaled their strength and resolve so as to perform distasteful—though necessary—acts in the service of The People. And likewise Karl Marx sincerely saw his thoughts and writings as ultimately producing a worldly paradise. Because, yes, violence would regrettably be necessary, since the Capitalist class would never willingly give up its advantages. In the end, though, the Socialist state would wither away, and, what with an endless surplus of material goods, each individual would then be free to fulfill all of their wants.

Which, again, isn't that different of a projected end game than the one hypothesized by Liberal Democracy.

Which, as I've gone over before, isn't all that surprising, given that in terms of foundational assumptions Marxism and Liberal Democracy are both 'children' of the Age of Enlightenment. Both strenuously deny the existence of a God or of anything resembling a soul, and both believe that Religion is the opiate of fools. Which means that both believe that the human condition can be entirely explained by Economic Man. Now it is true that the two systems then took this in a different direction, with Marxism concentrating on the production of goods and Liberal Democracy focusing on the consumption of goods and services. And there is another major difference. Because Marxism hypothesized that since it was solely economic class structure which alienated one person from another,

then therefore if you got rid of said class structure then somehow magically all of humanity would unselfishly think as one.

My point here is that if you are a committed Marxist, then this sort of thinking makes some sort of logical sense. But we now know for a certainty that humans are way more than being just Economic Men. As the Science section made clear, we are a complex mixture of the rational and the primitive. What's more, we are hypersocial, and our natural tendency is not to separate into social classes, but to share and to look after our fellow humans. Although that doesn't mean that we can't degenerate back to the tribal, and even the individualistic, state. Most importantly, the social glue which is necessary to hold complex societies together has virtually nothing to do with Economic Man.

Which means that Marxism wasn't just flawed; it was outright wrong. Which meant that when the Soviet Union tried to sincerely implement Marxism, then it didn't really matter if the latest Five Year Plan had been an economic success. Because—and I don't want to get semi-mystical myself here—but there ended up being a basic dishonesty which permeated everything. And then no matter how much of a true believer an individual citizen was, and no matter how genuinely idealistic an individual citizen was, still in the end daily life ended up feeling dirty and dishonest. Nor can we blame this just on evil masters of propaganda. Instead it was baked into the System.

And if this happened with Marxism, which at least had hypothesized that liberated Economic Men would then automatically think of the welfare of the group, then what do you think the situation would be with Liberal Democracy, which hypothesizes that pure Selfishness—or to use the nicer sounding term 'personal freedom'—will magically create a world wherein everyone is happy?

Okay. For this let's go back to the mid 18th Century and the philosophy of David Hume. Which, as you'll recall, concluded that not only wasn't there any ultimate Truth, but that even partial truths would always be subject to doubt. Now if such a conclusion and such a debate were confined to Philosophy seminars, then there would have been little damage. After all, as you may remember from Chemistry and Physics, most of what we think of in, say, a solid chair is actually empty space. But that doesn't stop us from sitting in chairs.

But as I pointed out back in the relevant episode, most professional philosophers don't consider Hume to have been particularly deep or profound. Rather what we might call his Ultimate Skepticism became popular because it helped to justify the new and corrupt morality of both a cutthroat merchant class and the incredibly wealthy sugar plantation owners who made their money off of the backs of

African slaves. Not to mention the anything goes hedonism of faux intellectuals such as Voltaire. And the much wider group of 18th Century elite who viscerally hated the Authority of both Church and State.

So that those minds which—for whatever reasons—wanted to break free from the social bounds of needing to tell the truth and live the truth, now, through philosophies such as Hume's, had a convenient excuse.

Although, as I've also pointed out any number of times, the chaotic and scary results of the French Revolution put paid to those kinds of attitudes and lifestyles. And the 19th Century mostly returned to much more sober and high minded standards.

John Stuart Mill, however, was a devoted disciple of the 18th Century Jeremy Bentham, who historians agree took at least some of his ideas about social utility from David Hume. The Utilitarianism of both Bentham and Mill, though, by declaring that pleasure was the only real social good, took Hume one or two giant steps further. So that in the Liberal Democracy formulated by Mill, in philosophical terms 'Truth' ended up becoming meaningless. And it doesn't take a PhD in Philosophy to understand that when 'pleasure' trumps 'truth' the result probably isn't going to be pretty.

But it gets worse. Because as a good Utilitarian John Stuart Mill held the foundational assumption that humans would choose their various pleasures in a totally rational manner. What we now know, however, with rock solid certitude is that, as explained in Episode 45, that the human mind is way more complex than that, and, further, that it is in many circumstances irrational to boot.

So let's see how all of that works out as we run down 20th Century history one more time.

Although, again, let me reiterate that I am well aware that individuals have lied, cheated, and stolen throughout human history. And I am especially aware that towards the end of the 19th Century in democratic America, both robber barons and politicians were infamous for their relative sleaze. The critical difference, however, is that by and large proper society looked down on such folks. And that, even if only honored in the breach, the virtues of honesty and integrity still were officially honored by everyone.

So that, if we go back to the story of the North Pole, you can argue that it was Robert Peary's desire for the pleasure of fame and money which overwhelmed the long held social requirements of honor and honesty. Or you can argue that the media's desire for the pleasure of the profit generated from a big story gave him little choice. Either way, though, standards of truth were evaporating.

And I've already gone over how world leaders in 1919 acted completely differently from world leaders in 1814. But we can't blame the vast cultural changes which followed all on them. Because the public itself had also changed. After the Napoleonic Wars both intellectuals and most of the public recognized that revolution and wars had made regular life seem meaningless. The reaction, however, was that the 19th Century then saw a renewed effort to provide the missing meaning by strengthening what we now call bourgeois values. After World War I, however, the intellectuals and the rest of the population broadly concluded that the war had proven that life was indeed meaningless. Which in the 1920's resulted in a relatively drastic dissolution of sexual mores, marriage vows, and—especially among the intellectual elite and the entertainment industry—considerable dabbling in previously taboo behavior such as atheism, homosexuality, and drug taking.

This loosening of morals also applied to the previously highly sober and highly conservative realm of finance. For, as you may know, the stock market collapse of 1929 was largely due to the fact that so many people were so highly leveraged in their stock speculation. So that a slight downturn turned into a rout when such speculators couldn't come up with the 90% that they actually owed on their supposed 'purchases'.

Meanwhile that nephew of Sigmund Freud, Philip Bernays, was turning the foundational assumptions of Capitalism, Economics, and for that matter Liberal Democracy, on their heads by using the insights of psychology and, by appealing to the emotions and the subconscious, subverting the supposedly rational decision making of Economic Man. For instance, and just to remind you, one of his early campaigns was to get women to start smoking tobacco, which had previously been seen as a filthy habit, by labeling cigarettes as feminist 'torches of freedom'. And thus the modern advertising industry, and the constant promotion of useless desires and so-called 'needs' was born. Without which Capitalism itself might have well sputtered to a stop decades ago.

And one might imagine that the disorientation caused by the Great Depression would have served as a 'wake up' moment. But there was no grand return to personal morality and integrity. Instead the framework of Liberal Democracy had convinced opinion leaders that moral reform wasn't necessary, since a new cadre of technocratic and scientific 'experts' could solve all problems. Although, as economists and historians agree, what really brought the U.S. out of the Depression was the start of World War II.

Then after the war the wheels really started falling off the cart. For, as others have noted, when George Orwell wrote '1984' in 1947 he wasn't imagining the future nearly so much as he was

describing the present. Because we in the West were well aware of the propaganda efforts in the Soviet Union and in Nazi Germany. But they were 19th Century pikers compared to the much more sophisticated efforts going on in the West, both in government and in the 'free market'. Thus, as I've already mentioned, the Orwellian named Department of Defense. Or the sudden public desire for brightly colored automobiles with gigantic, useless fins. And although the intellectual crowd was outraged by the McCarthyism of the early 1950's, hardly anyone raised much of a peep about the Orwellian way that advertising was taking over people's minds. After all, if it wasn't directly run by the government, then it couldn't be 'propaganda', now could it?

So that by around 1962 no one outside of fringe beatnik commentators seemed to care that now orange juice was the new consumer product, 'OJ'. Or that used cars were now 'pre-owned cars'. Fake labels, fake products, fake subdivisions to live in. So that the word 'plastic' didn't just refer to moldable organic polymers not found in nature. It also referred to an entire way of life.

Or to put it another way, what we might call the post-classical way of thinking in the West started out in 1619 with Rene Descartes boldly questioning all preconceived notions and assumptions in an attempt to determine what was really True. And by the early 1960's, as exemplified by Andy Warhol's flat representations of Campbell's Soups cans, this had been thoroughly replaced by an actual celebration of the fake. And just as the Soviet Union turned out to be nothing like Karl Marx would have expected, so, too, was pop art nothing like John Stuart Mill would have foreseen.

But it most definitely was the result of a mass culture following Bentham's hedonic principle. It most definitely was the Utilitarian dream coming true.

So that if you were standing there around the year 1962 you would have no doubt concluded that history would continue on in its seemingly immutable course. Thin ties and Madison Avenue marching towards the future. But history does have a way of sometimes throwing curves at us. And just as the Age of Enlightenment had been spectacularly rejected by the Romantic Era, something would come along which would seemingly change this culture's trajectory.

Seemingly, that is.

But that's for the next episode. For this episode, as always, has reached its end. And, as always, I would once again like to thank you for so far having listened.