

EPISODE 62

DEMOCRACY: WHO NEEDS IT?

Hi there. Welcome to the beginning of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is Episode number 62 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Now for the last two episodes I've been laying out my vision for a plausible future society which actually works. And I've been trying to do so in a cautious and circumspect way. First, I established that the Revolution is going to of necessity involve restraint. After all, social harmony can only exist if there are strongly observed social norms. Second, I argued that the Revolution can only happen via a million little Evolutions. It's up to you and me and everyone else to just stop buying, metaphorically and otherwise, the material crap and the cultural crap that we are being sold. So that there wasn't anything particularly exciting, nor obviously controversial, in either of those episode.

Further, I recognize that, especially nowadays, when nothing seems all that positive, it is especially important for me to try to maintain a bright and upbeat attitude. What's more, with us kind of approaching the end of the podcast, and with my now going over the particulars of what we need to do in order to begin a new world, it certainly behooves me to keep everything as cheerful as possible.

On the other hand... I also noted back in those episodes that in the near future I would be getting into the nuts and bolts and the specifics of what needs to be done. And then, I suggested, you might well find little red flags or warning lights or whatever going off in your head. Because much of my prescription for the future might really seem contradictory to everything which the postmodern world has told you is right and good. But, hey, haven't I been saying from the beginning of all this that most everything that they've told you is a pack of lies?

Anyway, the time to really start messing with everything that's in your brain begins right about now. Because today I am going to discuss the utter idiocy and uselessness of Democracy.

Now, remember, to a large extent my ideal society doesn't have any political implications. Because to a large extent whatever political system develops from all of those millions of individual changes will have been organically grown. That is to say, just as I don't care about the particular grains which are in the bread that you eat, whether it is whole wheat or seven grain or dark Russian rye, just

that the bread is wholesome and healthy, so, too, do the particular political parameters of a future society not matter all that much.

Unfortunately, we do have to talk about politics a bit. Because the fact that two thousand years ago the ancient Greeks famously labeled mankind as a 'political animal' has to a large extent clouded our judgment ever since.

Now the reality is that what the Greeks really meant by this is that mankind is a social animal. That unlike, say, wolverines, very few humans are happy, even at ease, living isolated existences, and that, therefore, human needs and human behavior always have to be considered within their social context. And not only is there nothing to argue about with that, but as I have been endlessly pointing out, in fact we humans are far more than social animals. We are hypersocial animals.

An unfortunate aspect of equating 'social' animal with 'political' animal, though, is that in other primates which are social animals, such as chimpanzees or macaques, individuals within a group of, say, twenty, are constantly engaging in political behavior: Lower ranking males forming ever changing alliances so as to challenge the dominant males; groups of zero ranking females joining together to defend themselves.

But, as I've also been saying all along, even though we humans are most definitely primates, for whatever recent evolutionary reasons, we humans are now both strikingly and qualitatively different from all of our putative simian 'cousins'. And the demands of hypersocial living require behaviors which are far more innately cooperative than what goes on in a troop of chimps or macaques. If nothing else, the plain fact that we human males have become 'feminized', with no giant canine teeth and no sharp claws, signifies that we have evolved to a point where a primitive 'king of the mountain' social striation no longer applies, and where we are assumed to at least be able to get along harmoniously.

Well... Truth be told, we haven't evolved *that* much. We're still smack dab in the middle of that Cambrian Moment. And some form of political maneuvering has been the hallmark of most human societies. Indeed, one of the strongest hopes of the American Founding Fathers was that their newfangled form of a representative republic would somehow escape the curse of party politics. Good luck with that. Less than ten short years after the adoption of the Constitution, there were the Federalist Party of Alexander Hamilton and John Adams, and the Democratic-Republican Party of Aaron Burr and Thomas Jefferson.

And what made matters worse for the Western World in general was that, as you'll recall, the Age of Enlightenment arose out of a bunch of men sitting around in coffee houses and drinking any number of cups of extremely strong coffee. So that, as you can imagine, it seemed to them in their hyper-caffeinated world that spending endless hours arguing about politics was what every human, if given the chance, would love to do. Further, in England in particular, for over a century there had already been exactly two political parties, the Whigs and the Tories. Not that they were they divided along obviously left/right lines, as political parties are today. Rather in essence it was more like a pickup basketball game, with the 'shirts' and the 'skins' being arbitrarily chosen. Anyway, the results of a lot of men, a lot of caffeine, and a basic 'us' versus 'them' just-for-the-hell-of-it mentality is what laid much of the unseen foundations of modern political theory and belief.

And I also have to throw in the fact that getting longwinded about hypothetical political structures has been a hallmark of philosophical discourse from Plato on down through Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Then add to that the Scientism of the 18th Century, where many reformers, in their simplistic aping of the scientific method, were convinced that environment—nurture—was everything. And that if they just came up with the right social structure and the right rules and regulations then we wouldn't ever have to deal with the messiness of wisdom and judges and—let's face it—the entire human condition ever again.

Anyway, the result of all this is that for many of us it has been ingrained in us since probably kindergarten that if we want positive change, then the political route is the way to achieve it.

On the other hand... Historically, those few Utopian ideas which worked for even a decade or two were primarily (for lack of a better term) religious and spiritual in nature. Further, both in our own personal lives and in the lives which we see around us, real, positive change has always come from inner processes, and not from outer, political ones. And those drastic cultural changes which happened in the late Sixties occurred only after vast numbers of people tuned in, and then dropped out of all that political back and forth.

Further, as with that troop of chimps, 'political' implies a bunch of selfish egos which need to be massaged and/or manipulated. Whereas the entire concept of social harmony implies that it is possible, in fact it is our ideal state, that groups of us in larger societies can indeed make the communal success of the group more important than the success of any one individual ego.

And that's why historically so many family businesses have been so successful. That's why star athletes aren't being hypocritical when they say that their success was a result of the entire team's effort, and that they don't really care about their individual statistics. That's why Japan and other East Asian countries kicked our asses economically in the latter half of the 20th Century.

So now let me get back to my main point: Democracy is a really dumb idea. Not only doesn't it work, but—certainly today—it is pretty much a complete fraud. Whereas what we really should be focusing on is how to achieve social harmony. Not only that, but—and get ready for this—the whole concept of Democracy is actually antithetical to Science, to the Scientific Method, and to any sense of Scientific Progress. Because it is antithetical to the pursuit of Truth.

There. I've said it. I've kicked the Sacred Cow. And in fact I'll go further. Because, let's be honest, and especially nowadays, when the outcome differs from what someone wants, no one really believes in the validity of Democracy anyway.

So string me up.

Anyway, while you're busily trying to find a length of rope to hang me with, let me backtrack just ever so slightly. And say that there is one scientific finding which does confirm something of the theory behind Democracy. And this is the phenomenon of the Wisdom of the Crowd.

You see, it turns out that if you ask a random person to guess what today's temperature is, or to guess how many beans there are in a jar, then you are unlikely to get the correct answer. But if you ask a whole bunch of random people, then the average answer is almost always extremely close to the real one. And this idea that a group of randomly chosen people will tend to come to a better decision than having just one randomly chosen person is one of the justifications for our use of the jury system.

So that at first glance this would seem to be a strong indicator that Democracy does indeed work.

But there are also severe limitations on such crowd wisdom. Because it is only valid if you are asking questions about general knowledge or about common experiences, such as 'Who was Obama's Vice President?' or 'How hot is it today?' If you are asking questions which require specialized knowledge, however, such as 'Who was Franklin Pierce's Vice President?', or 'How hot is it in Turkmenistan today?', you will just get blank stares, whether you are asking one person or a hundred.

What's more, not only social pressure, but also unconscious biases, such as the anchoring effect discussed in Episode 44, can totally warp results.

And this is why political philosophers throughout history had always concluded that Democracy was only feasible with small, coherent groups, such as the stereotypical New England town meeting. In a situations such as this, most participants are at least somewhat knowledgeable about the questions being discussed. Further, social cohesion demands that no one deliberately screws things up.

And this is why the American Founding Fathers settled upon the idea of a Representative Republic. After all, a local group could reasonably be expected to be wise enough to choose the most qualified representative. And then the crowd of those representatives could also reasonably be expected to be wise.

Of course, in 1790 the size of each Congressional district was set at around 30,000 inhabitants, of which only a small portion were presumed to be sufficiently knowledgeable to cast a vote. Today each district is around 700,000 people. So that even if you are a fervent believer in ‘representative’ democracy, to think that this large a ‘crowd’ will be wise kind of strains credulity.

Then there is the argument which goes all the way back to Socrates. When we want to replace our roof or repair our plumbing we don’t just pick someone at random from the crowd. We certainly might ask advice from friends who are experts at home repair. But we definitely don’t just passively accept whatever workman that the crowd has democratically elected. And running a complex society calls for a lot more intelligence and a lot more deep and original thought than does guessing today’s temperature or how many beans there are in a jar.

Although if this were a perfect world, and if each and every citizen could be counted upon to be aware of the issues, to do their homework, and then, having taken all the relevant variables into consideration, to vote rationally and unemotionally, in such a situation I would be perfectly happy to endorse Democracy.

But let’s be real.

Because, first, let’s look at the most fundamental assumption involved here: That everyone gives a damn.

Now as I pointed out way back when, high school, especially if, like mine, it wasn’t just suburban or inner city, was a pretty accurate cross section of the rest of humanity. And as you’ll no doubt recall from back then, outside of a small handful of nerds and geeks, just about nobody actually cared about the political goings on of the wider world. And why should they have? They had their circle of friends to think about, their boyfriends or girlfriends to fantasize about or break up with,

maybe their after school job, maybe making the team, maybe getting into that college which they were aiming for. As for the local Congressional election, even if they could have voted, how many would have put any time or effort into it?

I mean, maybe some Greeks in Ancient Athens did like to stand around the agora in their togas discoursing on current events. But they also had slaves, some forty percent of the population, to do all the real work for them. And I think that you will agree with me that if we are really in favor of ‘freedom’, then people should be free to not give a crap about politics. But if they don’t give a crap, then why should they have a vote?

As an example: I personally don’t follow the sport of hockey. It really doesn’t interest me at all. And if you asked me to vote for this year’s NHL all star team, then gave me a list of names, the only criterion I would have would be who I might have heard about while half listening to a sports show. In other words, the most well known. Of course, well known players can have lousy years. But I wouldn’t know that. So someone like me should never get to vote for a hockey all star team.

And likewise, just because a bunch of guys in 18th Century England liked to separate themselves from the women, and from the rest of humanity, and then argue politics back and forth in coffee houses, doesn’t mean that all other humans should want to or need to do this.

And I realize that—especially if you are a political junkie yourself—all of this might sound like beyond heresy to you. But let’s look at the facts. In scientifically conducted polls, only about 30% of Americans say that they follow politics closely. Further, and strangely enough, a big chunk of the people who say they ‘follow’ politics end up performing poorly on tests on actual knowledge of current events. And if you want more evidence: As an example of our generalized understanding of civics, only around a third of Americans can successfully name our three branches of government.

So that, after over two hundred years with our experiment in democracy, after over two centuries of trying to get people interested, still over two thirds of us just don’t care.

And it’s even worse than that. Because, currently, some 80% of us say that we are dissatisfied with politics. Only 1% of us are classified as ‘really politically active’. And a whopping 62% of us are afraid to share our political opinions with others. Aren’t those numbers what you would associate with, if not the Soviet Union, then at least with some highly authoritarian, highly centralized, semi-police state, where citizens passively expect to be told what to do?

Now those true believers in Liberal Democracy usually come back with something like, ‘Then the answer is more education, more equality, more democracy. But as I just pointed out, we’ve had

over two centuries to do all that, and at least two thirds of the population just aren't into it. So what makes you think that some new effort, especially in this age of Netflix and YouTube and any number of other distractions, is going to succeed?

And that line about the insanity of doing the same thing that doesn't work over and over again, expecting that the next time it will, must surely apply to political theory, also.

And, again, it's not like the theory behind Liberal Democracy is some noble idea, such as everyone should have a vote because all souls are equal, or because of the wisdom of the crowd. After all, Liberal Democracy explicitly denies that people have souls. And it explicitly denies that hard to define qualities like 'wisdom' exist. No, rather, following the logic of Utilitarianism, it sees people as no more nor less than exactly equivalent economic consumption units. And, following that logic, then the only 'fair' outcome is whatever the majority of the consumption units decides.

Now as I've pointed out before, the concept of 'fairness' is both central to Utilitarianism and Liberal Democracy. But the word is also used in a remarkably slippery manner. First, doesn't your common sense tell you that it is fair that Person X, who is intelligent, educated, and fair minded, should have more of a say in how a society is run than Person Y, who is unintelligent, a drug addict, and a bigot? Well, to Liberal Democracy such a state of affairs is 'unfair'.

Next, there are many ways large and small in which the 'democracy' part of Liberal Democracy is a sham. For one thing, under Liberal Democracy it is impossible to vote Liberal Democracy out of office. The people are not allowed to decide that they'd rather have a king, or a theocracy, or some fearless authoritarian leader. As an example, in 1991 Algeria was in the middle of free and fair elections, and it was clear that a strongly Islamist political party was going to win, fairly and squarely. The army didn't like that, and intervened. Not a single one of the Liberal Democracies just across the Mediterranean Sea in Western Europe lifted a finger or said 'boo'. As a result a civil war ensued, and over 100,000 people died.

Here's another aspect: Back when Jeremy Bentham was first espousing Utilitarianism, one of the objections which people made to his principle of 'greatest happiness' was this: If everyone else in Athens would be much happier if Socrates were no longer pestering them with his philosophy, then according to Bentham the greatest utility would be for Socrates to kindly go kill himself, since his one small unhappiness in dying would be counterbalanced by the many citizens of Athens' much greater happiness in his dying.

Well, logically, given Bentham's assumptions, that does make sense. So it fell to Liberal theorists such as John Stuart Mill to try to get around this 'tyranny of the majority' with the idea that there existed certain fundamental human rights. And that these human rights could not be tampered with.

Now I think that our common sense tells us that it does stand to reason that basic human rights should exist. The problem, however, comes from defining and delineating what they are. Especially when, as is the case with Liberal Democracy, the existence of 'wisdom' is no longer acknowledged.

For instance, one would think that the ability to breathe free air and drink free water should be a basic human right. Yet according to the principles of economics, it's perfectly fine to charge your fellow man so that he can drink the water that you own. Further, today much of the lives of hundreds of millions of poor women around the world is consumed procuring water. And billions of people still lack access to good, drinkable water. So that one can reasonably conclude that Liberal Democracy does not see water as a basic human right.

Or take the working world, which for most people is far more important than the political world. Yet if I were to suggest that every person in a corporation, from the janitor to the CEO, should have an equal vote in how the corporation was run, you would properly label me as a radical Socialist or an Anarchist. Further, as you'll recall, both Bentham and Mill were about as pro-Capitalist as one could be. So that Liberal Democracy definitely does not see the guarantee of a job or of worker democracy as a basic human right.

Yet, currently, Liberal Democracy does believe that transgenderism is a basic human right. Now how is this 'fair'? In fact, how does this even make any sense? Because, historically, no other civilization has ever recognized that transgenderism should even exist, let alone that it should be a human right. So that the only possible explanation is that what is really going on is that certain ideologues who are running our culture have decided, for whatever reason, that they like transgenderism. So it must not be allowed to be put to a vote. Instead it magically becomes a human right.

In other words, in effect, Democracy doesn't matter one whit when the ruling oligarchy doesn't want it to matter.

And how is this then any different from any other garden variety totalitarian system?

And I've already gone over in other episodes chapter and verse how Liberal Democracy by its very nature does end up being totalitarian. Now, however, I'd like to remind you, from Episode 27, why on top of that Democracy in any form, once there are more than two choices, can never really be 'fair'.

Let's look at that example again. Say that Candidate A has extreme right wing views, and has 40% support. Candidate B has extreme left wing views, and has 33% support. Candidate C has very moderate left wing views, and has 27% support. And let's also consider three different voting systems currently in place in the world.

Now in the first system, called 'first past the post' in Britain, there is only one round of elections, and the person with the highest total wins. In the second system, the two highest finishers in the first round meet each other in the second round. In the third system, pioneered in Australia, voters in the first round also get to make a second choice, and when there is no clear majority winner in the first round, then those second choice votes are added in.

So in our hypothetical example, under the first system Candidate A would easily win, even though 60% of the population is strongly against him. Under the second system Candidate B would win, even though only 33% of the population really supports him. Clearly, Candidate C would be everyone's second choice, and he would indeed win under the third system. But, again, only about a quarter of the population really wanted that person, and even around 60% of the left wing people would prefer B. So which of these results is the 'will of the people'?

Now most elections in the United States are 'first past the post'. Which means, for instance, that Abraham Lincoln won the Presidency in 1860 with less than 40% of the vote. Yet we still consider his election legitimate, even though 60% of the population did not want him to be President. More recently, it is well known that Hillary Clinton received three million more votes than did Donald Trump. Yet still a total of 52% of Americans voted for somebody other than her. In fact, of the 58 Presidential elections held in the U.S., in 27 of them the winner received 51% or less of the popular vote. Now horse races are indeed exciting, but in terms of finding out a genuine popular will, 51% is statistically not that different from 49%.

Worse, when historians have looked at the results of all of these elections, they have determined that the consensus 'better' candidate won exactly 50% of the time. And that's not any different from flipping a coin. What's more, we all know by now that voters mostly make their decisions based on what's called affectivity: Who they'd most like to have a beer with.

So who are we kidding here? After all, if one really wanted to know the ‘will of the people’, anyone familiar with probability and statistics knows that you could just as accurately determine this, and thereby save all of the unnecessary time and money and energy and hostility of campaigning, by randomly selecting a thousand people and then surveying them.

And yet we all act as though ‘saving democracy’ is on the order of some incredibly important life and death struggle.

On the other hand, a few cynics over the years have pointed out that all of the hoopla involved with elections only serves to distract people into thinking that the people governing them are in some way being held responsible. Which fools them into thinking that each citizen really does have a voice. Whereas in reality, given that politics by its very nature assumes both selfishness and ‘otherness’, and given how complicated running a complex society really is, in the end there’s always going to be a self-serving oligarchy of some kind which is really pulling all of the strings and making all of the decisions. And, under this cynical interpretation, different ideologies might indeed end up with somewhat different personnel in their oligarchies. In the end, though, for all practical purposes, it’s always going to be, “Meet the new boss, same as the old boss’.

And unfortunately, in this situation and especially in this postmodern world, those cynics are hard to argue with.

What’s more, all of this assumes that the ‘will of the people’ actually means something that has any connection with truth or justice or with any other real value that real people actually care about.

After all, do we care about what the ‘will of the people’ is when we learn about Chemistry, or when we want to know the value of pi? And if you respond that math and science are by nature precise and exact, whereas the rest of life is inevitably complicated and messy, then how about this: Do we care about the ‘will of the people’ when we want to know the causes of the Civil War, or when we want to know how Mozart’s music compares with other 18th Century composers?

So what the hell is this magical ‘will of the people’?? Because even if in many subjects the exact truth is hard to pin down, isn’t what we really want in every subject, including politics, as close an approximation of the truth as possible? And what evidence is there, either in theory or in real life, that the ‘will of the people’ is in any meaningful way connected to this?

But aren't Democracies in general wealthier than non-Democracies? Yes, they are. But that is confusing correlation with causation. Because research has shown beyond a doubt that it is only when countries reach a certain moderately high level of income that Democracy becomes workable and stable. So that, in effect, it turns out that Democracy is a luxury good. Which tends to support that theory that a bunch of well off middle class people get to fantasize that their government is accountable. Whereas in reality there is that well defined oligarchy of one sort or another which is pulling the strings.

But aren't Democracies more peaceful? I've already dealt with this one. Athens was always starting wars with the other Greek city-states. In 1812 there were basically only two Democracies in the world, yet the United States declared war on Great Britain. Both the North and the South in the Civil War were democracies. In World War I Germany had a Kaiser. But it also had a Parliament, as did Britain and France, and, after 1917, Russia. Yet World War I was one of the grimmest and most pointless wars ever fought.

But aren't Democracies less corrupt? Well, sort of. But, once again, that has to do with the fact that they tend to be wealthier, and that this wealth accumulated mostly because their society was less corrupt to begin with. If you want to consider Democracy pure and simple, however, consider India, which has been dutifully Democratic since its independence from Britain in 1947. Anyone who has ever been to India knows firsthand that whatever small progress which has been made since then has been in spite of the government, not because of it. The infrastructure there, which is totally a function of government, is beyond comically bad. Family dynasties of retired movie stars run many of the states. Shockingly, right today 43% of its Congress's members have criminal charges against them, many of which involve murder or rape.

But... Even with all of its flaws, isn't Democracy at least the least bad option?

Well, as with all of those other truisms, when you actually look into the matter you find out that it isn't true. When it comes down to it, the underlying cultural conditions, which usually have built up over the centuries, are the major factors in determining whether a society or a country is efficient, trusting, caring, safe, wealthy, and forward looking.

And if you still don't believe me, and you really want proof that there can be a better system than Liberal Democracy, then—as I mentioned way back in the beginning of all this—you need look no further than the island nation of Singapore.

And just to remind you: In 1965, when Singapore was unceremoniously kicked out of Malaysia, it was a small swampy, hot, poor island with no natural resources. But it was run by a man named Lee Kuan Yew, who had studied at Cambridge, but who did not believe in Liberal Democracy. Instead, being of Chinese ancestry, he relied on Confucian ethics for his foundational assumptions. And the system which he set up might best be described as ‘managed democracy’. Or, maybe more honestly, as genuinely fake democracy. Political parties were allowed, and elections were held, but the way that the rules were written almost guaranteed that Lee’s political party, the PAP, would always win.

But the critical difference that guaranteed that Singapore wouldn’t turn into just another banana republic was that Lee made sure to put extra effort into education, competence, and, most important, individual and organizational integrity. Which means that, even though Singapore developed into somewhat of a ‘nanny state’, the rules were set up so that the best and brightest were attracted both to teaching and to government jobs. And the population could easily see that those who ruled them were squeaky clean. Because they were.

And the result? Today, outside of a few tiny oil rich places, Singapore is easily the wealthiest and most technologically advanced country on Earth. It is also consistently ranked as the least corrupt, and its citizens are some of the world’s most satisfied.

Now, does this mean that I would like to turn everywhere into a carbon copy of Singapore? Well, not quite. For one thing, I didn’t grow up in an East Asian culture.

But we’ll get into all of the caveats and particulars in the next episode. Because, as you may have noticed, by now we’ve come to the end of times here on this one.

Just remember, though, that in laying out how any new society is going to be organized, we’re trying to maximize social harmony, and most definitely not continue playing the same old political games. Because the real life demands of cooperative hypersocial living are quite different from the fantasy demands of a bunch of men in the 18th Century sitting around, mostly divorced from real life relationships or responsibilities, and drinking those endless cups of coffee.

Again, however, all of that is for next time. For this time, once again, I’d like to thank you once again for once again so far having listened.