

EPISODE 42

THE GLUE OF EMPIRE

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is Episode number 42 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Now last episode, among other things, I was talking about the process by which groups of around 150, which is the size limit which our brains had evolved to successfully handle, could expand to become, in the end, ‘groups’ of a million or more. And, to me, one of the most fascinating elements about this process of turning humanity into a completely hypersocial animal is that even with all of the practitioners out there of all of the social sciences, such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, etc., I am not aware of anyone who has ever really dealt with this problem.

So let me start off today with why no one ever seems to bring up the question. And this has to do with what is a core contradiction in the Western World’s conception and manifestation of what are broadly called the social sciences. Namely the Age of Enlightenment conceit that, when it is all said and done, individual rights are more important than those of the community.

Because it is also true that these various social sciences are also a direct outgrowth of that same Age of Enlightenment. For you’ll remember that this was also the time of Scientism—the belief that the same sort of quantitative analysis which was unlocking the secrets of Physics and Chemistry could also easily be applied to every other phenomenon and behavior in nature, especially including human nature.

Which means that as a result of this Scientism scholars would indeed seek to study society and culture in a cold, hard, quantitative, ostensibly neutral and normative-free way. But at the same time they would (usually unconsciously) be holding the more than somewhat normative belief that man’s innate nature (that is, back in the mists of time before the Social Contract) was that of a totally free individual.

Now in general there is no such inherent inner conflict in the study of Economics. In fact, one can argue that it is oxymoronic to even label Economics as a social science. After all, as I’ve mentioned any number of times, the foundational assumptions of Economics are virtually identical to

the foundational assumptions of Utilitarianism. That is to say, Economics views an economy—*ie* a society—as nothing more nor less than a giant aggregate of independent desires for goods and services from a giant aggregate of completely independent individuals. In Classical Economics, as in Utilitarianism, social interactions between people, outside of their roles as buyers and sellers, don't really exist.

But it's when you get into the truly 'social' sciences, such as Sociology or Anthropology, that the difficulty arises. Because in these disciplines, at least on the surface, the larger society is everything and the individual is next to nothing. To the Anthropologist culture determines all. To the Sociologist social structure determines all. Howsoever... does this mean that they are then saying that culture or social structure ends up making people happy or content? No, because as it turns out the vast majority of anthropologists and sociologists are also politically liberal. Which means that they themselves actually believe that happiness is primarily a function of personal liberty and freedom from authority. Which means that, in ways subtle and not so subtle, their 'science' always implies that social structure and culture equate with social control. The exact opposite of personal liberty and freedom from authority.

And if that last paragraph didn't make the issue crystal clear for you, then consider this. Because here is a list of 'subjects' typically covered under Sociology: social stratification, social class, social mobility, religion and secularization, gender, social deviance. Now note that a certain tension, a certain unpleasantness, seems to underlie all of these concepts. In other words, the very nature of social structures are seen to inevitably trap individuals in hierarchy and pecking orders, and individual preferences appear to be constrained by gender stereotypes and/or defined away as 'deviance'. And absolutely none of this in any way suggests that the goal of society is in the end to provide a sense of harmony. Rather it almost explicitly states that the goal of society is control.

But remember back to the various discussions about classical civilizations? Social harmony, as exemplified by the concept of Civic Virtue, was the theoretical framework for both the Greek and the Roman civilizations. Even Thomas Jefferson in the 18th Century, when he wrote about 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness', was using a definition of happiness which no longer exists today: Namely that 'happiness' in his mind was actually another word for 'civic virtue'. So that in effect the Founding Fathers were not seeking to establish a Republic based upon individual liberty. Rather they were trying to create one which maximized social harmony.

And when we go further afield we can see the same conscious hope for social harmony in virtually all of the other pre-modern social structures. For instance, we have been taught to be reflexively offended by the blatantly ‘unfair’ power structure of Medieval Feudalism. But *they* saw it all quite differently. To them if each stratum of society properly fulfilled both its rights *and* obligations, then the result would be peace, safety, and stability. And, as I pointed out back in Episode 16, one of the reasons Feudalism finally fell apart is because the obligations which the nobility had to fulfill ended up outweighing the rights which they enjoyed.

Or take India. Now I’m certainly not in favor of establishing a caste system. But the intellectual justification for such a state of affairs was that if each caste followed its particular rules and fulfilled its particular obligations then social harmony would reign. And the plain fact of the matter is that Indian culture was remarkably stable for some three thousand years.

But it’s when we go to East Asia that we can see how out of touch with the rest of humanity and history the present Western system is.

Now I’m the first to admit that there are certain aspects about present day Japanese culture which are, let’s say, rather strange. But the essence of traditional Japanese culture was that the welfare of the group was far, far more important than the rights or welfare of the individual. That conformity was actually a virtue to be greatly prized. And that in return for conformity each individual would then be treated as a respected member of the larger Japanese family. And this traditional Japanese culture explains why so many fighters in World War II were actually eager to sacrifice their lives for the Emperor. And it also explains why so many workers in the 60s and 70s would devote their entire lives to a corporation, and also why that corporation would in turn guarantee their jobs for life. Even if they weren’t particularly competent.

And if you ever study Japanese history you’ll see that much of its singular, and fiercely cohesive, culture is due to its relative isolation off the coast of Asia. But scholars also agree that many, if not most, of Japanese values, as with the other various cultures of East Asia, ultimately derive from those of China. And the dominant strain in Chinese ethics for the past 2500 years has been that of Confucianism. And, in a small nutshell, Confucian ethics declares that harmony in the family produces harmony in the village produces harmony in the kingdom. In other words, the most sacred duty of an individual is to know and to honor their place in society, and to recognize that the greater good is also always the greatest good.

Now the really interesting thing here is that we in the West were always taught that these Eastern communal visions were some strange aberration. And that they produced giant colonies of ant-people who lacked both drive and imagination. Even when, in the 60's and 70's, Japan's economy beat the crap out of all the Western ones. And even when, in the 80's, Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore's economies did the same. Finally, in the early 80's, when Deng Xiaoping turned the giant Maoist ship of China around and created the economic juggernaut which is now the largest economy in the world, he didn't do it by abandoning the idea of Socialism. No, what he did was to essentially replace the alien Western-derived ethics of Marxism with the traditional Chinese system of, you guessed it, Confucianism.

Yet here in the West, even though it should be obvious that, both historically and numerically, our belief in the sanctity of the individual is the actual outlier, said belief still more than permeates all of our social 'sciences'.

So am I saying that, after these two hundred years, with respected universities all having departments in Anthropology, Sociology, Economics, etc., and with thousands upon thousands of people having doctorates and writing articles and earning a living in these disciplines, it is all a crock to call them 'sciences'?

Well, kind of.

Now I'm not remotely saying that these subjects are irrelevant in their totality. But consider, for example, Economics. Because if you asked an American rocket scientist, a Russian rocket scientist, and a Chinese rocket scientist how to send a rocket to the moon, they would all give you the same answer. But on virtually any question in Economics, a politically conservative economist is likely to give you the exact opposite answer as will a politically liberal one. So how is this 'science'?

Because, yes, it's true that if you study Economics you're going to run into a lot of graphs and charts and calculus. So it certainly looks scientific. But if you ever go behind the scenes, as it were, you'll find that many times those charts and graphs are based upon assumptions which were more or less pulled out of the air. And a case in point is the Great Recession of 2008, which was mostly caused by subprime mortgages, which were based upon totally unsubstantiated assumptions which were then baked into formulas which were then mathematically manipulated with tremendously sophisticated algorithms. But in the end it all came down to Garbage In, Garbage Out. And trillions of dollars were lost.

Not to mention that virtually no economist actually predicted that Great Recession. Which is no great surprise, considering that one of the most prevalent clichés about economics has always been that economists have successfully predicted 16 of the last 5 recessions.

Again, though: Does any of this sound to you like Science—as in Physics or Chemistry?

Or let's look at my current bugbears, Sociology and Anthropology. Because when you picture the workings of science, I'm sure you imagine a laboratory environment where you can easily control the variables. And even if you're thinking of a human-centered discipline, such as psychology, you imagine a place where people are isolated from others and from their regular day to day lives.

But Sociology and Anthropology in general don't rely on laboratory conditions. Rather they rely on what are called field studies. That is, the researchers immerse themselves in a culture or subset of a society, and then report on what they've seen.

And researcher bias is a problem even in a laboratory environment. But in field studies this problem of necessity becomes much greater.

And to explain this in a, well, scientific way, let me talk for a little bit about the phenomenon of anchoring.

Now this little twitch in human mental behavior was first discovered less than fifty years ago by Tversky and Kahnemann, two Israeli pioneers in the field of behavioral economics. One of their best examples was an experiment in which participants were first exposed to a supposedly random spin of a roulette wheel, which actually was predetermined to stop at either '10' or at '65'. A little later they were asked to guesstimate the percentage of countries in the U.N. which were African. Those who had seen the '65' guessed a number that was far higher than those who had seen the '10'.

Since then any number of experiments have confirmed this aspect of our mental make-up. It turns out that even experts in their fields are not immune to it. Even when people are told beforehand about anchoring they still succumb to it. And so far no one has come up with a satisfactory answer as to why and how it happens.

We just know that it does. That this is how the human brain works.

And something like this phenomenon can also be seen in various other experimental findings in social psychology. For instance, if a subject's mind is 'primed' by, say, seeing pictures of sad people, then asking them later about a whole series of seemingly unrelated topics, from economics to politics to feelings of personal security, will all elicit much more negative responses.

Now upon consideration you might say that this is just an experimental confirmation of common sense. After all, most of us can intuitively see that a Marxist social scientist who conducted field studies would tend to see everything in terms of economic class struggle, etc. A Nazi social scientist would have conducted the exact same field study and seen it in terms of survival of the fittest. Their preexisting ideological belief system would have colored their findings, no matter how objective they were otherwise being.

And the same happens with our seemingly scientific social sciences. Someone going into a field study with a preexisting belief that humans are basically, say, selfish or promiscuous, or that all relationships at their core are about power, is probably going to see evidence of that.

Again, though, I'm not saying that all findings in the social sciences are bogus. For instance, in general people do tend to want to buy low and sell high. In general people at the top of a social stratification will tend to be less stressed than those at the bottom. But, when you think about it, such examples are just reiterating what folk wisdom has held all along.

And then there is the problem that some areas of a discipline can be highly rigorous and scientific, whereas others are so much unscientific hoo-hah. Take psychology. Now at one extreme you have the people studying physiological brain activity with high tech equipment such as MRI's and the like. At the other end you have Freudian psychiatry, which was—like any other ideology or pseudo-religion—solely based upon the mental noodlings of one individual. And yet it was treated, especially in the mid 20th Century, as though it was rock solid science, and it had thousands of practitioners who were respectfully referred to as 'doctors'.

But although most psychiatrists nowadays view Freud's so-called science as fictitious, in other areas of psychology and the like, as we shall soon see, we still have the phenomenon of 'true believers' versus 'real science'. Not only that, but even more insidiously, we have true believers endlessly trying to pound the square peg of real science into their round hole of previously held ideology.

Which brings us around to the reason why I have been having this discussion in the first place. Because as we get further into explaining how the mind really works and what human behavior really is, some of what I will be saying is going to directly contradict the postmodern world's common understanding of these things. And I know that I've been kind of saying this throughout the podcast. But now as we're getting down to it, I want you to be especially aware and alert.

Anyway, what this is leading up to at the moment has to do with a continuation of my presentation in the last episode concerning the centrality of the importance of social norms.

Now when talking about our initial human groupings of up to 150 people, I don't think anyone would argue about the necessity of forging a tribal identity. And at that relatively primitive level no one is going to internalize sophisticated political ideals. So that the most feasible way to get all of these folks to approximately think as one is to line up as many of their individual behaviors as you can. By social norms.

Nor is it any great stretch to see that should the resultant set of social norms be rendered invalid, then both the tribal identity and the sense of tribal belonging, which had arisen as a function of the mutual acceptance of these norms, would also be severely diminished.

For instance, consider the unfortunate position of so many Native Americans. Now Native Americans may or may not be genetically predisposed towards alcoholism. But the drug use, depression, despair, and all of the allied social ills which pervade the typical reservation go way beyond such a simple formulation. So let me suggest a more direct, Occam's Razor answer: What we are seeing here is what happens when a strong, personally satisfying sense of tribal identity, established through long years of shared, precise social norms, has been blown away by the sudden appearance of a much more technologically powerful culture whose ideology is that of the supremacy of the individual. In other words, the social glue that these shared social norms had created for the Native American had been suddenly dissolved. And the result was social collapse.

Social glue. Now if you go looking for a formal sociological definition of the term, you won't find one. And this is because commentators have only begun using it in the last few years. An informal definition, though, would probably be like that for pornography: You know it when you see it. Except that for social glue it's more like you know it when you don't see it. That is to say, the term describes what is missing when there are rises throughout society of suicide, drug and alcohol addiction, rates of depression, etc. In other words, what happens when large segments of a society no longer perceive there to be an essential *social* meaning to their lives. And they therefore no longer give a damn.

Well, it's one thing for an anthropologist to accurately see what's going on among Native Americans or in a tribe in the Amazon. But, as I've been saying, their 18th Century Age of Enlightenment way of thinking has so far made them blind to the possibility that this might also happen to our big, wide, modern Western way of life. After all, as I've also been saying, their belief system has

always been that social norms are the same as social control, which, because it inhibits us from that individual self expression which is supposed to be what makes us happy, is therefore inherently a bad thing. Further, their implicit belief is that the greatest gift of modernity has been the establishment of those so-called universal human rights which supposedly do away with the need for any such arbitrary social norms.

Okay, let's stop it right there for a moment. And go back to the discussion of the last episode which concerned the process in Mesopotamia and other early centers of civilization, whereby those groups of 150 slowly glommed together into ever larger groups. Now, as I pointed out, although a highly aggressive chieftain or tribe could in the short term subdue other tribes, in the long term it was the establishment of that broad set of common social norms which would create those stable larger groups. And the less arbitrary, bizarre and 'unfair' those social norms were, the less stress they would ultimately cause, and the more likely they would be to succeed in the great marketplace of competing societies.

Now once the historical period starts we seem to find continual stories of constant battles and the equally constant rise and fall of kingdoms, replete with the defeat and death of the losers. It's important to note though that these usually unending dramas involved the success or failure of various groups of elites. Through it all, whether it was the peasants tilling the Nile Valley or the peasants tilling the land between the Tigris and Euphrates, both individual lives and the greater society were held together by adherence to those social norms and the culture which had slowly been established.

Then in 550 BC Persia created the ancient world's first empire, which at its greatest extent extended from present day Pakistan and Tajikistan all the way west to Egypt and much of Greece. And Cyrus, Persia's first great king, had the great evolutionary insight to, more or less, allow the elites to continue to live, and to, more or less, keep their society's preexisting social norms.

Just so long as they agreed to adopt a small set of what might be called 'empire norms'.

And then when in 330 BC Alexander the Great conquered Persia, he famously adopted Persian ways and attitudes, and brought them to the West. And then in the 1st Century BC, when Rome consolidated its empire, the genius of its command and control, as I pointed out in Episode 14, was to continue this live and let live attitude towards other cultures.

Indeed, although the Jews under Rome are always presented as the most oppressed of people, you'll recall from your Bible that when Jesus was arrested he was taken under Roman law to a Jewish

court. And it was only after the Jewish court couldn't come up with a verdict that he was brought to Pontius Pilate.

So am I saying that an empire, or any giant agglomeration of people, can therefore exist without a coherent and cohesive and strictly observed set of social norms? No, I'm not. Instead I am saying that empires like Persia and Rome found out that the best way to impose these norms and to make them appear legitimate was not through brute force, but rather through, as it were, osmosis.

For by the 2nd Century AD the Pax Romana and the sense of peace and security which it produced made all eighty million Roman inhabitants, from Northern England to Portugal to Armenia, quite glad to have had a large part of 'Rome' rub off on them. And those barbarians at the gate in the 4th Century? As I noted, most of them were clamoring to get in. To settle down and farm. And to willingly take up those Roman social norms.

Finally, when the Western Empire broke down, and northwestern European civilization collapsed amid the Dark Ages, the glimmer that kept any hope alive was the idea of somehow putting the Humpty Dumpty of empire back together again. And centuries later Voltaire might have sarcastically noted that the Holy Roman Empire was neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire. But the other way to look at the situation is that, even in the midst of relative failure, people still wanted to believe.

Because empires were good. Empires were stable. Empires allowed all sorts of different peoples to live together in peace.

Now those last statements may have struck you as totally off. After all, haven't we all been brought up to believe that an empire is the absolutely worst political set up possible? Loss of freedom, Imperial boot heels, and all that? Well, yes, we have been so brought up. But, once again, should you look into it, you'll find that this belief is also a function of the ideology of liberal democracy. And, interestingly, it all has to do with one of John Stuart Mill's attempts to 'humanize' Jeremy Bentham's original Utilitarianism.

Let me explain. You see, as I keep mentioning, under Bentham's pure vision we are all, like economic man, each independent, self-sufficient, coolly rationalizing consumption organisms. Family considerations, let alone tribal or national ones, don't even enter into it. So to Bentham the 'liberty' implied in 'liberalism' specifically applied only to each individual. Attachments to family or nation were totally artificial constructs.

Mill, on the other hand, even though he basically agreed with the primacy of individual liberty,. also recognized that in practice we do have attachments to larger groups. Which to him was a good and natural thing. So he tried to square this particular circle by deciding that nations, that is naturally occurring ethnic groups, were not only good, but actually ideal. But then it logically followed that empires, which by definition were made up of various ethnic groups, were therefore necessarily evil.

Now from our vantage point it should be easy to see that one man's nation might well be another man's empire. For instance, in the 12th Century the south of France—Provence—had a completely different language, climate, culture, even religion (the Cathars) than the north of France. Yet by the 19th Century no one in Europe thought of France as an 'empire'. But how about the Ottomans, Austro-Hungary, and Russia, all of which were multi-ethnic and all of which had been stable and centrally ruled for at least several centuries? Nope, they were empires, and thus they were bad.

And by the end of the 19th Century this merging of Liberalism and Nationalism was complete. Which meant that when the Balkan region of the Ottoman Empire split into new 'nations' liberals cheered. And when those new nations immediately started wars with one another, the myth was instantly created that these animosities had existed for hundreds of years. And then when ultra-nationalists in Serbia almost singlehandedly started World War I, the myth was created that World War I had been inevitable.

Then at the end of World War I, as a function of this mania for 'nationhood', all of those empires were divided up by the victors into artificial and mostly unstable nation-states. And then all of a sudden Estonia, for instance, which had never existed as a country even in the Middle Ages, now had a sacred right to exist. And in the Middle East, where Jews, Christians, and Muslims had under the Ottomans co-existed peacefully for hundreds of years, there was now created the instant myth that they had hated each other all of that time.

Because no way could any of this be the result of Liberalism.

Anyway, since this is the Science part, I don't want to get bogged down in History. And we'll be getting back to all of this when I take up the history thread again.

Just one final observation, though. Because it also turns out that John Stuart Mill concluded that personal liberty was a precious gift which only white people were ready for. Which is why even though, say, the Austrian Empire was an abomination, the British Empire, which ruled mostly non-white people, was just fine and dandy. After all, even though India and China both had literate,

coherent civilizations stretching back thousands of years, still the so-called ‘oriental mind’ was just not capable of the rational and independent thought required for granting personal liberty.

Anyway, now it’s time to sum up the central points of this episode.

First, although classical civilizations explicitly held that their major justification for existence was the creation of social harmony, the legacy of the Age of Enlightenment is that almost by definition social harmony cannot exist. After all, there must always be an inherent tension between social control and the need for individual liberty.

Second, what holds us together in groups larger than the 150 or so dictated by our cranial capacity, the social glue, as it were, is the adoption and internalization of specific social norms. That is to say, there isn’t some mystical ‘German’ or ‘French’ ethnic essence. Rather it is a specific set of internally held and mutually observed social norms which create the German or French mindset or ‘nation’.

Third, the logical end point of this slow historical process of agglomeration is an empire. Nor, as the Persians and then the Romans decisively showed, need an empire be brutal in establishing its norms. All that you really need do is to co-opt the elites by making it relatively easy for them to, as it were, join the team. And then the rest of the population will follow.

Because—and not to put too fine a point on it—but here’s the problem with John Stuart Mill and liberal democracy. Because he *was* trying to square a circle by allowing for nationhood. For if you carry through on the concept of personal liberty, in the end you must return to Jeremy Bentham’s position: Any social norm, whether it’s saluting the flag or banning homosexuality, is inherently interfering with personal liberty. And if there’s anything that is sure about the last fifty years or so, it is that the zeitgeist has been following though on that Benthamite concept of personal liberty. So that if nationhood is defined by mutually observed social norms, then in the end liberal democracy must emphatically deny the existence of nationhood.

So that, for all of John Stuart Mill’s attempts to humanize Utilitarianism, in the end we are back to Jeremy Bentham’s original vision of atomized, pleasure seeking, pain avoiding, emotionally unattached consumption units. Which may or may not be what you personally desire.

Just bear in mind, though, that Science is not ideology. Science is science. And what I am saying is that science says that not only are we are hypersocial animals, but that what literally holds us together in groups larger than 150 is that social glue which arises from mutually observed social norms.

And that, since we are those hypersocial animals, then dissolving that social glue is going to inevitably lead to some very bad outcomes.

Which we'll get into a bit in the next episode. But mostly in the next episode we're going to be covering one final aspect of this hypersocial thing. The crowning proof. What ties it all together, as it were.

Of course, though, you will have to wait for the next episode to find out.

In the meantime, however, I would once again like to thank you so much for so far having listened.