

EPISODE 57

EBB TIDE

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is Episode number 57 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Now last episode I covered that brief period in the early '70's when it looked to all the world that, in effect, the counter-culture had won. The artificial was out and the natural was in. There was broad based support for cleaning up the environment, for peace instead of war, and for one's life to encompass much more than just work and the struggle for money and possessions. From the smarmy ubiquity of the happy face to the seriousness of the growing detente between East and West, it really seemed as if a significant corner had been turned. Even politicians were growing their hair long and their sideburns bushy.

But then, as we all know, it all evaporated. By the late '70's disco, heavy metal, and punk had replaced the proverbial 'Peaceful, Easy Feelings' from the beginning of the decade. Style was fast replacing substance. And cocaine had replaced LSD as the drug that was defining a generation. By the mid 1980's artificiality had come roaring back. Greed was good. The best and the brightest now were figuring out new and devious ways to manipulate financial markets. And Jimmy—I'll never lie to you—Carter had long been replaced by Ronald—I'll lie to you with a smile on my face—Reagan.

And nowadays those early Sixties, which had seemed so plastic and untenable back then, instead seem like some quaint, slow paced memories of yesteryear. Fifteen cent hamburgers and service station attendants filling your car for you.

So how did this happen? How did this return to Nature, this belief in a wholistic life of meaning and spirit, which seemed so right and so clearly superior to artificiality back then, collapse, as it were, without a fight? If the real was so much more satisfactory than the fake, how come the fake ended up triumphing so easily and so completely?

Anyway, what we're going to try to do this episode is to attempt an explanation. And, don't worry, there will be no shortage of reasons and no shortage of culprits to blame.

But I think that perhaps the best way to approach the explanation is to compare and contrast both the underlying conditions and the modes of expression between the two different ‘revolutionary’ reactions to Scientism and Artificiality which I have covered: The Romantic Era, which started around 1800 and which lasted, in various forms, up until World War I, and what we might call the Greening of America period, which only lasted little more than half of a decade.

So, first, let’s examine some of the reasons why the Romantic Era took hold so easily, and then continued for so relatively long.

Now you’ll recall from the Science section that it turns out that we humans are born with an innate moral code. But you’ll also recall that, first of all, the understanding that we are in the midst of a Cambrian moment means that the code is not permanently set in each and every one of us. And, second, that because of our free will we can with relative ease break that moral code in order to follow our various selfish desires. Therefore Religion, while not absolutely necessary for morality, is nonetheless, in combination with social norms, an extremely valuable adjunct so as to enforce morality throughout an entire society.

And in 1800 the entire West had been adhering to a pretty ironclad and unchanging Christian moral code for some 750 years, ever since the start of the High Middle Ages. Even during the incredibly disrupting and violent Reformation, just about every new Protestant sect which came along loudly insisted that they were not questioning that basic Christian moral code one bit. Which meant that those relatively few people in the 18th Century who openly flouted this code were looked down upon, if not despised, by the general population. And it also meant that most of the Classical Liberal theorists of the time, when talking about ‘liberty’ and ‘freedom’, assumed a certain set of what I have called ‘implied parameters’, which, unbeknownst to them, derived from that code.

Thus when advocating for Free Speech it never occurred to anyone that Free Speech could possibly include graphic violence. Or pornography. Such ideas were too far beyond the pale to even mention. Even Jeremy Bentham, for all of his radicalism, found the idea of homosexuality, which according to his theory had to be treated the same as all other sexual desires, to be personally disgusting. And if he had known that in the future people would take pleasure—ie collected utiles—by watching snuff films, or ISIS beheading videos, I am pretty sure that he would have withdrawn his theory in horror.

And although in the latter part of the 18th Century the various shades of Deism, hatred of organized religions, and a belief in a soulless, large ‘M’ philosophical Materialist Universe became

common among the intellectual elite, these ideas never really percolated down through the rest of society. The masses still went to mass. The God fearing still feared God.

Next, the Age of Enlightenment itself also had extremely shallow roots. As you'll recall from the History section, it never even took hold in America, whose Founding Fathers were working off of John Locke's playbook from the 1600's. And the one true American radical, the Englishman Tom Paine, ended up being thoroughly discredited and despised by his countrymen

Further, in England Enlightenment thinking never went much past the coffee house, discussion group stage. By and large, the landed ruling class was far more rural and conservative. And although the merchants and the proto-Capitalists were growing in size and in power, mere money making still had a strong whiff of greed and unseemliness about it.

It was in France, with its power structure highly centralized in Paris, and with its several decades of increasingly salacious attacks in the press on the powers that were, where these Enlightenment ideas took off. And although the first leaders of the Revolution were trying, as good Classical Liberals, to duplicate both the American and English systems, with a reasonable Republic and a Constitutional Monarch, the speed with which the mob took over, along with the thousands of heads rolling off the guillotine and the millions then dead in the endless ensuing wars with the rest of Europe, convinced everyone everywhere that Liberalism in general was way too scary a proposition.

On top of all that, in 1800 most of Europe's population—including England's—was still rural. Which meant that most people had never gotten away from the natural and the simple. So that when the intellectual elite turned away from Scientism and sterile rationality, they were merely affirming what was already the norm throughout the countryside. Thus the new Romantic mindset was in fact hardly revolutionary. And it also happened to somewhat dovetail with the mindset of much of England's ruling class, those landed gentry with their preexisting rural values and aesthetics.

Finally, one should remember that the typical 19th Century person, whether male or female, exhibited far more self discipline than someone of today, if for no other reason than that, absent labor saving devices, a lot more labor had to be exerted day in and day out. And this extended to the upper classes as well. Students were still learning Greek, Latin, and higher math, and entering University, by the age of fourteen. Many of that century's writers and intellectuals thought nothing of walking fifty miles to have dinner with a friend. Or even just for personal contemplation or for working out a novel's plot or a scientific theory.

Now let's contrast that with the situation in 1970. Because America had always been that curious amalgam of both being sincerely religious, but also being captivated by small 'm' materialism. And for most of the 20th Century, even though in theory Americans still believed in mom, apple pie, and small town values, in reality by 1960 both increasing urbanization and increasing industrialization had resulted in almost everyone fully internalizing that artificial life which was completely cut off from Nature. Which meant that for anyone to come along now and espouse a life radically different from this really was revolutionary.

What's more, in this milieu there was no natural constituency or place left for Back To Nature types to return to. In the early 1800's Wordsworth could rent a cottage in the Lake District and be instantly surrounded by an ongoing pre-industrial society. In 1970 many previously remote wild areas were now holiday resorts. And farms by and large had become large and highly mechanized affairs. So that if anyone were to attempt to go Back To Nature they were pretty much on their own. And they would have to figure it out all for themselves.

Or consider the effects of this new, glorious vision of Simplicity and Authenticity on an advanced Capitalist industrial system. For no matter how mentally and emotionally appealing the notion of Peace and Love might be to folks at large, for society to actually go in that direction would be horrible for business. After all, Love doesn't cost anything. Nor does it lend itself to expensive options or add ons. Where is the profit in that? And Peace? So there goes the entire military industrial complex. But also think for a moment of all the money which is generated off of our fears. And this covers the entire gamut from the obvious, such as men buying guns and burglar alarms out of fear of both real and imagined crime, to the not so obvious, such as women spending small fortunes on everything from makeup to cosmetic surgery, out of fear of being rejected.

Then think about the spending habits of those counter culture types who did take it all the way: The homesteaders actually going back to the land. They chopped their own wood, grew much of their own food. When they did go into town they might buy a large sack of whole wheat flour or a sack of rice, and then go over to the Goodwill store to buy totally usable and practical clothing for their children at 25 or 50 cents a piece. Now what would happen if everyone started doing this? The total collapse of the economy.

And I'm not getting Marxist on you all of a sudden and blaming everything on economic forces. Nor am I suggesting that evil captains of industry got together and secretly plotted the downfall of Simplicity. But the plain fact is that a modern industrial Capitalist system can only continue growing

insofar as somehow it can get people's unnecessary desires to keep expanding. And the more that you can process an item, the more options which you can add to a product, or the higher status that you can confer to it, then the higher the profit margin. No one makes any money off of the basically equipped economy car.

As an extremely small example: Right now if you buy a fifty pound sack of brown rice, it comes out to around 20 cents a pound. To buy a one pound box of Rice Krispies, however, costs around \$3.25. And a pound box of puffed rice cost around \$4.80. As they say, you do the math.

And it's not like 'Capitalist' is even the proper term to use in all of this. Because that makes it seem as if there is a Daddy Warbucks somewhere who is ultimately responsible, and not the rest of us who have bought into such a system. Because let me remind you yet once again that the concept of 'Capitalism' as it is used in this regard is merely a function of Utilitarianism. As is the phrase most of us prefer to use: Personal Freedom. For both ideas in the end arise from that foundational assumption of the Liberal Democracy which was derived from Utilitarianism: Namely that Selfishness, Self Interest, is the basis for happiness. And that the more and disparate pleasures which we consume, then the happier we will be. Just always remember that the guy making the stuff and selling it can only exist if you the consumer is there wanting to buy it. You can't have one without the other.

So these were some of the headwinds which anyone who wanted to change the world was up against. Even when, in the beginning of the decade, much of the rest of the world was cheering them on. For what would be involved would be far more difficult than just getting a job, and then showing up and being told what to do. Not only would those headwinds have to be fought, but at the same time new foundations would have to be laid, new methods of co-operative endeavors would have to be worked out, and an entirely new economic ecosystem would have to be built. So that even with the best of intentions and the best of plans, this was going to take a lot of energy, a lot of focus, and a lot of discipline.

Unfortunately the people who were so eager to change the world didn't have much of any of these qualities.

Let's start with discipline. Because so much of the 20th Century and its many labor saving devices had conspired to make almost the entire population of the country, especially when compared to populations from previous centuries, pretty damn lazy. And the relative postwar prosperity meant

that many of the younger generation had never experienced any real hardship. Not only did people not walk fifty miles at a stretch any more, but now any distance more than a few blocks was usually driven.

Then consider some of the less desirable effects of the drugs which were being taken. First, the LSD experience had been an instantaneous transport to another world and another consciousness. So the reality of putting a lot of effort in order to attain anything, whether it was accessing a natural high or creating that new, better world, while overwhelmingly attractive in theory, was not nearly so appealing when the drugs had to be put down and one had to then sit in meditation for hours at a time, or one had to lift the hammer and nail the wood, and measure precisely, and mix and pour the concrete. Probably far worse, the widely smoked marijuana may certainly have been a better buzz than drinking alcohol, or taking speed, or downers. But one thing which it was most definitely not good for was that old get-up-at-seven-in-the-morning work ethic.

And then, on top of this, consider that one of the stranger aspects of the whole Sixties awakening was that there had been no leaders, no blueprints to follow, no master plans. Instead it had seemed like literally millions of people had almost magically all sort of reached the same conclusions more or less individually and simultaneously.

Sort of, that is. Because when around 1970 the straight world basically said, ‘You young Peace and Love types are right. So where do we go from here?’, no one really had the slightest idea of what to do next. And perhaps the implicit thought was that the next phase would be just like the last one: Individual men and women would decide on their own to forsake the cities for the countryside. And groups would then gradually and naturally aggregate, and all those new modes of being and behavior would organically develop, without the need to deliberate or agonize over tough decisions.

Well, it didn’t work out that way. Because although the ‘back to the land’ fantasy was undeniably widespread, the number of people who actually followed through on it was tiny. And for those who did, the majority soon found that life in the country not only consisted of hard and repetitive labor, but that in practice it was way more boring than their previous urban life had been. So that ‘back to the land’ turned out to be nothing but fantasy.

And for those who had stayed behind in the cities? For them it soon turned out that ‘right livelihood’—meaningful and useful jobs—were few and far between in an advanced industrial Capitalist society. What’s more, so many of those who had originally dropped out now lacked the qualifications for anything other than humdrum work, which was even more boring than being back on the land. Which meant that many went back to school and got some professional degree, as in law.

And many of those people no doubt convinced themselves that they would now be able to reform the greater society from within.

Of course, the conviction that this was impossible is why they had dropped out in the first place. And it did turn out that in practice even jobs which were theoretically meaningful and/or useful were in practice usually surrounded by a workplace culture which more or less existed so as to enforce conformity and resist change. After all organizations, like most organisms, can only be successful if they can replicate themselves. Which meant that those who chose that path ended up becoming the organization men (and women) that they had sworn never to be.

And in a few short year the new yuppie social class would be born.

But let's take a short break now. Because before we continue on with how this tide of positive change receded, I want to make a short detour into the realm of pharmacology.

You see, serotonin (also known by its chemical shorthand 5 dash HT) is, along with dopamine, which we've already discussed, another one of those neurotransmitters which is fundamental to the proper functioning of both the brain and life itself. But as opposed to dopamine, which is associated with the anticipation of pleasure, serotonin is associated with a positive frame of mind. And anti-depressants, such as Prozac and Zoloft, do their work by increasing levels of serotonin in the brain.

However, although dopamine pathways and functions are fairly well understood, there is still quite a bit of mystery surrounding serotonin, and it seems to be involved in all sorts of other functions. For instance, over 90% of the serotonin in one's body is found in the gut, and is somehow connected to the digestive process.

What's more, even after all these years, there is even more mystery surrounding what's going on when we ingest LSD or other psychedelic drugs. Yes, we know that these all, in one way or another, attach themselves to 5-HT receptors. But as to why that should produce such strange and unique effects, this is still a large blank area.

At any rate, what this connection to serotonin means in practice is that someone on LSD may well have intense experiences with their senses. But this is of a necessarily different quality from that of someone who experiences a rush of pleasure enhancing dopamine. And it also comes along with all sorts of abrupt changes to the mind and consciousness which are far more profound than any heightening of the senses. Which translates to, as I've said, that LSD is not exactly a party drug. And it was not therefore a drug which those stereotypical Playboy swingers would have wanted any part of.

The pharmacology of cocaine, on the other hand, is very well known. Especially its effect on the dopamine transporter protein. You see, this protein is what takes dopamine from a nerve synapse back into storage, more or less. And cocaine strongly blocks it, which causes synapse dopamine concentration to increase. Which causes intense pleasure, pure and simple. But the 'high' is relatively short lived, and pretty soon another dose is needed in order to maintain that high. The problem is, though, that the body is not producing any more dopamine than usual. Rather it is using up the dopamine which is usually held in reserve. In other words, to use the vernacular, you are using tomorrow's energy today.

And although we all know by now that continued usage of cocaine causes all sorts of terrible effects, when one first starts out with it there seem to be no problems afterwards. One can get pretty well zonked one night, and then wake up the next morning refreshed, with no hangover and no jittery nerves. So that on the surface it would appear to be the ideal party drug. The ideal drug for that Playboy swinger.

So now let's return to society at large. Because the extremely short half life of New Year's resolutions is one of those cliches which we are all familiar with. And almost all of us at one time or another have become determined to lose that extra weight, or to finally get ourselves into physical shape, only to be back a week or two later sitting on the same couch and munching the same junk food. Well, as I explained in the Science section, the existence of this dopamine reward system has been going on for literally hundreds of millions of years. And one of the problems of being in this Cambrian Moment is that on the one hand we have the free will to discipline ourselves against this, but that on the other hand we also have the free will to find ever more dangerous and addictive dopamine feedback loops to attach ourselves to.

And now let's combine these observations with another point which I've mentioned before. Namely, that Jeremy Bentham equated pleasure with happiness or well being (and, never forget, the entire field of classical economics is based upon this assumption). In terms of brain science, this meant that the Liberal Democracy which was derived from Utilitarianism, if ever allowed to come to full fruition, would create a world where all that existed would be the pursuit of those never ending dopamine feedback loops.

So that if we imagine ourselves back at some time around the year 1973 we would see a society that with all of the best intentions in the world was trying to stop its infatuation with the seemingly easy

life of artificiality, and was sincerely trying to muster the discipline necessary to create healthy new habits of natural living and simplicity.

At the same time, though, for most of those who had been in the vanguard of all this, the newness and immediate experience and revelations of those initial psychedelic experiences had now faded. Because in the end, no matter how meaningful it had been at the time, it *had* been drug induced and therefore temporary. So that it was relatively easy for them to lose that vision. It was easy for them—hell, it was easy for everyone—to return to the belief system and ego structure which they had had before all of this had happened. Which meant that, since they had been brought up being marinated in an educational system, etc., which reeked of those stealth Utilitarian foundational assumptions, soon status, possessions, the flash, the fake all started mattering to them once again.

Which then made everyone in society more than easy targets for the next stage of the process.

Now remember Episode 9? I didn't think so. But in it, among other things, I talked about the concept of Co-optation. Anyway, once again, it's kind of easier to understand than it is to precisely define. It's sort of like taking advertising wordplay, like calling a used car a 'pre-owned car', and turning it into Orwellian wordplay, such as 'War Is Peace'. It's the attempt to take something which is essentially artificial, such as a government agency, and then imbuing it at least superficially with characteristics that had always been associated with something which had been real and natural, such as a voluntary co-operative. Kind of like the pod people in 'Invasion of the Body Snatchers'.

And the example which I used back in Episode 9 was: What if your high school mascot was The Rebel. So that the cheerleaders, the football players, the popular kids, were all Rebels. And you didn't want to be one of them, didn't want to conform. Then what could you call yourself?

So for an entire society to break its resolution, to not properly discipline itself with those healthy habits and that simple living, to make the transition from high minded seriousness back to being that metaphorical lazy oaf stuffing his face with junk food, all of that was going to require a level of self-deceit never before attempted. But... What if you could *pretend* to be having high minded seriousness while still being that metaphorical lazy oaf??

Now remember a point which I have been making throughout these History episodes: That the ascendance of one side never means that the other side just vanishes. For although the early '70's had seen a genuine Greening of America, this doesn't remotely mean that everyone in the country was on board with the concept. And in this instance, for all of the whole wheat bread and all of the Sunshine

Family toys, the levers of power and influence were still firmly in the hands of the so-called straight world. The Establishment, as it was quaintly called back then.

And also never forget that to those who were thoroughly part and parcel of the Liberal Democratic System of Utilitarian Selfishness which had slowly been building up throughout the 20th Century, the true counter culture psychedelic inspired mindset was genuinely revolutionary and threatening. So to convert that crowd would have been like hippies showing up in Moscow and trying to convert the Marxists.

Although, when it came time for the counter-Reformation, as it were, as with any ideology there never needed to be any kind of conscious scheme or conspiracy. All that was needed was to continue following through on those foundational assumptions of Self Interest and both small and large ‘m’ Materialism. In fact, all which was really required was to somehow make the meaningless, artificial world which they were still intent on selling *seem to have* the attributes of the rebel, the non-conformist, the authentic and the natural.

In other words, this was the perfect time and place to perfect the fine art of Co-optation.

Of course, the thrill of the fake didn’t replace the beauty of the real overnight. In 1976 the American Bicentennial, which at any other time in American history would have been a yearlong commercial bonanza, turned out to be a nonentity and a dud. That year’s Winter Olympics had been awarded to Denver. But the good people of Colorado decided that they didn’t want any commercialization of their Rocky Mountains. They wanted Nature instead, and they voted it down.

But by 1977, just as the new breath of fresh air President Jimmy Carter was being inaugurated, cocaine had replaced LSD as the drug of choice. Studio 54 had replaced Be-Ins. Disco had replaced rock and roll.

And you could almost feel the tide starting to turn, the air slowly, and then not so slowly, going out of the balloon. By the summer of 1979 there was a palpable sense of emptiness throughout the entire country. In fact, when even President Carter felt it, and then gave a sort of fireside chat about it, it was later called the ‘malaise speech’, even though he hadn’t even used that particular word.

The revolution was over, and this time the longhairs had lost. Again, though, without having fired a shot.

Now to give you an idea of how this new new, glorious World would operate, let me give you a couple of vivid examples of our postmodern Co-optation.

First, consider Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream. The label shows two bushy, bearded, friendly hippie types, Back To The Land drawings of cows contentedly grazing, and a typeface seemingly lifted from a San Francisco poster from 1968. All pure and natural, right? Except that the product itself is a high fat, and even higher sugar, sensory overload of candy, with many of the standard industrial additives. And the company itself is a wholly owned subsidiary of the giant corporation Unilever.

Or how about the legend of Steve Jobs: A hippie acidhead dropout who spent a year in India, and then became a lifelong vegetarian and Buddhist. Except that he had a nasty temper, and he made an obscenely large fortune (which he kept to himself) by inventing shiny objects which were so highly addictive that users would end up evaporating what short attention spans they still had, would find it impossible to sit still or calm their minds, and would become ever more attached to this physical existence. Which probably wasn't exactly what the Buddha had had in mind.

Anyway, those two examples are about the least of it. Most of the Co-optation which would come to dominate this postmodern world would be a lot harder to notice and a lot more sinister.

But that's for the next episode. Because once again it is time for this episode to be over.

In the meantime, though, it is also time once again to thank you once again for so far having listened.