

EPISODE 63

SHORT OF UTOPIA

Hi there. Welcome to the beginning of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is Episode number 63 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Now a few episodes ago I said that from here on out I was going to attempt to be as positive as possible. After all, what I'm trying to do here is to offer you a plausible, yet also upbeat, vision of the future.

At the same time, though, I've got to keep it real. And I don't want to be promising cake and ice cream when what really needs to be done is that everyone has to learn to eat their spinach. And so last episode I had to maybe bum you out a little by reminding you that not only is more democracy not the answer, but that in the larger scheme of things Democracy itself really doesn't make all that much sense.

And the reason that I had to do this is that, no matter how much I've been kind of making that point throughout, still it has been drilled into most of our heads almost since birth that 'democracy' is the magical answer to all of our problems. Further, we have all been taught that all 'democracies' are by definition Good, and that all other forms of government are by definition Bad. But I can tell you from my personal experience of having been to just about every country on Earth that this is simply not the case.

What's more, I believe that I can also make the same case both from just looking at history and also from examining the theory behind Democracy. Which I tried to do last episode.

And I hope that I was clear in that I am not saying that Democracy under all circumstances is wrong. As I stated, if we were indeed a nation where every citizen was interested, serious, well informed, and rational, then I would have nothing against it. But in the real world, except for relatively small homogenous groups, that has never happened. Moreover, given both human nature and natural human interests, it probably never will happen. Further, as I went over way back in Episode 2, there is a world of difference between the ad hoc semi-democratic system which the United States started out with, and the ideology of the innate goodness of Selfishness, which calls itself Liberal Democracy, which the word 'democracy' is associated with today.

So that when Alexis de Tocqueville visited America in 1831, before the doctrine of Liberal Democracy had even been invented, he found much to admire. (He also, by the way, found much which concerned him.) And back when I was growing up, when elites still mostly chose Presidential candidates, and when most high schools still had mandatory Civics classes, the system which ran the country still kind of made sense.

But that was then. This is now. Today we are like those Romans in the 1st Century B.C. that I described in Episode 14. Back then not only had Rome unwittingly become an Empire, but its centuries' old 'small city-state' virtues and norms had evaporated. And the Senators who ruled Rome had become exclusively aristocratic, hereditary, and totally corrupted. Still the politicians and other leaders of society, of whatever stripe, kept willfully ignoring how the reality had changed around them. Instead they kept spouting the same old banal bromides and platitudes about restoring classical Roman 'Republican values'. The result was a gridlocked, 'do nothing' Senate, and even more bribery and corruption. Then in short order Julius Caesar, of necessity, declared himself ruler. He was soon assassinated, he was then replaced by an Emperor, who was then followed by that succession of sadistic and insane Emperors, such as Nero and Caligula.

Anyway, what I am trying to do here is to give us at least a shot in ensuring that something like this doesn't happen here.

So now let's change tack just a little bit. And let me share with you my vision of Utopia.

If I had my druthers, my ideal society would take place in the countryside. Men and women would treat each other as brothers and sisters. They would all be industrious and sober, and their social intercourse would be calm and low key. Furtherance of knowledge and of science would be prized, and trivial entertainments would be discouraged. Mental and physical fitness would be central to their lives. Cooperation and social harmony would be stressed, and when disagreements arose or individuals strayed from proper behavior, the emphasis would be on firm but gentle correction. When not engaged in useful labor individuals would be free to pursue creative endeavors or healthy recreation.

But let's face it. That ain't gonna happen. Especially any time soon. And by 'any time soon' I mean, under the best of circumstances, probably any time within the next century.

You see—and this is both the extremely depressing reality about the world today and also an extremely important point about a possible world of the future—at this stage in the degradation of our society all of us, myself included, have become so polluted by the pornographic, violent, and all other

manners of ugliness which these days pass for entertainment and culture and thought and everything else, that it's probably impossible for us to ever really wash ourselves clean of it, to purge our minds of it, and to therefore be at all eligible to even attempt to live at such a level of social harmony.

I mean, just maybe maybe minds can be washed clean. Just maybe we can unsee what we have seen. Just maybe virginity can be restored. Just maybe we can wash away this sin. Just maybe a mass religious conversion of some sort can take place, and Grace can descend upon us all.

But I'm not holding my breath.

Now some of you might interject with something like, 'But you keep harping on the idea that we are not just social animals, but hypersocial ones. Aren't you contradicting yourself now?' And to this I reply, Remember that Cambrian Moment analogy. We may be a hypersocial species, but each of us little individuals has always been on some kind of a knife edge. Free will and all that. What's more, as I have pointed out before, our brains are quite a bit larger than that of ants, and, further, our bodies and personalities are in no way clones of each other. And biologists are correct in pointing out that, outside of those alien insect creatures such as ants, which have been hypersocial in their own way for over a hundred million years, all other animals have always more or less been in it only for themselves. And we humans have only been truly hypersocial for probably less than ten thousand years, what with the first mass groupings in Egypt and Mesopotamia. So that we are, in effect, only in the first stages of this hypersocial thing. And things can still definitely go wrong.

Which, again, is the whole point of the Cambrian Moment analogy. Because also remember those illustrations of the Burgess Shale fossils. There were a lot of really weird ass animal species back then that just didn't make it. And for all we know we're just another one of those species, another dumb experiment by Mother Nature.

So I wasn't just bloviating to hear myself bloviate when, during the History section, I kept extolling the virtues of what I have called Classical civilization. Because all of them, East and West, were structured so as to maximize social harmony and social altruism, and minimize the negative effects of selfishness and individuality. And, further, no matter what you might think of their particular theologies, the same can also be said of the major World Religions.

And, strangely enough, even ideologies which we consider totally evil, such as Communism and the Nazis, still preached that individuals should strive to selflessly work for the betterment of humanity in general, or of the German race in particular. In either case towards something greater or more meaningful than the individual Self. While it is only Liberal Democracy which outright preached

that not only was Selfishness actually good, but that one should ceaselessly work towards the betterment of one's own personal Self. So that, even if you disagree with me about, say, the innate perniciousness of pornographic and/or violent imagery, surely you should agree that scrubbing this doctrine of the Holiness of Selfishness out of the minds of hundreds of millions of people is not going to be any kind of easy matter.

So, again, maybe in a hundred years this can be accomplished. But it's probably, under the best of circumstances, still going to be a long slog. In the meantime we're going to just have to accept the fact that we are all damaged goods. And just as a person who weights five hundred pounds has to understand that they can't lose all of that weight tomorrow, and just as someone who joins a 12 step program has to accept that they just have to do it one day at a time, so, too, we all are going to have to realize that the changes which we need to make are going to have to be small and steady.

I mean, back in the 19th Century those few people who did ever seriously try for even a partial vision of Utopia found that living it, actually being socially harmonious in a conscious, voluntary way, was easily the most difficult thing for themselves and for their fellow humans to do. And right now, here in 2020? I'm afraid that you're way beyond kidding yourself if you think that it is possible.

Okay. It's been a while since I've told you one of those interesting stories which you might not have been aware of. So let's slightly change direction once again.

Although, before we do that, let me make a sort of preamble. Because, as I've mentioned before, I'm one of those people who really hates having other people telling me what to do. I've always almost instinctively been a natural born non-conformist. And I've gotten into any amount of trouble throughout my life because of this.

Further, probably because of this personality trait, I've always assumed that under any totalitarian system, right or left, I'd be one of the first people who they came for. So that, all in all, and almost needless to say, I've never been remotely pro-Communist.

But, as I've also previously mentioned, when I've thought about it I've realized that what's really going on is that I hate being told to do really dumb or unnecessary things. I really have no problem at all with reasonable requests stated in a reasonable manner. Thus, if we're in the middle of a pandemic, I will quite willingly wear a face mask.

Anyway, with all of that in mind, let's go back to the story.

You see, as a direct descendant of the Age of Enlightenment Marxism, like Liberal Democracy, assumed that in the end economic interests determined human behavior. The two ideologies just had different takes on that assumption. In either case, though, particular cultures or national characters didn't matter. Thus Marxism, like Liberal Democracy, like Utilitarianism, assumed that, once it was implemented, then a globalist 'one size fits all' set of rules and regulations would obviate the need or desire for any localized culture and/or particular nation-state. Now we know, since we remember it from the Science section, that being those hypersocial creatures that we are, then if we remove the social glue that jointly held norms and behavior foster, we each end up becoming lonely, isolated, and atomized. And then our society falls apart, whether we are committed believers in Marxism or we are committed believers in Liberal Democracy.

Well, Mao Zedong was a committed Marxist from 1920, so he didn't know any of that. So that when he and his Communists took over China in 1949 he saw the existing Chinese culture, especially its over two thousand year long commitment to Confucian ethics, as a great impediment to the proper implementation of his Marxist ideology. And this strong desire to eliminate any traces of Confucian thought from the Chinese mind reached its highest point during the Cultural Revolution of the late Sixties.

And by the time of his death in 1976 Chairman Mao had thought that the people who he had chosen to succeed him, including the infamous Gang of Four, would continue to implement this destruction of Confucianism. But the Gang of Four, and others, were outmaneuvered by another longtime Communist, someone who had been sidelined during the Cultural Revolution, named Deng Xiaoping. And Deng had concluded during his years out of power that economic prosperity was far more important for the Chinese people than was rigid adherence to abstract and totally unproven 19th Century Marxist theories of internationalist 'ethics'. Which is why, once in power, he launched his idea of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'.

Now here in the West that phrase is usually interpreted as a cynical attempt by the Chinese Communist Party to justify ditching Marxist economics while still maintaining the dictatorial control of a Marxist regime. But this was not what Deng was trying to do. Instead he was recognizing that the egalitarian aims of Socialism, plus maintaining government control over critical infrastructure and enterprises, such as banking, steel manufacture, and making sure that the trains ran on time, as well as providing centralized planning and generalized allocating of resources, could all be done while still

deferring to the long Chinese tradition of individualized initiative and personal pursuit of the accumulation of wealth.

For, as I've mentioned before, we may believe in our Western arrogance that Orientals are essentially a mindless communal horde lacking in individual personalities. But anyone who has spent time there knows that the range of personalities and personality types in China might well be even greater than here in the West. Further, although some of us might idealize ancient Chinese wisdom and all, the reality is that Chinese culture has always been heavy on the small 'm' materialism, and that in their popular religious culture prayers to the gods for wealth have always been at the top of the list.

So Deng realized that it was useless and destructive to try to force a billion Chinese to adopt Marxism's substitution of an artificial globalized 'ethics' which was based on Western 18th Century Age of Enlightenment strange hyper-individualist theories. Much better to continue with, and adapt when necessary, those Confucian principles and ethics of ideal family life and ideal harmony between the government and the governed which had seemed right and just to the Chinese culture for over two thousand years.

So, for inspiration, Deng looked to the wider world around him. And he soon found an ideal working model to copy: The island city-state of Singapore, that thoroughly modern and prosperous country which I discussed in the last episode. And Singapore was conveniently run along Confucian principles, not Age of Enlightenment ones. So that soon some of the best and brightest of the young minds of the Communist Party were sent to study under Lee Kwan Yew, the Overseas Chinese 'inventor' of the Singapore model. And from that point on, it was Singapore, not Moscow or Marx or Lenin, which was the foundation upon which, from the early 1980's on, the miracle of modern China was built.

And 'miracle' doesn't even come close to describing it. Since the 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' started in 1979, China has *averaged* economic growth of 9.5% a year, year in and year out. The World Bank, as Western and as Capitalist as you can get, has called it 'the fastest sustained growth by a major economy in history'. Its GDP has doubled every eight years, which means that in just 32 years it has gotten 16 times larger. 800 million people have been lifted out of poverty, and China's economy (in purchasing power) is now the world's largest.

What's more, its modernity has to be seen to be believed. In fact, with its giant network of high speed trains, its brand new airports, its digitalization of its economy, etc., in many ways it has completely surpassed us. And here's the thing: If you were suddenly plunked down in the middle of,

say, Beijing or Shanghai you would never, without being told beforehand, guess that the place was Communist. Bright shiny buildings, bright shiny billboards, people walking around seemingly without a care in the world, and (assuming that they knew English) willing to talk to you about just about any subject in the world. The reality on the ground is about as far as one can get from our hackneyed image of a 'police state'.

Now I'm not claiming to be an expert in Chinese history or Chinese culture. But I have been there a number of times: In 1982, when they first opened up to any kind of tourism; in 1986 when Tibet was first opened up; in 2002, in 2006, and in 2010. In 1982 the train ride from Hong Kong to Guangzhou passed endless rice fields with bent over coolies in their conical hats. The brand new Communist era tourist hotel which I stayed at had plumbing which didn't work and floor to ceiling cracks in its guest rooms. Four years later, in 1986, there were well built Western style hotels in all the major cities. By 2002 the mega-city of Shenzhen had replaced those rice fields, and now we passed mile after endless mile of thirty story apartment buildings stretching to the horizon. As for the people, in 1986 almost everyone that you had to deal with were almost comically rude. By 2006, at least in Shanghai and Beijing, almost everyone was intelligent and helpful.

So am I saying that I want us to become like China? Well, not exactly. For one thing, my culture does not have Chinese characteristics. For instance, as I've mentioned once before, the 'freedoms' enjoyed by the typical Chinese citizen of today may seem constrained to us. But, considering Chinese history, this is far more freedom than the typical Chinese citizen had ever known in the past. What's more, I know from both personal experience and from reading unbiased surveys that the vast majority of Chinese people don't feel constrained. Yes, for instance, the government has built an internet firewall which keeps out Facebook and Google. But this firewall also keeps out both pornography and ISIS beheading videos. And although with a little bit of effort Chinese people can bypass this firewall, in reality to the vast majority of people it isn't worth the effort. After all, there are at least 200 different television stations in China. There are also homegrown versions of Facebook and Google and the like. And, just like back in high school, the vast majority of people care far more about gossip and entertainment and shopping and even high culture than they do about politics.

Because—and sorry if I'm repeating myself—but here is the larger issue: Just because a bunch of men in 18th Century England liked to sit around, get high on caffeine and tobacco, and then argue politics back and forth doesn't mean that the rest of humanity should be expected to be into that. And

what makes the whole issue even dumber is that there was that other 18th Century conceit that if you just had the right set of rules and regulations in place—in other words, the right ideology/philosophy—then you would no longer need to wrestle with the hard work of wisdom and justice and fairness, and all of those other hard to quantify qualities.

This is indeed nonsense on stilts. And it is one of our largest problems in attempting to understand the world today. Believers in Liberal Democracy continue to insist that ‘democracy’ is some wonderful, magical cure all. And then they reflexively demonize any system which is not Liberal Democracy, regardless of how stable or prosperous it might otherwise be. Likewise those few remaining believers in Marxism still believe Communism to be some wonderful, magical cure all. Really, it’s like different religions arguing over whose tautological belief system is correct, rather than over which one is actually producing devout, humble, loving, and, well, religious adherents.

And as for ‘freedom’... Well, I would hate to, as I did with Democracy, trash the concept. But I recall being in Chile during the Pinochet dictatorship. And I was talking to a small corner store owner, who was no fan of the regime. But he pointed to a bunch of men just standing around on a downtown corner doing nothing. And he said, ‘In Los Angeles those men would be arrested as vagrants. Because in the United States you don’t have the freedom to just stand around on a downtown corner doing nothing.’ Which definitely made me pause to consider.

Further we have this fantasy here in the U.S. that we are among the few people in the world who are allowed to speak their minds. (Which is especially ironic in this age of Political Correctness.) But I have traveled a thousand miles from one end of Cuba to the other. And some people there really liked the regime, and some people really hated it. But none had any hesitation in telling me their opinion. Likewise I have been to Turkmenistan, which has been deemed, next to North Korea, as the most repressive place on Earth. Even there no one had any problem conveying to me their opinions. And a young gypsy cab driver was even eager to share all of his latest Eminem hip hop tapes with me. Now I was also in the Soviet Union in 1982, when people did look reflexively over their shoulders before saying anything, so I know what that is like. But in today’s world, especially in so-called Communist states such as China or Vietnam, that’s just not what’s going on any more.

So kindly follow me on this train of thought. Because you’ll remember my point that, sociologically speaking, by definition, for any group to exist, even a group as simple as a stamp club, there has to be a set of rules which members have to follow. Which means that, again by definition, any society can be viewed as authoritarian. Especially by people who are outside that society.

And let's also remember just about the first point ever made in this podcast: That observation by the Ancient Greek philosopher Herodotus some 2500 years ago, that every society on Earth has a different set of beliefs. And that each society thinks that their set of beliefs is the correct one, and all other sets of beliefs are wrong.

So now let's add a corollary to that as regards Freedom. Because every society which exists is also its own unique collection of certain freedoms and certain constraints. And not only does every society believe that its set of freedoms is the correct one, and all other sets are wrong, but that also, and almost without exception, every society also sees its particular constraints as not constraints at all, but instead perfectly reasonable ways to keep said society sane and upright.

As a for instance: Here in the United States I am definitely not free to indulge myself in fantasies of child porn, let alone actual pedophilia. But for me and for the vast majority of other Americans, since we truly believe that child porn is horrible and disgusting, we sincerely don't want that 'freedom' to be available. But, as you'll recall from Episode 13, those same Ancient Greeks in Athens who we respect as founders both of rational inquiry and of Democracy, not only indulged themselves in fantasies of child porn, but actually engaged in male pedophilia as part and parcel of their culture. So that they would have considered our society to be horribly unFree and repressive.

And if you have trouble wrapping your mind around that example, let me give you a slightly more contemporary one. When, in 1992, I was in the Soviet Union while it was in the midst of falling apart, I met this very nice, well meaning lady. And she told me about how, when she was a little girl in the early 1950's, she used to cry herself to sleep because she felt so sorry for all the little girls in the West who were unwitting slaves to the crass materialistic culture of Capitalism. And when she grew up she became an interpreter and tour guide for Intourist, the official Soviet travel agency. And while at her job she was only too happy to spy on her tour groups and report anything suspicious to the KGB. After all, the KGB was all that was protecting her fellow citizens from contagion by the filthy lies of Western propaganda.

As I mentioned, she was a very nice, well meaning lady.

Anyway, the broad point which I am trying to make here is: Let's just stop the nonsense of judging a country or a system by some ideological framework from the 18th or 19th Century, which didn't make that much sense then, and which is certainly meaningless when compared with the actual realities of the 21st Century. And just as we should judge the efficacy of a religion by how virtuous its

followers are—in other words, not by their talk but by their walk—so, too, do we need to use the same approach when we are trying to figure out which system, with its particular combination of freedoms and restraints, is best suited for the post postmodern world.

Because, as I've been saying, I don't want to be in the position of all of those other social critics and futurists and whomevers. For over the years I've read any number of their analyses and 'solutions'. And I've yet to find one that seemed remotely plausible and/or doable. After all, as I've also said any number of times, most of these writers in the end are just reiterating a belief in their pre-existing ideology, the theory of which has already been obviously proved to be wrong by the plain fact that the world around them which they are criticizing was built upon the foundation of that ideology.

Either that or they're laying out some airy-fairy and/or impossibly Utopian dream vision. And, as I covered earlier in this episode, short of there being an incredibly merciful personal God who has some sort of Divine Plan, given how much we've all been suckered into this belief in Selfishness, I just don't see how any of that can happen.

Nor do I want to make a claim that there is some obvious economic fix, such as a guaranteed income or whatever, that is going to do the trick. And by saying that I am not saying that we don't have severe economic problems, such as income inequality within a nation and even worse income inequality between nations. But to think that there is an economic solution to what ails us is to fall into that trap which underlies both Marxism and Liberal Democracy: Namely that the economic impulse is the central determinant of human nature itself.

Finally, as I've tried to make clear throughout, neither is there any political solution. And I most certainly don't want to trivialize all that I've said so far by signing off on a pledge of restoring our individual freedoms or re-invigorating Democracy or whatever. Because I think that we all know that that ship sailed a long time ago.

So I'm not going to tease you, or insult your intelligence, by laying out some sort of specific plan of attack on how we can get from Here to There. Besides I'm not smart enough to figure out all the details anyway.

What I can do, however, is to draw some kind of generalized road map. What I can do is to sort through all that was covered in the Science section about what, stripped of ideology, we do now know about human behavior and human nature. And use those insights to more or less construct a plausible outline of at least where we should be heading.

So now let's return to China. And Singapore. And those East Asian, Confucian, hypersocial, the group welfare is more important than the individual, values. Because, again, let's try to put our Western arrogance aside. And let's again consider the possibility that we're the ones who have had it wrong these past several centuries, and that they're the ones who've had it right.

Because now we can't even use the excuse that we're more economically advanced, and that this proves that Liberal Democracy is right. After all, the reason that you're coughing isn't just because of all the forest fires, or because of the coronavirus. It's also because Asia is so quickly leaving us in the dust.

Now I am by no means saying that China, Japan, and other East Asian countries are in any way close to being perfect societies. Because, just as in my world travels I have never found a society which doesn't have some redeeming values, I have also never found one which doesn't have some pretty obvious flaws.

Further, as I've said, I wasn't born into two thousand years of Chinese thought and culture. Nor, probably, were you. So us trying to ape having the Chinese thought process isn't going to work any better than China trying to ape Marxist thought or Liberal Democratic thought or any other strange aberrations of Western culture.

So how about this as a solution: Socialism with *American* characteristics.

Okay. I'm not suddenly revealing myself now as a closet Socialist. After all, as I just said a few paragraphs ago that there isn't going to be an economic solution. Rather I was referring to what Deng Xiaoping did: He found a way to be both modern and ultimately collectivist without rejecting longstanding traditional Chinese values. So, likewise, what I am suggesting is that there might well be a way to go forward and create a future which might actually work by creatively staying within the boundaries of longstanding traditional American values.

And exactly how to do this? Well, for that you're just going to have to wait for next time. Because for this time, once again, it is time for me once again to thank you once again for so far having listened.