Episode Book

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When the System Feels Rigged: A 180-Year Pattern

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SYNOPSIS

The feeling that the game is rigged isn't new, and it isn't just a vibe — it shows up in national life tables. Public-health research finds life-expectancy gains stalling across all six major English-speaking countries since roughly 2010, with rising deaths of despair among young and middle-aged adults, and the US as the starkest outlier. This episode traces four earlier moments when a critical mass concluded the system had stopped making sense — 1848, the Gilded Age, the 1930s, and the 1970s — and asks what actually decided whether the outcome was reform or rupture. The answer has less to do with the protesters than with the people holding the levers.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Here's a thing you hear constantly now, and it's usually said with a certain tone, like the person has just figured out something nobody else has noticed.



Herman

The system is rigged.



Corn

Cost of living climbing faster than anyone can run, wages stuck, the whole thing feeling like a casino where you can play your best hand over and over and the house just keeps winning. And the standard reaction is to treat that as a brand new discovery about the modern world.



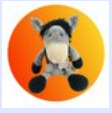
Herman

It isn't new.



Corn

No. Which is not the same as saying it isn't true. Daniel sent us a prompt about exactly this. He describes the current arrangement as a rigged casino, and he's asking the question underneath it, which is whether we've been here before. Have there been clear periods in history where a crescendo of people concluded the system as practised had stopped making sense? What caused those crises of faith? What corrections followed? And what do those periods tell us about the way forward from today, where the mood is an impasse over income inequality and social division that a lot of people assume ends badly.



Herman

That's four questions wearing one coat.



Corn

It's Daniel. He asks in paragraphs.



Herman

The right first move is to check whether the feeling is just a vibe or whether it shows up in hard data. And it does. There's a body of public-health work on mortality that is, frankly, the most alarming economic evidence I've read in years.



Corn

Define the claim before you defend it. What are we measuring?



Herman

Life expectancy. Specifically, the slowdown in life-expectancy gains across the entire English-speaking world. A 2024 paper in the International Journal of Epidemiology, Timonin and colleagues, found that gains in life expectancy have slowed or stalled in all six major English-speaking countries since roughly twenty ten. The United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand. Same pattern in all six.



Corn

Stall is a soft word. What's behind it?



Herman

Rising death rates among young and middle-aged adults. Injuries, which mostly means suicide, and substance-related mortality, which mostly means poisoning. That's the signature Case and Deaton named deaths of despair, and here it is showing up at the level of national life tables.



Corn

So a rich country stops getting healthier, and the group that stops benefiting first is the young.



Herman

Then there's the comparison study. Zheng, van Raalte and Sasson, European Journal of Public Health, published this year. They looked across twenty high-income countries from twenty ten to twenty twenty-one. The US is the outlier. Its gains in premature mortality were entirely offset by rising deaths from drug and alcohol use disorders. Every improvement, cancelled.



Corn

Entirely offset.



Herman

And the US is the only country in that set where lifespan inequality worsened. Meaning the spread between the longest and shortest lives got wider.



Corn

That's a specific and grim piece of accounting. You gained years on one side of the ledger and lost them on the other.



Herman

There's a third piece. Woolf, in the Milbank Quarterly, also this year. US life expectancy is falling behind peer nations and the gap is widening. And his argument isn't really about medicine at all. He says the proximal causes, the overdoses and suicides and homicides and chronic disease, can't be fixed without addressing structural factors, adverse socioeconomic conditions, and public policies that perpetuate health inequities. His line is that it's not a lack of policy solutions but of political will.



Corn

That's the whole thesis of Daniel's prompt in one sentence, and it came from a public-health journal.



Herman

Which is the thing that makes this more than a mood. When the richest country on earth stops adding years to its own citizens' lives, and the deficit is concentrated in deaths of despair among the young, that is the social contract failing in a form you can put in a table.



Corn

Let me push on that, because a skeptic would say life expectancy is a blunt instrument. Wars, pandemics, a bad flu season, those move the number too. How do you know this isn't just noise?



Herman

Fair challenge. The answer is the duration and the cross-country consistency. A bad flu season is a spike and then it recovers. This is a flattening that persists for over a decade across six countries with different health systems, different drug policies, different labor markets. If it were one country you could blame one policy. Six countries with the same language and the same broad economic model pointing the same direction at the same time is a signal about the model, not about any one government.



Corn

So we have the present tense established. The feeling is real and it's measurable. The next move is the one Daniel actually asked for, which is to zoom out and ask whether history has produced this exact signal before, and what happened after.



Herman

It has. Several times, and the mechanisms are distinct enough that I don't want them blurred together. Start with eighteen forty-eight.



Corn

The Springtime of Nations.



Herman

The first modern systemic crisis. The setup was Restoration Europe. After Napoleon, the monarchies put the old order back and rigged the political game so that neither the rising industrial working class nor the frustrated middle class had any path inside the system. Then you get a pile-up. Industrialization's dislocations, the potato famine running from forty-five to fifty-two, harvest failures across the continent, a financial panic in forty-seven, and every one of those landing on a population with no vote, no unions, and no recourse.



Corn

What was the correction?



Herman

The revolutions mostly failed. That's the important part. What they did was force the concessions that followed. Gradual extension of the franchise. The right to organize labor. And then Bismarck's welfare state in Germany in the eighteen eighties, which was a top-down answer to the socialist threat, designed to make the system survivable before the alternative got more attractive.



Corn

So the correction didn't come from the revolution succeeding. It came from the people in charge deciding they'd rather buy off the pressure than fight it.



Herman

Which is a pattern worth flagging now, because it recurs. Next case, the United States, roughly eighteen seventy to nineteen twenty. The Gilded Age into the Progressive Era.



Corn

Robber barons.



Herman

Monopolies, political machines, a Supreme Court that read the commerce clause as narrowly as it could get away with. The feeling was that the game was rigged by men with names you'd recognize. And then the depression of the eighteen nineties added the material pressure, and the Populist and Progressive movements supplied the political vehicles.



Corn

And this one produced actual statutes.



Herman

A pile of them. The Sherman Act in eighteen ninety. The Clayton Act in nineteen fourteen. The income tax via the Sixteenth Amendment in nineteen thirteen. Direct election of senators, Seventeenth Amendment. The FDA. Labor protections. That's the single clearest example of a reformist correction in the whole record.



Corn

Reformist meaning it preserved the system by redistributing leverage inside it.



Herman

It saved capitalism by taming it, and it did so in time to avoid the alternative.



Corn

Then the thirties.



Herman

The deepest one. The crash of twenty-nine discredited classical economics outright. And here's what makes it different from eighteen forty-eight. Fascism and communism were both live, fully-formed total alternatives with states already running on them. Liberal capitalism looked finished. Not rigged. Finished.



Corn

And the correction?



Herman

The New Deal in the US, social democracy in Europe. Deposit insurance. Social Security. The SEC. The Wagner Act. Later Bretton Woods. And the intellectual scaffolding came from Keynes, which matters, because a correction without a theory tends to fall apart the first time it's tested.



Corn

This is the precedent that carries the most weight for Daniel's question.



Herman

It's the most important one, and also the most double-edged. The system did correct. But it corrected only under existential pressure. Nobody in that decade did the New Deal as a matter of good management. They did it because the alternative was on the ballot or in the street.



Corn

Keep going. You said four or five.



Herman

The nineteen sixty-eight to seventies crisis of the postwar settlement. The Golden Age from forty-five to seventy-three had been shared growth, Bretton Woods, the welfare state expanding. Then it hits stagflation, the oil shock in seventy-three, the social upheaval of sixty-eight, and the Keynesian consensus stops describing the world it's in.



Corn

People forget this one was a crisis of confidence in the consensus, not in capitalism generally.



Herman

Right. And the correction that followed is the one that built the world Daniel is complaining about. The Volcker shock. Reagan and Thatcher. Deregulation, globalization, financialization. The pendulum swung the other way, and it's been swinging in that direction for the better part of fifty years.



Corn

So one correction creates the conditions for the next crisis. That's not a footnote, that's the engine.



Herman

Then the fifth, which is the mirror image of the others. Nineteen eighty-nine to ninety-one. The fall of the Berlin Wall.



Corn

The opposite crescendo.



Herman

A critical mass concluded the alternative system had failed. Fukuyama wrote the End of History essay. The correction was the global spread of market liberalism. And that's the irony sitting under all of this. The correction from the last crisis is the system that now feels like a rigged casino.



Corn

One more piece of data before we move to the pattern. Where does distribution sit now?



Herman

Piketty's work and the World Inequality Database. Wealth concentration in the US and globally has returned to levels not seen since the Gilded Age and the Belle Époque, so around nineteen hundred to nineteen fourteen. The top one percent share of US income roughly doubled from about ten percent in the seventies to north of twenty percent now.



Herman (continued)

And there's a piece of IMF work, Ostry and colleagues, that found inequality is associated with lower growth, not higher. Which knocks out the trickle-down defense at the knees.



Corn

That's the bridge back to the present.



Herman

That's the bridge. So we have the pattern, and now the uncomfortable part.



Corn

Start with the rhythm. Is it a rhythm or are we pattern-matching?



Herman

There's a decent argument it's a rhythm. Strauss and Howe's Fourth Turning framing puts the crisis periodicity at roughly sixty to eighty years, and Piketty's own account of inequality has a cyclical structure to it as well. I'd be cautious about treating either as a law. You can find cycles in almost anything if you squint. But the spacing here is at least suggestive. Eighteen forty-eight, the Gilded Age crisis, the thirties, the seventies, and now.



Corn

Roughly every three generations.



Herman

And each time, the mechanism is different, which is the part that stops it from being a simple loop. Famine and franchise exclusion in forty-eight. Monopoly and machine politics in the Progressive Era. Total economic collapse and rival systems in the thirties. Stagflation and a broken intellectual consensus in the seventies.



Corn

Then the taxonomy. You've been circling it.



Herman

Corrections come in two flavors. Reformist, which tames the system and preserves it. And rupture, which replaces it. The Progressive Era and the New Deal were reformist. Eighteen forty-eight and nineteen seventeen were ruptures.



Corn

And what decides which one you get?



Herman

Whether the people holding the levers concede reform before the pressure becomes existential. That's the whole ballgame. Bismarck's welfare state is the cleanest example. He looked at the Social Democrats and decided a pension was cheaper than a revolution.



Corn

Which is why the thirties are the case that should keep everyone up at night. Same crisis of faith, same decade, opposite resolutions.



Herman

The New Deal in the United States. Social democracy in Scandinavia. Fascism in Germany and Italy. Soviet consolidation in Russia. The identical diagnosis, the system has stopped making sense, producing both the most humane expansions of the welfare state in history and the worst political catastrophe in modern memory.



Corn

So the correction is not guaranteed to be benign. That has to be the flat statement.



Herman

It's contested. That's the word. There is no automatic mechanism that sorts a crisis of legitimacy toward the good outcome. It gets sorted by people, in specific rooms, with specific incentives, and sometimes they pick wrong.



Corn

Which brings the mortality data back into focus, because you framed it earlier as a symptom.



Herman

I want to reframe it now as a leading indicator. Look at the sequencing. The stalled life expectancy starts around twenty ten. The deaths of despair concentrate in young and middle-aged adults. That is precisely the profile that preceded past ruptures. Disproportionate mortality among the young is what a society looks like when a generation concludes the game isn't worth playing.



Corn

You're saying the data isn't just describing the problem. It's forecasting the next phase.



Herman

I'd want to hedge that. I don't think anyone can put a number on the probability. But the shape of the signal is familiar, and it's happening in the richest countries in the world, which is what makes it unusual.



Corn

Let me put the pendulum point on the table, because it cuts against the doom.



Herman

Go ahead.



Corn

The neoliberal correction of the seventies and eighties was itself a response to a prior crisis. It wasn't a permanent settlement. It was one answer to one set of problems. There's no law that says the distribution we have now is the distribution we keep. The pendulum has swung back before. It swung the other way for fifty years, which is a long time by human patience and a short time by historical standards.



Herman

And the mechanism of a reformist correction this time is not mysterious. Woolf basically wrote the menu. Deposit insurance, Social Security, the SEC, and the Wagner Act were not utopian. They were specific, targeted, and they got passed. The problem he names isn't a shortage of ideas. It's the political will to prioritize population health over competing interests.



Corn

That's the rigged casino thesis stated in the language of public health.



Herman

And Buffett says it in the language of a rich man at a dinner party. There's class warfare, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning.



Corn

That quote gets passed around because of who said it. It's a hedge fund manager confirming the house always wins.



Herman

Which is a strange thing for the house to admit.



Corn

The house can afford to admit it. That's what being the house means.



Herman

There's one more thing worth saying about the way forward, and it's the least comforting line in the whole episode. The historical record doesn't tell us the correction will be good. It tells us the correction will happen. The system either gets tamed or it gets replaced, and broadly speaking those are the options on the table.



Corn

So the question isn't whether. It's what kind.



Hilbert

I had one. Nineteen ninety-two, I think. A Mercury Sable, and I got the extended warranty because the man in the office said the transmission on those was a known issue.



Corn

You've been sitting there the whole time with a car warranty.



Hilbert

It's relevant.



Herman

Go on.



Hilbert

The warranty was four hundred and eighty dollars. The transmission went at ninety thousand miles, which was about three years in. I take it in, and the service writer tells me the warranty covers the transmission but not the work to get at it. The transmission's covered. The labor to reach the transmission is not.



Corn

The part is insured and the part is unreachable without the thing you're not paying for.



Hilbert

That's what the paper said. I asked him who wrote that, and he said the warranty company, and I asked who owned the warranty company, and he said he didn't know, and I believed him. I paid eleven hundred dollars to have a covered part installed.



Herman

So the coverage was real and it was structured so that the coverage didn't reach the thing that actually cost money.



Hilbert

The man in the office wasn't lying to me either. He sold me a warranty that did what the document said it did. The document just wasn't about the car.



Corn

That's the whole argument in a service bay. The rules are honored and the outcome is still fixed.



Hilbert

I kept the paperwork for a while. I don't have the car.



Herman

What I keep turning over is that there were two layers. The warranty company and the dealer, and the gap between them was where your four hundred and eighty dollars went and also where your eleven hundred came from.



Hilbert

There was a third layer. The warranty company had a reinsurance arrangement. I found out about it later from a man who sold them.



Corn

And nobody at any layer had to do anything dishonest for the whole thing to work out that way. That's the part that maps onto the data. The mortality numbers aren't being produced by villains. They're being produced by a structure that honors every rule and still loses the person at the counter.



Herman

The distinction I was trying to get at earlier, between the system being rigged and the system being broken, mostly dissolves when you look at it from the service bay.



Hilbert

The transmission was fine, by the way. After they got it out.



Corn

Herman, you had a question about the concession.



Herman

I did. The Bismarck move. The idea that reform gets conceded before the pressure becomes existential. Hilbert, when you paid that eleven hundred dollars, did anyone offer you anything?



Hilbert

They offered me a discount on the next one. I didn't buy the next one.



Herman

That's the concession. That's what an elite conceding reform actually looks like at ground level when the pressure isn't existential yet. A discount on the next warranty.



Corn

Which means the pressure has to be real before the concession is real. The discount arrives after the leverage does.



Hilbert

In my case the leverage never arrived. I paid and I drove the car and I sold it.



Corn

So the political will Woolf was talking about. It's not a moral quantity. It's a function of how much pressure the people at the bottom can generate before the people at the top decide a pension is cheaper than a revolution.



Herman

That's a darker reading than I'd have given it an hour ago, but it fits the record. The New Deal arrived after the banks closed. Bismarck's pension arrived after the Social Democrats started winning seats.



Hilbert

And the four hundred and eighty dollars arrived before the transmission did.



Corn

So the question isn't whether the system corrects. It's whether the correction arrives as a pension or as something a lot worse, and whether it arrives before the leverage does.



Herman

The pattern is cyclical, the corrections are contested, and the mortality data says we're in the early part of a crescendo. None of that tells us how it ends.



Corn

What it does tell us is that the feeling isn't a hallucination and it isn't new. The casino has been rebuilt before.



Herman

And the thing that decides whether the rebuild is reformist or a rupture is whether the people holding the levers move before they have to. Bismarck did. The French monarchy in seventeen eighty-nine did not.



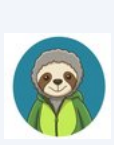
Corn

So the reformist version isn't a mystery. Deposit insurance and Social Security weren't utopian. They were specific, and they got passed, and they held for eighty years until the pendulum swung back.



Herman

The open question is whether anyone in a position to move this time reads the mortality numbers as a warning rather than a forecast. The data gives us the pattern. Hilbert gave us the texture. What's missing is the political will, and that's not something history supplies on its own.



Corn

That's where we'll leave it. Thank you to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer, who has been here the entire time and chose a Mercury Sable as his entry point.



Herman

He always does.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you want to send us something, email us at show at my weird prompts dot com. We'll be back soon.



Herman

See you tomorrow.