

Anthony Comenga: [00:16](#) Welcome back to Ideas in Progress from the Institute for Humane Studies. Last week we spoke with the IHS's CEO and President, Emily Chamlee-Wright, before she went off to Georgetown to lead a discussion colloquium on women in classical liberalism. We asked her if there really were only three founding mothers, if the Enlightenment was really as horrible as historians now say it was, and we got a bit of a review of the readings. This week, we pick up with Emily after the discussion group has concluded its business. We'll hear more about the readings, we'll find out what surprised her, and hopefully we can get a handle on how minds changed and how this discussion helped our scholars with their ideas in progress.

Anthony Comenga: [01:02](#) Emily, thank you so much for being back on the show, and, uh, I, I wanted to start this week, if we could, with a bit of discussion about those so called three founding mothers whose legacy that we interrogated so much last time. Uh, so that's Isabel Paterson, Rose Wilder Lane, and of course Ayn Rand, and, uh, I, I think that certainly their, their contributions are wide and varied, uh, they, they certainly did a lot, and maybe it's, uh, entirely unfair to treat them all together like I think everybody pretty much always does, uh, but why do you think it's important that we have a better understanding of these three particular authors today?

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [01:45](#) One of the things that's just incredible is that 1943 represented the, the year that each of their, at that point, major works came out, and that seems to me to be something of a watershed moment where we have these three classical liberal scholars making arguments really from, uh, uh, you know, from, uh, with different tone and dif- and different points of view, different genres, but, uh, really, uh, you know, coalescing around these ideas. So that seems to me to be important, you know, why, why this year in, uh, 1943? And one of the things that the, uh, the colloquium allowed me to do is to recognize that, that these came from some place, and that there were forerunners to, uh, the thought here, an- an- and also that the arc of, um, female writers within the classical liberal traditions.

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [02:43](#) So when we were talking last time about the Early Modern and the Enlightenment Era period, um, you know, there we were really focusing in on topics related to, uh, the rights of women, uh, the, um, space needed to, for women to engage in philosophy. Uh, women needed, in that Early Modern and Enlightenment period, to make the argument, uh, and to make the case that women possessed reason, and, and full personhood. They were focused on topics, um, like, you know, the, the rights of women, so that tended to really kind of

dominate the conversation in that, in that period of, of women writers. By the time we get to, uh, Paterson, and Rand, and Wilder Lane, they're less focused on that, they're less focused on, um, specifically the rights of women, and they're more focused on, frankly, topics like economic freedom, which is really interesting to me, and one of the things that, that you just have to look at is what are, what's the timeframe in which these women are writing, and these are post Industrial Revolution thinkers, and they benefited from all of the social and economic benefits of, uh, the Industrial Revolution, and that puts them as female thinkers and writers in a very different position, uh, than the Early Modern, uh, writers that we talked about last time.

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [04:14](#)

So that was one, one important difference. I think another importance, um, th- thing to recognize is that these are women also who ha- who are witnessing what's going on in Europe at the time. Uh, the rise of Faci- Fascism, and that was really occupying their attention and their concern, and that gives us, uh, important reason to pay attention to their work as well.

Anthony Comenga: [04:38](#)

Now, you mentioned that the Modern Period is very much characterized by this explosion of sort of inclusive thinking about the rights of human beings, and it strikes me that all three of these women are intensely modern in their sensibilities, their outlook, certainly their ideas. They, they love and almost fetishize, if you would want to use such a word, the, the Modern Period and modernity. You know, think of like Ayn Rand romanticizing cigarettes, right? (Laughs).

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [05:11](#)

Exactly.

Anthony Comenga: [05:12](#)

As though you're holding Industrialism in your hand, and you're irrational and unreasonable if you don't support this practice. It's an expression of everything that is great about humanity to smoke, and, uh, like, like the great smokestacks that built the modern world. And, um, you know, a title from Paterson like "God of the Machine."

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [05:32](#)

Exactly.

Anthony Comenga: [05:32](#)

Lane has this discovery of freedom idea, that it, it's sort of woven into the fabric of the universe and the definition of the modern world is, is, uh, the discovery of that fact, and, uh, the, their, their just intensely modern, their in love with modernity. And I, I love these anecdotes like about Rose Wilder Lane's family flying around in their plane and stuff. Like, you know, uh, that just, that, that factor about them leaps out to me, and I wonder if, uh, wh- what do, what do you think is behind, uh,

explaining not just the year 1943, but, but the fact that it's three women really leading the, what, what became the, the Modern Libertarian Movement. It's three women all at once, in the 1940s. How does that happen at this particular time? Wh- why women?

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [06:24](#)

When you think of who benefited most from the Industrial Revolution, arguably women benefited most from the Industrial Revolution when we think about their metaphors of machine and the, um, Rand's favorite metaphor in Atlas Shrugged is, is motive power, uh, that, and, and we see, as you said, with Wilder Lane also, this, this focus on this kind of mechanistic motion of, uh, a society that moves us forward, that technology is beating back the enemies of humanity, and the enemy of humanity is, is essentially nature in her view.

Anthony Comenga: [07:03](#)

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [07:03](#)

Right? And, and she has this-

Anthony Comenga: [07:04](#)

Yeah.

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [07:04](#)

"We will conquer those forces that are the enemies of, of humanity," which is that, that everything in our environment, uh, that we are born into is, is sort of targeted at our death, and everything that we do in our, in our actions from, or in our purposeful action is to counteract that. So she has a very combative kind of rhetorical posture when it comes to, uh, what human progress looks like. And I do think that, that it is the era of the machine, I do think that it is this, uh, sense that h- that human, the human power of reason, and to conquer one's, uh, external environment is, uh, uh, an epic- an emancipating idea for them, and I mi- it might be reading too much into it, but it may be the case that, that, uh, women coalesce around this idea perhaps because, uh, women benefit the most once we are freed from an economy of brute force. Once we are, once we are, we enter into an economy, uh, where it's, it's our mental abilities that are our comparative advantage, not our physical being, that is liberating for women, and they certainly had tasted the fruits of that.

Anthony Comenga: [08:30](#)

Now, I think out of those three Rose Wilder Lane is definitely my favorite, even though Ayn Rand was certainly, like, like with so many people, she was certainly my entryway into, let's call it the radical liberal tradition, and, uh, but Rose Wilder Lane is, is my favorite. I just, her, her writing is beautiful, her ideas are fantastic, her history is, is great. It's, it's just rich and passionate, and she intersperses all sorts of her own, uh, adventures across

Europe, and, uh, her, her own deep reading of things like Anthropopathy. Like I, I love her, her commentary on how 19th Century Frenchmen were still living in caves in so many examples, uh, and, and she compares that to how American were this always more and more modernizing people, and, uh, I, I just, she just seems to me one of these, uh, writers who does the rare thing of really challenging you to be a better person, and I suppose for some people Rand does that too, and Paterson I admittedly know the least about, but that's something really special and powerful in, uh, in a writer.

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [09:41](#)

What it is about Rand, uh, sorry, what is it about Wilder Lane that inspires us to be a better person? Who are, what are the, what are the takeaways that you see in Wilder Lane?

Anthony Comenga: [09:52](#)

So, I look at her refrain that, uh, freedom is something that man discovered as a fact of nature as really, really important. You s- it's something you simply have to respect, like you respect gravity. It's, uh, it's a fact of the world that we should each deal with in responsible ways, and, uh, every time that we do it produces better results for everybody else, as, you know, as though it were some magic formula of, of physics or something. And, you know, there's, there's certain truth to that at least, but even more so I think it's, uh, I think of it as a moral challenge to people, and she is such a great, uh, communicator and inspirer with that one idea, uh, that I, I think it, it's really, uh, unique.

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [10:41](#)

I, I see something similar in Rand too, and, and I do understand why, uh, some mi- people might challenge that notion that Rand is inspiring. Uh, you know, she has such an austere notion of charity for example, and she seems, uh, to embody sort of the virtues of homo economics, where it's al- you know, it's all transactional, it's, it's all cost versus benefit. And a, you know, a friend, a friend of mine and I were, were talking once, we were talking about, uh, Rand's, uh, female characters, and, and she said, you know, "You get the sense from Dagny Taggart," who's the, the female lead in, uh, Atlas Shrugged, the lead character in Atlas Shrugged, "that if, if she found, you know, she had a love of her life, but she found that another person was a slightly, had a slightly better tennis serve than the love of her life, all other things being equal, she would dump the love of her life and go with the guy who had the slightly better tennis serve, because, you know, that's, you know, it's all about cost benefit, and it's all transactions all the time." And, you know, I, I thought that was, that was, uh, a funny characterization of, of Rand, but let me make the case for why I have a more sympathetic view of, of Rand and her characters.

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [11:55](#)

Um, you know, my, my favorite characters in her stories are not the fully formed, moral, morally perfect ones. So it's the, the Howard Rourke in Fountainhead, or the John Galt in Atlas Shrugged I actually find pretty flat and, and uninteresting characters, because they're really a phi- philosophical worldview wrapped up in human form, and so they're serving an important role for her in her novels, but they're not people I want to have dinner with, right? Um, so on the other hand, you know, characters like Dagny Taggart or Hank Rearden in Atlas Shrugged, these are, these are not perfectly formed characters, and they are more like real human beings, and I think of Hank Rearden for example, has a ton to teach us about what it means to be a better person, because early on in the novel Atlas Shrugged, uh, Hank Rearden has the wrong moral paradigm driving him.

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [12:54](#)

So, he has an unquestioned duty to his family. For example, his mother, his wife, his brother, they, he, he does everything for them that provides for them, and at every turn they make him, or they try to make him feel guilty for his principle virtue, and that is that he's productive, and they try and make him feel guilty for that, and he does feel guilty for that, because he, he feels guilty for the fact that he'd rather spend time at his work, uh, than time with these people, and something keeps nagging at him in the back of his mind, some logical flaw in his thinking, but he can't put it together over the course of the novel. He doesn't quite get it, and finally when he gets it the whole system for him falls into place. When the scales fall from his eyes he recognizes that, that the reason he doesn't want to spend time with these people is because they haven't deserved his love, uh, that they try to make him feel guilty for his virtue and they, uh, and what their whole game is is to get the sanction of the victim, and so if they can just make him feel guilty enough that they can kind of keep turning the sort of, uh, emotional screws on him, then they make him think that he deserves this ever increasing burden that, that he's weighing.

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [14:19](#)

And so, this, this is interesting to me, and I, I would say Dagny Taggart is, is a similar kind of fantastic character who just oozes, oozes agency, right, compared to her brother Jim, who was the easy glide path, because he's the, he's the male heir to the Taggart, uh, uh, company and fortune. You know, Jim Taggart has it all smooth and ready to go for how he's going to enter into the company, Dagny doesn't. So what does she do? She finds a job at a switching station on the railroad line, right, rather than having taken the smooth route. She didn't I-, uh, she didn't, uh, perhaps, you, you know, maybe, maybe she might have been, you know, frustrated that she didn't have the same

path, but rather than letting it stop her she just found a way around it, and so, you know, we see this character over and over again emerge that whenever there was someone else who challenged her, uh, someone who thought that she was just another ...

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [15:17](#)

There was a case where, um, Ellis Wyatt, who is a real man of integrity, assumes that she's as corrupt, and he has good reason to think that she might be as corrupt as her brother Jim, and she knows why, because he's, he's just been, um, uh, you know, put in an awful situation by, uh, by the political maneuverings of her brother, and so she doesn't flinch in, in the face of this, instead she doesn't make any excuse and she does the two things that she knows how to do, which is to work exceptionally hard and to deliver value, and when she does that she eventually earns the other character's respect, but I think th- of that as a great set of lessons for, that we can take away and help us be better people, is to offer no excuses, to take responsibility, have an unwavering commitment to excellence and delivering superior value. These are the kinds of things that I would want and expect of myself, and I would think that, that her characters, uh, really inspire us to bring the best out in ourselves.

Anthony Comenga: [16:21](#)

You know, I, I love that theme that you, uh, sort of highlighted there of, let's say an enlightened or liberated agency put up against mere power and influence, right?

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [16:33](#)

Exactly.

Anthony Comenga: [16:33](#)

That's a common theme across Rand's work, um, that the, the hero is always some sort of enlightened or liberated agent fighting against the, the, you know, corrupt toadies or the, the people who are merely in power. They, they haven't earned it in any way, uh, but they are there-

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [16:50](#)

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Anthony Comenga: [16:51](#)

Nonetheless. And, um, uh, I think probably my favorite things from Rand are the, the book that's actually in our reader, uh, Capitalism the Unknown Ideal, which of course is nonfiction, and then her other piece of fiction, uh, short fiction, Anthem is definitely my favorite-

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [17:08](#)

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Anthony Comenga: [17:08](#)

Of course in part because it's so short-

Ideas in Progress, Episode 2, Women and the Classical Liberal Tradition, part 2

- Emily Chamlee-Wright: [17:10](#) Yeah.
- Anthony Comenga: [17:10](#) Compared to the, uh, you know, door stopper of Atlas Shrugged, but, uh, that, that's also another, you know, the major theme in Anthem, the main character fighting this sort of mid evil regime, uh, that's dead set against the spread of knowledge, because power comes with it-
- Emily Chamlee-Wright: [17:28](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Anthony Comenga: [17:29](#) And we can't have dispersed power. Um, and I, I love that's it's a dystopia. Uh, it, I think that's just fascinating, and, you know, I think this theme is, uh, certainly something that Rand is not usually given credit, among mainstream academics at least, for being much of a feminist-
- Emily Chamlee-Wright: [17:48](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Anthony Comenga: [17:48](#) Although she certainly was-
- Emily Chamlee-Wright: [17:50](#) Right.
- Anthony Comenga: [17:50](#) In a lot of her ideas. I don't know if she would categorize herself that way today, in today's context-
- Emily Chamlee-Wright: [17:57](#) Right.
- Anthony Comenga: [17:57](#) But it's, it's definitely there in her ideas, and that whole theme we just identified could be, uh, de- defined down to feminism. It's, it's, uh, fighting against patriarchy, simply inherited power, right?
- Emily Chamlee-Wright: [18:10](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Anthony Comenga: [18:11](#) And, um, I, uh, you know, it's no surprise to me, for example, that, uh, my mom had the copy of Atlas Shrugged that I read in high school, she had it back in her college days, because-
- Emily Chamlee-Wright: [18:22](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Anthony Comenga: [18:22](#) It spoke to the young feminist in her, and, uh, you know, I think that's, uh, a major and probably overlooked factor in, in explaining why she's been so popular for all these decades.
- Emily Chamlee-Wright: [18:34](#) That's right. I mean, one of the things about her female characters is that they are self possessed sexual beings, and they derive pleasure from sex, and these are, this is, this is, had

to be at the time, you know, kind of, uh, uh, uh, a kind of shocking portrayal of feminine virtue, and I think it reads as, as really quite fresh in man- in many ways.

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [18:56](#)

When we look at, uh, you know, Margaret Atwood just came out with her sequel to Handmaid's Tale, and this is, uh, and we've seen new renditions of Handmaid's Tale on, on Hulu and, and the like, and I'm a big fan of that series, in part because it, it has a very liberal feminist view of, uh, women's control of their own bodies, and, and this theme is very much in Rand, and that when women have control over their bodies one of the things that they want to do is express themselves sexually and gain pleasure from that, and that there is absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, it is one of the great things about being a human being and it's something to celebrate. Uh, this was, uh, this was radical notion in the mid part of the 20th Century.

Anthony Comenga: [19:46](#)

So let's, let's talk a bit about the actual, uh, discussion colloquia here. Um, did anything at the conference, uh, surprise you or stand out to you?

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [19:57](#)

One of the things that always surprises me, it really shouldn't, uh, is how live the question is, what is the nature of our rights? Can we derive the existence of our rights from reason alone for example? And for some in the room, the stakes are really high on that. If we don't have a reason based, objective, moral standard, then we're really sunk, uh, s- some would argue. We have no basis for arguing against a culture, a cultural or historical pattern that denies the existence of individual rights unless we've got a kind of hard and fast objective, reason based, uh, grounding for rights.

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [20:42](#)

Now, as an economist, and a student of [inaudible 00:20:45] work, and a student of cultural systems, I'm, I'm quite a bit more sanguine about this. That individual rights, um, property ri- and property rights are kind of in my view like solved problems. We keep, human, human societies keep discovering more or less the same lessons across time and place, and that, you know, that for things to work out well we need individual rights, we need property rights. They can take slightly different forms, but sort of the basic, the basic rules of the game keep getting discovered and rediscovered over and over again, and so I'm perfectly comfortable continuing to subject the thesis that we need these rights to have the good society to the evidence and see whether individual rights based rules of the game keep generating the wealth and human flourishing outcomes that are so commonly associated with them.

- Emily Chamlee-Wright: [21:37](#) Now going back to the first group though, this seems way too culturally contingent, and it seems like, you know, our, my position that I've just described is ceding way too much to the consequentialists, and they worry that without grounding it into an airtight, uh, um, grounding rights in an airtight moral reasoning, that there will always then be justification for some social reformer to step in and claim that by bypassing individual freedom and giving our choices over to the state, well, geez, we could obtain superior social outcomes. So we really don't have a hard and fast case favoring individual based rights, so I think that that tension is, is, um, exciting to explore, and I was really happy to see it carried out in the conversation in the room.
- Anthony Comenga: [22:27](#) Now, uh, there's the (laughs), the perennial question of where are all the classical liberal women? And I'm a little skeptical of that question. I think they're out there and probably we're just not looking for them-
- Emily Chamlee-Wright: [22:40](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Anthony Comenga: [22:41](#) Most of the time.
- Emily Chamlee-Wright: [22:41](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Anthony Comenga: [22:42](#) Um, but what do you think about that question? What, if you had to venture a guess what would it be, and, and the flip side, uh, what do you think is within the classical liberal tradition that really should be drawing more women-
- Emily Chamlee-Wright: [22:56](#) Yeah.
- Anthony Comenga: [22:56](#) Scholars today?
- Emily Chamlee-Wright: [22:57](#) Yeah. Uh, uh, um, so, so I'm definitely of two minds on this. One is that I look around myself, I was looking around that room and I was seeing, you know, um, not quite two dozen, but, but, uh, a lot of classical liberal women in the room, and that was really exciting to see. I'm also looking around my own discipline of economics and seeing, uh, just an incredible surge of, of women economists, many of them, uh, are classical liberal in their orientation, and so that's exciting as well, um, but, you know, I, I ha- it wasn't so long ago that I can remember being, you know, one of essentially two women in my PhD cohort, and, yeah, it was pretty lonely, right? Um, so, so I have put a lot of thought into what is it that is, um, either drawing or repelling, uh, women into thinking about, uh, uh, uh, toward classical liberal ideas?

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [23:55](#)

For my own discipline, economics, I do think that there might be something to this notion that a kind of, a de contextualized a-cultural notion of economic man, uh, that it's, uh, a sort of cost benefit machine, um, is the, uh, archetype of the, of, uh, of the economic person. That, that's kind of, it's not so much that it's off putting, it's just not particularly appealing, uh, to, uh, young scholars who are much more interested in, um, in the context based, circumstance based, um, position of economic actors. So narrative and story matter, um, the embeddedness we have within our social relationships matter, and there are other disciplines frankly that aren't as closely aligned with and closely associated with classical liberalism, like sociology, that get all this stuff right, that understand that human beings are socially embedded, and that there's not just one universal human experience, but it's all contextualized by this embeddedness within the particular families we're in, within the social structures we're in, and so I, so I think that economics, which is so often associated with classical liberal ideas, for a long time really kind of turned off anybody, but I think women in particular who were paying attention to, to the context in which, uh, individuals operate.

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [25:29](#)

And so, one of the things that I think is happening though is that, in the, between the time when I was a PhD student and now, economists have become much more interested in, in context, in narrative, in story, embeddedness into, in rel- of individuals within complex networks of relationships, and that's been good for the discipline, it's been good for women in economics, and it's been, it's just frankly, it's made economics just a lot more interesting.

Anthony Comenga: [26:00](#)

So it sounds to me like, uh, you're saying that economics, along with of course many other disciplines in the humanities, have been influenced by, uh, feminism and a lot of ideas that come out of-

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [26:10](#)

That's exactly right.

Anthony Comenga: [26:10](#)

Feminist theory.

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [26:11](#)

That's right.

Anthony Comenga: [26:12](#)

Um, and, you know, narrative, storytelling, cultural context, perspective, even something like intersectionality-

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [26:18](#)

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Anthony Comenga: [26:19](#)

And that's another question I wanted to ask you, about, uh, whether you think there are any particular intersectional challenges associated with being a woman, an academic and a classical liberal? Are there any special sorts of problems that someone who occupies all three of those spaces face?

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [26:36](#)

Sure. So, so one of the things is that you face the consequences of being a traitor, right? So, so if you're, um, if you're a female academic, uh, particularly a female academic in, uh, in a s- in a discipline where you're, where women are still underrepresented, you're supposed to conform to a certain party line of, uh, and, and s- and classical liberalism doesn't necessarily align with that, with that dominant point of view. So if you're a classical liberal in that space, um, y- y- you're, your friends within the academy, uh, who see, uh, will see you as, um, a deviant in, in some respects. So your circle of friends, it's just as simple as your circle of friends might be smaller, or you have to work really hard to make sure that your circle of friends doesn't shrink, because you have to work hard to really talk across, uh, ideological lines, for example, if you still want to get invited to the, um, women's, uh, academic potluck dinner, and so that was, that was one of the things that was certainly something I learned how to navigate early on in my career.

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [27:51](#)

I think I navigated it well primarily by being a good colleague, because that's what people care about most, is that you're a good colleague, um, if they're good colleagues. So I, so I think I was successful in, at navigating that, those, that intersectionality, um, but it, but it is certainly there. It is, it is, uh, certainly there, and, uh, but over the course of, of time you also get the, the benefit of having different conversations because of that intersectionality. I think I've really informed my male colleagues within the discipline because of those friendships I had at those potluck dinners, and vice versa, I think I made those potluck dinner conversations a little more interesting an- and infused some variation in the conversation because I was bringing some challenge to the table, and pulling the lens back, my life has been really fun and interesting because of those intersections.

Anthony Comenga: [28:46](#)

Now, uh, uh, as our surprise conclusion question here, um, if you could add any reading to the reading list without, without, uh, reference to the cost or the page count, what would it be?

Emily Chamlee-Wright: [28:59](#)

I would have added Rand's Fiction, which we did not read, um, I would have, we would have had to have had an excerpt rather than, uh, the, the, the full reading (laughing), um, but I think it would have been great to have, say Francisco d'Anconia's, uh,

speech, um, uh, and, and to really unpack that. I think that would have been fun. I really would have liked to have read Margaret Cavendish's plays, that would have been exciting, and, um, just more work from contemporary feminists, uh, who are taking these ideas seriously. We had a couple of readings, but more work that's going back, more work by feminist scholars, I mean, that's their main wheelhouse. Really examining carefully, um, the works of, uh, the early modern, uh, female writers for example. We had, uh, we had a sampling of that, but I just sure would have loved, I could have done a whole conference on that.

Anthony Comenga: [29:58](#)

There you have it folks, our first pair of shows on the wide variety of ideas and progress batted around here at IHS. Next week, we turn to American history with Hillsdale College's Brad Birzer, on the subject of Federalists and Antifederalists, another discussion colloquium held last month here in Arlington, Virginia. So if you haven't already, click that subscribe button, toss in a rating and review, and we'll see you next week. In the meantime, and as always, keep the progress coming.