

Anthony Comegna ([00:24](#)):

Nick Gillespie is back with us this week, and, of course, you all know him as editor at large of Reason Magazine, host of The Reason Interview with Nick Gillespie, and a regular analyst, I guess, at the Reason Roundtable Show. He's also, though, one of the precious few postmodernist libertarians out there. Believe it or not, some folks think that this is a contradiction in terms and that libertarians can only properly exist within the Lockean natural law framework.

Anthony Comegna ([00:54](#)):

But as I hope you'll all agree here, Nick Gillespie's libertarian credit is beyond doubt. In any case, though, I hope you all enjoy hearing him talk about this particular component of his ideas and perspective. Perhaps concluding, as I have, that postmodernism can offer us a much richer and deeper classical liberalism than the ones we're otherwise so used to. Let's get to it then, part two with Reason Magazine's Dr. Nick Gillespie.

Anthony Comegna ([01:25](#)):

All right, so we left off last time with some advice for graduate students, especially during the current COVID-19 crisis, and I actually want to talk with you about that a little bit because you cover it so much on your podcast, The Reason Interview with Nick Gillespie. And I think it was on the Reason Roundtable last week, you were saying that you recently watched Team America and that it was like it was from a completely different world. So much has changed in the intervening almost 20 years that it just seemed like a whole different place. I'm wondering, do you think that this COVID-19 situation will be one of those Strauss and Howe turning point moments that defines maybe the founders' generation in the ways that 9/11 helped to shape and define my generation, the millennials?

Nick Gillespie ([02:20](#)):

Yeah, it's a really good question. Part of me is quick to say of course it will. It's going to define... Again, I'm kind of a quasi Marxist. I believe that economic realities tend to undergird everything and they create a cultural and political superstructure that then reinforces the status quo. And the COVID-19 pandemic, especially the economic lockdown that has ensued, which is a choice, without going into details, we chose to really shut everything down in a way that is going to have profound, long-felt economic consequences. On top of that, we have a national debt situation that has been growing for 30 or 40 years and is going to come to a head at some point. There's a lot of ominous clouds on the horizon.

Nick Gillespie ([03:18](#)):

By the same token, it's not clear to me that 9/11 changed America profoundly or on a deep level or college or the economic crisis, the financial crisis of 2008. I'm wary about saying, is this stuff going to change or not? In the short term, there is no question that the lockdown, because of the novel coronavirus has definitely changed higher education. It has shut down. I have a, my younger son is 18 and he doesn't go to school anymore. He's doing tele learning, which nobody is really happy with. And there is a real question as to whether or not campuses are going to open up in the fall or next January, or whenever exactly. I was just reading a story in Inside Higher Ed that some colleges are expected, or some people are expecting about a 20% drop off in enrollment rates come the fall.

Nick Gillespie ([04:13](#)):

So it's a serious impact. Colleges have been going through a financial restructuring, colleges and universities. It's clear on some level that there is an oversupply of colleges and students that are being induced into higher education through various means. That's probably going to change and fluctuate. But I don't know that any of this stuff is going to change things so dramatically that we won't recognize where we are in a university system in 20 years. I tend to think not.

Anthony Comegna ([04:47](#)):

Yeah. I think that in addition to your work at Reason, I think a lot of people might know you as one of the precious few post-modernist libertarians out there.

Nick Gillespie ([04:57](#)):

Yeah.

Anthony Comegna ([04:57](#)):

Probably you and Thaddeus Russell are the two best known, I would say. I wonder if you could say a bit about how you square postmodernism with your libertarianism?

Nick Gillespie ([05:07](#)):

Yeah. I was probably a libertarian first and a postmodernist second. And to have done literary or cultural studies in the later part of the 20th century and continuing it to now meant that you were going to read a lot of Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard and that you were going to encounter Marxist critiques of postmodernism by people like Fredric Jameson, the scholar at Duke. And it's important by the way... And also I'll say Hayek and Mises. To me, the essence of postmodernism is that it focuses on the limits of knowledge rather than the extent of knowledge. And it's not doctrinal so much as it is temperamental. Do you look at a system and say, "My God, we know so much, let's start manipulating things in various kinds of scenarios and see what kind of results we get." Or do you look at things and say, "Okay, something good is happening here, but let's not push it because we don't really know why things are the way they are."

Nick Gillespie ([06:15](#)):

That to me, when I encountered that kind of thinking, I started reading, when I went back to grad school, and this was partly through exposure in Reason where IHS would advertise all the time. And they kept talking in their ads about people like Mises and Hayek, I had no idea who they were. And I started reading their work, and Hayek in particular is extremely postmodernism in his conception of the limits of knowledge and why that should create a sense of epistemological humility when we are investigating the world. But especially when we are doing public policy or large scale planning. He's against the planning that he saw as coming out of the French enlightenment in particular, the idea that Marquis de Condorcet, a 19th century French intellectual said, "We've discovered the laws of physics and of math and of biology. We have also discovered..." There's no reason to believe that the laws of society are any different and we can start manipulating integers and factors and variables to get them the results we wanted.

Nick Gillespie ([07:19](#)):

Hayek, in his great book, the Counter-Revolution of Science studies on the abuses of reason, said, "No, that's exactly wrong. Society is far more human interaction, is far more complicated than anything like physics or biology or other courses that I could barely eke a D out in high school." And I think he's right.

And that melds perfectly with a postmodern sensibility. Lyotard in a book called the Postmodern Condition, which came out in the late 70s, talked about postmodernism as incredulity toward meta narrative. And what he meant by that, or what I take him to mean by that, is that there's, we should have a skepticism towards grand theories of the universe, unified field theories that explain everything and every little jot and tittle. And when you look at the 19th century and its broad intellectual theories that came out of it, you have people like Marx, Freud and Darwin, and they're very different scholars. And the reality of what they talked about is very different or the veracity. But each of them exemplifies something of an enlightenment hubris where, through one thing we can explain and understand everything.

Nick Gillespie ([08:35](#)):

And then they have acolytes who say, okay, now that we understand and explain everything, we're going to plan things the way we want to. And I think people like Hayek and Mises joined the postmoderns in saying, "No, that's a fundamentally bad way of thinking about things." And it doesn't mean we don't need meta narrative, but that we don't need theories that help structure our thinking and help us investigate the universe. But that incredulity part is really important. And to me, that seems fundamentally libertarian as well as postmodern. And when I was in grad school, I read Foucault a lot, by many accounts, he's a terrible historian and things like that, but by focusing on the ways in which the rhetoric of power often just takes on a helper tone. We're from the medical establishment and we're here to help you, and we're going to help you get better by putting you in a mental institution.

Nick Gillespie ([09:32](#)):

It correlates almost exactly with people like Thomas Szasz, the great skeptic of psychiatry and the medical establishment in America, who was a longtime Reason contributing editor. In fact, Foucault's first teaching gig in America was at Buffalo. Szasz lived in Syracuse he worked for the State University of New York Medical Center at Syracuse. They corresponded, they have large differences, but in many ways they're fundamentally similar. I think when you look at stuff like public choice economics, which is politics without romance, it's a postmodern turn to saying, we are going to have incredulity toward meta narratives. The idea that if you're in the public sector, you are helping people as opposed to attending to your personal aggrandizement and things like that.

Anthony Comegna ([10:22](#)):

Why aren't there more postmodernist libertarians?

Nick Gillespie ([10:26](#)):

Yeah, that's a good question. And it's kind of nice to hear, like why aren't there more libertarians? [crosstalk 00:10:31] Because on this one quadrant on the top of the pin here to talk about that. I think that is changing, but I would tend to say this, and this is overly broad and more filled with holes in Swiss cheese, but when I came into libertarianism, okay, and this is the late 80s really, in a formal way, there was an alignment in American in the libertarian movement, sociologically with the right. The conservative right and the libertarian movement were pretty tight. Excuse me. And one of the things that a lot of people in the libertarian movement back in the 80s adopted from conservatives, I think without thinking, was the idea that values mattered and that having standards of excellence were really important.

Nick Gillespie ([11:33](#)):

And that was a conservative value against some vague leftism that didn't care about anything and everybody was equal and everything was equal. And at least in the English departments and whatnot, that culture war often took the form of a tax on canon revision or expanding the canon to bring in more people who had either fallen out of the canon or had never been accepted into it. And so you would have conservative say things like, they're trying to get rid of Shakespeare in English departments and they're going to elevate Shakespeare sister, or matchbooks or advertisements from the time that Shakespeare was writing to the same level as the great man who, in Harold Bloom's term, invented the human. And so it became this conflation of conservative aesthetic preferences about what should be taught and libertarian willingness to go along, especially in cultural terms.

Nick Gillespie ([12:30](#)):

It was just rare when you would find libertarians who tended to be very much wedded to economics and an economic way of thinking about things. And I think that was part of the problem is, it's a sociological issue where you mistake artistic preference for something deeper than that. And I would say canon revision is a fundamentally libertarian project, particularly when it comes to American literature. To be honest, I don't really know very much about British literature. But American literature, when you look at the way it was studied in universities, it really wasn't until the end of the 19th and really the 20th, the beginning of the 20th century, when it became more serious and it used to be, people would talk about all sorts of stuff.

Nick Gillespie ([13:15](#)):

The American Canon was very loose and baggy and all sorts of things we're talked about all the time and then as literary studies became professionalized and implanted in the university, in the 20s, 30s and 40s, you had a bunch of people, most of whom were left leaning and were, oftentimes communists or fellow travelers would say, "Well the American Renaissance," which is a term that was coined or popularized in a book that came out in the late 40s, "reduced basically all of 19th century American literary production for like five people." It's insane. And then what happened after World War II, I think, as the Academy opened up to more types of people, it made sense that you would start rummaging around for literary and cultural representations of the people who were attending universities to see how did they deal with, what did it mean to be black or Irish or female in the 19th century.

Nick Gillespie ([14:13](#)):

And I want to talk about that in the Academy. And that was seen as an attack on all that was good and dear, as opposed to a proper understanding of the role of literature, which is to allow us to understand how people live and imagine they want to live in different places in time. So I think that's part of it. And if that doesn't make sense, I'll try to clarify. The other thing is actually within libertarianism, because their politics were the same, it's easy to think that Hayek and Friedman, Milton Friedman, are basically, they agree on everything. But Milton Friedman, he wrote a famous essay called *Economics as a Positive Science*, and his methodology was very different than Hayek's. Both the way he wrote and what he talked about.

Nick Gillespie ([15:01](#)):

And you can see through Friedman and then through other people who ideologically were opposed to him, people like Paul Samuelson and whatnot, a shift into econometrics, into formulas and facts and things you could prove or disprove as opposed to a more discursive understanding of economics that you see coming out of the Austrian school in particular. I think the Austrian school is absolutely

postmodern. It rejects the idea of unified field theories or of certitude and replaces that instead with this epistemology humility that, I think, characterizes postmodernism in a very profound way. So I think those are some of the reasons why there haven't been postmodern libertarians for a long time, because even within the movement, libertarianism it was anti postmodern for two reasons.

Anthony Comegna ([15:54](#)):

Now I'd like to dig into that topic of those culture wars a little more.

Nick Gillespie ([15:58](#)):

Yeah.

Anthony Comegna ([15:59](#)):

Because feel, and I don't think I'm the only one, I think there is a massive culture war within libertarianism right now, that has maybe been going on for the last, I don't know, four years. And that seems like a ripe figure to use.

Nick Gillespie ([16:15](#)):

Okay.

Anthony Comegna ([16:17](#)):

And it seems to me that there is a coalescence of the hauynite cosmopolitan libertarians, or classical liberals who are very future oriented. And then there is this probably larger contingent of actually reactionary American libertarians who want to go backward to some mythologized past. The days of the founders when everything was great, except 25% of the population was enslaved and things like that. And they both seem to have cogent stories, at least, for what libertarianism is and one is thick and the other is thin. And they have cogent stories about what it looks like in practice. The one is universalist and the other is very particularist. And they do have legitimate and real histories to draw upon for their different ideas. So I'm wondering, do they actually belong in the same broad tent of libertarianism? Or should we just fight it out and have a winner in the end?

Nick Gillespie ([17:24](#)):

What's the saying about pissing contest? In pissing contest, everybody gets wet. So I'm not sure that trying to... Or let me put it this way. To me, it's not a particularly interesting project to find and define pure libertarianism versus non pure libertarianism. And I'll point out that that seems to be mostly project of the particularists and the nationalists and the nostalgics. I think people will look backwards. They're the ones who are constantly saying, "It's all just the non-aggression principle, and if you ever say anything apart from that, go to hell." I believe in life extension, I believe that we're getting better and better, and that we're going to live to be 200. Even if I live to be 200, I don't have enough time in my life to bother with that kind of endeavor. It just seems like a really boring waste of time.

Nick Gillespie ([18:24](#)):

What I would say, and I think this speaks to some of what you're talking about, I see libertarianism... Over the over time and over the years that I've been involved with Reason and with the broad libertarian movement, I've shifted from thinking about it in terms of particular policies or a checklist. When you go to a doctor or a psychiatrist, they have a checklist to see if you're depressed. And if you

have six or seven things on a checklist, they'll give you an SSRI. With libertarianism it's kind of the same way, like, "Do you believe in free speech, do you believe in gun rights, do you believe in this or that?" And if you get seven or eight or nine out of the checklist, you're libertarian or not. I've started thinking more about it as a temperament or as a direction. Michael Munger has talked about the economists and political scientists that do, because talked about libertarian in a directional terms.

Nick Gillespie ([19:20](#)):

I think of it as an adjective. It's no longer a noun, and I don't want to be a libertarian rather I espouse libertarian ideas or sentiments. And what that means is, is your default setting towards more freedom for individuals and groups or less. And that pretty much is it it's kind of vague, but are you moving in that direction? I think it's pre political. It's certainly pre partisan. And that many of the ways that we talked about libertarian ideas, and this is partly because the libertarian movement as a movement is really a post World War II phenomenon. In many ways, it's even a post 1960s event. The libertarian party got started in 1971, Reason started in 1968. IHS had started in the early 60s. But the things that people care about, if we look at the particular issues and topics, we miss the broader set of ideas that inform them and that are going to change.

Nick Gillespie ([20:19](#)):

And so when I started at Reason, there were many more discussions about things like affirmative action and where you stood on that had something to say about whether or not you were libertarian or not. It just doesn't matter the same way anymore. Back when Reason started, the draft was a huge issue. The draft is not a question anymore. Abortion rights were a big issue. They are not an issue in the same way. There's still obviously an argument about that and various ways that people are trying to limit reproductive freedom, but it's not the same. And I find that I align certainly with the cosmopolitan crowd on all of this. I was born in Brooklyn, I grew up in New Jersey and I'm an American, my parents are descended from Italian and Irish people, I believe in all of those particularities.

Nick Gillespie ([21:14](#)):

And they informed me and they mean a lot to me, but I'm also ultimately first and foremost, I'm a citizen of the world to use a pained phrase. And it doesn't seem to me to be very difficult to reconcile all of these things, particularly in a world where we can connect with people more than ever before, across time and across place and across gender. And so anybody who is focused so narrowly on particularism, especially nationalism, or trying to figure out a way to not simply to vote for Donald Trump, which is fine, I don't care, but to somehow elevate Trumpism to a philosophy and one that is coherently simpatico with libertarianism, that strikes me as a hell of a workout. And you're it just isn't worth the effort.

Anthony Comegna ([22:12](#)):

So I wrote my dissertation on a very little known, let's say, proto-libertarian movement called the Locofoco movement, starting in Jacksonian America. And throughout the course of writing that dissertation, I became horrified about the prospects for libertarianism in the next couple of generations, because I literally saw this libertarian movement without the word libertarian attached to it, disappear into the midst of history and be completely forgotten, even though they did amazing things like revolutionize incorporation across the country and abolish slavery. So they were tremendously important and effective, but no one knows they ever existed. And I'm wondering, do you think that with all these kinds of fights, these internecine battles over the heart and soul and definition itself of what

libertarian is, do you think that the word will still be around to describe a political movement in the next say, 50 years, or do you think the cluster of ideas will be the only thing that remains?

Nick Gillespie ([23:21](#)):

Well, you say those things as if they're different. As we talk, the US Congress just got its first libertarian congressmen, because Justin Amash who had been elected in 2010 as a Republican, became an Independent last year affiliated with a libertarian party. So there is for the first time in centuries, we actually have a self identified libertarian in Congress. Wow, that's something. But more broadly, I guess I don't have anxiety about whether or not there is a political movement called the libertarian movement. I'll grant that I am a panglossian about this, but I know when I look at recent history and by that, I think of my grandparents showing up in the United States, in the mid teens, from Italy and from Ireland.

Nick Gillespie ([24:19](#)):

And I look at my parents' experience and I look at my experience and I look at my kids' experience and I look at all of the bad things that are happening. Government continues to grow, we have massive debt and we're in the middle of a global lockdown, all sorts of terrible things happening in many, many profound ways. And it's like, are we more free or less free to dream and to define ourselves and to chart our own destinies. Which to me is the essence of libertarian thinking and of a libertarian worldview. And the world continues to advance along those fronts in very, very basic and profound ways. And so I'm hopeful, to the extent that I think about this issue, I think it's going to proceed because human freedom. And exactly what that means might change. And we're not going to be talking about it in the same way that somebody like Ayn Rand or Rose Wilder Lane might've talked about it or Milton Friedman, but human freedom is a pretty persistent theme and engine of change and discovery.

Nick Gillespie ([25:23](#)):

More importantly, and this goes to your point about talking about the Loco-focos, they got wiped out in profound ways, but they still exist because you can go back and rummage through history. And this is a Colden idea that is shared by a lot of other people. You can create, you can rummage through the past and find an infinite number of case studies or attempts to create the world, demonstration projects, proofs of concept in the past, and then create a genealogy that takes you from that moment to the current moment and what you're trying to do. In literary history, this happens all of the time. And you have somebody like TS Elliott going back and rummaging through literary history, finding, what was at the time, he was talking about the metaphysical poets and whatnot, a relatively minor group of people. And he built them up into something that even by the time I was in grad school, we still had to learn about them because he had elevated them retroactively to a place of high renown.

Nick Gillespie ([26:33](#)):

This happened in English literature, the Beowulf poem was only discovered, in the beginning, in the industrial revolution and stuff like that. So the past is a different planet as my colleague, Jesse Walker likes to say, but it's also one that is always fresh. It's always with us and not necessarily in the way that Faulkner talked about the past always being, not even the past, and being a repressive shroud that covers everything and limits possibility.

Nick Gillespie ([27:07](#)):

And this is where, and I'm getting abstract to the point of ridiculousness here, we now live in a world where what is local is universal, is global. And we can mix and match and hybridize and mongrelize so

much. I feel the potential for human liberation across all sorts of fronts has never been stronger and will continue to be. We still have to fight against all the forces of repression, all the forces that are trying to clamp down and shut down people from living the way they want. And running what John Stuart Mill would call experiments of living. But, man, I think we're doing pretty well. So I think your pessimism is understandable, but is ultimately raw.

Anthony Comegna ([27:58](#)):

Once again, our absolute greatest thanks go out to Nick Gillespie. And while we're at it, everyone else over there at Reason. By the way now really is the best time to subscribe. Get in there quickly and you just might be able to get a hard copy of my next article, which will be in the June edition, but that's just a teaser. If you'd rather go the route of free content, subscribe to the Reason interview with Nick Gillespie and the wonderfully entertaining Reason Round Table. We'll see you all back here next week. Here's hoping you all stay healthy and happy.