

Jeanne Hoffman ([00:21](#)):

Welcome back everybody to another week of ideas and progress. You may be surprised to hear a different voice on this podcast. I'm Jeanne Hoffman, Senior Faculty Liaison at the Institute for Humane Studies. And the reason you're hearing my voice is because this week our guest is the usual host of this podcast, Doctor Anthony Comegna.

Jeanne Hoffman ([00:40](#)):

Doctor Comegna's PhD is an American at Atlantic history from the University of Pittsburgh, where he wrote the first and only history of the Loco-foco Movement. After graduate school, he worked at the Cato Institute as the assistant editor for intellectual history at [libertarianism.org](http://libertarianism.org) before coming here to the Institute for Humane Studies. He's here to discuss the currently ongoing world history of liberalism series.

Jeanne Hoffman ([01:07](#)):

Dr. Comegna, how the tables have turned, I'm interviewing you now.

Anthony Comegna ([01:11](#)):

Right, yeah. Pretty fun.

Jeanne Hoffman ([01:13](#)):

But I heard you have this really interesting program that's been going on a series called the World History of Liberalism. Could you tell me a bit about that?

Anthony Comegna ([01:22](#)):

Yeah, so of course in the wake of all this COVID nonsense, we've been trying to really beef up our online capabilities, since we can't do in-person programming, IHS really wants to lean into the situation and focus as much as we can on that online programming. And hopefully, we can make a lot of that online programming part of our permanent capacity moving forward.

Anthony Comegna ([01:49](#)):

So, what I've planned out here are these several different series of what I'm calling like open-ended seminars, where it's kind of designed to mimic a graduate course but obviously with an explicitly classical liberal cast to it, where we can really spend about an hour and a half each month focusing on a single work, one important book or a short collection of articles all on a single topic.

Anthony Comegna ([02:24](#)):

And kind of get the richness and depth of discussion that you have from a graduate seminar, but with works that will really hopefully make a big difference to the different kinds of classical liberal scholarship that our graduate students are doing.

Anthony Comegna ([02:40](#)):

So I chose The World History of Liberalism as our first topic. For a couple of reasons, I think world history is in its fundamentals interdisciplinary. So it includes insights, at least when world history is done right, it

includes insights from all sorts of areas of the humanities, economics, sociology, history of course, but also philosophy and political theory. And everything else really, could be worked into a good rich example of world history.

Anthony Comegna ([03:15](#)):

It also includes by its nature, a cross section of different cultures from around the world. So I think it also fits nicely into something that Emily Chamlee Wright and I talked about on the show a few weeks ago, which is our new discourse initiative. Where we're trying to bring scholars from across the different spectrums of liberal scholarship into the same conversations about the values and the methods and methodologies and everything else that we all still hold in common.

Anthony Comegna ([03:47](#)):

Even though the world is kind of going to hell right now in a couple senses at least I think, there's a lot for all sorts of different self-identified liberals to hold onto. And world history is really a cross section of that.

Anthony Comegna ([04:01](#)):

So we have 10 of these different sessions set up over the next, I guess, eight more months, because we've already done two of these, where we're spending each week or each month, I should say, talking about a single book, a single collection of articles. And it's been really great so far. It's good to see how our students respond to a topic like World History.

Jeanne Hoffman ([04:25](#)):

And talking more broadly about this program type before I dive into that topic more, I think it's great that you're looking at the online space as an opportunity right now. Because these discussion colloquiums that you work with at IHS were my favorite part of IHS during my legal studies, but there was a huge opportunity cost to getting out to the programs, because it took up a weekend when there were so many other things on my plate. So I wish this existed when I was back in school.

Anthony Comegna ([04:55](#)):

Right. I kind of think the same thing. On our end of things, it's very easy, because these are very quick to put together. We're asking everybody to purchase their own books and of course we're reimbursing folks for that. But it makes it really streamlined and simple. We can run a lot of them. They're fairly cheap, because you don't have to pay for things like hotel rooms and all of that. So we can roll the money into honoraria to students to help them out at this current moment, that is so awful and trying. And we can just do a lot of these.

Anthony Comegna ([05:27](#)):

So it's really great. At least from what I've seen in the first two sessions, it's really creating a nice feeling of community that just wouldn't be there if you only saw each other every five or six months or more. So I think it's fantastic. It is really actually a great opportunity for us and, hey, maybe that makes us opportunists, but that's the kind of thing we need to be doing to respond to the climate. And I think it's going great so far.

Anthony Comegna ([05:55](#)):

I also incidentally quite agree with you. These kinds of discussions were the best programs I ever attended with IHS. Just because there's so much fun. It's so much fun to get in a room with people who care about the same things in pretty similar ways and to hash out the details of a scholarship that you're all probably studying anyhow. It's really been fantastic.

Jeanne Hoffman ([06:20](#)):

Yeah, that's great. And I'll just say that being an opportunist is okay when all parties seem to benefit in this. It seems like there's a lot of benefit to attending the program. So the topics themselves sound really interesting to me and some of them were surprising, some of them were really intriguing. But before I talk about what I thought was surprising, I just wanted to ask you, what do you think is the most surprising topic on the docket for this program?

Anthony Comegna ([06:46](#)):

In a sense, it's topic number one, which we discussed back in July. Mainly because of the book it's by Ernst Gombrich who wrote the first draft of this A Little History of the World back in the 1930s, and then he updated it in the 50s, I believe.

Anthony Comegna ([07:04](#)):

But it's a world history written for children. Now he's German, so in the 1930s, apparently children meant teenagers. It's not a picture book, but it very much reads like one of your high school textbooks today on world history, in that it covers or tries to cover pretty broad scope of cultures, the broadest scope of time possible.

Anthony Comegna ([07:30](#)):

So actually in a pretty cutting edge way, he goes all the way back to the formation of the universe and the solar system, which today we would call big history. But at the time didn't really have a sub-discipline title attached to it. And there are problems with Gombrich's book, like many of our students pointed out in the discussion.

Anthony Comegna ([07:51](#)):

He really kind of superficially covers non-western cultures. And basically his story is still ancient Greek ideas translating to the modern world and the different kinds of changes that gave us Western civilization as we know it today. And he, writing at the time again, doesn't have any problems using that word civilization, although I think there's a lot to pick apart there too. So I think that's kind of surprising just in the sense that it's not written for a scholarly audience or an adult audience, but there's so much to be gained from it.

Anthony Comegna ([08:25](#)):

And the title of that session was, What is World History? It was just introducing the concept and practice to our students who undoubtedly haven't had that much exposure to it. We have so few historians working with us anyhow but most people had not really spent much time reading world history until this series. It's accessible, it's fun and yet you can see both the strengths and weaknesses of his approach so clearly that it's very, very helpful and instructive.

Anthony Comegna ([08:58](#)):

And I found it very interesting that a book ostensibly written for children could be so useful still even 80 plus years after it was published. It was just a ton of fun. I think one of the other surprising subjects is going to be in February, when we talk about liberalism and The Spiritualist Movement-

Jeanne Hoffman ([09:21](#)):

I was going to bring that up.

Anthony Comegna ([09:21](#)):

Now I'll ask you, Jeanne, what kinds of your familiarity do you have with The Spiritualist Movement?

Jeanne Hoffman ([09:28](#)):

I honestly have none at all.

Anthony Comegna ([09:30](#)):

It was this, I'll just say it, it was kind of a bizarre movement. A quasi religious movement in the Victorian era. In the United States and in Britain especially. And it's this strange moment in time when I ... The thing I love the most about the Jacksonian period is from about 1815 to 1845, the world just completely changed, in every significant way.

Anthony Comegna ([09:57](#)):

And you can see this most clearly through new technologies and new understandings of science like telegraphy and electricity. And the spiritualists were this group of almost new age in our modern sense spiritual thinkers, who believed in something beyond the physical.

Anthony Comegna ([10:20](#)):

And yet they incorporated the new Victorian science of electricity and magnetism into this understanding of what the spirit was. And they produced the set of ideas that were not really dogmatic religion, but it could easily be grafted onto the old religions and updated in quasi-scientific fashion to include new understandings of the world.

Anthony Comegna ([10:44](#)):

And they believe kind of that, the soul is actually part of the physical world. And so using things like electricity, you can reanimate corpses, of course, as scientists had shown for several decades at that point. This would be the 1840s when spiritualism's really getting going. But they thought that you could not only make corpses move again, but you could somehow capture the essence of the individual, their soul as a material force and almost shove it back into their lifeless body. Right?

Anthony Comegna ([11:16](#)):

And that eventually using scientific understandings of the world, you could conquer death itself, and transform the whole of human history. And there's this amazing moment, where especially women are engaging in spirit mediumship. They're using things like telegraphs and electromagnets to charge their

auras and to tap on the telegraph keys and communicate like an early weege board or something to spirits. And then speak with their voice. Right?

Anthony Comegna ([11:48](#)):

So there's actually this amazing moment where early libertarian figure named Frances Whipple, who had been a spirit medium since the late 1840s. She moves to California during the civil war, and she gives a speech in front of a hall in San Francisco where she channels the spirit of a guy named Colonel E.D. Baker. And if you listened to my episode a few months ago now on five libertarian heroes, Frances Whipple was one of them because of this speech.

Anthony Comegna ([12:21](#)):

And she supposedly channels E.D. Baker's spirit. Baker was Lincoln's best friend and he was a Senator in California until he signed up to go fight the civil war back East. He dies at Ball's Bluff, Virginia, and then his spirit travels to Francis Whipple and dictates his own funeral oration to her. Right? And in that funeral oration, Baker is just vociferously abolitionist. And at a time when the war is not about abolition yet, he says, "We need to seize the moment and the opportunity and make it about abolition."

Anthony Comegna ([12:59](#)):

But he of course speaks through Frances Whipple, a woman, right, who has no political rights and very little social standing still to be even making speeches like this. But because of the science and mystery behind her ability to communicate with spirits, she is given this perch to become what her biographer says is, the first prominent West Coast politician to advocate emancipation.

Anthony Comegna ([13:28](#)):

And I just think that is an amazing moment in women's history. And it's an amazing moment in a classical liberal or radical liberal history. Because it's this woman absolutely seizing the moment to expand her own voice and her own ability to impact change. And I just love that.

Anthony Comegna ([13:48](#)):

And there's so much to talk about there with what this new age package of ideas that bucks the trend and challenges all powerful institutions and offers a direct connection to the individual to knowledge beyond themselves. What you can do with that is just amazing. So I can't wait to see what people make of that.

Jeanne Hoffman ([14:10](#)):

It's really interesting you bring up that last part, because earlier when you were talking about the reanimation, I was going to bring up Shelley and Frankenstein and ask if that's related. And we had been discussing that at a discussion colloquium back in August of last year, where we were talking about lots of women, like Margaret Fell, who is the wife of George Fox and other women who pretended to be men when they were writing different opinion tracks, so that they would get taken seriously. But I've never heard of one pretending to be a dead man.

Anthony Comegna ([14:44](#)):

Yeah. I think my guess would be that all of these people had read things like Frankenstein, or certainly we're at least aware of it because it was such a phenomenon even in its day. And of course, Mary Shelley was the daughter of a William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. And Godwin, we've talked about, on the show before, he is some readings from him were included in our mental health discussion. A few months ago, we had to talk about that.

Anthony Comegna ([15:13](#)):

Talk about a radical family. That was one. And people at the time, I find it so fascinating, they thought of science as the ultimate savior. Not because it came from the top down, but because, these were ideas and practices and technologies developed in tinkerer shops.

Anthony Comegna ([15:30](#)):

And the most they had to depend on from government to change the world like they thought they were doing was intellectual property. And of course, this is also the era where everybody is stealing ideas from everybody, if you consider it stealing, I don't, but ...

Anthony Comegna ([15:46](#)):

So yeah, the connection is very strong and real. And you mentioned the Quaker, so I'll just say the other one that I'm really, really excited to talk about, is our session called Liberty Responsibility and The Putney Debates. And the Putney debates were a moment in the English revolution in the 1640s, when the parliament, which is currently holding the King captive. The parliament starts debating "Well, what is the world going to look like, now that the King has been essentially removed from his normal suite of powers and parliament is directing the show?"

Anthony Comegna ([16:28](#)):

And it's this incredible moment where the levelers, who are the big reformers of the group, and a lot of the levelers eventually became the founders of Quakerism. They look back at history to inform them about how to change things moving forward. And normally, before then people would look back at history to instruct them about what things they should replicate. And the levelers look back at history and they said, "History is the long story of all the aristocracies crimes and all of their violations of the people's rights."

Anthony Comegna ([17:08](#)):

Things like enclosure, where for a couple hundred years in a row, the aristocracy of England would fence in their lands, essentially stealing them from people who worked them in common and share the proceeds of the land that you and I talked about that before, when you were on to talk about Ostrom.

Anthony Comegna ([17:28](#)):

So that's going to be another one that's very exciting too. And I think especially so, because this is one of these parts of radical classical liberal history that we often forget about. In part, because John Locke, when he wrote the second treatise of civil government, was trying to make sure this kind of thing never happened again.

Anthony Comegna ([17:49](#)):

So I see it as like his great moment of radicalism where the well-to-do, the influential, the wealthy, they want to make sure that they maintain some measure of power control and influence moving forward, and that we don't have one of these moments of Victorian science, where the world just seems opened up to change from any tinkerer in their shop or any member of the new model army who thinks he should have a voice. So these are going to be some pretty exciting topics to talk about.

Jeanne Hoffman ([18:19](#)):

One that I wanted to ask you about, because most of the topics, the works that you're reading have very dynamic, interesting titles. And I know that everything that you put on a reading list is very deliberate and purposeful. You have the new world history, a field guide for teachers and researchers. First, showing the limits of my knowledge of history, what is in compensated in a new world history, but also what is the thinking behind reading a field guide and what are you hoping people will get out of it?

Anthony Comegna ([18:50](#)):

Well, that's going to be, if I may, probably our most boring set of reading. In part, because it's all historiography, which is the history of writing history. And yes, that's a little dry and it can be ... I mean, this is the kind of thing you're most likely to encounter in a standard graduate seminar on the world history that's included in our whole reading list. But it's there because I couldn't conscientiously exclude something like this. Right?

Anthony Comegna ([19:19](#)):

So if students are spending all this time, month after month with us, and most students have signed up for the whole series, or at least every session that they could actually attend, they can't just read interesting books every week. They also have to really seriously engage with the field itself, and understand what the practitioners are doing and why, what ideas most historians have brought to the table when they're writing their world histories and everything else. They should understand something about how the field has developed.

Anthony Comegna ([19:52](#)):

So perhaps I shouldn't say boring, but this'll be the most serious of our sessions in a way. Because I've assigned this book, like you said, *The New World History*, it's a collection of essays edited by Dunn Ward and Mitchell here. And it's historians who are very, very big name important people from across the field who've been working in world history for four, five, six decades in some cases now, people like William McNeill.

Anthony Comegna ([20:24](#)):

And it really gives them an idea of how world history has changed from its beginning. So, for example, I was just thinking earlier today in preparation for this interview. What are some of my favorite world historians? One of them is Voltaire. Because Voltaire was one of these European enlightenment figures who was very interested in other cultures and societies like China, the kinds of things they might have to teach Europeans and what we could learn from that.

Anthony Comegna ([20:55](#)):

But Voltaire has all sorts of problems. Somebody like Condorcet is the same way, another French revolution and enlightenment figure. If you read his history of civilization though, it's all about Europe and it's all about this idea of constant progress toward modern European life and the things that a modern Europeans hold dear. But by now we know, especially going through the early 20th century, that that idea, that history is leading up to a single telos, is just not only flat out wrong, but it's dangerous.

Anthony Comegna ([21:31](#)):

It's dangerous to everybody who doesn't fit into that mold. And people can take it way too far in thinking that, we're the ones who live up to this standard of civilization and modernity and so we're the ones who have some sort of mandate on directing the future and deciding who gets to be involved and who doesn't. It's kind of the exact opposite of that Frances Whipple spiritualism method of change and development, where we can all tap into important knowledge about the world.

Anthony Comegna ([22:03](#)):

And historians have, to their great credit, they have learned to navigate those waters in really creative and inventive ways. So, world history today, you have all sorts of different kinds of world history and ideas about what it is. It's not just history that crosses borders. It can also be history that treats borders as though they never existed in the first place. Where at least, as was actually the case I think.

Anthony Comegna ([22:31](#)):

Borders didn't exist like we know them and until pretty recently in history. And instead you see all sorts of world systems developing, usually across ocean basins or navigable areas of land, like Steppe plains in inner Asia, things like that. So it's a whole way of re-conceptualizing what the world looks like and how peoples across the planet interact with each other. And it's just incredibly rich. And like I said, it's inherently interdisciplinary.

Jeanne Hoffman ([23:04](#)):

And then to be a little self-indulgent, I wanted to talk to you about pirates. So there's Villains of All Nations, I'm a huge fan of Pete Leeson. I don't know if you've read his Invisible Hook, talking about anarchy and pirates and how, if they are evil villains, their alignment would be lawful evil villains because of all the systems that they follow themselves. But what angle does Marcus Rediker take with his view on pirates?

Anthony Comegna ([23:33](#)):

Yeah, I got to say I love Pete Leeson too. I did an interview with him on his pirate's book and another book of his, when I was at the Cato Institute. And I have a Liberty fund proposal out right now that also got COVIDed that puts Marcus Rediker and Pete Leeson in conflict with each other and is going to have the discussions, hash it out, who's got the better end of the argument.

Anthony Comegna ([23:57](#)):

I actually went to graduate school at the University of Pittsburgh where Marcus teaches and I got the chance to have a couple seminars with him and to teach early US history with him. And I just think he's amazing. I think the greatest possible things about his work, not because it's always accurate, but

because it's always heartfelt and compelling. And the thing about Marcus in his book, *Villains of All Nations* that we're reading, he famously argues that pirates in what's called the golden age, the early 18th century, they were the first revolutionary communists.

Anthony Comegna (24:35):

And that's quite a bit different than what people who've read Pete's book might think about pirates where it's all about-

Jeanne Hoffman (24:43):

For sure.

Anthony Comegna (24:43):

It's all about rational calculation, right? And it's all about coming up with institutional balances and checks for this and that activity, aboard the ship and maximizing individual profit of each sailor and things like that. Marcus says actually, there's something really radical in the intellectual life of these people that gets translated into those very pirate codes that Pete talks about, and the way that they regulate themselves aboard ship.

Anthony Comegna (25:12):

So for example, Pete says that they divided up the booty of any particular hit on a British ship or any other ship pretty evenly in part, because it ensured the loyalty of each individual sailor. And it was same thing with the way the pirate captain would treat his crew. They would treat each other pretty leniently and according to codes that they all made themselves rather democratically.

Anthony Comegna (25:39):

And Pete's explanation is rational choice that this ensures that the crew would actually be loyal when they come into conflict with a British ship. They won't just run away to the British Navy side. They don't need to seek refuge from their pirate captain because they make those rules themselves and their captain more follows the rules made democratically.

Anthony Comegna (26:01):

Well, Marcus says, in fact, this is a reaction to the way the early capitalist imperialist system of nation states treated working people. That working people were essentially disposable and what's more, we want to get them out and force them out of the cities and aboard ship because that lowers the risk of rebellion at home. Class rebellion, where poor people start to take ideas from things like the Putney debates and the English revolution and turn society on its head.

Anthony Comegna (26:34):

In fact, that's exactly what was happening. Sailors were learning from their experience in this modernizing world, that they actually had a lot of power. Even though their captains claimed absolute powers over their lives and liberties, once the whole crew decides to stand together in solidarity against that kind of torture and exploitation. I mean, real torture.

Anthony Comegna (27:00):

Being a sailor was just about as bad as being a slave in the sense that your captain had absolute control and legal authority over you and you had no standing to challenge them. You had no legal standing as a person when you were aboard ship. And those captains were downright sadistic with their crews.

Anthony Comegna ([27:20](#)):

And so Marcus says that, what we see with the explosion of piracy in the golden age is actually an intellectual and political revolution, where soldiers seized the means of production, which at the time, the most complicated and expensive machinery in the world where the tall sailing ships in Europe. They seize the means of production. They already control the labor, outputs or inputs in the whole system.

Anthony Comegna ([27:50](#)):

And when they decided to act in solidarity with each other, they dramatically changed the whole system. And in fact, during that period, piracy did more damage to European shipping than the whole of the 15 year long war of Spanish succession. So it was a major, major set of events.

Jeanne Hoffman ([28:10](#)):

Wow. Certainly different from the Pirates of The Caribbean movies then?

Anthony Comegna ([28:16](#)):

Yeah, quite a bit. Quiet, there's very little that's accurate in those movies, especially because a good chunk of every crew would have been black, and they don't show that. It was a Motley crew as Marcus says. They were made up of people of all colors, people of all national backgrounds and when they turned pirate, as the saying went, they would specifically hold these ceremonies where they renounced all of their previous national allegiances and obligations. And they would recommit themselves to the crew itself, really as a set of working class people.

Anthony Comegna ([28:52](#)):

So, as you can probably tell, I'm a little bit more on Marcus's side of this divide. I think Pete tries to explain a little too much with reference to rational choice. And in fact, what we might see is a generation and a class of people literally broken psychologically by the world they lived in. And they determine, "We have to make something new."

Jeanne Hoffman ([29:17](#)):

Now you said that you're considering doing this as an ongoing series, do you have any ideas about future topics or themes that you might be doing?

Anthony Comegna ([29:26](#)):

Yeah. So for world history, we did have some subjects that didn't make the first round of cuts. So let's see, the titles I have here are class, conflict and change, which will be a theory focused one. I'd like to do a session on comparative federalism, different federalist systems of government around the world and across time. And another one on comparative totalitarianism. Same thing, comparing different totalitarian regimes across time. And then we're also planning three more series like this, next year.

Anthony Comegna ([30:01](#)):

So these open-ended online seminars are going to be, like I said earlier, hopefully part of our permanent capacity moving forward well past the days of COVID. So the next series we're going to start, we'll actually be fired up here in November and we'll have applications up on the website soon. So anybody who has an interest in this, I'd say, just check the website.

Anthony Comegna ([30:23](#)):

That next series is going to be called Comparing Singularities. And so this is going to be ... A singularity means a lot of different things in different fields. In mathematics, I'm not a mathematician, but it's the point on a circle where a fixed observer can no longer see past the curve. So if you're like standing on the sidewalk next to a circular building, there's a point on the building where you can't see the back of it anymore, you can't see past the curve.

Anthony Comegna ([30:54](#)):

In astrophysics, a singularity is a black hole, essentially. It absorbs everything into it, including light and so you can't actually see the black hole. Well in modern computing, as we've talked about a bit on the show before, a singularity in the technological sense is the moment at which technology changes so dramatically and so rapidly that you cannot predict how it will affect society after the change.

Anthony Comegna ([31:24](#)):

So what we're going to do in this series comparing singularities, is we're going to look at examples of technological singularities from the past and compare them with the possibilities of technological singularities right now and in the near future. As I said, this is the thing that amazes me over and over again about Jacksonian America, that at the beginning, it took you weeks on board, the fastest steamship you could find, or a sailing vessel you could find to get from New York to new Orleans for God's sake.

Anthony Comegna ([31:55](#)):

And at the end of that period, you can take a train in maybe two days, or you could send your thoughts electronically by telegraph instantaneously. And that's just amazing. That is an amazing change of world shaping proportions that I think we've lived through it to some degree with the internet. But then again, I also think the internet is more or less, it's just an extension or a perfection of the telegraphs technology. Right?

Anthony Comegna ([32:25](#)):

So a lot of people say, well, the real technological singularity that we will experience is artificial intelligence. And if you follow somebody like Ray Kurzweil, who is on our reading lists toward the very end of this series, the technological singularity will happen roundabout 2045. And that will be the point at which you can buy, get this, this is amazing to me. You should be able to buy a personal computer for about a thousand dollars that has the computing capacity of the entire human species.

Anthony Comegna ([32:59](#)):

And that doesn't necessarily say anything about whether that intelligence in those computers will be artificial or specific general intelligence or general, general intelligence, whatever the terms are, I'm no computer expert.

Anthony Comegna ([33:17](#)):

But it does say the raw computing power of humanity will be dramatically, dramatically increased over the next 30 years. And with all that change of information, the capacity to transform society is virtually unlimited. So we're going to look at examples of that kind of change in the past. And we're going to try to draw some conclusions about what that sort of change would mean for us today and what we can do about it.

Jeanne Hoffman ([33:49](#)):

A huge thank you to Dr. Comegna for joining us on the show. You can check out the series on our website at the [ihs.org](http://ihs.org). And don't forget to rate, review and subscribe to the Ideas in Progress. And continue checking us out at the [ihs.org/podcasts](http://ihs.org/podcasts).