

Anthony Comegna ([00:21](#)):

Folks, today is a great honor and a real treat for me. About two years ago now, while I was back at the Cato Institute, my old faculty mentor from my student days with IHS approached me with an idea for a book. At that time, Cato was running a series of document readers. And my old mentor wanted to put one together about liberal histories, and I jumped at it. And now, I have the great pleasure of sharing that project with you all. Joining us this week to talk about his new book, *The Liberal Approach To The Past*, it's Georgetown University's professor Michael Douma. So, go ahead, start us off here by just telling us the background for the book. Why did you start collecting this volume together in the first place?

Michael Douma ([01:08](#)):

Well, the simple answer is because I knew you would be the editor, so I wouldn't have to work with somebody I didn't get along with. And it makes it easier to have to work with somebody you know, and to have an idea for a book that's already shaped in discussion so you don't have to fight with an editor. But I wanted to do a few things with the book, I wanted to further define what liberal or classical liberal history is about. And then in the process, teach myself because I didn't have the answers before I wrote this. I wanted to provide a set of readings for others to get acquainted with the topic. And I wanted to show that liberal historians have been dealing with problems and philosophy and methods of history for a long time, even if these ideas are not very well known. So, there is a tradition of thinking about history from a liberal perspective.

Anthony Comegna ([02:07](#)):

So, a lot of that sounds like it's in a way building on the kinds of things that you and Phil Magness deal with in your book from a few years ago now, *What Is Classical Liberal History?* Which is another edited volume of essays from different historians, mainly. And if I am remembering it correctly, it's been a few years since I interviewed you for that book on another podcast of mine. But if I'm remembering correctly, that seems to build from what you were arguing there. That, really the main line of the history profession was at once what we now call classical liberalism. So, I'm very curious to talk a little more about that divide, and how do you see this new book fitting into your ongoing body of work?

Michael Douma ([02:59](#)):

Well, you're correct. So, the book, *What Is Classical Liberal History?* Roman & Littlefield 2018, I think. It was going to come out in '17 and came out in '18. Is very similar at a distance to this book, but I do different things. So, in the introduction to that previous book, I defined what classical liberal history is. I said it's a focus on freedom and history and approach that considers individuals as the primary actors in history. But it's a book that had chapters that demonstrated how you could write classical liberal history for a modern audience. That this isn't something that's dated, that's not just 19th century historians, that it's a tradition that continues. So, this new book provides both a set of historical background texts to show ideas about classical liberal history, but also a philosophical explanation of them.

One of my motivations, I'm not sure how this came about, but I read Helena Rosenblatt's *Lost History of Liberalism*, which is a fine book. I wrote a review of it. I disagree with certain things, but it's not really too problematic. But her book and various other ones, wanted to define liberalism first and then go looking for it. At least that's what it seemed to me. And I instead wanted to say, "What do historians who call themselves liberal, what have they written about history? What do they think it means to do history?" And so, in some sense, this was a set of readings that I look for and discovered, where historians are explaining their own thought processes. And I feel like in the liberal tradition, when

we talk about liberalism, we often focus on the philosophers and the political theorists to the exclusion of people like the historians, that were very important in forming liberalism in the 18th and 19th century.

Anthony Comegna ([05:11](#)):

Well, so I'm wondering then, when exactly would you place the beginning of a distinctly liberal or classical liberal history? How far back exactly does it go? And what's your rationale for starting the volume exactly where you started, which is in the mid to late 19th century

Michael Douma ([05:32](#)):

Yeah. And that's a good question. Historians are always interested in origins, we want to know when things started so we can trace them going forward. There's no start date for liberalism. We can't say, "In 1756, David Hume said, 'We're starting liberalism or something.' " It doesn't have an origin or a manifesto the same way something like Marxism has an origin in essentially one person and a set of core books or texts. So, it's a general tradition that emerges, I say in the 18th century, some people might say earlier, some people might say later. And comes into power in the 19th century, dominates political discourse in the 19th century. Now, this of course is a bit of a bias as a scholar historian of the 19th century. I'm a bit biased, I have trouble looking further back in time, to me, the dark periods, the dark centuries because I don't know anything about them. And so, I might've focused too much on the 19th century.

Anthony Comegna ([06:39](#)):

Yeah. The 19th century, it's the relatively happy wedge in between two really awful periods. And that's why I'm there at least.

Michael Douma ([06:49](#)):

The sweet center of Goldilocks problem of looking for sources, it has just the right number of sources.

Anthony Comegna ([06:58](#)):

That's right. I don't have to go through endless journals full of awful handwriting, I can just read newspapers. Now, it does make me wonder though because I actually think I'm more sympathetic to the idea that classical liberalism distilled down to a few principles, it's more like principles of physics or proof's in mathematics. If a particular people in somewhere in history, in space and time, figure out certain true things like more efficient, optimal solutions are achieved when you leave people alone from central direction, then those are going to be more successful societies. That to me, can spring up anywhere regardless of some sort of historical tradition called classical liberalism. So, do you see any elements of liberal history back before the enlightenment era, or is it just more important to you to talk about a definable tradition?

Michael Douma ([08:11](#)):

I think you're certainly correct. At one point I think in this book, I quoted Sam Hammond who works at the Niskanen Institute, because he says something about rediscovering. These liberal principles are not just seen once but are discovered and rediscovered over time and can be lost. And you're correct. We can go further back in time and ask, "Oh, were the Greeks liberals, the Romans or the Venice or something?" And there's historians that have done that. The 15th century commercial revolution in

Europe or something, people treat that as a liberal era of increased trade and prosperity, something like that.

So, I think you're correct. And that's something that actually that plagues, for example, libertarian history, which I see as something different than liberal history. Libertarian history can either be defined as, Murray Rothbard, Forward, that kind of school of thought, or it can be this general principles of libertarianism going back to Lysander Spooner, I don't know, Epictetus or something. Anybody that mentioned something about the individual could be part of that tradition, depending on how you define it. But for the purposes of this book, and I think for the development of history as a discipline, it's crucial to see liberalism as coming into its own in the 19th century, and starting to, I would really say, dominate historical research and thinking in the West, principally in the West.

Anthony Comegna ([09:55](#)):

Yeah. I actually, I think I can agree with that too. Because, while I do have this long view of things, I think that, actually as any sort of real movement, liberalism is still extremely young. So, we have to reckon with that still, just how young it is. And now I'm wondering, can you tell us a bit about some of the more widely known figures that you excerpt in and talk about in the book here?

Michael Douma ([10:23](#)):

Some of the more widely known figures; Croce, not the gym, but Benedetto Croce, Collingwood, Butterfield, Hayek, I've included all those. A lot of lesser known figures, but those are some of the major ones. Collingwood in the 1930s, I include him because his ideas are very similar to a lot of the other writers. I'm not sure if he explicitly calls himself a liberal like most of the other writers that I've looked at, but I see his tradition of idealist history and focused on the ideas and history, not the material causes of things that shaped the past. And there's a lot of overlap between Collingwood and Croce. I'm not, by far not the first one to notice that, you see in Oakeshott as well, this idealist history. And I would say Butterfield is fairly well known and he's pretty clearly a liberal. And then of course Hayek, better known as an economist, writes one book on history. And you see that as well with Mises. So I include Mises and Hayek, and I see the continuation of 19th century liberalism in them.

And this might be a question or a problem that self-described liberals, or progressives today would see in this book. And they would say, "Why does it appear that the liberal tradition you've traced it into more of the modern libertarian writers?" Well, they're really saying pretty much the same thing. If you look at Mises, you look at Hayek and you compare it to the early 19th century British writers like August Freeman, I don't know how to pronounce it, Froude, F-R-O-U-D-E, they're saying very similar things about the philosophy of history. Whereas, liberals and progressives in late 20th century history writing, are saying very different things from what the liberals in the 19th century were writing. And so, I see the modern liberals and progressives as coming quite a bit off of this traditionally liberal pattern.

Anthony Comegna ([12:50](#)):

Now, I'd love to follow up on that because I'm wondering, well, who's gone more off track? Is it the classical liberals or the mainstream historical profession? Because, like I was saying earlier from your previous book, you've argued that the historical profession used to be classical liberal in its mainstream representation. And now it is decidedly not. Is that because classical liberal scholars have drifted too much from their first principles or important insights and methods, or have the progressive left folks gone too far in their own directions?

Michael Douma ([13:34](#)):

Yeah. I think there's a couple of things going on. So, the modern liberals and progressives are still historicist, they're still a lot of them. And if you talk to people today... So, let me maybe backtrack a second. People will say, "Okay. You're inventing a liberal tradition." Or in some ways, I'm one of the first ones to define this as the mainstream undercurrent foundation of all of historical writing. And people would say, "Okay. Point to it. Where is it?" Well, there's an attempt in this book to do that. But it's also, I think, underlying just our general assumptions of Western history. Simply the way we write and think about history in the West, is so influenced by liberalism that we forget that even if we write Marxist or a Nowell school history or gender history, that a lot of our preconceptions are still liberal.

And so, there's a lot of people today that are progressives and liberals that write history, but when they come down to defending history or talking about its methods, they don't feel much need to talk about their traditional ways. That is, the defense of the liberal views of history have come more from the conservatives and libertarians because they see in that liberal tradition, a defense of the individual. Where I think modern progressives and liberals look at the historical tradition and they say, "Okay. I agree with some of that. In some ways I am a liberal, but we need to use these other tools if we're going to understand class, race, gender, larger developments and categories of historical analysis." And so, I think there's probably more agreement between a lot of liberals and progressives and the school of liberal history than might appear on the surface.

Anthony Comegna ([15:37](#)):

Yeah. I certainly think there is. We just ran a program recently on intersectionality and individualism, where at least the thrust of the readings was that the two ideas work perfectly hand in hand as social science methodologies. And there's no reason to exclude one in favor of the other, you can use them both together and get a lot more out of it.

Michael Douma ([16:01](#)):

Yeah. And there is a tendency-

Anthony Comegna ([16:04](#)):

Now, I am curious... No. Go a head. Please.

Michael Douma ([16:07](#)):

... I was going to say, there's a tendency today to look towards the fringe elements of historical writing and see everything as antagonistic. But I like to joke that I'm a historian working for philosophers and a business school, so I direct a business ethics institute at Georgetown. And when I watched the philosophers talk, they're antagonistic, they argue with each other, they fight with each other. At the end of the day, they shake hands and they're happy to argue, that's what philosophy is essentially, just argumentation. And they enjoy that. But historians, we tend to accept each other and try to work towards some sort of agreement. I don't see there being as much disagreement in history as the fringe writers would like you to believe. When they're trying to raise money for the political causes, they want to say, "Look at this incredibly incorrect interpretation of some historical event." And there's plenty of debates worth having between left and right, but I think his historians have more agreement than they have disagreement.

Anthony Comegna ([17:18](#)):

Yeah. I don't necessarily think you're evil because, well, you're writing about Dutch civil war soldiers and things like that.

Michael Douma ([17:26](#)):

Yeah. I think it's completely non-ideological. We all like to think that what we're writing is not ideological, but who knows what my underlying assumptions are? Why I even choose the topics I write?

Anthony Comegna ([17:48](#)):

Now, speaking of, I'm curious to know why you chose some of the lesser known figures in the book here to cover. Because, you know me, I love the lesser known people. You can't say anonymous by the way because that's a surefire win, but nobody's heard of your anonymous person. But aside from anonymous, who are some of the lesser known figures that you cover in the book and why did you make those choices to include their stuff?

Michael Douma ([18:18](#)):

Yeah. So, first of all, you make a really good point. Usually, the people that we call lesser known, weren't necessarily lesser known at the time. We have a tendency to canonize certain historical figures and thinkers and philosophers, and make them the important ones and pretend as if the others didn't matter. But there's historians in their time that were famous that are forgotten, and there's people in their time that are obscure, that became famous later on. And so, the trajectory goes in both ways. Okay. So, a few examples of people that are maybe less well-known, one of them I think is not known at all, that I included, his name is William Torrey Harris. And he was a Hegelian liberal, very clearly Hegelian, living in St. Louis. I believe for some time, he was the secretary of education or worked at the national level with the secretary of education.

And to me, it was just fascinating because he demonstrates how a lot of these liberal ideas had left the academy and had come into schools. And he was actually actively shaping history textbooks and history teaching in the United States with certain liberal ideas. Now, mixed in with these ideas were things of American exceptionalism and nationalism, patriotism and stuff like this. But he very much saw the world as a history of progress and improvement in a Hegelian tradition.

And I also included the introduction... I forget the name of the author, but there's an introduction of a textbook written near the same period, where they do the same type of thing. Just to demonstrate that these classical liberal ideas really did shape even K-12 education and how people taught history.

Another historian I included that I really like, maybe it's, again, my influence in the Dutch. But I really liked this Dutch historian named, in Dutch it'd be pronounced Pieter Geyl or Peter Geyl in English. And he gets in these decades long debates with Arnold Toynbee about the interpretation of long scales of history, and whether we can even say that there are periods of history that determined things, and TLA logical determined history as Toynbee likes. And I find Toynbee just absolutely intolerable. I don't know if it's his accent or just his views or something, but I don't like the guy. And Peter Geyl, they remain civil despite these arguments with each other for years. And they're featured on television and radio debates because Toynbee was a big deal and Geyl was a big deal in his country.

And so, including some of him to remind readers of first of all, the liberal historians outside of the Anglo-American tradition. And I wish I would have included more of them. I discovered the writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt really after I had assembled this collection. And I certainly would have included something from Humboldt. He writes a work on history very early, turn of the 18th century.

No. Excuse me, the beginning of the 19th century. And so, I would have included another German, less well known to the American audience.

Anthony Comegna ([21:58](#)):

Well, let's dig in there a little bit more because I'm sure there's... We all know that the more time you spend and the more you dig into all of this kind of history, the more you're going to find. So, you'll never have everybody that you could have in a collection like this. And you'd have a lot more pages to deal with anyways, if you tried to put them all in. But talk to us about some of the big changes or shifts you've seen in the course of classical liberalism's history, and its history of writing history. So, if I read you correctly, it seems like you think the core of classical liberal history is classic empiricism and humility, in the scope of your claims. And individualism, and just the concern for Liberty. Has that always been the case or has it ever substantially shifted? And that might take us back to again, well, then what has happened with mainstream history and why is it in quite a different state right now?

Michael Douma ([23:10](#)):

Okay. You know this very well, the history of liberalism. In the 19th century, liberals dominated the political discourse and they put all these ideas of free trade, even women's rights, antislavery, all these types of things were driven by the liberals. And at some point, it seems almost as if the liberal project was successful. All these things happened. And then later in the 20th century, they lose out on these arguments. First with, of course, the fascists and the communists, et cetera, and getting their ideas across. But now it seems in the past say half century, that liberal voices disappeared because people are arguing for new rights, new things that maybe they aren't entitled to. We can argue about certain positive rights and things. But the liberal project was first largely a negative rights project, "Give us freedom. Take off our chains." And then some positive rights allow us to vote, things like that.

And I think maybe something similar has happened in history, in historical writing from a liberal perspective. Liberals told us things like, "We need to aim to describe reality, even if it goes against our views." And sometimes they struggled with this as well. They get caught up in nationalism or tracing liberty of their own country as the center of the world and all those types of things. Liberal historians also said, "Let's not use social scientific categories that treat the historical change as coming from a nation or a group, we have to trace it to the individual. That's where the decisions are made, in the minds of people." They say history is a separate discipline. It's not some sort of weak physics, where we're just checking the material reality of things, there are ideas behind historical change. Liberals are also opposing laws and history generally, and teleology.

And so, all of these things, once again, modern liberals or progressives might say, "Well, I agree with those." But they want to push it a step farther or change it in a different direction. But not all historians agree with those basic premises of liberal history that I think are still shaping the mainstream. So, some post-modern historians might say, "Well, we don't agree that we're all aiming to described reality, history is all just as a series of attempts to gain power over the narrative." Not all historians think that history is driven by individuals. You can look in both directions. You can look towards Christian conservative historians that want to say there's providence shaping history, or Marxist historians that think it's some greater force behind the actions of what happens. And then I've encountered recently some of these scientists who come into history and think, like I said, history is some sort of weak physics. That historians, if they were as good as the physicists, they would figure out, like computers, everything that has happened in history.

And so to me, the foundational elements of liberal history are still quite in the mainstream. And people will defend them when they need to, but they're curious about these other developments. And

they go off in different directions amongst themselves to try to push these new views without entirely abandoning all of liberalism underneath.

Anthony Comegna ([27:03](#)):

Well, yeah. And you do cover liberal historians up, really, until the present, I would say just about. The most recent publication, the last chapter in the book comes from our own humane studies review. So, tell us about that one. The articles called, *Towards A Critical Classical Liberal History*. And maybe you could close us off by just explaining, how have classical liberal historians responded to some of the main changes in the discipline since say the '60s postmodernism, especially? And what is the state of this new critical classical liberal history at the moment?

Michael Douma ([27:46](#)):

Yeah. I believe you're referencing the Sheilagh Ogilvie article. And she is now quite distinguished historian in England of, *The History Of Commerce In England*, I believe. I'm not a scholar of English history so I forget. Her article from, I believe it was the late '70s, she says, "We should incorporate liberal themes in academic historiography." And so, it's push these liberal ideas into writing, into the discussion, but she also says there's all these other things that classical liberal or liberal writers need to learn from the new developments in historical writing. So, stuff from the inaugural school, stuff from gender studies, different economic Marxists, different takes on things. And so, she says a lot of good important things in the article. But to me, the message is, liberal historians need to get better to understand the modern current debates and why they're important, so that they can engage these and let their voice be part of the discussion.

And you're absolutely right. That's a good proposal of thought for historians going forward. Because, I've met lots of people that say, "Oh, I'm a classical liberal or a libertarian or whatever, but as a historian, I'm not because I don't know how to bring these two things together." And that's what this book and my last one, I think both try to do. Is to say, there is room for thoughts about liberty and freedom in the type of history that you right.

Now, not all history needs these perspectives. Sometimes we're writing some sort of... I like folklore. We're writing some sort of folklore cultural history that's really just descriptive and interesting. But there are lots of important historical debates where we need this liberal perspective, debates about slavery, debates about political representation. And that's what the first book with Phil Magness attempts to do. Is to say, here's a number of chapters where people have used some of these liberal ideas to approach modern topics.

Now, whether we're doing this very well, I think not. There's not a lot of people working in this tradition. It's hard to identify them. People don't stand up and defend it. They're not getting jobs because they're using the new popular, interesting techniques that would get them attention. And nobody at, say Ivy league schools that are creating new PhDs has this kind of perspective much anymore. And so, liberal history is slowly being squeezed out, is my impression

Anthony Comegna ([31:02](#)):

Michael Douma is an assistant research professor at Georgetown's McDonough School of Business, where he is the Director of Georgetown Institute for the Study of Markets and Ethics. He was a great mentor and he's a prolific classical liberal historian, a wonderful colleague. And for me, he is a prime example of how important the connections we make through IHS are. So, thank you all for joining us once again. Be sure to pick up your copy of *The Liberal Approach To The Past* on Amazon or other

outlets, or go straight to libertarianism.org. And in the spirit of the best liberal historians, keep the progress coming.