

Anthony Comegna:

All right, everyone. We're back for another week with George Mason University, Professor of Economics, Larry White. If you caught the show last week, you'll know that Larry has a long storied and important history with the IHS. Though, not necessarily because he's been coming to programs for so long. He hasn't been to any in quite a while now. But the relationships and exposure developed during his IHS years have really translated down the line in interesting ways. For me, the most interesting is a book he published long ago now, with Liberty Fund. Developed out of his undergraduate and grad school research, which found its way onto a library shelf and into my own hands some decades later. I found that book, drew on his work to expand my own project, and swiftly found myself in grad school wrapped firmly and warmly in that IHS family blanket. And now here I am hosting the IHS podcast featuring guests like Larry White for our 60th anniversary celebration.

Anthony Comegna:

In a really important way, I owe my academic career to Larry in particular and scholars like him in general, but absolutely to places like IHS. Anyways, that's enough for me from now. I could go on about Larry for a long time, but let's get back to Professor White.

Anthony Comegna:

All right. Excellent. So Larry, we left off last episode with you mentioning you very cleverly dropped a hint for listeners as to what our next topic would be. We are going to switch gears to the Loco Focos and William Leggett this week. We're going to sort of talk content here. Because this is a way that you and I have linked up in a way through IHS's impact purely on ideas. And not to say that IHS was the progenitor of your original involvement in this subject. But your success in academia ended up say 20, 30 years down the line, translating to inspiring my own dissertation topic and expansion of this subject in the wider historical discourse.

Anthony Comegna:

And I think it's a great example of how the impact of an organization like this might be delayed. It might be unseen for a while. It might be unplanned, spontaneous and everything else, but it can be very deep and profound. And at its best, it can help otherwise dying ideas, stay alive to keep impacting the world in a good way. And so I want to really cover this subject of Loco Foco-ism, William Leggett, and your history with this whole topic. So just start us off by telling us about your research during graduate school and how you ended up finding this somewhat odd, definitely radical, 19th century faction of people I would say where the first libertarian movement in American history. I know that's contentious, but that's what I would want to argue. So go ahead, start us off here.

Larry White:

Well, it actually goes back to college. I was an undergrad at Harvard. I was taking a course in U.S. Intellectual History. The professor was named Donald Fleming. I don't know if that name means anything to you or any listeners. He was a big deal in his day. And it was a two semester course. And each semester we had to write a term paper on some important American thinker. I had met Walter Grinder and was in touch with him. And I knew he was a font of ideas. At that point, this was before he was working for IHS, he was working for The Center for Libertarian Studies. But I got in touch with him and said, "Who would you suggest I should write a paper on?" He said, "Well, this guy, William Leggett is pretty interesting." So I'm not sure what he had read at that point. The only thing of Leggett's that you

could get was a collection of his writings that had been published in the 1830s, just after he died. Walter had probably read that.

Larry White:

So I plunged into that topic and I kind of went overboard on it. I didn't just read the collection edited by his friend, Theodore Cedric Jr. But I visited the new newspaper annex of the New York Public Library. And I got my actual hands on actual copies of *The Plain Dealer* from 1837 and the *New York Evening Post* from 1834. One thing I discovered reading Leggett was an essay on free banking in Scotland. This was the first time I'd ever heard of this, that there had been such an experience. And then in graduate school, when I had to write a term paper for a monetary theory class, I said, "Well, let's see if what Leggett said about free banking in Scotland was actually true." I mean, it seems too good to be true what he's saying about it, that it worked so well and it should be a model for other countries to adopt.

Larry White:

So I wrote that paper, that was for a course taught by Axel Leijonhufvud. And Leijonhufvud said, "Well, I've never heard of this. Nobody else has heard of this. This would be interesting. Why don't you write your dissertation on this?" So really Leggett gave me my dissertation topic. And that was the launching pad for the rest of my career as a monetary economist.

Anthony Comegna:

I'm the sort of researcher who thinks that obscurity most of the time is enough to revive somebody. But is that the main factor that went into you, and your advisor, and Walter's calculations about Leggett being an important topic that literally nobody had really done much on this obviously important thinker?

Larry White:

Yeah. So I soon discovered that there was this... Going back to 1975, there was a secondary literature that mentioned Leggett and the Loco Focos. But it was very cursory. It was an article here or there, or a chapter in the *Jacksonian Persuasion*. And nobody had really dug into Leggett as a thinker. So he was an important political economist, I think. He had some very deep thoughts. Although, he's writing them down very quickly because he's a newspaper man and he's not an academic. Nonetheless, it's clear, I discovered later when I started reading the pamphlet literature from Great Britain at the time on the debate between the free bankers and the pro central bankers, that Leggett was up to date on the latest, sophisticated economic monetary theory. He was clearly reading pamphlets from Britain. I'm not sure how he got hold of them, but he was reading and citing. Although, the citation practices are very spotty in those days, that literature.

Anthony Comegna:

Yeah. One of the things that always annoyed me the most, because as you know, and you just indicated when you're researching these people, because there's so little work by historians done on them, I think mainly because historians just can't be bothered to research weird old libertarians. But there's so little done on them, you really have to stitch footnotes together and spare references here and there across many different volumes. And something that always annoyed me was historians just assuming that we could dismiss these people because they had these really radical ideas. And they just assume that, well, they must've been stupid and not very sophisticated.

Larry White:

Or crazy, as the name Loco Foco suggests.

Anthony Comegna:

Yes, exactly. Or they're Fanny, Wright, communists, or agrarians or something like that.

Larry White:

Well, he was called that in his day.

Anthony Comegna:

Yeah, absolutely. The Guy Fox of politics and stuff like that. But before we get too deep in the personal weeds here, give the audience... Folks who've been longtime listeners of the show will maybe know a bit about this, but tell us who were the Loco Focos, what were the big contributions that William Leggett made as you see them, and give us kind of a broad overview of the history here.

Larry White:

So I'm sure you know more about the Loco Focos as a political movement. And Leggett himself actually didn't want to form a splinter party as eventually happened in New York City by his followers. But Leggett was initially interested in writing poetry, and then he tried to be an actor and he'd failed at that. And he was hired by William Cullen Bryant at The New York Evening Post to write reviews of plays and books. But Bryant was a strong, free trader, a classical liberal. And pretty soon Leggett was writing political essays for The New York Evening Post. He became editor of The Post when Bryant went on leave for a year and sort of took the editorial direction in a more radical direction.

Larry White:

And you can read through his editorial saying, "Well, I've angered another advertiser, so we've lost more advertising. Sorry about that. But I've got to stand up for what I believe." Eventually, Bryant came back and sort of put the ship in order again. But Leggett was not afraid to sort of take the logic of free trade to its radical conclusions. One of my favorite pieces, which I included in the volume I ended up editing for Liberty Fund was his essay on Thanksgiving Fay. He said, "It's great to celebrate Thanksgiving, but it should be a social holiday. It shouldn't be a political holiday. The governor shouldn't be declaring that it's Thanksgiving Fay. That should be the job of the clergy, if it's a religious holiday. Or civic leaders, if it's a civic holiday. But let's separate church and state and make Thanksgiving a private affair."

Larry White:

He had essays, which I included in the volume criticizing public weights and measures. He said, "Look, they're incentives for merchants not to cheat their customers. They'll be found out if they do." By the way, this is a theme I'm working on right now. I'm working on a paper on private gold mints in the American gold rushes. And it's the same story. They had an incentive not to cheat their customers. Some tried and they got found out and they went out of business very quickly. But the honest mints survived.

Anthony Comegna:

One of his, to me, not to interrupt you there, but on this topic. One of his most brilliant insights and moments of communication to me is when he's arguing that, I don't remember the article, but he's arguing that Congress doesn't need to set the value of money, just like they don't need to set the definition of words. And that the market can decide these sorts of things, optimally, and we don't need

some central authority dictating the value of money and we don't need them setting the definition of any particular words. In fact, the system is best when it's left open and fluid to change from the bottom up.

Larry White:

And he's one of the first to apply that to coinage. I don't know what he knew about the private gold mints that were actually operating in his day. There was one called The Bechtler Mint in North Carolina that carried on for more than 20 years, basically until it was outlawed. But that's just another example of how he took the logic of free trade. If the market can do it, it's rather impertinent or presumptive for people in government to think they can improve on the market outcome. So he criticized in particular the monopoly grants of corporate charters that were given out by state legislatures in those days. And he's an important figure in stimulating the move toward general incorporation statutes, where anybody can incorporate by just filling out some papers. In his day, I think his estimate was that a third of the time of the legislature was spent on corporate charters.

Larry White:

And this week I've been reading in old newspapers and sure enough, when they have an account of what the legislature is doing. So this is in the 1830s. A third, or maybe half of the things that have been introduced into the legislature are to give a charter to this or that corporation, to this or that business, allowing them to incorporate. And Leggett said, "Why does it need to be a privilege? Why not let anybody incorporate in the sense of declaring to the world that they have limited liability?" But then without the chartering system, you would have free entry. And so he's a big advocate for free entry into banking. And so was an inspiration to the free banking laws, which weren't laissez-faire exactly, but they did open entry in the United States. So New York State is the first state to draft a free banking statute. Although, Michigan actually passed it first. And from there, it spreads to more than half of the States before the Civil War.

Larry White:

So he's important in those respects in actually influencing the adoption of general incorporation, either statutes or in many states, it was made part of the state constitution. And encouraging freer entry into banking. So he wrote editorials for The New York Evening Post and became popular, or at least he had a cadre of followers. And then left The Evening Post and started his own newspaper called The Plain Dealer, which just ran for a year in 1837. And he died shortly thereafter. He had been sickly for much of his adult life. And I forget the age at which he died, but he died, I think in 1839. And so he was like a brief shooting star. But he wrote so prolifically turning out these newspapers that he wrote on a great variety of topics. And so it was easy to fill a volume of his best work. And of course I could have made it even thicker, but because there was other stuff out there. But I think I got most of the important stuff. So I worked on this collection of his writings in my year as a post-doc at NYU.

Larry White:

Well, when I got to NYU in the fall of 1981, I hadn't yet quite finished my dissertation, which was a little embarrassing, because it was supposed to be a postdoctoral fellowship. But I spent a couple of months finishing my dissertation and then much of the rest of the year working on the Leggett volume. And let me tell you chasing down his literary references, because he would make references to paintings, and plays and 17th century novels. Chasing down those references was pretty hard in the days before

Google. I actually had to spend days in the library, and with the help of the NYU reference librarians, I found most of what I was looking for.

Larry White:

But it was a much different chore than it was... Just a few months ago I did a similar project, which was editing the free banking pamphlets written by Sir Walter Scott, the famous novelist. He wrote in defense of the Scottish free banking system when there was a threat to it in 1826. And he also wrote... In fact, he and Leggett shared a lot of references. So maybe Leggett read the pamphlets that Sir Walter Scott wrote. But I'll tell you it's much easier chasing down what Scott was talking about when he quotes something that was obscure to me using Google than it was in the days before there were search engines.

Anthony Comegna:

I'm definitely sure of that. And not to poke too much fun at you, Larry, but wow, what a different day in academic history when you can have a post-doc without having your dissertation finished yet. Because, oh my gosh, today, just imagine that. But clearly you're doing yeoman's work there in the archives too without Google and Google Books and all of that. Because I tell you, that's how I got my dissertation cranked out. It was essential to me. But Leggett is just such... There's so much to say about him. I think he's a little bit [crosstalk 00:19:06]. Sorry, go ahead.

Larry White:

Have you been to the New York Public Library newspaper annex? Is it still there?

Anthony Comegna:

I have not gone. I do not know. For somebody who wrote [crosstalk 00:19:16].

Larry White:

I would recommend it if it's still there. It was over on the west side of the city. It was separate from the main branch there in Bryant Park. Sorry, Brian Park. It's named after William Cullen Bryant.

Anthony Comegna:

Yeah, no, for somebody who did a lot of work on New York history, I did not actually go to New York for any research. All that stuff I needed was online, especially from fultonhistory.org, I think where it's like the largest private collection of newspapers digitized in the world. There are amazing New York history archives digitally now. And I had to go to Brown University to research the Loco Foco impact on the Dorr War there in Rhode Island. But I did not go to New York. But Leggett is such a deep, deep figure. And you're right, his birth date is a little bit unclear, it seems to me. Whether it was 1801, or 1802 or '03. But he was only in his late 30s in any case when he died. And the most amazing advance in his thought to me was his anti-slavery, which was clearly connected to him.

Larry White:

Yes.

Anthony Comegna:

To his earlier anti-monopoly economic positions. So walk us through that. How did he connect his anti-monopoly economics, which is very familiar to today's libertarians, to his anti-slavery, which at the time was extraordinarily radical?

Larry White:

Well, he was a natural rights theorist. I think that's the clear connection. So on some issues, he didn't really see a natural rights... That natural rights theory... So he's a Lockean, a Jeffersonian, a Jacksonian, and so believes in the rights of the individual against interference. And that points in a clear direction when you're talking about free trade and banking law. I have a section of the book where he talks about intellectual property. And there, he doesn't see that there's a clear natural rights position. So he kind of falls back to a utilitarian position. But on slavery, he initially said he didn't like it, but he thought that the reasonable thing was colonization, which was a common position at the time.

Larry White:

However we bring about freedom for enslaved people, it would be best for them and it would be best for the working men of New York who were Leggett's audience, not to have them compete for jobs in New York, but to resettle them back to Africa. But he clearly wasn't comfortable with that position. And in his own account, when he saw the literature of the American Anti-Slavery Society, he said, "Well, they clearly have the principled position on this, that black people are people. They have all the rights of people. And it's a monstrosity to keep them in bondage." And yet, he wasn't a sort of an out abolitionist right away. But when he saw the abolitionists being beaten up in the streets, all right, which happened in New York, they would have a parade. And people who were worried, who thought this was going to upset the apple cart, it was going to cause a civil war.

Larry White:

It was going to bring too much competition to the labor market in New York. Would beat up the abolitionists. And Leggett said, "Well, they're arousing my sympathy for the abolitionist." And so he studied what they were writing and then said, "Well, I woke up and said, I'm an abolitionist. I have to be an abolitionist. If I believe it's horrible to keep people in bondage, as I do, then they ought to be freed. So that's the only acceptable way to resolve this situation." And I think he managed to bring along at least a part of the Northern Democratic Party, but you would know more about that than I do.

Anthony Comegna:

Yeah, folks-

Larry White:

... I was just reading something on a completely different topic. I was looking through an old newspaper. This is from 1851. And a Democrat who supported General Winfield Scott as a candidate, who was kind of mushy on the issue of what to do about slavery, was criticizing the radicals, the abolitionists in the democratic party as Loco Focos. That late in the day, they were still using that as a term, I guess, of abuse.

Anthony Comegna:

Yeah, absolutely. And of course, Leggett was explicitly kicked out of the democratic party once he became an advocate of abolition. The Washington Globe officially, as he put it, ex-communicated him by

publicly reading him out of the party and saying, no good Democrat of good standing should affiliate with him or The Evening Post as long as it's under his influence. And now, that's exactly this kind of thing that got me hooked on this guy. Because back in 2008, I was at a summer program for young libertarians. And I was looking for a research topic to do my undergraduate honors thesis. And I just happened to come across your book, because I was looking for things in the library on Jacksonian America.

Anthony Comegna:

And I was hooked right away reading about this guy and his is wild-eyed, but insanely well-informed radicalism. I just loved it. And I'm sure I'd seen him in a footnote, as we said before, somewhere along the line, but it never registered until I really saw your book and got to dig deep into Leggett. Now, I'm curious to know, with so many years behind that volume, *Demokratic Editorials*, that's demokratic with a K, everybody. If you're Googling this. The old style democratic.

Larry White:

Yes. For some reason, Liberty Fund agreed to that anachronism when I proposed it.

Anthony Comegna:

It adds a great touch of classicism to it. But what do you think has been the impact of that volume over the years? Do you see, as I do, a comeback for William Leggett and the *Loco Focos* in the last decade or so? And why do you think that might be?

Larry White:

Well, I'm happy to hear that it's had an influence on your career. I mean, every so often I would get a message from somebody who said, "That was a great volume. I'm glad you did it." But I haven't seen a lot of tangible impact. I should mention for the benefit of younger listeners, that it was really not a good career move to work on that volume in my post-doctoral year. I should have been focused on turning my dissertation into refereed professional journal articles, but I was young and naive. So I'm glad to know that it has had some positive impact down the line somewhere. I certainly enjoyed doing it. So I don't regret doing it by any means.

Larry White:

But I did get some mileage out of it in a more professional way. And that Liberty Fund, I wrote a long introduction to the volume, sort of explaining Leggett's views. And Liberty Fund fortunately said, "We don't like to tell our readers what to think. We just want them to read and make up their own mind. So just cut the introduction down to a bare biography." And that was fortunate because I assembled the rest of it that I had cut out and turned that into an article in a journal called *History of Political Economy*.

Larry White:

But yeah, as you say, the academic market is different now than it used to be. Of course, as I mentioned earlier, I didn't get tenured at NYU. And maybe that was never in the cards. But when you get your first academic job, you need to listen. You need to ask, what do I need to do to get promotion and tenure, if that's a priority for you. But as I said earlier, if I had listened to some people, I wouldn't have written on free banking. And I think that's turned out pretty well. And since Leggett led me to that, then I think doing the Leggett volume was sort of an expression of my gratitude. But with you and with Phil Magnus,

who did that online Liberty Fund forum, there are people rediscovering. And I suppose there will always be people rediscovering Leggett. I think work remains to be done on sort of his ideas and where they lead.

Anthony Comegna:

I really, really hope you all enjoyed that primer on William Leggett and the Loco Focos. They really were an amazing bunch of people whose personality types are no doubt familiar to many of us who've ever attended so-called movement events. They're still around in strong, no doubt. And Leggett was the perfect mixture of original thinker and fiery writer. He's been an inspiration and however much a mistake Larry thinks it was to spend time in grad school working on an edited volume, I'll certainly be forever grateful that he did.

Anthony Comegna:

One of the greatest thrills of my academic life has been getting contacted by graduate students who say, "These Loco Focos sound pretty cool. I'd like to start researching them myself in graduate school." And it's just fantastic to hear that students are interested in continuing that kind of work that Larry started long ago. All I can say is get to it folks. There's always much more to be done, always progress to be made. My best again to Larry for his time and expertise, and to you all for tuning in another week.