

Anthony Comegna ([00:20](#)):

Welcome back to another week of Ideas in Progress, everyone, where we take a break from material celebrating IHS's 60th anniversary to instead take a look at one of my favorite sister podcasts out there, Libertarianism.org's show, Portraits of Liberty hosted by our guest, Paul Meany. Paul's a former colleague and a friend. He was actually one of our interns when I worked at libertarianism.org. And without a doubt, he was the best, most curious, energetic intern we ever had. He also took over from me as assistant editor for intellectual history when I moved over here to IHS back in April 2019. Among his duties is producing the absolutely fabulous show, Portraits of Liberty.

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

Without further ado then, let's get to it with Paul Meany and hear what he has to say about the globality and timelessness of Liberalism and three liberal figures everyone should know more about. So Paul, welcome on the show.

Anthony Comegna ([01:20](#)):

Given that you have such a wide scope of Liberalism across time and across space, I really want to start out with you with the big picture here. And I've been kicking around this idea for a while in my own head, reading world history and being sort of a scholar of Liberalism, I've been kicking this around for a while and I want to hear what you have to say about it. I have this hunch, this fundamental hunch, that radical liberals or libertarian types have always been around, they've always been out there in the world. Just about every single place and every single time in history, everywhere, always, essentially there's someone out there who hates the state, as Ralph Bard would put it, or someone who wants a dramatically freer society, as most of us would put it, people who prefer peaceful solutions over violent ones, people who just want to be left alone. They don't want the emperor to continue stealing their children to go fight warlords. So what's your initial reaction to that?

Paul Meany ([02:30](#)):

Yeah. Well, thanks for having me first off, of course. But I would say the show I have, Portraits to Liberty, it mainly came from how I experienced history when I was very young. I started reading history when I was like eight or so, mostly because I started reading about Roman history. And that gave me the idea that history is about the great generals and emperors and kings who lead people into battle. And I watched a bunch of movies like Lord of the Rings and Troy, all these movies about big battles. And that's what I thought history was.

Paul Meany ([02:57](#)):

Then I got a little older, and I started reading a bit more about philosophy. And then I started reading about the history of freedom. And I found myself actually very disappointed because normally when you talk about freedom and Liberalism and all these important ideas, it starts with John Locke. And John Locke's great and I love him, but there's a whole world before that that just isn't really touched on. And there is whole cultures that aren't really touched on either at all.

Paul Meany ([03:21](#)):

So what I wanted to do was to try and think, okay, Liberalism has only existed as a system for a few hundred years, but liberal principles have always existed. And so the show, I originally was going to call it Liberty Before Liberalism, but that's already a book. But that's the idea of it. It's what did people

thinking about freedom look like before we actually had the level of liberty we have today. Because I thought, okay, well, the freedom didn't really exist until the modern world. Life is so miserable, a lot of people died at very young ages or died as children, malnourishment, rickets, all the worst things possible, living terrible lives in dirty hovels, but people still think about freedom.

Paul Meany ([04:02](#)):

And that's what's universal, is that a lot of the thinkers I put on the show, it's very hard to relate them all together because they're all so unique and so different, from different cultural backgrounds and different times. But what links them all together is a pretty skeptical nature, [inaudible 00:04:16] skeptical attitude towards the narrative that they're given in life and a skeptical attitude towards authority and the powers that be, but also, an idea of something better out there, that something has to be better, we can't just live in this way, the way we always have, or a radical going back to the past that was better to begin with.

Paul Meany ([04:36](#)):

But for example, the last four episodes I did, I did on [Mozi 00:04:41], the ancient Chinese philosopher, Zora Neale Hurston, the Harlem Renaissance writer. And then I did an interview about Buddhism and libertarianism. And my newest episode just out is about Arcangela Tarabotti, who was a nun who was forced at a very young age to join a convent by her father, but then spent the rest of her life writing about how the patriarchy, the church, and the state all ruin women's lives.

Paul Meany ([05:04](#)):

So you can just see the variety. I started to realize that Liberalism isn't just one thing, it's a variety of different ideas and intonations. And that's why it's quite universal in history, is because people have always been annoyed about unchecked power. So I believe it is something very universal, but it's something very unique in every culture it pops up in and it's always a little different.

Anthony Comegna ([05:26](#)):

I sometimes wonder, is Liberalism more like an artistic movement, a set of preferences that people have? And we talked about aesthetics here on the show a couple of weeks ago, and I'm wondering, is it a set of preferences and artistic ideas, sort of like impressionism, an idea about the way you would like the world to look and then people work toward that? Or is it more like fundamental forces of nature that once discovered, people can utilize them to fulfill their own ends better than with the alternatives, fighting against natural forces? So what do you think about that? And what exactly do you think is universal about Liberalism?

Paul Meany ([06:13](#)):

Well, the most intense political thought, when people start discussing politics most and getting most abstract is usually when the systems that have always been are starting to fall, are starting to collapse. And that's when you start to see all these different kinds of liberal figures come out, is when systems are in complete disrepair, things aren't working. I think Liberalism, more often than not, it's kind of opportunistic. It comes in at those times when the systems that existed before are at such weak points, kind of runs in.

Paul Meany ([06:39](#)):

And people have their own justification why they adopt liberal principles. For example, today I'm going to cover three people, we have Rose Wilder Lane, John Cook, and the ancient Chinese philosopher, Mencius. All of them came to these principles for different reasons, John Cook, maybe to defend his religion, Rose Wilder Lane, to keep the strong sense of individualism, Mencius to bring peace, harmony, and virtue to civil war-torn China. You can just see how they all come at it from a different angle, but they all come at it from the same general approach of people in power aren't that smart, they're not that much better than us, a lot of life can be solved by regular people on the ground. And all the people I'm covering today actually didn't grow up in the aristocracy, they're actually quite poor. As you see, very different perspectives.

Anthony Comegna ([07:28](#)):

Well, tell us about those three figures because they cover a pretty broad array of time and space here.

Paul Meany ([07:35](#)):

Yeah-

Anthony Comegna ([07:35](#)):

Let's just start back with Mencius then. Tell us a little bit about Mencius as a liberal figure and a little bit about why you think he was a really important character to cover on your show and why he's a good representative of sort of global and timeless Liberalism.

Paul Meany ([07:54](#)):

Yeah. So the people I chose, I just chose because I enjoy them all. And so I said, I'll pick these three I like. But it could have been any three people. They're always very diverse figures. But Mencius, he was at a time of Chinese history called the Warring States period when the Zhou dynasty was weakening and had to start relying on armies from allied states. But then, this kind of compromised the empire and it kind of fractured and broken into multiple small empires and everyone started vying for independence and domination over each other. And so for about 200 years, there was constant civil wars of all these different factions trying to unify China. And it was a terrible time. And the aristocracy was very powerful, began to wane. And without an aristocracy to check the despotic tendencies of the different factions, one man rule and tyranny became the norm.

Paul Meany ([08:47](#)):

And in this kind of tumultuous time, Mencius is growing up. And Mencius grows up, his father dies very early and his mother raises him. And she first takes him to a cemetery. And then there's these people who are like ritual mourners, who are wailing with sadness for people who are dead. And he starts copying them. And she's like, "Ah, I don't want to be shouting all the time." So she brings him into a marketplace instead. When he goes to the marketplace, he starts copying the merchants who cry out about their good deals and their prices. So then she realizes the trick is... She brings him into a school and then he starts acting like a scholar. So it's all about the environment.

Paul Meany ([09:24](#)):

But Mencius, he becomes a Confucian, he follows Confucius. And Confucius' whole thing was he wanted to bring back the ways of the ancient Sage Kings. He didn't think that he was making new ideas, he thought he was just bringing old ideas back to people. And Mencius very much follows along in this way.

He thinks that the point of a good state is to make virtuous people. And this is when libertarians start to go, "Oh God, he's not really going to be like us at all."

Paul Meany ([09:47](#)):

But this is where it all gets a little different. Mencius believed, like his predecessor Confucius, that the best way to make people virtuous was by not interfering with them. So Confucius, for example, said rulers should not lead by coercion or by force, but by moral example because if you try to guide the common people with coercive regulations and keep them in line with punishments, they will become evasive and have no sense of shame. And Mencius takes a lot of this on board.

Paul Meany ([10:16](#)):

So there's this story about a man... Mencius' writings are actually students and followers of Mencius who compiled the much later after his death. But we take them as Mencius normally just for simplicity's sake. But Mencius has this whole philosophy of how... He realizes that human nature is pretty good, people actually want to be good people, they want to get along with others. But the problem is environment. In the middle of war-torn China, it's hard to get your next meal, it's hard to even know if you'll be safe, it's hard to have a roof over your head. And Mencius believes that people can't be moral and virtuous unless they have these bare minimum, bare necessities of life. But he thinks the way to provide these necessities isn't by the state handing them out, it's through the free market, the division of labor, stopping price fixing.

Paul Meany ([11:02](#)):

So Mencius talks about how price fixing won't help. It'll have inferior quality products and they won't improve anything in particular. Those people call agriculturalists and they believe no one should work with their hands or their mind, everyone should just do one. Agriculturalists said, "That everyone should take part in agricultural work, that's not a question." But Mencius said, "Look, that's ridiculous. If everyone had to make what they use themselves, it would just take so long for anyone to get anything done. Using the division of labor is a good thing."

Paul Meany ([11:36](#)):

And then when Mencius talked about the Sage Kings and what good government looked like, he talked about, well, they kept taxes low, they inspected goods at the border but put no tariffs or levies on them to promote trade. And so you start to see the Mencius his idea, okay, yeah, he wants people to be virtuous, which sounds a little paternalistic, but the way you do that is by kind of just letting people work together.

Paul Meany ([11:57](#)):

He has a story where he talks about a man who runs home to his rice crops. And he starts trying to pull them up at the ground before they're ready. And when his family goes to check on them, they're all dead. And the point is he was trying to force something to grow that you can't force to grow. That's kind of like the rulers doing everything wrong.

Paul Meany ([12:16](#)):

And other parts of Mencius that are really important are his beliefs on war. He thought that trying to make a prosperous state through war was like climbing a tree to search for a fish. He thought that people who dedicated themselves to aggressive wars deserved a punishment worse than death.

Paul Meany ([12:32](#)):

But a last little thing to focus on Mencius is that normally people think of the right to resist tyrannical powers as originating with John Locke. But when you look at Mencius, he's talking to one king... A lot of his writings are actually dialogues between him and different rulers. He kind of wandered through China, talking to different people trying to convince them to adopt humane government. But one king asks him, he was saying, "Was this one king, was he killed by his people?"

Paul Meany ([13:03](#)):

And Mencius asks, "Okay. If I had a job, and my job was to get you back home, to wherever you live, which is, let's say, you're far away. And I try to bring you home, but I don't give you a car, I don't give you a coat. You're left out in the rain. It's terrible. You get mugged. I'd be fired from whatever job that was." And [Spence 00:13:23] is saying, if someone didn't look after their country, didn't look after their people, they should be fired, right? He's saying the exact same thing, he's saying, what's the difference if you are a ruler or a regular person, you still have to be moral.

Paul Meany ([13:35](#)):

And so he says, "One who mutilates righteousness should be called a crippler. A crippler and a mutilator is called a mere fellow." And the idea of this is, is that once you break some sort of moral law, just because you're in government power, it doesn't make a difference. Once you break the laws of your own country, you get rid of your status as a public person or a leader, and you become a private person, a mere fellow. This is exactly what John Locke would say later in more flowery language. "When a person in power quits the representation, this public, and acts by his own private will, he degrades himself and but a single private person without power, without will, that has any right to obedience." So you can see lots of really important ideas in Mencius. This is in the BCs in China. And he has all these ideas about the importance of the market for the economy, antiwar attitudes, and deposing tyrannical leaders. So I think that's a brilliant start.

Anthony Comegna ([14:29](#)):

Yeah. Thank you for that because, oh man, if I were good at languages and learning other languages, I probably would have gone into Chinese history. Because I find those periods of intense decentralization so fascinating because they were unquestionably the most vibrant, productive, intellectual, and cultural periods of Chinese history. So it's just fantastic.

Anthony Comegna ([14:53](#)):

And another thing that strikes me here is that the mandate of heaven certainly doesn't sound like a very libertarian or liberal idea, but yet it does cut both ways. It's a justification for the emperor and it's also a warning that you better perform your duties and give us good government, that is your job.

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

But let's turn then, many, many centuries further to somebody who isn't following Mencius' example, but nonetheless, taps into that same idea that wicked evil rulers should be laid low to mere fellows. Tell us about John Cook, who perhaps has some particular relevance this week.

Paul Meany ([15:37](#)):

Oh yes. Very much so. So John Cook is a tragedy. He should be someone who's so famous, especially among libertarians, but for some reason, he just slipped through the cracks in history. And so, if you look at medieval thinkers and ancient thinkers, everyone agrees, tyranny is wrong, it's a moral wrong. But it's not always a legal wrong, like tyrants don't get punished by the law. And so, everyone kind of, in Europe, agreed, okay, yeah, tyranny is bad but what do you really do about it? People wrote about tyrannicide, but they're often very unpopular, like the Jesuits who are believed to be conspiratorial because of it.

Paul Meany ([16:15](#)):

And so, you go to 1608 when John Cook is born. A year after his birth, the king at the time, King James I, was talking to Edward Coke, who is this very important judge in the common law tradition. And the king basically says, "I'm the Supreme judge above everyone else. I have appointed every single judge in the country, so I could just kick them out or overrule everything they say because I made them, right?" Coke says, "No, that's not really the way it works. And everyone's under the law, even the king." And so, James, the King, decides the most rational thing to do is to try and punch him in the face. Coke instantly prostrates himself on the floor and apologizes. But you can see the idea that kings were starting to be questioned.

Paul Meany ([16:57](#)):

So John Cook was born in 1608 to a family of poor farmers living just outside a small village named Burbage. Now he wasn't wealthy by any means whatsoever. And usually, John probably would've went off and been a farmer just like his father and his grandfather and so on and so on, but thanks to a man named Nicholas Wattam. He was given a small sum of money to attend school. And when he went to school at the age of 14, he took on rhetoric, logic, moral philosophy, quite a demanding curriculum for a teenager. But he turned out to be very bright and he kept going in his education and studied at Gray's Inn to become a lawyer. And here he came under the influence of a man named Richard Sibbes, who taught him the idea that the law is no respecter of persons, which is very flowery and interesting language, but simply put, it means-

Anthony Comegna ([17:44](#)):

Wonderful biblical phrase that had a lot of play during the English Civil Wars.

Paul Meany ([17:48](#)):

Yes. So the whole idea is the law is no respecter of persons, the law doesn't care who you are. It doesn't matter who your dad is, who knows you, anything like that, the laws the law, and that's it. And Sibbes would write as well, "Of all the men in hell, the torment of great men is most because they had the most comfort in this world. Mighty men shall be tormented, that is the privilege they shall have in hell." And I like that line a lot. But after seven years in Gray's Inn, the English Civil War breaks out.

Paul Meany ([18:16](#)):

And to keep it really simple, back in 1215, English barons revolted against the King named John and implemented what was called Magna Carta, a legal document that kind of became the backbone of English common law. And the most important part of it was there's certain legal norms, most importantly, the king could only raise taxes through the consent of parliament. This allowed for a certain level of power sharing between the king and parliament, but eventually, King Charles, he had no interest and power whatsoever in John Cook's day. He dismissed parliament in 1629 and just ruled without their input for about 11 years, raised taxes without their say whatsoever, had tricks to get around it.

Paul Meany ([18:53](#)):

And so for 11 years, parliament kind of just watched this happen. And they eventually wrote something called the Grand Remonstrance, which is a list of grievances. It triggered the First Civil War. And the Civil War was massive. Some scholars estimate that one-tenth of the British male population died in this war. So it was really, really a big deal. But after four years of conflict, the parliamentarians beat the king. And they arrest him, put him under house arrest for a while. But the weird thing about the war is they're fighting a war against this guy and they're so...

Paul Meany ([19:22](#)):

England's been a monarchy for so long. A monarchy is so normal in the world that they're fighting a war against a man that they want to reinstate as the head of their government. So they're going to beat him in a war and then they're going to take him and put them right back on the top. It's a very bizarre war when you think about it. But they eventually win thanks to the more modernized army Oliver Cromwell's commanding. And during all this, Cook didn't take part directly in the war, but he definitely supported it because he was a Puritan. He was more on the side of religious tolerance, which is a parliamentary cause.

Paul Meany ([19:57](#)):

But during this time he writes two really important pamphlets that I think, while not as like magnum opus of his life, are important just to touch on because they're very good. The legal system of Cook's day was just terrible, it was rife with arbitrariness, abuse, and corruption, lawyers often used nepotism and favoritism to get into positions of power, important legal positions of the government were often up to sale to the highest bidder. The law was also written in archaic Norman French so unless you want to try and translate that yourself while farming all day, be my guest. So most people didn't even understand the language.

Paul Meany ([20:31](#)):

Then on top of that, the law wasn't equal. Those who were wealthy often could avoid the worst to most gruesome punishments, which were for the poorest people. And those who were educated even had a get out of jail free card for their first penalty, it was called the benefit of the clergy. So imagine if you said, "Well, I have a master's degree so I'll just do one assault or just steal once. So I'll get away with it though." That's how equal the system was. And so, he wrote a pamphlet called *The Vindications of Professors and Profession of Law*, where he said limit lawyers' wages, waive fees for the poor, get rid of the benefit for the clergy, and he wanted a speedy legal system. He had personal experience with his family of how long and drawn out court cases could be.

Paul Meany ([21:14](#)):

And he had another pamphlet called *The Poor Man's Case*, where he talked about how he realized, in his time, a lot of criminals went to crime because of circumstance. He's actually one of the first people to ever kind of observe this. And so he was saying people who are poor, they should be given a degree of mercy because maybe they had to steal some bread for their family. And this is at a time when any sort of theft over a shilling resulted in hanging. So he is a very fresh breath of fresh air.

Paul Meany ([21:38](#)):

He was considered a very honorable lawyer, he was called White Cook because he was pale or virtuous or both. But the big part of Cook's life is after King Charles tries a second civil war and it's put down again. And parliament has been captured again. And they say, "We're going to have a trial." This whole war was about Magna Carta and the commitment to the law over the will of kings or *lex before rex*, the Latin for law over Latin for king. Revenge wasn't legitimate, justice was. And so they wanted to have a fair trial in front of everyone. And this had never been done, a king had never been tried for a crime because to have a trial, you have to have a jury of your peers. And who's the peer to a King? God maybe. That was the idea at the time.

Paul Meany ([22:24](#)):

And so, this was really dangerous. And a lot of lawyers, once they heard that this trial was happening, they just left London. They were not bothered. They were like, "This is too dangerous." One guy, John Bradshaw, at his wife's advice, he put a big steel plate on his heart, just in case someone tried to shoot him. Some people wore armor under their robes.

Paul Meany ([22:43](#)):

John Cook was originally going to be a solicitor general on this case, collecting evidence and writing legal arguments. And this other guy called Matthew Steele will be the head of the prosecution, kind of like the celebrity of the case. But then Matthew Steele said he was too sick to do the massively important trial of the century. So he probably backed out. And so Cook took his place. And so eventually Cook had to write this in a very short period of time, only a couple of weeks. He had to write the most nuanced original attack upon the divine right of kings in the most immediate sense.

Paul Meany ([23:19](#)):

And so when the trial began, King Charles walked out in front of everyone, the pointed group of judges, he was dressed covered in black silk with the medal of St. George, and he had importantly, a silver-tipped cane. And when Cook was asked to read out the prosecution, he stood up and then Charles kind of tapped him on the shoulder with his cane and said, "Just wait a second." And then when Cook waited a second, then began to read again, he tapped him yet again with the cane and said, "Stop there."

Paul Meany ([23:46](#)):

And then Cook said this [inaudible 00:23:48] make any sense. So he decided to start reading out the prosecution anyway, regardless of what Charles asked him. And this made him furious because remember Cook's like a low-born man. In his college application, he would've been considered a plebeian. So a plebeian not listening to a king, this was ridiculous. So Charles smacks him with his cane, but then it dislodges the beautiful silver tip on it. And then the king beckons to Cook, he says, "Pick up the silver tip for me." And John Cook turns, looks at the crowd and reads out the prosecution, and read something along the lines of, "On behalf of the people of England, does for said treasons and crimes,

impeach the said Charles Stewart as a tyrant, traitor, murderer, and a public and implacable enemy to the Commonwealth of England."

Paul Meany ([24:34](#)):

And so it might be lost on us today, but eventually, the king stoops down and he picks up the silver tip of the cane. And that doesn't sound like anything particularly important, but the symbolism wasn't lost at all, for the first time, a king had bowed to law. A lawyer had told a king what to do, and he did it, he couldn't be swayed by him.

Paul Meany ([24:54](#)):

And so when the court actually starts, it's a bit of a mess. The king refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of the courts. And this kind of plays out for a few days. And eventually, they have to convict them on the basis that he won't plead guilty or not guilty. He gets one more chance to try and argue his case, but he decides, again, to attack the legitimacy of the court. And so eventually, with no other option, they put the king to death. And a big part of it was that the king, during the trial, walked out and started laughing about people's dead comrades. And people kind of realized this guy is just the worst, he is a morally reprehensible being. And so a lot of the judges got together, they had some evidentiary sessions to kind of satiate their consciences and then they decided, yes, we're going to have to execute this man for the crime of torturing prisoners, pillaging innocence, and conspiracies.

Paul Meany ([25:47](#)):

So he's eventually [crosstalk 00:25:48].

Anthony Comegna ([25:48](#)):

... Charles.

Paul Meany ([25:48](#)):

Oh, sorry.

Anthony Comegna ([25:50](#)):

No, please, go ahead.

Paul Meany ([25:51](#)):

Charles is executed on the 30th of January in 1649. And Coke never got to use his prosecution, his full speeches, but he published them after. And the points he makes are amazing. He says tyrants should never live with impunity, they should never be allowed to live the rest of their life as if it never happened, they should be punished. Then he argues that Charles committed a war crime, he was in command of the situation. Cook has this principle, "He that does not hinder the doing of evil it lies in his power to prevent it is guilty of a commander thereof." So the idea, if you could have prevented it, it's your problem, you're responsible for it in government, something that politicians often today will dance around.

Paul Meany ([26:31](#)):

But then Cook also makes the really important argument that the king isn't really a position, it's kind of like an office. You're not a king because you're just magically a king, you're a king because of the kind of

tacit consent of the people. And just like any other office, you can be kicked out if you're not performing, just like a job, really. And so, the last point Cook makes is that there's kind of a natural law in nature and in God and the Bible written in the fleshy tablets of men's hearts, it states that if a king becomes a tyrant, he shall die for it. And so the new English republic, it only lasts for a very small amount of time, basically 11 years and then it collapses.

Paul Meany ([27:08](#)):

And the son of Charles, Charles II, a little confusing, he comes back in 1660 and reinstates the monarchy. And he's a general pardon for everyone, except for those who had any sort of role in executing his father. And so Cook, after four months in prison, he is hung... Not hung, drawn and quartered. What is it again? I used to remember exactly what the punishment was, what it was called, but it was the punishment for treason where you were disemboweled in front of yourself while being hung and they light your entrails on fire. It was absolutely horrific, but he faced it with a lot of bravery, for what it is.

Paul Meany ([27:46](#)):

I think the best way to sum up Cook's life, really, is a letter he wrote while imprisoned, where he said he dedicated his life to that noble principle of preferring universality over particularity. So he believed that everyone should have to obey the law regardless of who you are or who you know. And that's kind of his legacy. He's the first ever person in the world to prosecute a head of state. And for that, libertarians should think of him like a saint.

Anthony Comegna ([28:11](#)):

I just absolutely love that. It's a wonderful story. I mean, obviously, it doesn't end well. But the wonderful, amazing thing to me about the English Civil War is it really was, in the famous phrase, a generation where the world turned upside down. And it's just fascinating, endlessly so, for me.

Anthony Comegna ([28:31](#)):

But let's move here to close us out with a figure that I'm quite sure all my listeners have heard of, Rose Wilder Lane, who is a really important and interesting figure for me here because the history she wrote is not professional-style history, it's more like the old Enlightenment era philosophical histories, right?

Paul Meany ([28:55](#)):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Anthony Comegna ([28:57](#)):

And yet she presents liberty and freedom as something to be discovered in the world, right, like Ben Franklin discovering electricity or something. She also led just an amazing, rollicking [crosstalk 00:29:16]-

Paul Meany ([29:16](#)):

Her life was very crazy, the more you read about it, the more happens.

Anthony Comegna ([29:21](#)):

I love these stories [crosstalk 00:29:23].

Paul Meany ([29:23](#)):

I'll give you the highlights as fast as I can to be good on time. She was born fifth to December, 1886, in De Smet, South Dakota. Her mother and father had to move the lot around because they're very poor, a lot of crop failures. But eventually, they live in Minnesota with a few relatives, then to Florida, then back to South Dakota. They finally settle in Mansfield, Missouri. While in Mansfield, Missouri, she lives with her aunt in Louisiana. She moves off for a while.

Paul Meany ([29:47](#)):

And she's introduced to socialist ideas from people like Eugene Debs. And at the time, she likes socialism a lot, but politics wasn't at the forefront of her mind. Rose basically sticks three years of schooling into one, graduates high school very early, gets out into work very quickly.

Paul Meany ([30:02](#)):

She meets a man called Gillette Lane, a traveling salesman. They initially get along very well together, but then she kind of realizes he has no drive or ambition and their relationship comes sour. Eventually Rose has a stillborn child, or the child dies after birth, basically, the couple divorce or separate because of it. And Rose is left never being able to ever have children again, which is tragic. But then, she spent a lot of her life looking for someone to help raise because of that, which is very honorable.

Paul Meany ([30:29](#)):

But she eventually got a job at somewhere called the San Francisco Bulletin. And while there, she distinguished herself very well. So eventually, she got to see Europe. She wanted to go see it in 1920, but there was stuff that got in the way, but eventually she got there. And she came to Europe a socialist. She was very convinced by people like John Reed in New York that socialism was the way to go. And she thought that Europe was like the jewel of civilization. But after World War I, it wasn't looking so great.

Paul Meany ([30:54](#)):

And so the big change in Rose's life comes from a conversation with a random dude in Georgia, which sounds bizarre. She goes [inaudible 00:31:01] in Georgia today. And she's hosted by this family. And it's very nice village. It's poor, but they all work communally and they've owned property communally for generations. They are perfectly suited for communism, in reality. They all work together. They all know their place. No one's trying to get above anyone else. So this should be perfect for communism. But then one of her hosts he's saying, "The more power that's centralized in Russia, the worst it's going to get." And she's like, "How can you think that? You must be just a country bumpkin." So she takes it on herself to try and convince him. But he says this very interesting line, he says, "In Moscow, there are only men, and man is not God. A man has only a man's head. And 100 heads together, do not make one great head. No, only God can know Russia."

Paul Meany ([31:49](#)):

So Lane began to realize was that just one person in power, it doesn't make them really smarter at all, it doesn't do anything to change them. And she started to realize that when you say command the economy, you don't really mean like command a bunch of financial abstract mumbo-jumbo, you mean tell people what to do on a daily basis, grow this, grow that, make this, make that. That's what commanding the economy really is, it's telling people what to do because the economy is really just the aggregate of people's actions. And so she comes home realizing that she never appreciated freedom or the level of freedom she had. And so she becomes much more politically involved. And this is helped along a lot by the new deal.

Paul Meany ([32:29](#)):

And once the new deal starts happening, the size and scope of the American government is increased to an unprecedented level and Rose's completely perturbed and very afraid by this so she becomes much more political. She becomes a complete advocate for individualism and laissez-faire economics. And she writes this piece in 1936, called Credo, where she talks about her new beliefs about representative government and individualism, the failure of representative government, in her eyes, versus individualism. And then after that Leonard Read, who libertarians might know from writing I, the Pencil, he comes to her and he wants to publish her essay Credo under a new name, Give Me Liberty. And then after this, another guy comes along called John Day Company. And he says, "Well, I loved Credo. Let's see some more." And he asks her to write a full book. And what comes out of this is The Discovery of Freedom in 1943.

Paul Meany ([33:18](#)):

And Discovery of Freedom, I think, is a very unique and interesting book in many ways. But I think the main, big idea of it is a lot of human history didn't really go anywhere. And then it went really fast. All of a sudden, a lot of progress came out of nowhere. And how did this happen? And Rose tries to explain this. And she thinks it's because of the discovery of freedom. She thinks that every single person has a kind of energy. And this energy is what kind of pushes forward creativity, spontaneity. And governments can't control this energy, only people can." And so she thinks that the gears of history are not governments, they're not great men in power, they're not generals, it's average everyday people being left alone to do what they can with the resources they have in any way they feel will benefit them best.

Paul Meany ([34:12](#)):

So she thinks that each person is self-controlling and therefore responsible for his acts. Every human being, by his nature, is free. And she thinks that freedom is what's made the world so wonderfully and habitable to live in, and the furthering of freedom for people who haven't traditionally felt it will only make the world better. And so, I think a lot of people focus on the Discovery of Freedom, but I think it was a little bit of time. I'm going to try and slide it in for her time at something called the Pittsburgh Courier. So from 1940 to 1945 she wrote columns for this. And Pittsburgh Courier was the most widely read black newspaper in America.

Paul Meany ([34:44](#)):

And what Rose did there, I think, is really important is she combined individualism with anti-racism. She started talking about the fallacious ideas of race, which he calls the ridiculous idiotic and tragic fallacy of race by which a minority of the Earth's population has deluded itself during the past century. And I think that is one of the most important things she did was combine individualism with a staunch opposition to racism. Now, sometimes she goes too far, says people should revoke their race and become individuals instead. But overall, she has the right idea.

Paul Meany ([35:18](#)):

And most important thing for us today, we're having all these conversations about systematic racism is that Rose admitted that before reading the Pittsburgh Courier, she wasn't exactly the most woke person alive. She thought lynchings and racial injustices were isolated incidents, she didn't see it as like a pattern. And then she realizes this and she says, "I was an utter fool. And I was a traitor to my country's cause of human rights. And I think someone admitting how wrong they were, I'm being open-minded, it's just something so amazing to learn from today. And that's why I respect Rose so much because a lot

of her greatest ideas came from her realizing she was wrong, whether it was realizing she was wrong about racism in America or the planned economy of the USSR. I think that's amazing to be able to be so humble and to admit your mistakes.

Anthony Comegna ([36:06](#)):

All right, everyone, thanks so much for tuning in again. Remember, by the way, to rate and review on whatever platform you consume the show, it's absolutely the best way to help us gain traction and keep on going. I hope you enjoyed learning about the global timeless puzzle that is liberal history. Often a hidden history, certainly, often a non-Western history. And I hope you enjoyed hearing from Paul Meany. Assuming you did, you should also tap on over to libertarianism.org and absolutely consume their huge database of information and articles on all things classical liberal. And while you're at it, be sure to subscribe Paul Meany's Portraits of Liberty, which is just fantastic and always enlightening. There's nothing I enjoy more in academic research than learning about a new relatively or even completely obscure liberal thinker and doing the work to figure out exactly how they fit into the larger mosaic. So hats off to Paul all around, I think, and to all of you for doing your parts to help keep the progress coming.