

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

Lovely loyal listeners. We have a really special show for you this week, and next week too, come to think of it. Not only do we have a returning guest, libertarianism.org and the Cato Institute's Paul Matzko, their editor for technology and innovation, but we also have his longtime colleague, friend and podcast co-host, another historian mind you, Professor Sean Trainor joining us on the show. Paul and Sean, though they both have day jobs as a think tanker and history professor respectively, they've been the long-time co-hosts of the fantastic and always enjoyable podcast, Impolitic. Now I first listened to Impolitic when Paul was interviewing at the Cato Institute for his current position. I was on the libertarianism.org team as editor for intellectual history, and it was a small team. So I was one of the folks interviewing him. I saw that he had a podcast and I started listening to it just to learn more about him and quickly became hooked.

Anthony Comegna ([01:18](#)):

Thankfully, Sean and Paul have never let up. They've kept doing shows ever since then. And I will let them explain more of the show's origins and dynamic better, but suffice it to say, it should be immediately apparent why this kind of dialogue is so important to those of us at IHS and why I think the Impolitic podcast is well worth your time, subscription, rating, and review. And while you're at it, why not toss us the same? Now we'll go to Doctors Matzko and Trainor.

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

All right, well, thank you both a ton for coming on the show. I already went over my full disclosure bit that I started listening to Impolitic when Paul was interviewing at the Cato Institute for the technology editors spot at libertarianism.org. I interviewed Paula and I noticed, "Oh my God, he does this podcast." And since I've always been a podcast addict and remain a podcast addict, and also I'm a completist, I started at the beginning and I just listened to all of it and I absorbed it. I'm a subscriber to this day. And it's usually the first show that I listen to whenever I see that there's a new episode. So I just love Impolitic and I wanted to have you guys on. I think your relationship and the purpose behind your show speaks a lot to many of the priorities that we're following here at IHS. So to start us off, especially given that you guys are both inveterate fans of Hallmark holiday movies, maybe you could tell us your couple story, your how you got together story.

Paul Matzko ([02:56](#)):

Yeah, we have a meet cute, right? I think it was raining outside and Sean had the only umbrella. Then I tripped and he held me in his arms and I said, "Impolitic," and it all goes from there. I think the funny thing about this is I'm pretty sure that when I interviewed for the Cato job, I probably mentioned to Sean that like, "Oh, there was this guy who was in the interview who's wrote a dissertation on the LocoFocos. So like really our... I remember that moment too, Anthony, the interview where I was like, "Is Anthony coming? I've read his dissertation on the LocoFocos." We don't talk about as often as you do, Anthony, but the LocoFocos come up on Impolitic, not infrequently.

Anthony Comegna ([03:48](#)):

The ideas are always there.

Paul Matzko ([03:50](#)):

Yeah, that's right. That's right. But no, we met...

Sean Trainor ([03:53](#)):

Oh wait, sorry, sorry. Sorry to interrupt. I've got such a great joke. I can't let the moment pass. It's a match just waiting to be struck. See what I did there?

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

How great. How fantastic. This is why I have you guys on.

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

Oh, goodness. Yeah, no, we both went to Penn State. We were working on our PhDs in history and it was actually Sean, I think you got there a year before me. I think it sounds right?

Sean Trainor ([04:18](#)):

I was there a year or two before you and I was tasked with giving a tour of the campus to our crop of incoming students who were visiting for I think at that point you had already been admitted and Paul was in the group that I was assigned to and we just hit it off. I have liked Paul literally from the moment that I met him and the politics stuff, at least for me, maybe you disagree Paul, but the politics stuff has always been downstream from our basic human connection. But, yeah, we've just always gotten along.

Paul Matzko ([04:48](#)):

That's true. And I think too, in class, we had a couple of classes together, an antebellum seminar, I think, and some other stuff. And we ended up, even though our politics were very different, even then that was obvious, we agreed kind of, I guess it's a personality or a temperament thing. We tended to agree when it came to like questions of how to apply history, the idea that history should be, that it was okay for historians to engage in in politics, and applying it to the present. That was, believe it or not, a controversial thing in grad school. And both of us were like, "Well, of course you should. What are we doing here? History doesn't have anything to say about the present at all." And so there were a number of questions like that in class that we lined up arguing with each other against classmates. And I think that that also played a role in us building a relationship.

Sean Trainor ([05:50](#)):

And then we just started going out to lunch and that was really the deep origins of the show. We used to go out this place called The Big Bowl Noodle House, State College, Pennsylvania, and just sit there for hours and hours chatting about politics. I guess Paul would come home and talk about the conversations and Paul's wife, Jessica said, "You guys should start a podcast." And eventually, we listened. So that's really kind of the origins of the show.

Paul Matzko ([06:19](#)):

Of course, we ignored her for a long time because it flew in the face of everything you're told to do as a graduate student, or at least what we were told to do as a graduate student, which was, unless this has a very clear applicability to becoming a tenure track historian, it's a waste of time. And so the idea of starting a podcast, I mean, we weren't even encouraged to have social media accounts. I think we were told like, "You really shouldn't open a Twitter account, and if you do have Twitter, you should vehemently strip out any kind of personality out of it." Such bad advice. So it really took until we both had graduated. You were, I think, down in Florida at that point.

Sean Trainor ([07:02](#)):

Yes.

Paul Matzko ([07:02](#)):

I was on a post-doc fellowship and we had the time. We were like, "Hey, let's give this thing a go." So it's a pity. We could have had several more years of back catalog for you, Anthony, if we had just listened to Jess earlier on.

Anthony Comegna ([07:17](#)):

Well, I think the time was right. By the way, I love how often lunch brings people together and creates amazing things, but the whole conceit or point of your show is really to bring a socialist and the libertarian together in meaningful conversations, because there is shared ground there. That's where I see it linking up with what IHS is really trying to do right now, fostering those kinds of conversations, because there is so much shared ground between different types of liberals, whether you identify as a socialist or a libertarian.

Anthony Comegna ([07:55](#)):

So maybe you two could tell us a little bit about your intellectual backgrounds there, why you identify that way and why you put together the show in that sort of form. I'm also curious, gosh, I hate to say this, but one of the things that stands out to me still about my graduate school experience is just how powerfully uninteresting mainstream graduate students are. It's only the libertarians or classical liberals and the socialists who are actually interesting people. Everyone else is just there apparently because their parents were professors and they don't know what else to do and I guess maybe they're good at it and it's just so boring. So tell me about that.

Sean Trainor ([08:43](#)):

It's funny that you say that, Anthony, because we actually, I don't know if Paul would agree with this, but I would say that in general, our grad school colleagues, the fellow grad students, had more interesting politics than the professors. It was the professors, I would say in general, who had pretty dull, progressive, like Warren Democrat politics, more or less across the board.

Paul Matzko ([09:04](#)):

Yeah.

Sean Trainor ([09:06](#)):

Paul and I were probably the most dramatic outliers in our grad programs. In those days, I was really more of an anarcho-syndicalist than sort of a traditional Marxist, I guess. But yeah, we were in school with folks who had a bunch of really interesting political views. We went to school with a pretty well-versed and intense anarchist, some folks who had kind of heterodox conservative views and like our grad program, I don't think we recognize at the time how remarkable it was, but it really, we did have folks from a variety of different backgrounds.

Paul Matzko ([09:45](#)):

Yeah, and this cuts against the public perception of I mean, you hear this often from Republican politicians where it's like those radicalizing professors who are shoving their far left ideology down the

throats of students and the reality was not that at all. The students tend to be more radical in either direction. I mean, I guess there obviously were more left-wing radicals than right-wing radicals of the student body, but the students were the ones who tended to have the more interesting outlier views. Well, yeah, the professors tended to be kind of very ordinary, center left to progressive left range of views and not very politically engaged. I mean, the idea that they were shoving politics down our throats in any kind of doctrinaire sense is ludicrous.

Paul Matzko ([10:37](#)):

So that was very different than I think the common public perception of what college professor ideology is. I'd also say too though that both of us have changed over time. I mean, when I met Sean, I was still [inaudible 00:10:58] in the Republicans before I left the Republican party. After the nomination of Donald Trump, Sean, you were still a Democrat for awhile there. I remember we used to argue. I would give him crap for supporting Barack Obama. Here I am being like, "Hey, if you were a real anti-imperialist and a real anti-war pacifist, you wouldn't be supporting Mr. Drone strike everything, Barack Obama." But we've both kind of moved farther apart. I mean, I'm now not a Republican, I'm a libertarian, and Sean's a socialist not Democrat.

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

So we have changed over the last couple of years, but that's also a good reminder though. The two of us, we did have, I mean, people, at least I'll talk from my side of the spectrum. It's very common for libertarians to think of themselves as situational allies with the right, that Republican party conservatism, that there's a significant overlap between conservative views about small government and the like that libertarians feel at home working with Republicans. But I would argue, especially post-Trump, but even pre-Trump, that libertarians have just as much overlap with folks on the left and the further left you go, the amount of overlap can actually become broader. So Sean and I, we share views about the downsides of PAX Americana, of the American empire.

Paul Matzko ([12:28](#)):

We share views about the futility of foreign wars, about being anti-racism, being anti-police brutality, being pro-immigration. I mean, you go down the list. Yes, sure, there's lots we disagree about in terms of the political economy and government intervention, but I'm not sure those areas of disagreement are any larger than the areas of disagreement that most libertarians have with Orthodox fusion as conservatives and the like. And so you do have to kind of retrain your impulses to think of, "Hey, just because someone's a socialist, that should be no more inherently alienating than someone saying they're a Republican or a Democrat." You can find areas of overlap in significant ways.

Anthony Comegna ([13:16](#)):

Sean, what were your impressions of your fellow grad students and the professors and their politics?

Sean Trainor ([13:23](#)):

Yeah, I mean, pretty similar to Paul. Had a lot of really productive political conversations with my colleagues. I would say, in general, the conversations with the professors were just not as useful or illuminating. Certainly learned a lot about history and how to be a historian, but in terms of the actual application of history or engagement with politics as it exists now, that's just not really what grad school was about for me, certainly in terms of my conversations with professors. I do remember, we did have, in those days at Penn State, we had one pretty Orthodox Marxist, and there was a lot of sort of tittering

amongst the grad student office, like, "Do you know that so-and-so is a Marxist?" "Oh, that's, it's interesting." It's a reminder of how much the discourse has changed in just a relatively short period of time.

Sean Trainor ([14:23](#)):

I mean, encountering a Marxist in any walk of life is increasingly unremarkable. And the fact that we considered it remarkable even in academia in those days, I think is kind of telling about how things have changed, but yeah, that's sort of my take on the etiology of our colleagues in grad school, but it's also worth noting just real quick that so much of this is determined by setting. Penn State is just, it's a deeply apolitical school and it's a deeply apolitical community. I mean, football basically is politics and religion in State College, Pennsylvania. And so it's not surprising that that kind of apathy towards politics spills over into the attitudes of the faculty. I mean, you can only live in a community for so long before you start to absorb some of its characteristics.

Paul Matzko ([15:24](#)):

Yeah. St. Joe, I got there right after that scandal broke, or right before, 2010 is when I got there, which I think was right before the scandal broke. Yeah, you would have thought, it'd be like finding out that the Pope had a secret wife or something, that was how big of a deal that was in State College.

Anthony Comegna ([15:45](#)):

Well, it's interesting that y'all have that story of your experience there, because for me, it was very much the opposite dynamic. Like the grad students were utterly conventional in their thinking and their approach to things. And the professors were actually, I guess it's because I went to Pitt and the departments skewed a bit older at the time. So we did have some pretty old school Marxists. We had plenty of people who were like active in the seventies from SDS and stuff like that. And one of them actually recognize [Murray Rothbard 00:16:18] on a hoodie of mine because he was an old activist in the SDS days when Rothbard was trying to fight the Vietnam War with the left. I thought that was just hilarious. He was pretty much like, "Gee, what's Rothbard done since then?"

Anthony Comegna ([16:36](#)):

The story it's too long, but the professors were pretty interesting people and challenging. Like we had Marcus Rediker, who's made a career on arguing that pirates in the early 1700s were revolutionary communists and stuff like that. They were my favorite people in the department who are always pushing the bounds of my libertarian thinking on issues and challenging me to consider new perspectives. Meanwhile, the grad students looked at the Marxist professors or the old quantitative professors and thought they're old fuddy duddies who were so silly for having these ideas. And it just struck me as kind of totally contrary to the normal narrative we get about the academic experience.

Sean Trainor ([17:27](#)):

That's really interesting.

Paul Matzko ([17:28](#)):

Well, and I always enjoyed, I mean, there's something there too. I think the generational difference matters. I mean, if you go to grad school in history, you're going to read a lot of Marxist historiography, whether it's Hobsbawm or Genovese or whoever, but they're from an older mid 20th century or earlier

time period, mostly. But one of the things that's interesting is I think in older generation of Marxists, they get a certain degree of suspicion of the state that's kind of baked in, like if you went through the second red scare, you know that the national security state isn't your friend.

Paul Matzko ([18:02](#)):

Whereas I think there's a generational difference today where some of those lessons of the dangers of excessive statism that got bashed into the heads of an older generation of Marxists has gone, has faded, the memory of that has faded. So anyways, I definitely, I mean, I enjoyed reading, you fill in the blank with Marxist historiography. There was an attention to structure and attention to class and attention to the ways in which the distinction between the state and the actual interests of the worker that sometimes a newer generation of Marxists don't always hold to. So anyways, yeah.

Sean Trainor ([18:45](#)):

Yeah. What Paul said about the generational thing, I think is really important. We obviously read a lot of the old Marxist stuff as kind of foundational text, but the actual literature that we were really steeped in, in kind of a week by week basis, was the more recent stuff, which it's not explicitly postmodern, because what does that mean anyway? It certainly has more of a post-modern, theoretical influence than it does of a Marxist theoretical influence. But for me, I just always found the older stuff, mainly Genovese, the Hobsbawm, I just always found that stuff more compelling. I thought that the use of quantitative methods was really kind of inspirational. I have done a fair amount of quantitative stuff myself. It's something I'm really interested in, but more than anything else, there's an explanatory power and richness to that literature, because of its foundation in materialism, I would say, that just makes it so compelling in a way that a lot of more recent stuff is not.

Sean Trainor ([19:49](#)):

So, yeah, I think that was another kind of experience for me, at least, in grad school was constantly looking back to the generation that trained the people that we studied with and thinking, "Hey, these folks had something, and there's something really important there that that needs to be recovered." Another, just sorry to go on for a moment here, but another thing, and this is most apparent, I think, when you read like the historiography of the French Revolution, but there's a real suspicion of radical and revolutionary change in the most recent generation of historiography.

Sean Trainor ([20:28](#)):

I mean, the generation of French Revolutionary historians who came after the kind of dominance of the Marxist school, they basically arrived at the conclusion that revolution is bad and it just can't ever produce positive results. I get that most revolutions are bad, or at least that they have very negative sides, but I just, I cannot bring myself to believe that revolutionary change that we just have to give up on that, that it's something that we have to write off. So yeah, kind of a non-sequitur, but I figured it's all part of sort of teasing through this conversation about our relationship to generations of scholars and where we fit in them.

Paul Matzko ([21:11](#)):

One of the valuable things, I mean, you know this from grad school too, Anthony, where it's not normal human, I don't think it's a normal, innate part of being a human being to think this way. And so for most of us, for me especially, you have to train yourself to think like this, but it is to take, grad school trains you to take a source, to take a secondary source of historians writing about from the primary sources

about the past and extract value, regardless of the views, the ideological framework that the historian uses, and you do that over and over and over again in grad school. It's a very valuable exercise.

Paul Matzko ([21:51](#)):

I mean, but again, it's not normal. So just because blank historian was a Marxist doesn't mean that what they're doing can't be interesting, can't be valuable to a libertarian frame of mind and vice versa, though. We don't read many libertarian historians in grad school, unfortunately.

Sean Trainor ([22:09](#)):

Alas.

Paul Matzko ([22:09](#)):

Unless they assign the Radio Right, then that should be required to reading and [crosstalk 00:22:14].

Sean Trainor ([22:14](#)):

Yes, agreed, agreed.

Paul Matzko ([22:17](#)):

But that process, I mean, that's the thing I valued the most about grad school. It's not learning facts about the past. It's not even learning necessarily the analytical tools that you learn as an historian per se, it's that habit, that mental habit of regardless where a source comes from, trying to extract the value from it that there's something interesting there, at least some nugget that you can extract and use to improve and sharpen your own thinking. That's a good habit to develop.

Anthony Comegna ([22:48](#)):

Well, that brings me perfectly to this, which is, Sean, I know that you've at least read a few libertarian things as part of the show that you can discuss.

Sean Trainor ([22:55](#)):

Yes.

Anthony Comegna ([22:56](#)):

So what do you think is your favorite piece of libertarian scholarship you've ever read?

Sean Trainor ([23:02](#)):

Well, obviously the Radio Right.

Anthony Comegna ([23:05](#)):

Oh, no, no, no, no.

Paul Matzko ([23:07](#)):

He's not going to let you off the hook.

Sean Trainor ([23:10](#)):

If I'm being honest, most of my knowledge of the libertarian fundamentals, I get secondhand through Paul. And so at some point I should probably, Paul is just such a good translator for me that I've never felt compelled to actually dive into the Road to Serfdom from beginning to end.

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

Well, I made you read the life version, the comic book.

Sean Trainor ([23:34](#)):

Yes. So the life comic book version of The Road to Serfdom, very good. And what was that other thing that we read, Paul? Consider the Pencil?

Paul Matzko ([23:45](#)):

Yeah, I, Pencil, yes.

Sean Trainor ([23:47](#)):

I, Pencil. I, Pencil was great. It was awesome. I loved I, Pencil.

Paul Matzko ([23:52](#)):

I mean, early on, this was even before the show, we spent a lot of time talking about, I mean, this is a reflection of my own interests, but Hayek, I think I got you convinced to love Hayekian type ideas about [crosstalk 00:24:04].

Sean Trainor ([24:05](#)):

Despite the fact that I've never really read Hayek in any meaningful way, I admire Hayek. At a fundamental level, obviously I don't agree, but yeah, I think that Hayek had some pretty solid insights that socialists 100% need to grapple with. So, yeah, I guess I would have to say if I had to choose a libertarian thinker who am I'm most interested in, it would be Hayek.

Anthony Comegna ([24:30](#)):

You got to check out the Batman comic where he rescues [Meses' 00:24:34] books from the Nazis. That's pretty hardcore.

Sean Trainor ([24:39](#)):

All right, I'm definitely going to check that out.

Paul Matzko ([24:40](#)):

That's that's going to be an episode of Impolitic. Yeah, let's do it.

Anthony Comegna ([24:45](#)):

Paul, what about your favorite work in the wide world of socialist scholarship?

Paul Matzko ([24:50](#)):

Hm. Yeah, I've got a little more to choose from, I suppose. I already mentioned, I mean, this is a bit of a cop out because everyone has to read them in grad school. Maybe not now, but certainly 10 years ago

we were still reading them. But I would say Genovese, Eugene Genovese, we all read, for a whole generation of historians that might not be themselves social historians. Wait, am I thinking Genovese or am I thinking Hobsbawm, Sean? Enormous Condescension of Posterity.

Sean Trainor ([25:34](#)):

That's Hobsbawm, isn't it?

Paul Matzko ([25:35](#)):

That's Hobsbawm, yeah. It's Hobsbawm. All right. I got, not Genovese. I mean, we all read the Roll, Jordan, Roll by Genovese on...

Anthony Comegna ([25:40](#)):

Yeah, that's one of my favorites.

Sean Trainor ([25:40](#)):

Yeah, but Political Economy of Slavery is where it's at.

Paul Matzko ([25:43](#)):

Yeah.

Sean Trainor ([25:43](#)):

Roll, Jordan, Roll is okay. But Political Economy of Slavery is...

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

Political Economy of Slavery, yeah. So Hobsbawm, so this shows both of us showing up for impressive knowledge of [crosstalk 00:25:53] libertarian literature.

Sean Trainor ([25:54](#)):

I read a comic book.

Paul Matzko ([25:56](#)):

So Hobsbawm, no, E.P. Thompson, not Hobsbawm. E.P. Thompson. Sean, you're supposed to help me out. So E.P. Thompson about the working man.

Sean Trainor ([26:07](#)):

Yeah, the Origins of the English Working Class.

Paul Matzko ([26:09](#)):

Origins of the English Working Class, yeah.

Anthony Comegna ([26:10](#)):

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Paul Matzko ([26:11](#)):

He has a famous line there where he talks about the enormous condescension of posterity, the way in which historians have forgotten the life and plight of just ordinary people, working people. And he wrote that, I believe, in the fifties and it launched, or maybe in the forties, but anyways, it launched just a wave of historiography that led kind of the social turn in history, which took the field by storm in the sixties, seventies, and eighties. And now today, almost all history is influenced by a social history approach. We're all trying to tell stories from the bottom up. I mean, Anthony, your work telling a story about Locofocos from the bottom up, that's not just some elite movement. It's ordinary workers in New York City and is influenced by... My work about, it's about people listening to the radio, not just Republican politicians that explain the rise of the new right, Sean's work obviously about barbers and barbering is influenced by the social turn.

Paul Matzko ([27:09](#)):

So a lot of that can be traced back to people reading Thompson and being inspired to tell these stories of the forgotten and the non elite. So I would say, I mean, E.P. Thompson was a pretty doctrinaire Marxist, old school type. None of this like Neo Marxist stuff. He's an old school guy and it is his Marxism that led him to say, "We can't just tell stories about great men of history, about the elites over and over and over again." You know what? He was completely right. I mean, yes, it was his Marxism that led them to an observation that has been utterly valuable to me as a libertarian historian, as a libertarian thinker that I apply constantly to my work. So again, don't obsess with where an idea comes from, think of the validity and utility of that idea, regardless of the source you find it. So yeah. E.P. Thompson, that's who I'll go with.

Sean Trainor ([28:09](#)):

Solid save, Paul.

Paul Matzko ([28:10](#)):

Yeah, yeah. Third try is the charm. Does it sound like I actually knew what I was talking about once I finally figured out who it was?

Sean Trainor ([28:18](#)):

Once you got going it was great.

Paul Matzko ([28:19](#)):

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Sean Trainor ([28:20](#)):

Yeah.

Anthony Comegna ([28:29](#)):

All right, everyone, Paul and Sean will be back on the show next week when we'll continue the conversation right where we left off. For the moment though, let me remind everyone that Paul Matzko is editor for technology and innovation at [libertarianism.org](#) and the Cato Institute and he's author of the recent book, *The Radio Right, How a Band of Broadcasters Took on the Federal Government and Built the Modern Conservative Movement*. And Sean Trainor is a historian and professor at the

Ideas in Progress, Episode 75, A Libertarian and a Socialist Walk into a Noodle Shop

University of Florida and author of the forthcoming book, which we'll be sure to follow up on, *The Bearded Age, The Rise and Fall of Victorian America's Most Infamous Fashion*.