

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

Welcome back, everybody to another week of Ideas in Progress, where we pick up with doctors and historians, Paul Matzko and Sean Trainor. Paul you'll remember is editor for technology and innovation at libertarianism.org and the Cato Institute where he hosts the podcast Building Tomorrow. And, Sean teaches history at the University of Florida. Together, they're the hosts of the fantastically fun podcast Impolitic, which brings together libertarians and socialists to find common ground and enjoy one another's intellectual company. It's a wonderful show and a really great time, so for more Impolitic, the ideas behind the show and the dynamic that makes it run so well, let's get right back to Sean and Paul.

Anthony Comegna ([01:08](#)):

All right, let's start this week actually, with something Paul left us off with last time, which is your own actual research as historians because we haven't really covered that much yet. So, let's start with Sean because, of course, I just am more interested in the 19th century than Paul's 20th century stuff when everything is horrible. I much prefer the wonderful days of early steam trains and bearded men gallivanting about town. So, Sean, tell us about your research in my wheelhouse area of 19th century America.

Sean Trainor ([01:46](#)):

Sure, so my dissertation was on the 19th century beard movement. So, I was trying to figure out where beards came from and long story short, the answer, as it is oftentimes with American history, it's racism. Sorry, so basically long story short, white men grew increasingly uncomfortable with being shaved by African-American barbers who dominated particularly the upper echelons of the trade in the early 19th century and increasingly moved toward home shaving, and it turns out that shaving yourself is actually very hard with a straight razor. It's a bit of an acquired skill, and at a certain point, it just became more of a nuisance than it was worth. And, it kind of blended with a lot of ideas that were kind of floating around about masculinity and virility and convinced them that, hey, if shaving is painful and beards are cool, we might as well just have beards. And there you have it, that is in a very, very small nutshell, the origins of the 19th century beard movement as conceived of in my research.

Paul Matzko ([03:02](#)):

There's the Sweeney Todd, I've only seen the movie. I know it was like a play or book or something before that. Was there anything more interesting in the original source material for that? Did they extract race out of that story? I know there's the anxiety over having the blade to the throat-

Sean Trainor ([03:20](#)):

Well, it's a British story originally. And so, the barbering trade in England wasn't dominated by men of color. So, it was a different context, but the moment that it comes over to the US, it's immediately racialized. And, that danger which is sort of a class-based danger in the original source material, immediately becomes a race-based danger.

Paul Matzko ([03:51](#)):

I can't remember, did you center your dissertation, is it Baltimore [crosstalk 00:03:55]-

Sean Trainor ([03:54](#)):

I did a bunch of different cities, just sort of like random US cities.

Paul Matzko ([03:59](#)):

You have all those black barbers with literally a knife or a razor to the throat of wealthy white guys and they're at their mercy, right?

Sean Trainor ([04:10](#)):

To demonstrate this, Anthony, just as a heads up, we had a seminar where we had to like do little skits to kind of dramatize stuff that we were working on and to demonstrate how uncomfortable it is to be shaved by somebody. I mimed shaving Paul and just rubbing my hands all over his face, and it was a deeply uncomfortable experience for me, for Paul, and for literally everyone in the room.

Anthony Comegna ([04:34](#)):

I can quite imagine, yeah.

Paul Matzko ([04:38](#)):

Sean, I still think fondly of this moment. No, I forgot about that [crosstalk 00:04:43].

Sean Trainor ([04:44](#)):

Any time you want me to come rub your face, Paul, just say the word.

Anthony Comegna ([04:47](#)):

You guys should get your own cameo [crosstalk 00:04:48]. Sean, what you were saying was interesting though, because it makes me think of my favorite piece of Marxist scholarship, which is almost certainly... Well, unless you're going to count my favorite book period, which is Many-Headed Hydra by Rector Linebaugh, my favorite piece of classic Marxist scholarship is C.L.R. James, his history of the Haitian revolution, The Black Jacobins in which he says very clearly, in no uncertain terms, the race problem is subsidiary to the class problem. That's Marxism boiled down to a T. All these other cultural problems where the ruling class divides us, it comes down to fundamental class relationships based on property ownership, and that's what starts all the rest of these things like race. So, I'm curious, how do you see your Marxism inflected in this project?

Sean Trainor ([05:49](#)):

So to be fair, the project really took shape, and I wrote the dissertation before I really identified as a Marxist and much respect to C.L.R. James, who am I to criticize or push back on the likes of C.L.R. James, but a lot of the conversations going on in left circles these days are about how we navigate the question of class reductionism. And on the one hand, part of being a Marxist is seeing the world as being primarily shaped by people's individual and collective relationship to the ownership of the means of production, as you said. But at the same time, if you just reduce all questions to a question of class, then it both oversimplifies the social inequalities that are posed by race, and it also is an organizing obstacle because if you just go around saying to people like, "Actually, class is more important than race. That's just the truth, sorry. Some German guy said so, so he's right."

Sean Trainor ([07:08](#)):

That's just not going to work, particularly in a context like the US where so much of organizing is shaped and has been shaped for much of the past 150, 200 years along lines of race. So with all due respect, I've got to say that I think that C.L.R. James taken in that case is a bit reductive, and part of the challenge of

the Marxist project in a US context is finding ways to see how race and class intersect. Sorry to be annoying and talk about intersectionality here, but I do think that intersectionality has a place in the Marxist tradition.

Anthony Comegna ([07:56](#)):

No, we are big fans of the concept, at least for myself. I think it's fundamental to individualism as a matter of fact, but, Paul, let's talk about the 20th century because I guess it's only fair.

Sean Trainor ([08:11](#)):

If we must.

Anthony Comegna ([08:13](#)):

After the world went to hell and we invented atomic weapons and we've been holding each other hostage ever since, tell us about The Radio Right.

Paul Matzko ([08:25](#)):

That's right, so in a nutshell, I write about how in the 1960s right-wing radio broadcasters built the new right movement. If you consider yourself a conservative today, the origins of the movement that you're part of really can be traced back through a right-wing broadcast during in the 60s. That's how the ideas were transmitted to whoever turned you into a conservative, whether it was your father and mother or someone else you came in contact with early in your life.

Paul Matzko ([08:59](#)):

So, they built the new right, and they were so successful at doing so that these broadcasters attracted the ire of the John F. Kennedy administration, and later the Johnson administration and the Nixon administration who used a variety of Federal Communications Commission regulations, something called the fairness doctrine to punish radio stations that aired conservative programming, leading to lots of stations just dropping them altogether. So, it was a weaponization of federal regulations, just a massive abuse of executive power.

Paul Matzko ([09:40](#)):

In fact, the way I usually put it is that the difference between JFK and Richard Nixon when it came to the abuse of the executive branch, is that Nixon got caught. So, that's what it boils down to. Both of them, if you think Watergate was a big deal, and it was, then let me tell you the story about how JFK shut down political opposition using the Federal Communications Commission and the IRS.

Paul Matzko ([10:06](#)):

They did targeted audits of right-wing broadcasters, big old scandal. I was in the archives, found some smoking gun... They found actually an audio tape from the oval office of Kennedy talking about the censorship campaign, a bunch of documents, and it's an account of the most successful censorship campaign of the last half century that nobody's heard of and came out with Oxford, June of this year, and it is on a bookshelf near you. I mean, probably not. This isn't the end of the day... It's not published by Not for Norton or a Trade Press, so, but it's available online. It's on a website near you. So, look up The Radio Right: How a Band of Broadcasters Took on the Federal Government and Built the Modern Conservative Movement.

Anthony Comegna ([11:00](#)):

Thank you for that, and of course you've been doing lots and lots of very big media hits on it too, which has always been impressive to see and to follow.

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

Well, there's something in there for everyone is the way I put it. In fact, when I got my peer reviews back, the publisher sent it out, and the first peer reviewer said, "This is great. You should publish it, but I'm a little bit concerned that talking about JFK censoring right-wing broadcasters will just play into a pro-Trump narrative that the media is out to get you and the government's out to get you and this will be bad in the era of hashtag resistance."

Paul Matzko ([11:46](#)):

And the other peer reviewer said, "Oh, this is excellent. You should publish it, blah, blah, blah, but this is excellent because it talks about the abuse of executive power and in the era of hashtag resistance to Donald Trump, we need to be more attuned than ever to the way in which executives can abuse their power. This is great." I was like, "I don't know what to do with these two." They can't both be true. It can't both be great for Trump and terrible for Trump. But also, why are you analyzing whether this is a book to publish based on what it tells us about Donald J. Trump?

Sean Trainor ([12:15](#)):

It's so sad.

Paul Matzko ([12:19](#)):

It's so sad, but the point being there is that there's both something there that I think... There's a libertarian angle, which is, hey, the government has immense power, and with that immense power comes the immense power to do this kind of illicit, skullduggery to punish the speech of political opponents, to reward political allies. That's a very libertarian through line, but there's also stuff that folks on the right will like, which is, hey, JFK was not the Prince of Camelot who could do no wrong. He was a bad dude. There's things there for, if you will broadly speaking, the left to like, which is I have a whole long discussion about the way in which right-wing radio was used to transform the South from safely Democratic to safely Republican, that partisan transformation of the Deep South by appeals to explicit racism and support for segregation that essentially right-wing radio paved the way.

Paul Matzko ([13:24](#)):

They kind of played the John the Baptist role preparing the way of a racist Jesus. They prepared the South by saying, "Hey, you can be a Republican and be racist too. So, there's something there for everyone that will tickle their mood affiliated fancies as well as something that would alienate everyone. So, I'm never sure what people will be willing to read past in order to get to the stuff that makes them feel good about themselves.

Anthony Comegna ([13:55](#)):

One of the most interesting things to me about the history of talk radio is always how absolutely massive these audiences used to be even compared to today when there are simply a lot more people and presumably a lot more radios out there. Everybody seemed to listen to a Clarence Manion or something, and they had tens and tens and tens of millions of people listening. The kind of audience

that the departed Rush Limbaugh, the recently departed Rush Limbaugh could have only dreamed of, even though he was the most popular daytime host of his era. I believe though, still, Coast to Coast AM always beat him in raw numbers of listeners, which is just fascinating and a critique of the 90s. But I'm curious, I've been playing this cellphone game recently where it's a bunch of crabs fighting each other and eating each other and growing bigger until you're the king crab. Do you think that's kind of how the right is going to compete for that spot of cultural influence left open by Rush Limbaugh's recent death?

Paul Matzko ([15:08](#)):

Yeah, it's interesting. That's one of the things that I get asked on these post Trump obit hits and the way... Right now, my current guess is that everyone's hunting for the next talk radio replacement for Rush Limbaugh and talk radio is not going anywhere. We're talking about 13 to 15 million people who are faithful, everyday talk radio listeners. They're not going to just disappear because they lost Trump anymore than golf disappeared when Tiger Woods... Well, he's still technically around, but after he was forced to leave the stage or when Michael Jordan retired. It'll have an impact, but it's going to remain, but I don't think the future of that kind of role will be played by a talk radio guy. We already have a great example in a different medium, which is Joe Rogan in podcasting.

Paul Matzko ([16:05](#)):

In fact, the correlators between him and Rush Limbaugh are quite interesting. Both of them came from... You would've been shocked if I had told you 20 years ago that there would be this color commentator for a mixed martial arts league named Joe Rogan who would some day launch the political campaign of Andrew Yang, a guy campaigning for the Democratic presidential nomination on the universal basic income guarantee. You'd be like, "What are you talking about?" But, Joe Rogan, you have that mixed martial arts career that he honed his voice. Rush Limbaugh, before he became El Rushbo, was an ad salesman for the Kansas City Royals in baseball. So, both of them had this quixotic, pre-broadcasting career where they developed this blend of humor, a bit of commentary on outrage politics, or fomenting about outrage politics, and that ability to appeal to folks who aren't highly politically engaged.

Paul Matzko ([17:16](#)):

And so, both Limbaugh and Joe Rogan have that capacity. And, podcasting is on the way up. We're talking on a podcast obviously, but still only like half of Americans listen to a podcast in any given month. So, there's still a ton of room to grow just as in 1988, when the Rush Limbaugh Show gets syndicated nationally, it was still a young, growing sector. There was still a lot of room to grow. So anyways, that's my answer is that there's a lot of corollaries between like Rush Limbaugh and Joe Rogan, but that more importantly, podcasting for our generation, talk radio is the key mechanism for ideological transformation for like boomers, people who were in their 20s and 30s in the 80s and early 90s, it was a key mechanism for them to find their politics and their voice.

Paul Matzko ([18:15](#)):

Today, people in their 20s and 30s are listening to way more podcasts than they do talk radio. The average age of a talk radio listener is their mid-60s. They're aging. It's not people of our generation, but the median age of a podcast listener is 35. So in a nutshell, don't look for a talk radio successor to Rush Limbaugh, look to podcasting, whether it's Joe Rogan or someone else.

Anthony Comegna ([18:43](#)):

Now I'm curious to know, switching gears, back to Impolitic here in particular, you already went over several points of key agreement and common ground between the two of you in our last episode. But I'm curious to know, what is the main area or point of disagreement where you think, oh God, come on, Paul, you, you really just need to get on board with this already because you're so clearly wrong and you just really need to accept it and move on and vice versa? Let's start with Sean.

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

Well, the one that's freshest in my mind, because we've been coming back to this pretty much every other episode of late, is Paul just will not concede the obvious truth that there is in fact a ruling class.

Anthony Comegna ([19:35](#)):

Oh my.

Paul Matzko ([19:36](#)):

Once more into the breach, Sean.

Sean Trainor ([19:38](#)):

Once more into the breach. In a sense, this identifies what I see as one of the main benefits of doing a show like Impolitic, both for me as one of the co-hosts, and also I think for those of our listeners who come from a left background is when I'm around socialists, I don't have to defend the existence of the ruling class. It's like, "Yeah, it's those guys. Yeah, it's totally them." We know who it is, but when you start talking to somebody who has fundamental questions about the existence of a concept that you regard as foundational, it does force you to tease out what you mean when you use a phrase like that.

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

And, what does it mean to have ruling classes? Does it mean that they understand themselves to be a class? Does it mean that their actions are unified, that they move and act in unified ways? Or, does it mean that it's people whose interests align and that when those interests align to a greater or lesser degree, it can motivate greater or lesser degree of political action? That's the kind of stuff that you don't get unless you talk to your... I wouldn't say political opponents because I don't regard Paul as an opponent, unless you talk to people who fundamentally disagree with you.

Anthony Comegna ([21:02](#)):

That's a good one. We do argue about that a lot. From my point of view, this goes with the common critique I have of a Marxist view of class, which is that it tends to be overly rigid that there's the idea of a ruling class. Well, there's just different... Maybe there are classes. There are different classes of people who have various kinds of power and compose an elite, but the idea that they have a shared interest around their relationship to the means of production, it's just not something I see that fundamentally there's a difference between the relationship of, I don't know, Jeff Bezos to the means of production that differ from those of someone with political power, but not as much money or someone who is of... Anyways, you get the point, that there are...

Anthony Comegna ([21:51](#)):

This isn't a denial of a power that corresponds to some sort of relationship to broader structural phenomenon. The word class fits there, but I think the Marxist view tends to be overly rigid. So, they

talk about a ruling class in a singular, and then talk as if people with money and political power are all relatively united in their interests and not often at odds. Anyways, so that's one that Sean and I have been arguing about for years on Impolitic. That's a pretty good one. So, Sean, it's obvious that I'm correct and you're wrong. Would you like to fess up to that here, now, live on the air?

Sean Trainor ([22:35](#)):

Never.

Anthony Comegna ([22:39](#)):

Well, what is it on your end there, Paul? What does Sean just need to hurry up and get along with?

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

Well, to me the frustrating thing is that very early on, I introduced Sean to the knowledge problem. We were talking about the high knowledge problem, and then Sean was like, "Yeah, man, that's great stuff. Knowledge problem, that's real. That's a legit concern." But, whenever we get to an actual situation where I say, "Well, see, there's a knowledge problem here that this centralized authority claims all the power, but it's cutting itself off from access to local information." Actually, it's the struggle to get Sean to apply that insight to real world situations. That is the one that I'm ready for him to move on. But that said, Sean is not a big statist, a state socialist, at least in theory, that we both share a de-centralist, a localist impulse, so that helps.

Sean Trainor ([23:41](#)):

I guess what I would counter with is, what I've come to see... And, this kind of gets back to an earlier question about libertarian thinkers that I admire, and we were talking about Hayek, I do think that that grappling with the knowledge problem and the power of the price signal and all of that good old libertarian stuff is super important. Basically as a socialist, you have to make one of two choices, which is either all of that stuff is real and true and it does impinge on any attempt to plan an economy, but it's worth it, or that that stuff can be overcome through, whatever, better planning, better computation, et cetera, et cetera.

Sean Trainor ([24:27](#)):

And so, I think a lot of the times that Paul's referring to where I'm bumping up against the knowledge problem, it's not that I don't see that it's there. It's just that, yeah, it's there, but the benefit of dealing with its problems, with the problems caused by the knowledge problem, whatever, that's kind of circular, but that the benefits of pursuing whatever course that precipitates that confrontation with the knowledge problem is worth it. And again, that's something that I never would've even had to think about if it weren't for this confrontation with Hayek and actually having to engage in meaningful ways with the most thoughtful elements of the libertarian tradition.

Paul Matzko ([25:16](#)):

Anthony, is it okay if I say one thing I really do appreciate about encountering Marx as reflected by Sean? Like a mirror reflecting the sun, if you think about that. And on this note, is that I don't think growing up I would have had any conception of class at all. In fact, I would have scorned the mere mention of the word that class has a role to play in how I analyze the structure of society. And, I will take

someone with any understanding of class over folks who have no appreciation for class, that completely atomize society as if we are...

Paul Matzko ([26:01](#)):

I'm an individualist. I believe very strongly in individual civil liberties, in the autonomy that we should have, the freedom to choose, to make choices in our own lives. That said, I also recognize that we aren't making those choices in a vacuum, and that we are often unaware of the ways in which our class, the class that were brought up in, the class that corresponds to what we do or where we live, what we do with our lives, impinge upon our thinking in ways that are often hidden to us.

Paul Matzko ([26:32](#)):

And so, I think encountering Marxist historians who write about class, talking to Sean about class, I think it's important to have some understanding of, yeah, hey, you know what, my relationship to the means of production, my relationship to the people who work and live and act like me influences my thinking in ways that I'm blind to, that shapes my consciousness. That's valuable, and it's not bad for libertarians to think about class. You shouldn't be afraid. I know it sounds sort of ludicrous to say this here, but you shouldn't be afraid to consider class as part of your analysis of society, and that's been an impulse strengthened by talking to Sean, even if I disagree about, yes, his overly rigid conception of class. And also, I'm usually the one who pushes back on Sean for the class reductionism, whether fairly or not, but that said, so that's something I take away from... Sean has the knowledge problem, I have this more robust appreciation of class.

Anthony Comegna ([27:49](#)):

That does kind of bring me to my last question. Maybe we can close out by sort of asking the inverse of that, which would be, what is the main area or topic, question outstanding in your mind that just nags at you and you think, "Oh God, Paul said this a long time ago, or Sean's been saying this forever. And you know what, I think finally I have to fess up to it. I think he's right." Where do you suspect you're going to have to change your mind and become more in line with the other one here very shortly or in the near term?

Sean Trainor ([28:25](#)):

Well, it's kind of hard to answer because there's a bunch of stuff that we already agreed on. And for me, the questions that most eat at me, they're ultimately empirical questions. They hopefully can and will be answered by the unfolding of politics and of history, and I guess certainly the idea that nags at me the most is the knowledge problem and the price signal. As Paul said, I certainly don't favor a Soviet style, sort of centralized command economy, but to be a socialist in any meaningful sense is to believe that people should exercise democratic control over the economy, and that means not just sort of the allocation... Not just the setting of priorities for labor and investment, it also means democratic control of individual workplaces and things like that.

Sean Trainor ([29:36](#)):

And, I do think that a lot of the problems that socialism has encountered in the past and the present, that they're technical problems rather than philosophical problems, that we don't know how to manage an economy or a workplace particularly, effectively at scale yet, but we can figure out how to do so just as people had to figure out over time how to engage in democratic politics at scale. So, I guess what I'm trying to say is that the knowledge problem, the price signal, a lot of those foundational libertarian

insights that we've been talking about so much, they do nag at me. And, it's not that I think that I will have to concede that I'm wrong per se, but that we will have to figure out meaningful ways to navigate them if the socialist project is ever actually going to come to fruition.

Paul Matzko ([30:39](#)):

I think for me, I think it's a little too easy for libertarians to get caught up in a very limited set of problems that they're interested in speaking to. It's the distinction between the libertarianism in theory, versus libertarianism in practice. And, you can see this all the time. How much more energy do libertarians spend on trying to encourage economic laissez-faire, especially via things like tax cuts, as they do on the pursuit of racial justice. I know certainly in think tank land it is all out of whack, the ratio. Now in theory, both things should be equally important to a libertarian. In practice they are not. So, one of the constant challenges to me from talking to Sean and seeing what various Marxist and socialist organizations actually spend their time doing, it's a challenge that... How am I applying my libertarian views to venues, to communities? How am I encouraging the spread of liberty into kind of realms that aren't traditionally within the ambit of what libertarians deign to care about?

Paul Matzko ([32:00](#)):

And so, that's a constant challenge. It's one thing to say, hey, a market-based system would have been... We could have ended the Jim Crow era of segregation if the markets had just been free to undermine racism because it would show that racism doesn't pay and it's required laws to make people sit in the back of buses, and it was actually not in the interest of the bus corporation. I could go on and on about that, but the reality is in the mid-20th century, libertarians weren't on the sides of the angels when it came to the civil rights movement. And even today, to be a libertarian is going to correlate inversely with support for marching against police brutality and for various forms of racial justice and equity. And so, the thing that I'm always being pushed on by my relationship with Sean is, hey, are you selectively applying your libertarian values in ways that are just because it's convenient for you? As a relatively upper middle class college educated, white, knowledge economy worker, living in small town Maine... We can't get whiter than that.

Paul Matzko ([33:14](#)):

Are you only interested in libertarianism as long as it keeps your life comfortable and looking more or less the way it does, or are you interested in pursuing libertarian concepts even when it benefits people who aren't like you, or in fact even if it takes something from you and gives to... In terms of say white privilege in this case. So, that's one of the things that I think my proximity to Sean and to, I guess, socialism via Sean, is that it constantly challenges me to think about how I apply my libertarian views in ways that are uncomfortable. So thanks, Sean.

Sean Trainor ([33:53](#)):

Can I actually add something in here, Anthony? I just wanted to mention, I think one thing that I appreciate, and I'm conscious of this because I am here on this show is that I do think that in general libertarians do a better job of reaching out to people they disagree with and trying to learn from them than many on the left do. I think that there's a general attitude on the left, and I get it to an extent that because we live in a capitalist society, because right-wing media has such a large footprint that we really don't need to engage with thoughtful right-wing or libertarian ideas. We already know them. There's nothing there for us to gain from that interaction.

Sean Trainor ([34:40](#)):

And, my friendship with Paul and the experience of doing Impolitic and just through Paul being privy to libertarian-ish circles and thoughtful right-wing circles has been super beneficial for my intellectual growth and development, and I think it's made me a better socialist and maybe even a better person. So, that's something that I hope that as the left in the US gets more secure in its position, that it emulates from all of you all because it's a positive quality, and I'm grateful that I've had the opportunity to observe it and learn from it.

Anthony Comegna ([35:23](#)):

All right, everyone. My greatest thanks to you, our listeners, for tuning in yet again this week, but my greatest, greatest thanks go, of course, to Paul and Sean for taking their time to join us the past few weeks. It was good fun talking to them about their research and perhaps unlikely, but certainly productive friendship and the dynamics that have made Impolitic such a good show. So, here's another call for all of us to have more conversations like Sean and Paul, more interactions between good faith, classical liberals and good faith socialists, conservatives, and really whomever else. The important thing is not really that we all come to agreement, but that we encourage each other to become sharper and better scholars who ask better and better questions. But, that's it for me for this week, everybody. So until next time, keep the progress coming.