

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

Welcome. Welcome, welcome everyone to what promises to be an amazing pair of shows, this week and next. Continuing our 60th anniversary theme, we've invited historian Steve Davies to talk on his long experience and storied history with IHS. Not only has Steve been attending IHS events for decades, but he also worked here for a stretch as a program officer and has been one of our most consistent faculty lecturers, reviewers, and discussion leaders. He has exercised a huge influence on me personally, as a historian. He has a deeper grasp of classical liberalism's history than almost anyone else alive, and he's exceptionally rare in the ranks of classical liberal historians, and that he has cultivated a decidedly global perspective on the subject. We'll return to more history in particular next week, but for now, let's get straight to the biography portion with Steve Davies' own IHS story.

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

So historian Steve Davies, welcome. Welcome to Ideas in Progress, and thank you a ton for being here. Being perfectly frank with you and our audience, you're actually one of the first people at IHS that I have a strong memory of, because really you were the keynote speaker at one of the first programs I think I ever went to, or at least that I remember going to, which was a 2013 symposium on scholarship in a free society, which I believe was a grad research seminar. And like I said, you gave a keynote speech and gave feedback on papers and all of that. And something that always stuck with me about that keynote, which was your power point had this, I now understand somewhat famous series of slides, where you juxtapose the normal type of timeline we get in your standard history textbook, let's say, where it's all great battles and King's birth dates and death dates, and different dynasties overlapping each other and stuff like that. National histories, big, big, big history stuff.

Anthony Comegna ([02:27](#)):

And then, you have this other timeline where it's the great innovations and technologies by tinkerers, and inventors, and regular people that improve humanity at large. And you talk about the difference between those types of history and perspectives, and that always stuck with me, because I was, of course, studying history from below at the same time in graduate school. And it just meshed so well, but you were decidedly classical liberal, and that was something I didn't feel like I got from many other classical liberal scholars. So, that always stuck with me. And I always appreciated your lecture there. So maybe you could start us off just by talking a little bit about your perspective on history. What really matters, and what doesn't matter?

Stephen Davies ([03:17](#)):

Yeah. Well, thanks very much, but I'm glad to learn that you remembered that slide. I think that I am a big experiment actually I think. I supported the idea of history from below in the sense that what really matters ultimately in the longer term is the way that the lives of ordinary people are affected by what is going on in the world. A lot of this historically is down to things which human beings can't control, which is why I think that things like geography and climate should have more attention paid to them by the historical profession than they actually do. I'm always been strongly influenced by the approach of the late Fernand Braudel, and his great book on the Mediterranean where he assessed the scene by describing the terrain around the Mediterranean and the nature of the sea and the way it shapes the lives of the people who live around it.

Stephen Davies ([04:09](#)):

But in addition to that, of course, there's what we human beings make of the world and the way we do this acting collectively and individually, and I suppose societies and individuals. And so I've always been interested in the way in which people live and the way in which they understand the world and the way in which their lives change through time as a result of not just the obvious things like wars, government policies, power, and its exercise, but also through things above all like innovation. And one of the big concerns I've always had, I had to write a book about year ago, of course, is the way in which the [inaudible 00:04:43] world, the world in which we live is so fundamentally different from the world that most of our ancestors inhabited. And it's not just a matter of being staggeringly, more wealthy than our ancestors were, although that's a central part of it, it's also a matter of understanding the world differently. And suddenly living in a world in which the range of human possibility is vastly greater than it was for most of our ancestors for most of history.

Stephen Davies ([05:08](#)):

And so that particular kind of historical transition and understanding both how societies worked before that transition, and how and why that transition happened has always been one of my big interests and hence the interest in things like the tinkers inventors, you mentioned who were largely responsible for that transition. The Edisons and others who did things like banishing the world lit by fire as it was called.

Anthony Comegna ([05:37](#)):

Yeah. That's William McNeill, right?-

Stephen Davies ([05:41](#)):

It is, yeah.

Anthony Comegna ([05:41](#)):

... And his great book on... Yeah. So now we are, of course here to talk about, at least in the first part of our interview, your history with IHS and really your perspective on it, given that it's our 60th anniversary this year. What kinds of research were you personally working on while you were going to IHS events early on and meeting these sorts of people and having this kind of influence on your thoughts? What sorts of projects were you working on that might have been changed a little bit in direction or perspective as a result of these early contexts?

Stephen Davies ([06:13](#)):

Oh, it had an enormous impact on my research perspectives. One of the things I was working on... My PhD is actually about the Scottish criminal justice system, before the abolition of private courts in 1747. So before 1747 in Scotland, you had what are called heritable jurisdictions, which are courts held by landowners or others. And the court ultimately becomes a thing in law, which is detached from the land over which it exercises the jurisdiction. It could be bought and sold just like a business. So I was looking at that and I was always influenced by the kind of... This has been an example of a non-state provision of what is seen as a central function, state criminal justice. But my thinking about this was significantly developed by the experience I had at those history seminars. And at the same time, they also pushed me in the direction of another project, which I then pursued for quite a few years, which was about the private provision of public goods more generally.

Stephen Davies ([07:14](#)):

And so that was a major feature of my research for quite a few years. What I also got from them, was an interesting, forgotten parts of the history of the liberal movement. And this led me then to engage things, which I'm still doing, like the studying of the history of classical liberal feminism, for example, and also the history of like what forgotten liberals, such as the local focus, who I know you're fond of, and people like the various radical groups, radical individualists and others in Britain and the United States, the late 19th, early 20th century. And all that kind of part of my research was something which I don't think I would have gotten into, had it not been for the impact of IHS. I was already engaged in the study of private, Scottish criminal law, but it was given an extra boost if you will, by my interaction with IHS. And that then pushed me into these other areas as well. Some of which have continued.

Anthony Comegna ([08:10](#)):

Now, something I've been asking a lot of different guests on our show, especially during the 60th anniversary year here, is to put the mission of IHS in your own words. And there is of course an official version, and there's certainly a historical version going back to, to Baldy Harper and Hayek et cetera, et cetera. But go ahead, and try to put it in your own words, given your experience, what do you think is the mission that either has been undertaken or is being undertaken at the moment still?

Stephen Davies ([08:41](#)):

I think there's a core mission, which is to promote and sustain the development of classical liberal scholarship and research, and support and help the scholars who are engaged in that activity and that project, both through financial means, helping them in their career and by encouraging networking and intellectual exchange amongst themselves, and between them and the wider intellectual world. So I think that, that's the core mission as I'm defining it. It's about the promotion of classical liberal scholarship. And particularly, I think it's fair to say, classical liberal scholarship beyond the realm of economics, because one of the main features of IHS, its mission over the years has been to promote other disciplines, such as, my own discipline history, sociology, psychologies, and also particularly political science, political philosophy, more abstract philosophy generally. So there's an emphasis on more than what tends to be thought of as being the core area of economics.

Stephen Davies ([09:48](#)):

So it is scholarship in a much wider or general sense. Now there's other things as well, popular education if you like, taking the ideas produced by scholars and making them accessible through programs like the Liberty program that I just done recently. But I think that what I've just described is still remains the core sort of function of the core mission of IHS.

Anthony Comegna ([10:09](#)):

And come to think of it, at that 2013 program. I think that's when I picked up a copy of your book, *Empiricism and History*, and hearing your lectures over the years and reading your books, it has seemed to me like you have a pretty broad idea of what counts as classical liberalism within the realm of academia or scholarship. It's not just an interest in Liberty or individualism or something like that. It's also a set of methodologies and practices. It's a scholarly perspective and set of habits. First of all, you referred earlier to a radical approach to classical liberal history. I'm curious to know about that, but also maybe sketch out the landscape in your mind of what classical liberal scholarship is.

Stephen Davies ([11:10](#)):

First of all, I would say that most classical liberal history is empirical history, but not all of it. You can have classical liberal historians who inspire some kind of ideal response for you, like Collingwood for example. But the basic focus of classical liberal history is upon the nature of preconditions of human flourishing and particularly the part that Liberty plays in that human flourishing. And the radical aspect of that, is a constant concern with questions about power. Where power comes from? How it is exercised, how it comes to be followed and [debased 00:11:46]. And this is combined typically with a particular kind of methodology, which is one that emphasizes both structural factors, but also critically individual agency, and the importance of decisions made by individuals. Whether those be people in power or people who are simply living a quotidian and mundane life, whose decisions at an aggregated by some social process like markets.

Stephen Davies ([12:11](#)):

And so I remember one of the people I met through IHS is, Tom Palmer. I remember Tom giving a lecture once where he read out a passage from a classical liberal historical work called *Imperialism and World Politics* by Parker T. Moon. And in this book, Moon explains how Statements like France invaded Tunisia are actually a kind of shorthand for a much more complicated question, which is how some people in a part of the world known as France inhabited by 70 million people of enormously diverse tastes, [inaudible 00:12:47], decided to send 3000 other people from that part of the world, to that part of the world called Tunisia, inhabited by five million of an overestimate. What this is, as moon said is you can now ask some serious questions, like who were the people who made the decision? How did they get to be in a position to make this decision?

Stephen Davies ([13:08](#)):

Why did they make it? Who were the 3000 they sent and why did those 3000 do what they were told? And why did the other 70 million, what did they think about to do anything? And that's a kind of approach to history, which is obfuscated. I think it's fair to say, if you talk about political States like France or the United States as though they're actually meaningful entities. Who is this thing? It's actually, we need to focus on the people with power and what they do. And so I think that, that's the kind of profound classical liberal approach to history that I get from my own study of the discipline. It's a way of thinking about history, which is concerned with, as I said the preconditions and nature of human flourishing. How has [inaudible 00:13:58] throughout history and what part liberty plays in that human flourishing under centrality, in fact, to liberty for that, but also the counterparts are the dark side if you will.

Stephen Davies ([14:09](#)):

Power and domination as [inaudible 00:14:11] called it in his famous book, which is the sign of both power exploitation governance of rules. And this means being on the side of the powerless systems, or being on the side of the resisters, the people that James Scott talks about who find ways of not being governed. Ways of resisting the State. And it also means looking at power launched to the political kind. So I think that the radical aspect of this for example, is looking at the way power relationships exist in other areas than the purely political. Within the family, for example, maybe within the workplace or the firm or within society at large, or the kind of power that's exercised by religious leaders or popular leaders and opinion forms and the like. So it does lead to some pretty radical approaches and interesting questions. And this is a form of historical approach to history, which can draw on the insights from all sorts of people who are not themselves liberalist or pursuing a liberal line of inquiry.

Stephen Davies ([15:12](#)):

So the point about power and I just made, you can draw the work of Michael Mann. He's definitely not himself liberal, but a great historical sociologist with lots of powerful insights. You can even draw on the work of Marxist historians. Many of them have done very good work about this kind of thing.

Anthony Comegna ([15:30](#)):

Well I'm curious, given that perspective on power, which I completely share surprise, surprise, I'm pretty sure I got it from you. But given that wide perspective on power and its role in shaping history, and conflict between different groups of people with antagonistic interests, so I'm thinking, for example, the late great Ralph Raico another one of my favorite classical liberal historians. He sort of famously I suppose, among people who consider this kind of thing important and interesting that civilization ended with World War One as a process of constant improvements, civilization was dead after World War One. And the world is not exactly been in a more free position ever since, especially as I said on the show before, we talked with Chris Coyne about this. Essentially, a small handful of world executives hold the rest of us hostage with their nuclear arsenals. And we, the people better not cross them, ultimately.

Anthony Comegna ([16:42](#)):

They have complete power to annihilate the species and life on the planet, as we know it with their mistakes. Do we live in a freer world today than we did, let's see, 2021, 110 years ago, let's say?

Stephen Davies ([17:01](#)):

Yes and no is the rather hench [inaudible 00:17:05]. I think in one sense, you could say that we're in a worse place than we were in 1914, because the growth of political power since then, and the growth of destructive liturgical power since then, as you indicated, has been enormously damaging. And in a way you could say that the state of affairs in 1914 illustrates for what you mean, because if you read Chris Clark's recent brilliant book I thought, that's the Sleep Walkers, you can see how a bunch of people basically [bundled 00:17:34] their way into a terrible catastrophic war in 1914. And they don't have the excuse of not knowing what it would be like, because actually that's a myth. They knew perfectly well what the war would be like in 1914. That's why so many of them were in the total funk once they realized what they've done. So in many ways, 1914 is actually a great watershed.

Stephen Davies ([17:54](#)):

It really was a point at which the kind of progress of society in a generally liberal direction was severely damaged, but not completely arrested, and that's where I disagree with Ralph. I'm afraid, Ralph was Mr. Gloomy throughout, to the end of his life. He was very discontented [inaudible 00:18:14] with life in general, I think it's fair to say, because I think that in many ways there's still being progress. One of the points you can make is that, because of the growth in wealth that has taken place, and human comfort that has taken place since 1914. We are in many ways more effectively practically able to do things than our ancestors were in 1914. Even with taxation now being way, way higher than it was 1914, the actual amount of disposable income that we have, and our ability to do things with it, is greater than it was in 1914.

Stephen Davies ([18:49](#)):

And in addition, we should not forget that the world of 1914 was not a liberal paradise. For most of the world, it meant rule by and being screwed over by colonial empires of one type or another. Things might look pretty cool if you were living in Britain in 1914, but not so good if you're an Indian or even more so an African, particularly if you're one of the really unfortunate Africans who have a misfortune of being

ruled by the Belgians. So this is not a straightforward story of everything was very hunky dory up until 1914, and suddenly went off the rails, certainly that was a terrible disaster. But in many ways, looking at things from a global perspective, there's still been improvements since 1914. There are many ways in which we are more free and better off in non-material ways than was the case in 1914. Sure, there are terrible problems, and in some ways, such as the destructive powers of the disposal of, or sometimes irresponsible idiotic political leaders were in the worst shape.

Stephen Davies ([19:55](#)):

A nuclear weapon is obviously worst, than a dreadnought but in other ways perhaps, we are in better shape. It's always too simplistic to say that, after that never glad confident morning again, I don't think that's how history has ever worked.

Anthony Comegna ([20:12](#)):

Well, maybe you could close us out here in the first part of our interview with some comments on maybe how IHS and its mission again has fit into this past centuries history and what you see as the really important things for classical liberal scholars to be doing moving forward.

Stephen Davies ([20:31](#)):

Well, that's two big things. I Mean as far as how IHS fits into the intellectual history if you like, of the last half century or more, I think that what IHS is doing is work that is below the radar, but ultimately much more effective if you like for that. So it's not in the business of producing clickbait or the kind of stuff that will get lots and lots of headlines in the media, or even worse on the contemporary social media or the total swamp and cesspit that is Twitter. But what it is doing I think, is work that actually pays off much more in the long-term, which is essentially the work of scholarship. The work of changing people's minds or understandings of the world. There also engaging in dialogue and discourse with people from different perspectives, which is more important than ever, particularly if you are in the business of trying to change people's ways of thinking about the world, which [inaudible 00:21:32] IHS is.

Stephen Davies ([21:34](#)):

So what it has done is the considered routine I think, of preserving and then developing and growing an intellectual academic traditional, which quite frankly, was on its last legs at the time when Baldy Harper set up IHS in 1961. During the central decades of the 20th century liberal thought in a whole range of academic discipline, and pretty much perished because of the extremely hostile intellectual climates of the central decades of the 20th century. So that's part that it's played, but this is a never ending task it seems to me, particularly given in my view, structurally banned state of the Academy and lots of Western countries at the moment, which I think reflects various facts to do with the purpose or function of the Academy has taken on in the last 50 years. As to what do classical liberal scholars and people that we looking at, at the moment.

Stephen Davies ([22:29](#)):

Well, there are two things I would say really one is to recover and redeveloped aspects of the liberal tradition that were prominent and widespread in the 19th century, but which have tended to fall by the wayside to some degree in the course of the 20th century. I've mentioned already classical liberal historiography as being one of these, but another one even more important actually, would be classical liberal sociology. We tend to forget that Herbert Spencer is one of the great founding fathers of the discipline of sociology. There's the idea, which I mentioned of classical liberal class theory, that's one of

the great sort of like insights if you like of the 19th century. Also, ideas like the voluntary principle, the idea of bottom up spontaneous order, social and political federalism, which you can trace back to non liberal thinkers like Fudan, but also to liberal ones. That's another insight, which was very powerful and widespread in the 19th century, which I think needs to be recovered.

Stephen Davies ([23:32](#)):

So there's a kind of program of intellectual recovery and refurbishment to be done in rediscovering and developing ideas that were once influential and are still deeply relevant or applicable, but which will be maybe like put to one side because of the inevitable access by domination of contemporary discourse by economics. And the other thing that needs to be done is to think about the issues that obviously face today. The big questions that face people in particular parts of the world, or that face the world in general. The question of what to do about, for example, environmental challenges of one kind or another? How to cope with and what to make of the revolution in technology that we're undergoing at the moment? Or what this actually means. So I'm currently working on a little book about systemic risk and the idea of catastrophic risks and how to think about these from a classical liberal and also free market perspective.

Stephen Davies ([24:32](#)):

And I think that's a very important question. Maybe people realize this more now that we've gone through a pandemic, which is a classic example of a catastrophic risk. Something that highly fact tailed risk distribution, I think is fair to say. And things of that sort as you obviously know, I'm quite famous or infamous maybe for telling the students that I expect them to live to be about seven or 800 years old. Nice [inaudible 00:24:59] a service, going to be a bit late for me, but not too late for you hopefully. And I think that, that's just one example of a whole range of transformative technological revolutions that we're going through at the moment. And they're going to change everyday life every bit as profoundly as the changes of the transition from the traditional worlds of redundancy that we went through in the late 18th, early 19th century or then again in the late 19th, early 20th century.

Stephen Davies ([25:26](#)):

And I think just as people at the time had to cope with this, we need to think ourselves right across the range of academic disciplines about what the implications of this are, how to understand it, what to do about it and what it means for the way we think about a whole range of issues like human identity, human nature, human autonomy, independence, the structure of governance and the like. And there's some issues which I think we can put to one side because the caravan is moving on as a great pace at the moment. So there's a curious, kind of combination of recovering old but still valid ideas on the one hand, but also applying those ideas and others to what are actually quite normal situations that are coming back right now.

Anthony Comegna ([26:14](#)):

Our most fanatical. Thanks to Steve Davies for joining me on the show this week, it was a thrill to get to talk to him and to mind him for more info about his experience here. And I really can't wait for more next week. Steve Davies got his PhD in history from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. He's the author of the book Empiricism in History and co-editor of the Dictionary of Conservative and Libertarian Thought, with our own Nigel Ashford. So make sure you don't next week where we hear more from Steve about Liberty and the struggle for the early Chinese state by simply subscribing to the show. And while you're at it, remember to toss us a rating and review to help other folks out there in the digital

ether, find their own ways to IHS and people like Steve Davies. My best to you all and keep the progress coming.