

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

Well hello again, everyone for another week of Ideas In Progress where we have another 60th anniversary show for you. And really where do I even start with our guest Jeremy Shearmur? It's a tough question, because as you'll hear, he's had an amazingly storied career, including studying at the London School Of Economics under no less than Karl Popper and working on Hayek whom he met several times. He's currently a reader for the Australian National University's Faculty of Arts working in political theory. Before that though, he taught at the University of Edinburgh. He was Director of Studies for the Center of Policy Studies, and he worked right here at George Mason in IHS for a time as well. He's the author of *The Political Thought of Karl Popper Hayek, And After*, and edited H B Acton's *The Morals of Markets and Related Essays*.

Anthony Comegna ([01:16](#)):

All right folks dig in, because we're about to cover a whole lot of ground with Jeremy Shearmur. Jeremy, thank you so much for being on the show this week. We really, really appreciate your time. And I just want to hit the ground running here because you have such a storied academic career where you touched so many important places and people in recent intellectual history. So just go ahead and start out our audience with a brief intellectual and personal biography of your own journey through academia.

Jeremy Shearmur ([01:52](#)):

Thanks very much. I'm really delighted to be able to participate. My story as it were, is this. I was at a Quaker's school and it was recommended that I might go to the London School of Economics and study economics. When I got there, I discovered just how dire economics, as it's normally taught at an undergraduate level is. Happily, I took a course in philosophy at the same time as part of the first year, found that the most interesting thing and took a BSc Econ., special subject philosophy. So it was really a philosophy degree with some political science and some economics. I then went on to do a master's degree. I then thought that I would go into librarianship and support myself doing that while taking a PhD. But while I was doing that, I got a phone call asking me if I would be interested in being assistant to Karl Popper.

Jeremy Shearmur ([02:57](#)):

And the answer was yes. It's roughly on the level of someone who's a Catholic getting a phone call and saying, "Would you like to be personal assistant to the Pope?" But at any rate, I went to the LSE, was working on a full-time basis with Popper indeed for eight years. And while I was there, I registered for what became a PhD on Hayek. And it was really when I was working on Hayek that I became convinced by the case for classical liberalism. I worked for Popper, as I said, for eight years. I then taught on a temporary basis philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, then political theory at University of Manchester. Then I was Director of Studies at the Center for Policy Studies in London, which is a think tank associated with the Conservative Party and was then rescued back to the academic work that I love by the opportunity to come to work at IHS.

Anthony Comegna ([04:10](#)):

Take us back for a minute there with Karl popper because that's just astonishing to me. All of us today in academia, I think tend to think of people like Karl Popper, as in terms of John Locke or something like these giants of the past in philosophy, in Popper's case, philosophy of science. What was it like actually working with him and studying under him?

Jeremy Shearmur ([04:38](#)):

It was interesting. I took courses of his when I was an undergraduate and then I got permission to participate in his graduate seminar. He was an interesting man, although his lecturing varied quite a bit. That's to say sometimes he would come and just talk in a fascinating way about particular things that concerned or preoccupied him. And other times he'd really in a way that was actually rather tedious, tended to ask the undergraduates to pose questions, to which he could respond. But as nobody knew anything much that wasn't a very productive way of things working. The seminar was quite something. It was a bit of a bear pit. I mean, very, very tough criticism and discussion. It was said, I think probably apocryphally, but Popper at one point interrupted a speaker before he got to the end of his first sentence. And then he never got really to get on with giving his paper.

Jeremy Shearmur ([05:51](#)):

But the LSE at the time was quite something because there was also Michael Hayek teaching there. I took some courses in the department of government and got permission to attend Michael Oakeshott's graduate seminar as well. And so the experience of these two departments with important figures, but with contrasting perspectives was really quite something.

Anthony Comegna ([06:16](#)):

And then take us back to... This is something I've been asking most people in our 60th anniversary themed episodes here. Take us back to the first moment, if you can, that you heard about IHS and what did you initially think about the organization?

Jeremy Shearmur ([06:34](#)):

What I first heard about IHS was this: John Blundell, who was someone that I knew in London had attended the first two Austrian conferences that IHS put together. And he then organized one in Windsor, but he was able as a kind of add on to that, to put on a seminar about the Austrian School. In fact a conference about the Austrian School, which Hayek attended and Robbins attended. It was really quite something and John had heard that I was working on Hayek and he asked if I'd like to attend it. What then happened was that we set up informally, a group called the [Karl Mayer 00:07:27] Society. Just a few people who'd meet together and discuss issues in Austria economics and methodology and political philosophy and so on. And I gathered from John Blundell that IHS, an organization I previously not heard about was assisting financially with the rather modest costs about putting these things on. John and I continued doing this until I then heard that John had been invited to take up a position with IHS. This was in Menlo Park in California.

Jeremy Shearmur ([08:07](#)):

And a little bit after that, I received an invitation to take part in a summer program, which was being put on by Liberty Fund and IHS together for faculty members. And I came across IHS in that context in the sense that their headquarters at the time was in Menlo Park. They hired a small office building to house the summer fellows. And I was one of those people and occasionally meetings would take place at IHS. And I remember meeting Baldy Harper's wife who, [inaudible 00:08:53] Harper, who was looking after the library at IHS then. I was then invited back, I think a couple of years after that to IHS for a summer to look after graduate students. They'd had a program which gave financial support to some graduate students, working on their dissertations. And I think that they'd previously given money to people, but where they could just stay at home and work.

Jeremy Shearmur ([09:25](#)):

And I think they took the money, but didn't always do all that much work. And so they decided to have a slightly different arrangement where they bring them into residence. And I was working as something like a supernumerary member of the dissertation committees of these various people across a range of different disciplines. I'd meet with them, talk to them and so on about their work. And we also put on various programs for them.

Jeremy Shearmur ([09:56](#)):

What then happened was that after I was working at the Center for Policy Studies, I had an approach from John Blundell to see if I'd like to come to work for IHS looking after that summer program and also networking with graduate students during the rest of the year. And because I found the public policy work at the Center for Policy Studies quite interesting. It wasn't going to get me anywhere. It would have been possible to go into politics, but that's the last thing I wanted. IHS's invitation gave me the chance to get back into academic work and I and my wife Pam, accepted the invitation and moved to the US and to IHS, which by then had moved from California to George Mason.

Anthony Comegna ([10:51](#)):

So what were the actual years that you worked at IHS?

Jeremy Shearmur ([10:55](#)):

I am just trying to think. It must, I think have been, it's either 86 or seven into 92. I also continued doing a little bit of networking for IHS after I'd left and taken up a position in Australia, an academic position in Australia.

Anthony Comegna ([11:23](#)):

Yeah and in some sense, it seems like the networking never stops. Whether you're working there or not, you're always networking for IHS in some manner. But I'm curious...

Jeremy Shearmur ([11:34](#)):

Yes, although effectively, they continued with a certain amount of remuneration, my work in contacting graduate students, talking with them and then sending a record to IHS of our conversations and of issues.

Anthony Comegna ([11:55](#)):

So you had a pretty good chunk of time there. Now I've been asking lots of the... Every now and then we do an episode where we spotlight folks who work at IHS. And what I often ask is to put the mission in your own words. Because we certainly have an official mission statement going far back with its roots in of course, Baldy Harper and Hayek's ideas about intellectual leadership in cultural and political change. But everybody nonetheless seems to have their own unique spin on it if they put it into their own words. And I think part of that has to do with folks that work here. We're all working on individual components of the overall mission, and so we might have a different perspective. But I'm curious, given your long history with IHS, how would you put the mission into your own words? And I know that you could cite Hayek probably word for word on this kind of thing, but put it into your own words.

Jeremy Shearmur ([12:51](#)):

Yes. What I was invited to do was really to work with graduate students rather than undergraduates. And typically with people who were working on their doctoral dissertations. And my task for IHS was to talk with them, to discover what they were working on. If I could usefully give criticism and assistance, to do that. And also to make use of IHS's resources and network to get them assistance and information. So what this meant in part was a matter just of giving them assistance in tackling the intellectual problems that they were dealing with. In part it was also a matter of passing on suggestions and information from other people. So for example, amongst the things that I got into with graduate students was getting them to organize panels at academic meetings, which gave them an opportunity to contact other people in their discipline to do networking, to, if things went well, to be able to present their own work.

Jeremy Shearmur ([14:26](#)):

And in addition, what I was doing was quite often putting them in touch with other scholars that IHS had been working with, who had a background in the disciplines so that they could talk with them. If people had got interviews for jobs, we could sometimes put them in touch with people who'd actually taught at the places in question to give them a bit of information and so on. There was also later on the workshops. Something that in which I was also involved. So that scholars, typically towards the end of their dissertation, would be asked to present a current research workshop where they could work with us to nominate who they would most like to get to comment on their work. And we discussed with them also other more locally based people who it would be good to have as part of a group discussing their work.

Jeremy Shearmur ([15:35](#)):

And that I think was found really very useful. What was the point in all of this? Well, it was to attempt to assist people who were smart and had a personal link with classical liberalism to develop themselves and to be able academically, but also in terms of relevant skills, and know how to be able to attain positions in the academic world. How to give support and assistance to people without causing problems for them? The difficulty here was that you might get people who would think that unless they could do something which was really hard line as their PhD topic, then they were selling out.

Jeremy Shearmur ([16:32](#)):

On the other side of it you had the problem that there were a lot of people who could see the way which the wind was blowing and that if they mentioned classical liberal themes, they could see their supervisors wince. And who, because they're smart people would basically, if one can still use the expression, go native. And so they might say to you, "Yes, in my heart of hearts, I'm still a classical liberal, if not indeed a libertarian. Of course you wouldn't see any of that, if you were to read my work."

Jeremy Shearmur ([17:03](#)):

And our concern, but it was very difficult, and it seemed to me to get us into problems, which I'm not sure we ever were able to overcome, was how to help people who choose and pursue academic goals, which would be relevant from the perspective of classic liberalism, but which would also be things which their committees could support? Because it's crucial in the job market to have real support from your supervisor and from your dissertation panel. And if they just take you out of mostly your curiosity and aren't willing to give you support, then your chances of getting a job anywhere reasonable are really pretty grim.

Jeremy Shearmur ([17:58](#)):

But at the same time, the danger then is that people will simply move away onto the agenda that is set by their supervisor or by that panel, which is what indeed their supervisor and panel are going to be expecting anyway. And I'm not sure that we really were able to get this right. And I think a lot of very good people were kind of lost just because they came across very good and very sophisticated people that they were working with, who in effect were saying to them, "No, don't pursue that wild stuff. Why don't you do something which will give you a better opportunity?"

Jeremy Shearmur ([18:41](#)):

If I were asked to conceptualize it, I would do so using the broadly Popperian idea of research programs. That's to say, one may be attracted to an outlook, say to classical liberalism, as a program for research. At any one point, you can face what the problems are in the wider academic perspective facing your work and this then gives you a whole repertoire of things on which to work, on which you want to make intellectual progress. Which would be seen as being interesting in themselves by other people, but which would also make a classical liberal perspective academically stronger.

Anthony Comegna ([19:29](#)):

I think that is just fantastic insight and advice to grad students, especially. Because I think you're right too, that I don't know that we've been able to solve that problem or that it's even soluble. I know, I feel like I got lucky in my department that I had an advisor, for example, he was very laissez-faire. And he was interested in, so long as I was a competent researcher and thinker, he was just interested in letting me do what I thought was important. And that's what I got to do. And I felt very lucky. I had IHS as support along the way too, but a lot of people have very deep problems with their committees. And like you said, certainly marketing their work on the job market. But I'm curious, Nigel Ashford and I are working on a upcoming series of programs that we're trying to do on establishing what we're calling, The Modern Canon. So the last couple of generations of classical liberal thinkers who are really, really important.

Anthony Comegna ([20:31](#)):

And you were getting to that in the sense that a lot of people who have ended up coming through IHS and who have had success, despite perhaps the distinctly classical liberal nature of their ideas and how unpopular their perspectives might be in wider academia, they've nonetheless addressed really important issues that the mainstream can't ignore. So I immediately think of, for example, the Virginia school or the Bloomington school, or even the Austrian school with people like Hayek. That you can't help but respect their contributions. So on the one hand, I really, really want to ask you what it was like, no doubt meeting somebody many times that you worked on from a scholarly perspective, Hayek. But I also want to get your opinions on who do you think most belongs in that modern, classical liberal canon, whether it's economics or political theory or philosophy or any other field? Who are some of the people that you would put up there, given your experience, especially with all these different intellectual currents through IHS?

Jeremy Shearmur ([21:42](#)):

That is actually quite a difficult question, because if one thinks of, as it were, the big names in the classical liberal tradition, a number of them, Hayek is a good example, was a distinguished scholar with very interesting ideas, but his work really didn't fit at all well into the rather narrow academic frameworks, which are now expected of people. And there is a sense in which I think academia becomes

a difficult task for classical liberals, just because more and more work in academia tends to look like Thomas Kuhn's notion of a normal science.

Jeremy Shearmur ([22:30](#)):

And you can think in a way of the development of public choice theory and the Virginia School, as such an example. That's to say they started off doing what was in effect home publishing at the University of Virginia and so on. But they then really carved out a niche for themselves. But a difficulty about it has been that while initially there was a lot of concern on the part of Buchanan and Tullock and others associated with them. With the classical liberal aspects of their views, public choice really tended to become something that looked more like a specialism in its own right, and where people would be working on it, just almost because of its technical interest.

Jeremy Shearmur ([23:34](#)):

And so I think myself that, rather than being able to look back at those people as both providing inspiration and frameworks and also agendas for academic work today, what one has to do, is to allow perspectives of people in that generation to inform one and to inspire one. But also then, and this is the tricky thing, to try to match that up with work which would produce publishable papers and an acceptable dissertation in a very much narrower compass. And I remember in this context, when Dan Klein, who's now at George Mason University was a student, he was in the NYU program. And he did some work looking at issues to do with credit bureaus.

Jeremy Shearmur ([24:38](#)):

And he was writing papers where he was talking about the history of these and the institutional setting, but he was doing a game theoretical approach to this material. And effectively he was getting told by journals, "If you want to publish with us, you need to cut all the crap out." Meaning all the interesting stuff that gave it some point in the background and give them just the technical results. And so I think from this point of view, you can certainly say there are people who are really interesting and inspiring figures, but if you go back to the problematic that I've been talking about in terms of students being able to develop a classical liberal perspective and produce publishable work and get hired, they won't directly give you models. Now that being said, where can you go for stuff that's interesting? Well, the Virginia school is obviously interesting.

Jeremy Shearmur ([25:48](#)):

Hayek is interesting. Some people have got things from Michael Oakeshott, although even though I've got a lot of respect for him, I think that it's difficult to pin him down to a particular view of things. I think myself that a whole lot of really interesting programs for research have been opened up by Hayek's work, which in no way offers something that's a finished piece of work. It's more a whole lot of avenues for doing a lot of things. If you look at other disciplines, ah, things then really become tougher.

Jeremy Shearmur ([26:35](#)):

I remember once when I was working for IHS, that I gave a talk to a group of students at Harvard, talking about the way in which Nozick's Anarchy, State and Utopia, hadn't really set up a program of research for students. So if you compared Nozick's Anarchy State and Utopia and [Rules 00:27:01] work, Rules, it produced huge roomfuls of books and so on. By contrast, relatively little has been written on the sort of political approach that Nozick was taking in Anarchy, State and Utopia. And I think it's just difficult to find people in different specific disciplines who can really play that role for us.

Anthony Comegna ([27:30](#)):

Maybe to lead us out here, I'm curious to know, because I really want to ask other people about this during the 60th year, if you had to periodize the history of IHS over these 60 years, in the way that historians might, if they were writing a textbook for high school on the subject, break it into chunks of years. How might you do that and why?

Jeremy Shearmur ([27:58](#)):

Okay. I'd do it in the following way. And this really depends on archive research I've been doing as well as my own experience. First of all, there was the initial period when IHS was set up within the Volker Fund. There was then the period when Baldy was left with just seed money, when he'd been expecting to get a whole heap of money, when the Volker Fund collapsed. He was having to go back to do academic teaching at Wabash College for a period because he couldn't make a living out of running IHS. But he then returned, and what was really going on then was the notion, I think of a [Knochian 00:28:46] remnant of just spotting and encouraging isolated individual scholars. That then in a sense continued after Baldy's death with IHS running programs of various kinds, giving information to classical liberals and libertarians, who'd got interested in different fields.

Jeremy Shearmur ([29:08](#)):

There was a Law and Liberty program that lasted probably longer than the others in that, fought through ideas about how the impact that [Libertine 00:29:20] society was making on people, but it wasn't the same Libertine society in the sense that the plot initially was to give people a feel for how ideas in philosophy and history and law and economics could all knit together, giving you a systematic classical liberal approach. And things seemed to me to get much more diffuse after that, so that people tended not to be given the big picture view that they were before. But at that point, I really left IHS and moved on to other things in Australia.

Anthony Comegna ([30:06](#)):

I really, really hope you all enjoyed that from Professor Shearmur. It's amazing that we even have so many stories like we do, to gather up here on our 60th anniversary. And it just makes me remember that we're all part of a growing and developing classical liberal tradition. Every new bit of classical liberal research that comes out, every new book or dissertation article, or even podcasts... Subscribe, and rate and review of course. Everything contributes bit by bit to the new canon in the evolving classical liberal intellectual landscape. I'm terribly happy to have heard about Professor Shearmur's time spent with us during that process. And I'm grateful to each of you for tuning in and helping to keep the progress coming for many more years ahead.