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Timothy: Welcome to The Historical Gadfly, a podcast devoted to history, current events, good books and the connections between all three. I'm your host Timothy Nunan, a graduate student at the University of Oxford. Our e-mail address is historicalgadfly@gmail.com. If you have any questions or suggestions or ideas for future episodes, we'd be glad to hear of them. And as always, thanks for tuning in.

Right well finally we have a pleasant summer day here in Oxford and I am really glad to have a very special guest on today's programme which is Avner Offer, the Chichele Professor of Economic History at All Souls college at Oxford. On today's programme we're going to be interviewing Avner about his current project which is called from social democracy to market liberalism. And I am really glad to have Avner on, so Avner, thanks for joining us.

Avner: It's a pleasure.

Timothy: Right well as is becoming custom on The Historical Gadfly, I'd like to start off just to talk a little bit about your biography and where you came from, and maybe we can try to connect the dots on how your

upbringing or childhood may or may not connect with your current intellectual interests. So as is custom would you start off by telling us where you were born and raised?

Avner:

I was born in the British Empire in mandatory Palestine in 1944, four years before the state of Israel was declared. I was born on a kibbutz, a kibbutz is a communal village; communal organisation which comes I suppose as close as humanly possible to complete equality in a modern society. I grew up there, I was educated there, I lived there until about the age of 23, so that experience was powerful in shaping my values and my life experience.

Other formative experiences were, my father was a bit of a mover and shaker, so it just happened that I spent substantial parts of my growing up years – well, perhaps not substantial parts but I spent quite a lot of time overseas. So I spent two and a half years in North America as a child in Canada and New York, so I had the advantage of fluent English at a fairly young age. And then in my late teens I went to the Soviet Union and I saw the Soviet Union perhaps at its highest point in 1961; I spent five months in Moscow. Quite a rich, enjoyable period of growing up and then two and a half years of military service which continued as a reserve-service for another seven or eight years.

So the experience of the military and of combat as well, that is also quite a powerful experience. And I finished my National Service, although I was still a member of the Kibbutz, I started working in conservation and I worked first in the voluntary organisation NGO, which is the nature protection society in Israel, and then I moved over to their rivals who were the government agency. And I worked for them for three or four years and we organised quite a big project

which I won't go into but which also sated my wanderlust once and for all and gave me quite an insight of how government operates. At that point I decided that I had been in the sun for too long and went to university at the ripe old age of 25, started as an undergraduate. This is less unusual in Israel than it is in other places.

So I have a kind of eight years missing where other people have built up academic credits. On the other hand, one of the things I picked up in my scholarship is that people rarely express any regret about their experience, so je ne regrette rien. It is all fine. And I went to study History and Geography.

Timothy: If we can back up a little bit, I'd be curious could you talk a little bit about the influence that your mother had on you or kind of the other half of your parents. And also as you were going around the world to North America, Soviet Union, I mean what did you think of these places compared to Israel? Maybe talk about any sense of patriotism or what sort of models in different countries seemed to impress you? Or any specific memories that you have of those kind of experiences?

Avner: Well I think that my second year in North America left quite a powerful residue, swearing allegiance to the American flag every morning and being brainwashed about the American way of life and the American dream at a very impressionable age, 7 or 8.

Timothy: Where were you living?

Avner: In New York City in Manhattan. It took me about ten years to get this out of my system, but once I got it out of my system I think I moved to the other extreme. I came to the United States from a very poor country at the time, from Palestine, the war was just over in 1948 and America was in the midst of the greatest consumer boom ever. In fact, I pay a tribute to this experience in something which appears subsequently as a chapter in the Challenge of Affluence, which is a chapter on the American motor car of the 1950s; what did I call it? The American automobile frenzy of the 1950s, I was there and I remember all these cars and you can still see them in Havana.

Timothy: We were just talking about Afghanistan part of this, and just yesterday we were looking at some propaganda produced by Afghan planning agencies from the early 60s and you see these lines of Cadillacs and so on lined up at gas stations in ** [0:07:26], so very much the same modernisation thrust.

Avner: Yes, so as I said, I took all of that in and I was rather captivated by it in my childish way. And then I was thrust back once again into quite a low standard of living place, although we never felt any kind of deprivation, I think I got a great deal out of growing up on a Kibbutz, I thought it was, for me it was a wonderful experience. I don't know how much I want to say about my mother, except that she was artistic and in a variety of ways that influenced me a great deal and still influences me today. I still have that dimension which has actually appeared two or three times in my published work and in the future I have plans to take this further. And I could tell a very interesting story about my mother which I won't say.

The Soviet Union when I arrived there, we came from the Kibbutz, the Kibbutz was as wealthy as you can get from doing modern agriculture in the late 50s early 60s and dividing the product equally among everyone, which means that on the whole we lived at a standard of living which compared to that of a moderately well off skilled worker in the city. But not much more than that.

And the Soviet Union was not much below that, Moscow where we lived. And it was summer, and there was a wonderful sense of optimism in the air, and since my father came from Russia I'd always been interested in Russia and attracted to it, I'd read a lot of the literature in advance. And I spent a lot of time walking around, travelling around, seeing a great deal of what there was to see. One thing fortunately I didn't do was to learn the Russian language, why do I say fortunately? Because had I studied Russian at that time I would have become a Kremlinologist and I would probably be out of a job now. I have some of my best friends are Kremlinologists and some of them fell into that trap that way.

There's another thing about the Soviet Union, it is a truly ugly society and I am glad I didn't have to spend a good chunk – much as I love the Russian people, the literature and so on – I'm glad I didn't spend my starting career studying that way. Although I think Tim is going to spend –

Timothy: Well I think I know what you mean by ugly but I mean just based on the time that you spent can you go into a little bit more detail...

Avner: This is the aesthetic business, you know? The construction was so poor, there is no aesthetics there. Although curiously you're drawing

me into this, I've long had and recently developed more an interest in socialist realism which is the main art movement there. Again, things move in a curious way because my great interest in the history of art is late 19th century, I suppose you could call it, domestic painting which is mostly out of doors but also in the home. I call this the long afternoon, and the impressionists are part of this story but actually only a small part of a much larger movement.

And this movement was killed by modernism around 1910, but in the Soviet Union they didn't hear about this so they continued to do the same stuff into the 60s or 70s, some of it in quite an accomplished way, so it tells you very interesting things about the Soviet Union because it's figurative and so on.

So... how did I get there?

Timothy: Talking about Soviet Union is an ugly society but –

Avner: Yes, it's also full of lies, you know? It was just a country where everything is a lie. There was a counterpart to this which is that although there wasn't much of a civil society, there was a lot of intimacy and high quality intimacy, friendship and so on, although you never knew whether your friend was not an informant or a spy.

So what can one make of that century of communism? I think it's an absolutely – actually this brings us to policy norms and the policy norms were that these people felt the weight of historical necessity on their shoulders and would not let anything stand in their way. But they had no clue as to the intensity and extent of human devilishness, evil, you know? So they intended to force themselves

on the back of society but their leaders or their henchmen forced themselves on them. And while they were quite willing to break eggs and let chips fly and so on, they were themselves the victims of that same – this is the irony of history – themselves the victim of that very same logic.

It's interesting, I am reading just now and I recommend this, I'm reading the letters of Boris Pasternak who was the Soviet Union's greatest poet, to his parents who emigrated. In fact, the family lives in Oxford so there's an interesting connection. And in general it's not usual that you have an opportunity to read a sustained correspondence from within a country like the Soviet Union, and Boris Pasternak was a person who had a great soul I think. And so read a great soul expressing themselves in that context and saying whatever they could say, despite censorship, is quite an experience.

As I say, it's a country with great resources of humanity and culture which found itself in the most devilish prison really, and this class sometimes – you know the human spirit sometimes continues to bubble up in this context. But still, it's of phenomenal and monumental ugliness. And I am afraid to say that I feel similar uglinesses creeping up on us; history is playing its tricks once again. And that our world of freedom of democracy is also capable of throwing up ugliness of this kind.

Timothy:

I certainly know what you mean by some of the feeling of ugliness but also some of the intimacy, I think there's no where like Russia that if you were on the street you can feel surrounded and completely anonymous and almost in danger, but as soon as you

come into someone's home, a very strong sense of you've made it or survived. But I guess to sort of continue –

Avner: May I just say something. Since the Russians were nationalists, the communists were Russian nationalists on the whole; the one thing they chose not to suppress was the cultural legacy. So although you couldn't write freely in the Soviet Union, you couldn't express yourself freely, there was nothing to prevent you from reading the classics of the past, from hearing the music of the past. And the other thing is that, when I asked myself, "How did this place work?" And I think to myself, it's a bit like war.

In war time – so military commanders under strict hierarchical discipline, facing risks both ahead of him and behind, nevertheless, it is possible for people in that position to exercise their initiative and their imagination and I think that life in Soviet Russia to some extent was like that. It's an environment of heightened risk, and what happens if you misstep? You lose your head. But nevertheless people were pushing the boundaries all the time in a whole range of areas. You know, the system in a sense stifled a lot of that. But there's a lot that was interesting and positive that was created, and in some areas they had world leading achievements.

Timothy: So for better or worse, you can't go down the road of Sovietology even though it sounds like at least until – you could have had an excellent career if it went **that way**. Well, at that point, it's interesting because you talk about having this non-traditional academic approach to the first 25 years of your life. After that, how does one

figure out, here's what I want to do, or here are some of the directions that interest me most?

Avner:

Well – by the way that is also, it's an interesting point in time where say 10 years before I probably might not have gone to university, the circumstances were such that I thought it was a reasonable thing to do. I won't go into the details of how I managed it, because it wasn't – I had a family, I had a wife, I had a child, but you know, we managed. And I chose to study History and Geography, Geography because I thought I might go on working for these nature reserve people and that would be a good academic grounding. In fact, I did go on and work for them, or at any rate they continued to pay me.

And History, the reason I wanted to study History is I felt that we should remember the time – this is the period in Israel between I think 67 war and the **Yom Kippur** war. The country is already heading into a kind of dead end which it is still stuck in, and I felt a need to open the window to the big world. And I thought History was probably the best way of doing this. So I studied History, it was a very old fashioned sort of History, it was really a German and interwar German university History department. Quite strong on political, cultural, the old style cultural history and so on.

A lot of it didn't make a lot of sense to me, I think the thing that influenced me most was, Geography was quite a useful introduction to social science so we took quantitative methods, we took economics... probably the thing that influenced me most was a course I took in the Philosophy of Science. And I decided to become a historian of science at that stage. I had a lot of encouragement. And I wrote a kind of Masters thesis on Darwin

where I made points which I still think are not made in the literature, but I won't go into that. But in the course of doing this I realised that I had two disadvantages, one was that I was not actually a natural scientist myself, not even in Biology, and that was a serious **disadvantage**. And the other was that, learning what I learnt about Darwin, this was going to be a very crowded area. And so it turned out to be, so again I decided to leave that realm.

And that I got these scholarships to – actually I got scholarships to go everywhere. So I could have gone to the States and I could have gone to Cambridge, but I decided to go to Oxford. When I decided to go to Oxford – I didn't go to the States because I wanted to study the British Empire. I think it might have been those first four years, when as I said I was born in the British Empire so I thought I owed myself a debt to find out what this was all about. I didn't go to Cambridge because for some reason although they accepted me and gave me a scholarship and so on, they thought I was a philosopher for some reason and they wanted to see examples of my work in Philosophy. So even if I preferred Cambridge, I went to Oxford in the end.

Perhaps I should say something about the work I have done over the years.

Timothy: Great, because it sounds like we've figured out that Sovietology is not the right direction. Literary science or at least staying with Darwin, that's no good either.

Avner: What I was really interested in – oh yes, I should mention something else. I was also exposed to behavioural economics very,

very early, because **Kahneman and Tversky** were both of course Israelis and although I like to say that I **, since this is an official record, perhaps I should come clean and say that it wasn't **, it was one of his students who was called – I don't remember his name. He actually was a very good psychologist, but he had studied with Kahneman and Tversky was around so his spirit was hovering all over the place. So I was exposed to experimental economics at the point when it was being formulated, just at the time, 1972. The classic article in Science appeared in 71 or 72, so this was enormously exciting.

I thought I'd do a social history of... there was something I did in Geography on the aesthetic side. I wrote a dissertation on landscape as a value, so this related to the nature of the landscape and that gave me an enormous amount of satisfaction. I have to say that I looked back; the university system in Israel wasn't that bad actually. It stressed independent work by the students, so if you wanted to – I think I wrote four or five quite substantial, you know, 10, 15,000 word pieces of work. Each one of which I found as challenging as the stuff I've done later, and one or two of them might actually have been publishable, in fact I did publish a few items from them.

So landscape as a value and then I was exposed to the traditional British landscape design which I'm afraid is probably the greatest British contribution to visual culture. I say I am afraid, that's unfair because it is a wonderful contribution. And I thought I'd study English landed society and I had wonderful anthropological behavioural, all sorts of wonderful ideas on how I'd do this. You know, I had the original ideas, which were quashed as soon as I arrived in Oxford when I discovered an extremely conventional History department which has remained conventional ever since.

I had a bit of a struggle finding a supervisor and fortunately, I won't go into the details, but I finally managed to find myself probably the best possible person for this, who was not at Oxford. His name is Michael Thomson, he wrote a wonderful book called English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century, which is not perhaps as trendy vogueish as I might have done it but it was much better than anything I could do because he had seen that world from the inside and understood it from the inside. He's a marvellous scholar, one of the great British historians and that association ** [0:26:15].

So I started writing about – that's how they thought I was a philosopher, so when I applied to study at all of these places, first I thought I'd study social Darwinism and **, then I said I'd write about the **. But when I came here and started the research I realised that it was economic, it was legal, it was political, there was a cultural dimension to it but not a very important one. So I wrote a thesis ** [0:26:54].

Timothy: But that seems to sort of account for the shift from Art History or ** to institutions...

Avner: Well there is an aesthetic chapter in that book and it's the one I like best so... you know, there's a strand there which I've never really felt. And I regard myself as an artist. I don't paint anymore.

Timothy: I'll edit that part out.

Avner:

Perhaps I should say something about my ** [0:27:32] project. I've done a small number of fairly large projects, that is the influence of the German tradition in which I was raised and in which the combination of historical scholarship in a big book. So that has always been my ideal, except that I have been influenced by the British tradition to aspire for a thin book, and the result is a medium sized book of some kind. And each of these big projects has been motivated by an existential problem which I needed to sort out.

The first book was motivated by my experience of growing up in the countryside, in a communal society, in agriculture and so on. And the nature reserve authority, that's another part of experience. So I thought that's a way of sorting this out. What turned out was that the problem was completely different from what I thought it was, and in the process of grappling with it and getting on top of it, I turned myself into a social and economic historian. Also one of the things about studying, I have to say there's another thing that, as good as our secondary education was, one reason that it was so good is that it was not geared towards examinations.

So in fact I finished school and I wasn't qualified to go to university. So I spent – that's one reason I went to university later because I had to go through six or seven really tough examinations. And I won't say I was completely unprepared for them but I was also working full time. My results in these examinations were not earth shaking. They were okay, they were medium class, but they weren't earth shaking. So you go to university and you don't really know how good you are. But it didn't take me a long time to realise that I was doing what they wanted and doing it rather well.

So that kind of smoothed the way. I got a junior research fellowship, I think two years into my DPhil year, and I deliberately

took a whole year off from my doctorate in which I did two things, I studied Economics and I studied German, because I thought I might want to do something in German anyway. And again both of these decisions have served me – subsequently served me very, very well. So I finished this – I spent a long time doing this doctorate. Again I won scholarships to go to Britain; I won my scholarship here in Britain. I was performing quite well compared to what the standards, what the ordinary standard was. And then I had the problem whether to go back to Israel or not. I have to say that the Yom Kippur war broke out about two weeks after I arrived here and I went back then, so I spent the first term on the banks of the Suez Canal. And at some moments –

Let me tell you a little story, I just spent two weeks in Stanford and while walking up the steps of the Hoover institution, who is coming down the steps but Henry Kissinger. I wanted to grab him by the hand and say to him, “Henry, thank you for saving my life,” because while I was there on the Suez Canal and preparing for some ill thought out offensive action, Henry Kissinger managed to persuade the generals to stop shooting. And the next bout of shooting didn’t strike me as terribly sensible so at that point I felt a great deal of gratitude to him.

Timothy: I guess when did the choice about whether to stay here or go back to Israel..?

Avner: So I thought these were all on the wrong track, and I felt that the choice that was facing me was that – the thing about Israel is that for someone of my age and my generation, there was no option of

passivity because I was obliged to do military service. So I could refuse to do military service, that would make me into a dissenter, it might even have consequences. I don't think the consequences would have been horrendous but I'd have been quite marginal. Then I had to judge what were the chances of being effective there in that role. And the way I rationalised it to myself was that the personal costs to myself were not worth the very low chance that I'd be able to have an effect. I'd known that the sort of people I supported barely managed to get one member of parliament in the proportional representation system, so that was quite a hard decision.

Something I haven't mentioned is that before that I made a decision to leave the Kibbutz. I should say the decision to leave the Kibbutz was more difficult than the decision to leave the country.

Timothy: I think that – I don't know this, and I have to mention that this is just such a different world to the one I know – when you're leaving the Kibbutz, is that like a formal process where you're sort of retiring from it? Talk a little bit about how that...

Avner: Well you just say that you're leaving. The Kibbutz is open exit – well, not so much open entry, there's a certain amount of sifting and so on, but at that time you didn't get anything. Nowadays you get a bit of compensation. But I didn't worry about that because I had nothing in the world anyway; I was 23 years old, so yes. But essentially I had been quite strongly committed to the values. Actually I can tell you why – I don't think I'm here to talk very much about my background as such but it's more interesting.

Timothy: Well I think one of the big things is to hopefully get some sense of the intellect [welcome \[0:34:51\]](#).

Avner: We haven't really reached that, but I actually analysed, I was quite strongly committed to the values there. I thought it worked reasonably well, which it did, you know? These people are still there. And at that time they had, I don't know, 4% of the population of the country. But they were agricultural and they were just transforming themselves into industry, but medium sized industry, small scale medium sized industry. And I had quite a strong intellectual appetite.

Perhaps I should say I wrote a book about my first experience of war which was not published for various reasons and it wasn't terribly good either but nevertheless, you know; I had this appetite to do things. And I looked at that economy and I said, "This is not going to work because the basic units were too small," and they did not allow a serious division of labour. So you had to work in whatever the Kibbutz economy offered and I did have aspirations to work at – I didn't quite know at what level but a level that transcended that and that was a decision to leave. And again the circumstances, I was fortunate, even though I didn't have a penny and I had a family, the circumstances did allow me to study.

Okay so at that point I decided to leave the country because I thought the policy was futile and it would lead to further bloodshed, further violence, and I'm afraid I've been completely borne out. Things haven't been as catastrophic as I thought they might be at some stage but they haven't been good and I think that decision

has been completely vindicated. I'm very sorry to say that, I left behind my language – I can't say I left behind my culture because I'm quite strongly attached to it in a variety of ways which I bring into it even in a creative sense. But it was quite a big wrench and even more so for my poor wife who had to make a similar decision, whether to stick with me or to go back.

And I immediately got a job, although I had a pretty good job waiting for me in Israel, I immediately got a job in **York** which was in the North of England in the University of York. I have to say the North of England had never figured in any of my life plans. And that was in some ways an alien and alienating experience. It was my first academic job, there were some very good people there, Charles **** Feinstein** who I worked with for many years both at York and in Oxford, a great man, I've written a memoir about him. And I was teaching Economic and Social History, that was – I could have gone in several directions, I could have become a conventional historian, I could have become a political scientist, I could have become a sociologist, you know, the thesis allowed me to.

This is the first reasonable job which came up and I got it and that kind of determined my future where I became an economic historian rather than other things I could do. I have to say that looking at myself now I am breaking back into that condition of disciplinary indeterminism. Now that I have been released - I didn't mention this, I'm being released from my **fellowship [0:39:02]** here. I no longer have to define myself as an economic historian so I've reverted to a general kind of intellectual in social science.

Timothy: And I guess we may have to let you go for further obligations but I guess the question to talk about ** [0:39:23] in terms of the present work was, this is ** UK which has of course been –

Avner: This is very important actually.

Timothy: Talk a little bit about did you at the time get the sense that something was changing?

Avner: Well the UK was gripped with a tremendous anxiety, declinist anxiety. The economy was doing poorly, inflation, foreign competition, the pound was weakening, prices this, prices that. I didn't see it that way at all. My narrative, my story at the time was that something quite different was going on. The general thrust of public discourse at the time was that it was these bloody minded trade unionists which were dragging the country down.

I could see two things which were related. One was that coming from Israel which is a slightly disorderly sort of place, but it's the sort of place where everyone is looking for a better way to do things. There's this kind of get up and go sense, and a refusal to accept the way things are. Many English institutions struck me as being strongly bound by tradition; in some places this is wonderful, Oxford struck me as just being wonderful, a really intellectual and social paradise, except for the History department, which I thought was frankly a disgrace. (Laughter)

But all this talk about decline and so on, it struck me that there's a general condescension towards the world of production, the world

of work, towards trade in general. And within that world was manual workers which I found disgraceful. And the other thing is that it struck me that all these trade unionists were trying to do is to claim a slightly larger part of the cake, I didn't see anything illegitimate about this. But all the talk was about these people rising above their stations. And to this day I find it difficult to understand, and also the idea was that inflation was being driven by wage costs. Now if you look at the distribution of income, if you look at the income side of the national **income** well that counts 60% or 70%, the labour share is 60 or 70%, but within that labour share manual workers are only getting half of that, most of the rest was going to the middle classes and the professional classes, just as now the labour share includes the incomes of chief executives.

So no one was saying the middle classes were grasping, I was already an academic because I had this junior research fellowship which was a proper academic post and I could see, trade unionists, this is completely legitimate. My pay was rising automatically by 7 or 8% every year, no one mentioned that. It struck me as really quite barbaric and I have to say these attitudes still persist now.

Timothy: Well most of the – some of the features you're describing seem at least to me the echo for feeling, well we can talk about public school features or public (cross talking) [0:43:45].

Avner: Yes, exactly the same story. And so this combination of disdain for these people, which is really quite close to I would say – the relation between classes in this country smacks a bit of apartheid. And it's not that I actually find working class culture attractive, I think it's

really interesting and I've actually written about this in several places. So I have engaged with these types of issues. But I have also felt that I stood apart from British society; I couldn't really enter into their way of looking at things. And for a scholar that can be an advantage if you're looking for an independent point of view.

So I did that, with that book on land ownership I was playing it by ear. Although the book was completed and it was well reviewed and so on, but I never felt that I was in complete command of my materials there. I had a pretty good year I think, so year wise it went well, and that's pretty much the British style anyway. But I didn't feel that I'd done everything I could with it, with that material. In retrospect I think that book has held up rather well, it's just been reprinted and so on. And I don't think anything has appeared in that field which has displaced it.

So that was that, I set out to probe my kind of agrarian knowledge and didn't manage to find that. So the next thing, this is the height of the Cold War and the missile stand off and all of that, I became quite interested in that issue and I decided to write about the First World War. The way I got into this was – this is the way I like to call it – I went to the public record office and ordered some files and there's a file that looked vaguely interesting that I ordered. I came out with a big box, so I opened this box, there's an enormous bundle of papers tied with this string, I untied the string and this is a big pile of printed material on blue paper. ** [0:46:41] printed on blue paper, and this was a report by a commission of enquiry which I had not known about, which is secret actually, which outlined in considerable detail the arrangements for economic warfare with Germany once the war was going to break out. So these papers for the committee was ** but lots of paper.

And as soon as I opened this bundle my hands began to tremble because I thought, no one told me that, this thing should not exist. And I suppose it all started when I was trying to make sense of this document, this turned out to be an extremely **productive find**. So I spent the next ten years, or seven or eight years, writing this book about the First World War: An agrarian interpretation so that's a link into the previous stuff. Again, I had a hunch that ** was going to be very important and I can say that I felt a great deal of satisfaction with all of this, when I finished it I thought, "What can I do after this?"

Timothy: Maybe as you were engaged in that project, what was kind of the ambition animating that? I mean I remember speaking with ** **[0:48:10]** a couple of weeks ago and he spoke about, at least at a younger age, this ambition to be like the great historian. After he had completed the first book, what he thought was kind of getting him to wake up and how is that stoked as you're writing the second book?

Avner: Well you have to remember I was at the University of York, I once said to somebody after I'd been there a few years, "Oh ** **[0:48:39]**," I even said to somebody, "I'm reconciled to dying here." But fate would not have it that way; in fact I went to Australia for three years, so once again a great door was opened to me. When I was in Australia I did three round the world trips, I stopped at various places in the world and spent quite a few months in Germany and in the United States, and I guess I wanted a great experience. I just wanted to find that.

And also I thought of this, I think for a modern historian, I was actually trained in the disciplines of medieval history where every word counts, but for the modern history this is a joke. The quantity of evidence is enormous. I always kept a bit of that discipline, so there's this massive amount of material both archived or published in several languages from across the whole world, and the challenge was to distil this into a compelling story. At the level of texture I felt a bit like an artist; crafting the story paragraph by paragraph. And I think these books have a kind of readable quality which arises from that, people did comment on that in a serious scholarly exercise.

The other thing is, from the start I have had this sense of there is a truth that you could get at. It might not be the only truth, but it was true. And that not to be diverted by relativism, so there's always been the push to get to the bottom of things and construct something coherent out of that. And I think I've come closest to that with that book about the First World War, although the final clinching chapter evaded me. I only wrote it four or five years after I finished the book. This is the kind of **** [0:51:12]** which I didn't quite see how to do it and it only came to me four or five years later, so I published it as a separate article.

Even while I was in Australia I had this – England was going through the upheavals of Thatcherism and for people like myself this is complete and utter ******. But I couldn't really understand why, so I'd done my ******, I'd done my economics 101, I felt pretty much ****** a lot of that. And this is a decade where greed is good and there's nothing in economic theory which said greed isn't a good fact, economic theory says greed is good. But my whole being revolted against this and so I regarded this as a puzzle. And if the slogan

was greed is good, my response to this was that the thing that was good was not greed. That what is it that is good.

And so that started me on this research into wellbeing, and fairly early on I got into a trope which is still very important in my work today which is the conflict between the present and the future. I kind of hit on that as the key issue, that basically greed is a form of impatience, a form of even addiction, a form of insatiate appetite and so on. And that wellbeing is not about satisfying immediate desires, it's about balance. So I had that idea and I didn't know what to do with it. Again, I was fortunate I had almost a year in the States in the early 90s and I was just hitting my head against a brick wall. And then a book came out in 92 which solved this problem. Other people by the way were doing the same thing. And what is interesting is that the solution had been lying around for 25, 30 years but no one connected things. And suddenly it emerged very immediately.

Timothy: What was the solution?

Avner: Well the solution is time inconsistency, the theory of time inconsistency which **** [0:53:56]**, I won't get into this, but it offered a model that I could work with and so I spent the next 15 years working at it in the way I had been conditioned to by my engagement with economic history, which is to do fairly deep empirical work in the context of a theoretical framework. And I thought this would be compelling. I mean I published the work on the way, oh yes; quite early on I got this job in Oxford.

So once again I think I had good intuitions as to what were interesting questions and was able to produce scholarly stuff that presented this credibly. So in fact I was already doing this work and once the job came up – there were two Oxford jobs and I didn't get the first one, fortunately because it was a less good job, I got the second one which was the better job. And Charles who had been my professor at York had moved to Oxford so this couldn't have been a disadvantage.

Timothy: And I guess maybe to sort of close this panorama out but also to give a sense of where your current work is headed, maybe talk a little bit about the current project. I remember just as I was waiting here to meet you, I was talking with the ** [0:55:39] of All Souls about what would happen with the **, and talk about your – I'm not sure pessimisms would be the right term for it but maybe talk a little bit about where should it be coming from and if you already see norms.

Avner: Okay. This work culminated in this book which was published in 2006, *The Challenge of Affluence*, which expresses the basic idea which I started this episode which is that affluence in itself is not a worthy aim and there's something else – affluence is a good thing but affluence in itself or choice in itself is not sufficient to live a good and decent life. And implicit in that was that those who said that it was were leading us astray. So really ever since the rise of Thatcherism I took a dislike to this movement, but I needed to work out a credible argument as to why I disliked it. Especially as I had quite a strong commitment to the economic world.

And that took me quite a long time and I think you experience the early results of this in this course, 'from social democracy to **market liberalism**'. So social democracy for me is a way in which ordinary people use the state to protect themselves against conditions of dependency which are inevitable during the life course. This is quite a long way from the socialism in which I've been raised, which has some attractions and some non-attractions. There's another thing that has almost completely disappeared which is the tradition of the youth movement was a kind of positive idealist – of the age of ideology, which in other forms meant Bolshevism, you know in Europe this is quite strong and in Germany it is a powerful force.

So I increasingly formed the conviction that these doctrines [market liberalism] have a dark side and were perhaps harmful at the individual level. So for a man with aspirations to culture, with aspirations to decency and so on and so forth, there's something wrong with that I think. And I put in a proposal, but I also had a sense that by the mid – I suppose decade, that the spring time was over and that this stuff was beginning to run into trouble which I found encouraging. So I decided that the next episode would be to go deeper into this and I set out a big programme which again won quite a big grant. And what I said there is that this thing doesn't strike me as sustainable for reasons a, b, c. However, this statement was totally academic, I didn't actually expect it to be vindicated so quickly.

I've come increasingly to the view that what I call – oh yes, what are policy norms? Policy norms –

Timothy: This is kind of maybe one of the methodological ** [0:59:48].

Avner: Yes so again, this is a – when I started thinking about this I thought this is the biggest historiographical puzzles, how did this machine take over our lives? ** how did that sort of start? And when I started thinking about it I didn't see anyone thinking about this sense of it very much. That is unfair, another thing I said, if I am thinking about this there must be a thousand other people thinking about this. ** [1:00:24]. So I came increasingly to the view – oh yes, so what are policy norms? Policy norms are when policy makers have to make decisions, they have a set of beliefs, conventions, convictions, ways of doing things which are short cues which tell them what they need to do.

Timothy: So an example of a policy norm is that markets are more efficient than –

Avner: Yes, markets are more efficient than bureaucracy. It's a very simple thing. So the policy norm then is that if we have to provide security for our old age we do this through financial markets rather than through a bureaucracy, let us do it through investment rather than through taxation. These are policy norms. I increasingly came to the conclusion that – oh yes; now these policy norms are not theory, but they derive their conviction, their credibility to some extent from a body of thinking, a body of theory.

And I'd long ago reached the conclusion that the theory does not actually provide the support for the policies that are carried out and it's very hard to – in fact there's a void in the middle of this theory. Very simply the core idea is that people are only interested in

themselves. And the second is that if everyone pursues their own self interest that is conducive to the common good. Now you can drill down to **bedrock** and you find that this has never been proven, neither of these propositions have ever been proven. So the whole thing **.

Timothy: I remember we talked on the course and for me it was one of the most interesting parts that ties in with this is how do you – are policy norms something that are disproven or how are they debunked or how do they die?

Avner: Well they die because they fail, you know? The Soviets had a set of policy norms and then one day the people that ran this society decided that the society was not performing so they shifted to the other side.

Timothy: Talking about the current project ** [1:03:01] this history, what constitutes failure, who decides when they have failed?

Avner: Well I think that the financial crisis of 2008/09 was as blatant an example of failure as you would need. I have to say that the owners of the norms have not conceded that yet. But my basic position has been for quite a while that if we take a theory, and this is my philosophy of science background, if you take that as a theory which is tested in some sense for its fit with reality [i.e. fails] then it's a simple bad theory, really bad theory. It has also some other advantages and I don't think that some of the alternatives are more

appetising so Soviet ** [1:04:02] is by no means but I think that social democracy where it's been allowed to work is wonderful.

You know, if you go to Scandinavia, all the small countries in Europe are social democratic and they're the best places on earth in terms of socioeconomic factors and quality and dignity and income. And you know all of the education, everything you look for, health, they're the best places. We've had this financial crisis which is a vindication which came far earlier than I ever thought it would. I didn't think it was as close as that. This is a crisis which has not been resolved. What is more, the owners of the norms have not changed their minds; everyone is digging deeper into the holes that they find themselves.

But in addition I've become aware of another issue so originally I thought this is all really a business of how we conceptualise the process of social cooperation and market doctrines. Markets have their uses, markets are very good for delivering variety of goods and services for immediate consumption, but they are not good in the long run. And they are not good for other things, so some things are actually pretty dark.

I thought that this is really a clash about both the understanding of society and how to implement that understanding, so that's where the policy norms come in. Since then I've become increasingly aware of the mounting ecological crisis, and that ecological crisis; first I became aware of the climate change issue, and you don't need to be a genius to see these things, but now I'm much more concerned about that issue. So I think energy and resources in general are – this energy crunch is itself a consequence of the unbridled quest for satisfying appetites. The pursuit of growth, the pursuit of competition and all of that. So it's not separate, but it's

another crisis which has come upon us much faster than I think I expected when I started writing about it.

And so my mood has changed quite drastically when I thought, well, here I am, a kind of dissent and making an interest in electoral points, but you know it's a bit like the old Soviet Union; no one thought the Soviet Union would collapse.

Timothy: It sounds like you're working on this project when all of a sudden you have this ** [1:06:49], Autumn 2008.

Avner: Yes, that... I'm following behind history, history is moving faster than my research. And so I am in quite a political mood. But I think I have run out of time because I think my guests are arriving in five minutes, I have just enough time to change. So we'll leave it at that, yes. It's been fun to go over all of this.

Timothy: Yes, thanks very much and we'll definitely make sure to – well we'll definitely keep in touch on the progress of the project if it isn't eclipsed by apocalypse itself. ** [1:07:28]

Avner: No, no, this is a slow motion disaster. It's not going to happen immediately although it's happening already. And we don't even know what's happening, we don't quite understand, why is the economy not rebounding? ** [1:07:48] at the moment, that's not making things better, the stimulus people; the information just came out on how much the Fed has given to the banks, 16 trillion dollars.

Can you imagine that? All the conventions of the limits of government action have been shattered by this crisis. In fact government itself has probably been shattered in the process. So we're on completely new terrain, now this is 1940 or 1939 or something like that, this is a very historical...

Timothy: Thanks for tuning in to The Historical Gadfly. Again, I'm your host Timothy Nunan at the University of Oxford. If you have any questions, suggestions, or ideas for future episodes, please get in touch with us at thehistoricalgadfly@gmail.com. Thanks for listening and see you soon.

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