



**Episode 1,042: Ivy League Professor Turns Libertarian (and We Also Discuss Machiavelli)**

**Guest: Jo Ann Cavallo**

**WOODS:** So you teach Italian at Columbia University. What does that mean? Does that mean you teach the language or do you also teach history, literature? Because you write about all these sorts of things.

**CAVALLO:** Right. In fact, I don't teach language at all. I teach literature, mostly the Renaissance, the romance epic, Machiavelli, a range of Italian authors. But I also teach in the global core course called "Nobility and Civility: East and West," and we compare the concepts of nobility and civility through ancient, medieval, and the early modern world. So we have East Asian, Indian, Islamic, and Western traditions. And that's co-taught, so that's a fun course that I've been teaching for the past ten years.

**WOODS:** So is there a separate department of Italian?

**CAVALLO:** Yes, there is.

**WOODS:** Wow.

**CAVALLO:** It's small. We're the smallest department at Columbia, but I think we're the earliest Department of Italian in the U.S., founded by Lorenzo Da Ponte, so there's a long tradition. We have graduate students coming from U.S. and Italian institutions, so we produce PhDs.

**WOODS:** That's very exciting. You must know, because he was provost for a number of years, my old PhD director there, Alan Brinkley.

**CAVALLO:** Yes, I do.

**WOODS:** Yeah. I mean, I know he's not in good shape these days, but I got to know him from '94 to '99, and he was very good to me. Even though he had fairly conventional, left-liberal views, he was a real guy, a real professional. He just wanted his students to do well, and I sure did, and it had a lot to do with his guidance, so he was a good guy to know.

**CAVALLO:** So was it in '98 you got your PhD?

**WOODS:** It was in – I defended it probably in late January of 2000.

**CAVALLO:** Okay.

**WOODS:** So I finished my studies by '99. I had finished writing it, but we didn't get around to the defense until early 2000. And then one of the people on the committee was doing a series for Columbia University Press on religion in American life, and he said I'd like to consider this manuscript for that. So he was already considered one of my peer reviewers, so then we just needed one more. And so that opened tremendous doors, to have a book published by Columbia University Press when I was – by the time that book got published, it was 2004, I was in my early 30s. That's pretty nice. Not bad.

**CAVALLO:** Wow, that's great. I wish I had known you then, because I'm at Columbia for 30 years.

**WOODS:** That's insane that you were there.

**CAVALLO:** Yeah. I didn't know libertarianism yet, though, so I was mostly in the literature department and just missed you, so, sorry. But what you say about Alan Brinkley is true I think of so many of the faculty members that I know, that they're leftist, but apart from that are just very smart and wonderful people.

**WOODS:** Yeah, I mean, honestly, even though I – I say a lot of things about a lot of academics and the way they comport themselves, but I know from my own personal experience that there are good ones, so I don't want to give the impression that everything is terrible. There really are some good, conscientious people.

Anyway, let's talk about that. So at the time that I could potentially have known you, you would not have been part of our, let's say, little club. But since that time, that has indeed come to pass. You wrote a little bit about how that happened, and I wonder if you could share how it is that a professor in the Italian department at Columbia University comes to be in our little club.

**CAVALLO:** Okay, I guess it took a long while. I mean, there's a personal trajectory and an academic trajectory. And for years, I wasn't involved in politics beyond voting in state and national elections, and I'd just vote for the lesser evil and always be disappointed, right from Reagan, who promised to shrink government, to Obama, who promised to be the peace candidate.

I started to pay more attention when my kids were growing up. I watched maybe foreign French movies with my daughter, but lots of documentaries, especially political ones, with my son on Netflix. So I developed a skepticism towards what government does and what the media does. But for some reason, libertarianism was off my radar screen. So I'd say my instincts were libertarian, which is why I didn't fit into either the Democrat or the Republican mold, but the figures who had caught my attention were on the left: Ralph Nader, Noam Chomsky. So really, Ron Paul was the first libertarian thinker I stumbled upon, and that opened up an entire world.

So how did that happen? My son asked me to watch the Republican debates on his computer with him. And so that was the first time I heard Ron Paul speak. And at that time, I found him authentic, refreshing, outside the box. I loved that he was against runaway U.S. military intervention around the world. But I didn't expect that I'd end up agreeing with him across the world.

But then my son started pulling up videos from YouTube, and I started to understand the coherence of the liberty message. I remember early on watching a video clip in which Bill O'Reilly asked John Stossel what he agreed with Ron Paul about or what Ron Paul was right about. And Stossel replied, "Almost everything." And I was surprised at the time that somebody could say that, but then piece by piece, as I looked into the various issues more carefully, I realized how utterly consistent he was and how problems could only be solved by economic liberty as well as social liberty. I'm thinking, for example, the drug war, minimum wage, subsidies, Federal Reserve, and down the line.

So it was fundamental to me to have so much material available on the Internet by anonymous people who posted clips and made creative videos, because I should say we didn't watch TV because we didn't have cable. So it was really thanks to the folks uploading videos to YouTube that I was able not only to get a better understanding of Ron Paul's message, but also to see how underhanded and despicable the mainstream media was in trying to smear and silence him. So if I was somewhat skeptical of mainstream media before, the 2012 campaign was a daily proof of how utterly manufactured it was, not to mention all the unspeakable actions by the Republican Party during the campaign. So I realized there wasn't a democratic process, and that only increased my support for Ron Paul and my interest in anything liberty-related. So from there, it was easy.

**WOODS:** Well, that's exciting. Now, did you get to meet him in New York City, or had you met him before that?

**CAVALLO:** I never met him before we had gone to a rally in Philadelphia in the rain and stood with thousands of people getting wet in order to listen to him. So that was the closest I had gotten to him before the New York event, the 35th anniversary of the Mises Institute. And actually, I didn't expect to meet him personally. I thought he would enter, give his talk, and leave. And I found myself in front of him at the reception prior to the opening, and I didn't even introduce myself properly. I just said, "You changed my life." And he was very gracious and very, very humane and just wonderful. So we talked for a couple minutes, but for me, it was more important to follow his ideas than to meet him personally, but it was really sweet to be able to shake his hand.

**WOODS:** Yeah, how about that? How about that? But I assume this is not the sort of thing you sit around in the — you probably don't have a — I don't know if you have a faculty lounge, but if I were you, I probably wouldn't be sharing my newfound enthusiasm with everybody in the department. That's just me [laughing].

**CAVALLO:** On the contrary. In fact, I have to say my colleagues in the Italian department don't seem to mind I'm libertarian —

**WOODS:** Oh!

**CAVALLO:** They selected me as department chair for a second term, so they're cool with that. But I wouldn't want anyone to think I was anything other than libertarian once I realized. And I'm not annoying about it, but just to give an anecdote, in 2012, I had the chance to share my enthusiasm for Ron Paul on campus when an editor from the Columbia student newspaper asked me to write a piece in a faculty column called "After Hours" – that is, what professors do when they're not teaching or preparing classes.

So I wrote an article titled "How Ron Paul Rocked Our Family" that went into all of the ramifications of the Ron Paul revolution for myself and my two kids. And the campus newspaper required a shorter version, and they didn't include the hyperlinks, which for me were essential to understand the why as well as the how. So thankfully, Lew Rockwell published an unabridged version with all those glorious links, so I went ahead and I sent the full *LRC* version to everyone in my address list, including any colleagues and administrators at Columbia I had corresponded with, saying, I wanted to share the full version since the campus article was incomplete. I guess I was secretly hoping to find a fellow Ron Paul supporter amongst probably a couple hundred people. Well, I heard from one former student that her husband liked Ron Paul, but apart from that, the most I received in response were a few colleagues saying, "Oh, thanks for sending. That was interesting" – which was nice of them. Otherwise, there was total silence. On the bright side, I guess, there were no hostile responses either.

**WOODS:** That's true; that's true. Well, I remember – I don't want to get this whole thing down just to reminiscing about Columbia on my part, but I found there – I only went to two – I only have experience as a student with two institutions, and I found Columbia partly perhaps because it's a smaller campus – it's only got – I think it's got 1,600 undergrads. Am I in the ball park?

**CAVALLO:** There's over 1,000 per year at this point, so it's been growing since you were there. And I don't want to – In fact, I'm not the only libertarian on campus, because there's a student group, Columbia Libertarians. I don't know if you're aware of them.

**WOODS:** No, they didn't exist when I was there, I guarantee you [laughing].

**CAVALLO:** Great, well, they mention you among the university's notable alumni on their website.

**WOODS:** Yeah, there you go. These are good people.

**CAVALLO:** You're there, Walter Block, Rothbard. And this semester, they held the Modern Political World speaker series, and I went – I don't get to many events on campus because I live in southern New Jersey, so if I stay late at night, it has to be somebody really worth it, but this semester I did go hear Larry Sharpe, and I mention that because I noticed he was also on your show.

**WOODS:** That's right. That's right, yeah.

**CAVALLO:** So there's a small enclave of libertarians at Columbia.

**WOODS:** Yeah, I got to meet Larry in New York last month and he was a great guy to get to know. Let's talk about your project you did with the great Carlo Lottieri, *Speaking Truth to Power: From Medieval to Modern Italy*. That sounds juicy.

**CAVALLO:** Yeah. Well, when the proposal was approved by the journal – it's called *Annali d'Italianistica*, like *Annals of Italian Studies* I guess in English – I asked Carlo Lottieri to coedit the volume with me so that it would be a joint effort of a literary critic and a political philosopher who shared an Austro-libertarian approach. So I had maybe an unrealistic goal and a more realistic one. The unrealistic one was to use the call for papers to locate Austrian or libertarian scholars who had something to say about specifically Italian literature, and at the same time, to find scholars of Italian literature or history out there who were involved with Austro-libertarianism. Well, that really didn't happen. They weren't out there. And in the end, the only two essays explicitly drawing from Austrian economics and libertarianism were mine on a Renaissance novella and my daughter's on the novelist Elsa Morante.

But I think we did attain a more realistic goal, that of introducing the perspective of the Austrian school into Italian literary studies and showing that even contributors who didn't explicitly use this approach – after all, it was our suggestion, not an imposition – they could still write original essays focusing on resistance to political power that were in line with its spirit. And the first reviews are very positive. The reviewers were happy we could focus on the political dimension of literature and history outside of a Marxist framework. Reviews in literary journals typically come out one to two years after publication, so we'll see how it goes over the next year or so.

And perhaps there's a third, broader goal: to help develop the links between literary studies and Austro-libertarianism. To focus on the political and economic dimension of literature from a free-market, anti-state perspective spreads the ideas of sound economic and political thought beyond the social sciences, into the humanities. But also, I think this kind of project directs more attention to literature and culture as a serious line of inquiry within Austro-libertarian studies. Although we already understand that revisionist historical analysis is an essential undertaking, I'd like to make the point that so is revisionist literary analysis.

**WOODS:** Let me just clarify the nature of the project. So it's written for an academic journal, so therefore, of course it's a series of papers.

**CAVALLO:** Yes.

**WOODS:** But is it available in – how do people get it/

**CAVALLO:** You can go on Amazon.com –

**WOODS:** Oh, really, it's there? Okay.

**CAVALLO:** As I guess a PDF and also in a hardcover. So yeah, you just go for *Speaking Truth to Power: From Medieval to Modern Italy*. And 11 essays are in English, 9 essays

are in Italian, but it ranges from the early medieval writers – so Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio – through the Renaissance, humanists, Counter-Reformation right up to the 20th century. There's an article called the *Montina*, the female rice workers who sang in the fields and they sang their opposition to fascism. There's an article on Giovannino Guareschi, who wrote the *Don Camillo* series about his decade-long fight against communism in Italy.

**WOODS:** This is – obviously I'll link to the book. I've got David Gordon's very kind review up here also. And when David Gordon endorses something, it's darn good, so that's a nice feather in your cap. I'll say that this goes to show just one dimension of how great it is that you wound up seeing all those Ron Paul videos, because now with this project, you've inserted a libertarian perspective into Italian studies. That's fantastic. And as you say, I've seen a couple of the reviews, prominent reviews already, and they're very favorable. So tremendous. Good for you.

**CAVALLO:** Right, it's funny, just thanks to Ron Paul. And when I ended up saying in New York in the panel, "Murray's Heirs," was that, in the beginning, it seemed that Ron Paul was just a distraction from my research because I kept taking these Ron Paul study breaks with my son in looking at the videos and not getting my book finished. But in the end, it really opened up a new way of doing my work as a literary critic.

And I have to say I was always interested in both the political circumstances of writers that may have influenced their writing, as well as the political dimension of literature, and I just wasn't convinced by any of the Marxist or related theories I read. So I had been writing about politics in literature on and off, in an article on Dante where I wrote about his political vicissitudes and how they shaped his representation of anger in the Terrace of the Wrathful. And in my 2004 book on the Renaissance epic, I traced the shift from an early humanist emphasis on civic duty to a later claiming of personal liberty against an oppressive state during the Counter-Reformation.

So I didn't know about Austrian libertarian tradition before my encounter with Ron Paul, but my research and writing was I'd say already anti-statist, so I was just ready and waiting to discover Ron Paul, and through Ron Paul the Mises Institute with its treasure trove of works on PDF and books. So it started out as something personal and turns out to be the center of my professional work now.

**WOODS:** That's really, really exciting to hear. Now, given that I want to talk to you about a whole bunch of things, I want to shift again over to the question of Machiavelli. Because I have been trying to get a handle on what Machiavelli is really all about, and the thing is I'm just a layman when it comes to this, but you know, I can read, I can put thoughts together. But yet, I see these professional Machiavelli scholars who disagree with each other about what he was trying to say. They can't even agree on what he was trying to say, or they can't sometimes agree on whether we can reconcile the *Discourse on Livy* with *The Prince*. And so it makes me think maybe I'm not even entitled to an opinion.

So let's start off there. And the thing is I'm afraid I'm going to ask you a question that takes the whole rest of the episode to answer, so I'm trying to break it into digestible bits here. But I guess the first question is: do you think the general understanding of Machiavelli is a caricature?

**CAVALLO:** Well, that's easy, because from the beginning, I think it has been a caricature, especially the anti-Machiavelli treatises that came out. But part of it is I'd say Machiavelli's fault, because there's so much in his writing that is or at least seems contradictory, and the other thing is that we all come to Machiavelli with our own perspectives. So you'll find Benito Mussolini uses Machiavelli to promote his fascist program. He has a prelude to *The Prince*. And yet, on the other side of the spectrum, you have the, say, North Atlantic Republicans that use Machiavelli to say he was in favor of or had a republican vision.

And so you have really the whole gamut, but what I thought was missing going back and rereading Machiavelli – and I teach him. The last time I taught Machiavelli in 2012, I included in the first week's reading Rothbard's *Anatomy of the State* and in the second week's reading from Hayek's *Road to Serfdom*, how the worst get on top, because I thought that gives an idea of the predator state. And Machiavelli had a very clear idea that the state was indeed a predator. And so I ended up writing an article that came out in *Social Research* in 2014 called "On Political Power and Personal Liberty in *The Prince* and *The Discourses*" – and I could send you a link to that.

But when you look at what the state is, you get a certain vision, but if you look at what liberty is for Machiavelli and what the non-state is, what the civil population is, you get a different perspective. And what I end up arguing is that Machiavelli was looking for the best scenario under the worst conditions. I mean, the Medici government had taken over. He was imprisoned indefinitely. He was tortured. He had no illusions about what the state can do to an individual, and yet, I think he was looking to carve out a space for individual freedom, which is not an idea that's very common in Machiavelli studies.

But when he talks about the fox and the lion, they're for defensive purposes. The fox has to know the traps, and the lion has to defend himself from the wolves. And he talks about what virtues the prince should have and he needs to not take away the property or the wives of his subjects, and he has to avoid being hated. So most of the people who think of that famous quote about Machiavelli, whether it's better to be loved or feared, what Machiavelli says over and over again after is you have to under all circumstances avoid being hated, and that will allow you to keep your state.

**WOODS:** All right, so having said that, isn't it still the case that in Machiavelli he will look at, say – he'll look at the idea of religion and say religion may have its role in maintaining public order, but it cannot be an instrument used to restrain the prince because the prince needs the flexibility under unforeseeable circumstances to act in ways that the ecclesiastics may disapprove of but that are necessary to preserve the state, and in the absence of the state, we have horrific anarchy so it would be nitpicking to be hounding the prince in this way. Is that an accurate summation of his thought on that?

**CAVALLO:** Well, he was living during a time when the Church was just another state player, a secular player, and the pope was just as dangerous as anyone else. And he makes the comment that if everyone else would keep their word, then the prince should keep his word, but since in the real life no one keeps their word, then the prince is freed from the same kind of constraints. So I don't think he followed the mirror for princes tradition of talking about how a prince should be moral because he

understood that it was just lip service to the prince. He wasn't going to change any prince's behavior by preaching morality. He might do it through deception or trying to convince the prince that acting in the interest of the population was in his own interest.

So he talks about fortresses: should a prince have a fortress? And he ends up concluding that the best fortress is not to be hated by the people. He brings up arms and militia, and he says, well, no prince would disarm his people. Any smart prince would arm his people so that the people would support him. Now, of course, throughout history and in Machiavelli's time, that was not the case. When you got power, you wanted to keep your people unarmed and you had mercenary armies. And Machiavelli had the idea of a citizens' army and tried to convince the prince that that was in his interest not because it was moral, but because it would allow him to retain power. And what he ended up telling the prince that he should be doing would be to go out hunting and to understand the territory so that he could defend it from larger predators. So Machiavelli makes no mistake. The prince is a predator, but maybe a lesser evil than a large, foreign predator. And that was Italy's case at the time, when Italy's European neighbors were invading it.

**WOODS:** I read — this was a long time ago. I read and then dug out some quotations for an article by Quinton Skinner, who's of course written about Machiavelli, and he says — this is about Machiavelli and religion, and he would have answered some traditional questions. So for instance, you may say that the prince should pursue virtue when possibly. Obviously, he shouldn't just be gratuitously wicked. He should not pursue evil for its own sake. But at the same time, there can be cases where what traditional morality would seem to dictate to you in a particular case as virtuous is actually only seemingly virtuous and that sometimes apparently wicked behavior that maintains your power only seems vicious but is not.

And so Skinner says this. He says, "But what about the Christian objection that this is a foolish as well as a wicked position to adopt since it forgets the day of judgment on which all injustices will finally be punished? About this Machiavelli says nothing at all. His silence is eloquent, indeed epoch making. It echoed around Christian Europe, at first eliciting a stunned silence in return and then a howl of execration that has never finally died away."

What do you think about that passage?

**CAVALLO:** Well, it's very rhetorical. And actually, I know that when Rothbard talked about Machiavelli, he was following Skinner. So I would take it in a different direction. And actually, in this article I borrow Rothbard's phrasing: "To confine any existing state to as small a degree of invasion of person and property as possible" is something to be valued. And when Machiavelli in *The Prince* talks about changing the definitions of virtue, I would draw your attention to the first chapter in which he changes the definitions, and that is of liberality and miserliness.

And he said until now, the prince's liberality was all of the gifts that he gave to his cronies. That's my language, but in any case, that's the gist of it. And in order to do that, he impoverished the people. And I would change the definition and I would say the prince shouldn't worry about being considered miserly by the elite few if it

prevents him from robbing all of the people to do that. So between the lines and underneath the lines, I think there's a different message that Machiavelli is sending out in order to convince the prince that it's in his own interest not to mistreat the people.

And when he says that it's easier for a man to forget the murder of his father than to forget the confiscation of his property, it sounds like it's okay to go murdering people's fathers. But he then follows up by saying, because there are so many easy excuses to confiscate property, which was the case. Whenever there was a change in the political winds, you lost what you had. But it is much more difficult to find a justification to commit murder, so that it's not going to happen.

**WOODS:** What is liberty in Machiavelli's view?

**CAVALLO:** He doesn't stop to define it, but if you go through all of his works, in some cases he associates it with a more, say, republican – which at the time was oligarchical – type of government over a monarchical government. But that is not the same throughout. He talks about liberty being possible under both a republican and a monarchical government if the government leaves the people to continue their own – to thrive on their own, to do their own thing. And at one point, he makes the remark that it's maybe easier for people to preserve their liberty under a monarchical government because they're not tricked into thinking that they are free. I mean, he's almost anticipating Hoppe's *Democracy: The God That Failed*.

**WOODS:** Right, that is definitely a point that he makes. So what do you think libertarians studying Machiavelli – not that – you know, let me interrupt myself there. Sometimes libertarians, like any group, can be annoying to the point where you slightly want to smack them. Like every movie you go see, they have to decide was this a libertarian movie or not. They can't turn their brains off for two hours. So likewise, it's not like the only people we can learn from are libertarians. I'm not saying that. But I am saying, as a libertarian, what in particular as a libertarian should I look for in Machiavelli that I can say this is valuable or this is fresh and new or this is something that points ahead toward the development of ideas in our direction? What would I find there?

**CAVALLO:** Okay, I just grabbed the quote because I didn't paraphrase it. So also, Machiavelli describes – well, he says republics are generally compared favorably to principalities and even referred to as free states, but when he explains why they can sometimes be less free than principalities, he describes them as a parasitic institution.

And this is the quote: "Of all forms of servitude to, that which is hardest subjects you to a republic. First, because it is more lasting and there is no hope of escape; secondly, because of the aim of a republic is to deprive all other corporations of their vitality and to weaken them to the ends that its own body corporate may increase. A prince who makes you his subject does not do this unless he be a barbarian who devastates the country and destroys all that man has done for civilization, as Oriental princes do. On the contrary, if his institutions be humane and he behaves constitutionally, he will more often than not be equally fond of all the cities that are subject to him and will leave them in possession of all their trades and all their ancient institutions."

That's not a quote that you usually find when you're talking about Machiavelli, and so my answer to your question I think would be to look at him fresh, to understand that he writes in different moments of his life, and so he has different ideas that evolve, and so there's not possibly a coherent system, but that I think there is a libertarian side to Machiavelli.

**WOODS:** Jo Ann, do you have a web presence if not necessarily a website of your own?

**CAVALLO:** Well, I have two sites, one which is Academia.com, where I have PDFs of various of my articles, and then I also have —

**WOODS:** Actually, I think it's Academia.edu.

**CAVALLO:** Is it? Sorry.

**WOODS:** Yeah, okay.

**CAVALLO:** Yeah, Academia.edu, you're right. And then it's not linked to libertarianism, but I have another website on eBOIARDO, which has clips of puppet theater and theatrical representations based on the Romantic epic.

**WOODS:** Wow, excellent, all right. So I'm going to link to all this stuff. I'm going to have the links you just mentioned. I'll have your article on Machiavelli, your article on Ron Paul, a link to the *Speaking Truth to Power* publication. We'll put all that up at TomWoods.com/1042. Well, great to hear about your work, which is important and path-breaking, and about your story and that you're at Columbia. It all ties together so nicely. Thanks so much.

**CAVALLO:** Thanks so much, Tom. It's great to talk with you.