



Episode 1,771: Michael Rectenwald on the American Dystopia

Guest: Michael Rectenwald

WOODS: Geez, man, you just crank out books like Woods in his prime, which was like ten years ago. I can't even imagine keeping up the pace that you've set. It's unbelievable. So give us, without any spoilers of course, what you would want to give us as a teaser or background for what's going on in your book *Thought Criminal*.

RECTENWALD: Okay, yeah. So basically, the book started while — you know, we were in the midst of this pandemic, and I didn't want to deal with a lot of the details about what was going on. I didn't want to engage in any kind of conspiracy theories and so forth, because with everything that's going on, it's hard for me not to speculate about what's happening. And so what I did is started to think about — I was about to write a book called *The Pandemic Economy*, and I just found it to be overwhelming, but I had things to say. But I found that I couldn't really say them in nonfiction. I found nonfiction to be too constraining for what I wanted to get at.

So anyway, I'm looking through some articles about AI in particular, and I come across this article about human brain cloud interfaces. And it's about how nanobots will be used to connect our brains directly to the internet. And of course, I had known about this before, but brain cloud computing they're saying is about 20, 30 years off. And so it's about how these nanobots attach themselves to the neurons and then allow direct interfacing with the cloud. So then I come across another article that says that this thing called the ARC gene looks like viruses when it collects itself into like shell-like, virus-looking entities inside the brain. And this is the main means by which memory and other forms of brain activity are conducted. So I thought, why not make a novel about how nanobots disguised as viruses would attach themselves to the brain, to the neurons, and connect and conduct this kind of interactive brain cloud computing? And they tout this as something that's going to be just a utopia, but I said, what if this got into hands of totalitarians and they wanted to control what people were thinking? And that's how the novel got started.

WOODS: How long did this take you?

RECTENWALD: Three months.

WOODS: Was it crazy work? I've never done a novel. I can't imagine what it would be like.

RECTENWALD: It's very difficult, writing a novel. So I've written fiction before. I've written a book of short stories called *The Thief and Other Stories*. Never had written a novel. I wasn't sure I could do it. I was disabused of the idea by a lot of people. They say novels are really

difficult. Long-form fiction is really difficult. And I agree. It's one of the most difficult genres I've ever undertaken. But all I did is sort of set the constraints of the novel in terms of what were the conditions that would set up the plot, and the plot just unraveled from there. I wrote 12 to 15 hours every day, seven days a week.

WOODS: Wow, that's insane. Let's say you had to put a number on it. What percent of the story you're telling do you see as at least conceivable, and what percent is kind of a poetic license?

RECTENWALD: Yeah, well, I think it's pretty much all conceivable. The question is whether it will actually evolve that way. It's possible, but it's not necessarily the case. And that is one of the things I wanted to get across, is that things don't have to go this way, but they could. And that's sort of the premise of the book is, what would it be like if it did go this way? And so I would say that it's 100% conceivable. It's not necessarily 100% probable. It's possible.

WOODS: All right, now, in terms of some of the themes that come up, they really are going to be quite familiar to anybody who's been observing anything, because even if you get 30 pages into the book, you're already uncovering things like loss of individual autonomy, cancel culture, loss of privacy, a kind of cult of academia and science, punishment of people who deviate. I mean, it doesn't take long to get started, let's say.

RECTENWALD: Yeah, it jumps right in. And yeah, the loss of autonomy, the loss of oneself is really one of the major themes of the book. The possibility of the erasure of the self in this thing called collective mind, which what I posited was collective mind would be like this supercomputing cloud, in which all of these various clouds that are now privately held would be collectivized and owned by the state.

WOODS: And of course, not that we necessarily want to connect everything in the novel to what's going on in November 2020, but it's a little bit hard to resist.

RECTENWALD: Yeah.

WOODS: And I mean, in particular, right now one of the main themes that I hear is that Western society, but particularly America, Americans are too individualistic to be able to conquer this virus. If only they had the collectivist mentality that we see in the East, they would be more successful. So the propaganda is just unrelenting. It never stops. And so of course, we have this public health issue right now, and they're going to handle it ideologically. And they're going to use it, exploit it to try to advance their philosophy.

RECTENWALD: Indeed, and that's part of what's going on. It's this idea that ideology finally gets incarnated into technology in the novel, and then becomes a super ordinate thing that seemingly cannot be overcome. And that's the whole way the plot evolves. I just keep getting these characters into these situations in which it looks like there's no way out. And that's basically the premise.

WOODS: Can we talk about whether in real life you think there is a way out? Because you seem kind of pessimistic. I look at your Facebook updates, and it's pretty dreary, but that could be because you know the kinds of people whose ambitions are to run things and what their worldview is very intimately. So maybe that would lead somebody to pessimistic

conclusions. But I would say that right now, the thing that has driven me more toward pessimism than anything else has been the compliance with the lockdowns. Apparently, three-quarters of people in the UK are supporting the lockdowns that were just announced by Boris Johnson. I mean, it's unbelievable. They've had all year to find out the truth about the matter and to be outraged at what was done to their society, and they want more. They support more. They're cheering the destruction of their own lives. I never thought it would get to this point.

RECTENWALD: Neither did I, and it's really hastened. And one of the themes of the book is that people have to be complicit in their own subjection if they're going to be taken in by this kind of total conformity, which ends up wrapping itself in with the powers that be and producing totalitarianism because they have let it happen.

WOODS: Yeah. Yeah, that's exactly what's going on.

RECTENWALD: But the novel has a happy ending, I should say, speaking towards the thing of pessimism.

WOODS: Well, okay, that much is good for people to know, because actually, I wonder if some people might have hesitated to buy it because they just think I just don't think I could take more depression right about now.

RECTENWALD: No, it's actually very liberatory in the end. It gives a kind of a formula for how — not just in terms of how they undertake the escape, if you will, but just in terms of what is the principle that would save us.

WOODS: I'm glad you mentioned it, because I didn't want to spoil things, so as long as people know that one thing about it, that'll be the one tiny spoiler. It's not really a spoiler. Generally, you expect things to work out in a book, and that's what happens here.

So let's talk, though, about the future of our society. The trends are not particularly encouraging. I have a couple friends who still, nevertheless, are fairly optimistic in general about where society is going, because they just compare it to — they say the collectivism of 50, 60 years ago around most of the world is generally gone, and we on net are better off than we were then. And we still have a lot of tools at our disposal, despite the problems with big tech, that are very liberating.

RECTENWALD: Yes.

WOODS: And we still have ways of spreading information that we didn't have before, and even if they struggle sometimes, we still have more sources of news and information than ever before. So is any of that a counter to maybe your dystopian vision?

RECTENWALD: Well, I posit really early on that there are always gaps, and that we need to exploit these gaps. The system can never be completely closed. There isn't a totalitarian regime that can completely close all the gaps. And that's one of the things that I'm holding out for, is that we will make our way through all of this, and we will emerge, and we will be able to retain ourselves in the face of all this. I throw that word *totalitarian* around, but I think it is pretty clear that that's what we're dealing with. We're not dealing with

totalitarianism, per se; we're dealing with totalitarian creep. And it is definitely creeping on us, right? With every new masking a mandate or lockdown mandate in different parts of the world, this is just one totalitarian creep after another.

So there's a good reason to be very, very alarmed, but I agree that, here we are talking and so far we're not shut down and your program's not shut down and I'm still able to post those pessimistic remarks on Facebook, although I think some of them are being suppressed, frankly. But you know, I put this book out. So I want to say that I agree with you: there are obviously clear paths, and we have to keep exploiting them. And I use that term not in a Marxist sense by any means, but I mean just filling those gaps and finding our ways through these mandates and these lockdowns and these various ways that the powers that be are trying to pen us in.

WOODS: Yeah, I don't know how else to put it. Now, meanwhile, I hate to bring Hitler into this because everybody brings Hitler into it —

RECTENWALD: Oh, Hitler, always.

WOODS: — but every once in a while, you get people talking about Hitler and Trump's like Hitler and his supporters are like Nazis. And then they have that photo of people at a Nazi rally, and there's the one guy with his arms folded, and they're all saying, Yeah, yeah, we would be like that guy.

RECTENWALD: [laughing] Right.

WOODS: Now, look, I probably shouldn't speculate as to who would have been a Nazi and under what circumstances, but I am telling you something. If ever there were a group that I would not count on not to be Nazis, it would be these people.

RECTENWALD: Exactly.

WOODS: Because these are the people, they have to latch on to everything that's popular in society. So the idea that they would have been anti-slavery in 1850 is laughable. There's no way. Given the way right now they feel morally compelled to let everybody know that they have every single approved opinion under the sun? Oh, but in 1850, don't worry, they would have been courageous enough to have the most politically unpopular opinion of all, that even most Northerners didn't even share? Come on.

RECTENWALD: Right. I mean, the whole thing that ties people together like this under these kinds of regimes is conformity. And conformity is the real enemy here, and that is a mindless conformity to outrageously positive constraints. And so those who are the most susceptible to conformity are the ones that are most likely, in my opinion, to be the perfect subjects under something like Nazism or Stalinism.

WOODS: Yeah, no kidding. Well, I personally think — I'm sorry, I'm obsessed with the virus, but I think we all are right now because of what's been going on.

RECTENWALD: Yeah.

WOODS: But I feel like that's got to be something that, even regardless of what exactly the path is going to be, it will eventually be burned out one way or another. It will eventually stop.

RECTENWALD: Hopefully, yes.

WOODS: But after it has stopped, we can't just say, Well, that was an interesting historical episode. I think we've got to harp on this. For example, after the 2008 financial crisis, I felt like it's very important even during good economic times to make sure we try to explain to people what happened during this episode, so that when another one happens, we don't fall into the same errors. Well, that is like of no significance whatsoever compared to the virus, in my opinion. There need to be documentaries. We need to talk about the collateral damage, all the deaths, all the depression, the suicides, all the other totally predictable things. The ruined lives, the ruined livelihoods, the disruptions of society, the deformations of society, the interferences with relationships and friendships and normal human interaction. We cannot hit this enough to try to, even after the fact, convince people – or if we can't convince people who are alive that they were wrong, convince their kids that their parents were wrong, frankly.

RECTENWALD: Yeah, I try to get into that in the book in terms of what people are missing. What have we lost here? Just like, for example, walking outside in the sun and enjoying the sun beaming down on your face and feeling that without any interference and just without this constant sense that you're under surveillance in some way, by your compeers, mostly, right? And that, first of all, there's never anyone around when you're walking anymore. It seems like everything is a deserted landscape in all these places. And they're missing all the camaraderie and the carefree collection of people going to different places, like at a bar or restaurant or anything, a baseball game.

And just everything has become a kind of like – a pall has been cast over everything. And I have these themes where I've tried to make clear what's been lost here, what are we losing. And I think we've got to harp on that long after this is over, so that we don't get another case of this kind of complete conformity and complete complicity in our own subjection.

WOODS: Well, one more quick thing about this, and then we'll get more explicitly back into the book. The mask thing I haven't spent that much time on, because my view, I felt like people were talking way too much about masks and way too little about all the other restrictions.

RECTENWALD: Sure.

WOODS: I would wear a mask if I could have a million activities back, and then I want to get rid of the masks. So the order in which I want to do things is I want to live, and then I'll deal with the mask problem. But the more I think about it, the mask kind of is the symbol of the whole thing. And given that I've looked at all the charts all around the world, when mask mandates were introduced, and there's clearly no connection between when the mask mandates were introduced and how many cases there are – there's just none. If I show you the graph and I say, "When do you think they implemented the master mandate?" you'll always get it wrong. You'll say, "Oh, probably up at the top here, and then after the mask mandate it started coming down." You'll always get it wrong.

So I've looked at those, and I feel like I get — Thaddeus Russell has a good point. I get why the left loves the mask. Yeah, I'm sure some of them think it's public health, but instinctively, they love the egalitarian aesthetic of it, of all of us wearing the mask and individuality being suppressed. But it's abnormal and dehumanizing, frankly. We should — I can't believe I have to actually make an argument that it's a good thing for us to see each other's faces, and I believe that it's going to have a bad — I can't prove this. It's just a natural instinct to believe that this is going to be very bad for children and, frankly, babies, in the long run. It's not normal for babies to look around and not be able to tell that somebody's smiling at them.

RECTENWALD: Yeah, I have a new grandchild just born a little over a month ago who has never seen my face, for example. I've visited the baby many times, but I've never been able to — because my daughter is really nervous, because she's been told to be nervous. And the child has never seen my face. The other day I was driving down the street, and a guy was standing on the corner apparently waiting for the bus. He was wearing a gas mask, okay? A gas mask. And he's waving at me because I stopped short of the white line by about ten feet, and he's waving at me, pointing to the white line, like, *Move up to the line. Move up to the line. You're too far back from the line.* So I mean, it's just this kind of constant, like it's really — it's brought out the little authoritarian in these people.

And another day I was walking down the street, hundreds of yards from any other individual, and I didn't have a mask on because I don't put it on except when I go — I have to eat, so if I go to the grocery store and they require a mask, I put it on because I've got to eat. And this guy's screaming at me, "Where's your mask? Where's your mask?" So it isn't just collectivism and the erasure of the individual; it's also the authoritarianism in every individual. These people harbor a secret will to constrain other people, and to see others constrained as they're constrained. So they're authoritarians.

WOODS: Well, this gets back to something we said earlier about one of the themes in your book, about in some way, you have to be complicit in your own degradation as part of their vision. And so how much of what we're facing, either in the plot of your book or in the plot of real life, is a matter of people who are naturally inclined toward freedom and decency, who are just propagandized into the opposite? And how much is it people are actually kind of inclined to follow and obey, and so people are just kind of leading them down a path they're inclined to go down anyway?

RECTENWALD: Yeah, it looks like some people — there's obviously the propaganda and also the authorities that are putting this on us, right? There's no question about that. It's not like people are spontaneously trying to constrain themselves. There's obviously been this kind of a constant drumbeat that we must do this, we must do that. But there's a kind of compulsion on the part of some people to obey and to really push this obedience on others. And I think that there is a small percentage of people who are resisters and, to me, and in the book as well, it's the resisters that hold out the hope for us, because without these resisters, we have nothing but the compliers and the complicit. And so I think it's a good proportion that are actually reveling in it, strangely enough, and that they've turned it into a kind of aesthetic, a fashion statement not only, but an aesthetic more broadly speaking. It is a kind of symbol of something, a symbol of my ability and my willingness to be herded, to be nondescript, to bury my individuality for the sake of the collective.

WOODS: So far, I've taken the liberty of directing us to particular themes in your book, but let me give you the opportunity to develop further some themes that you want people to know about.

RECTENWALD: Yeah, I mean, one of the other themes is how — well, you brought it up somewhat, the academic world and what its role is in all this. There is a university in the book called Transhuman University. The short version is Trans U, and that's not an accident. And the idea there is that this kind of new transhumanism is something that we have to look at. And I know that's been a debate in libertarian circles, transhumanism, and what it represents. Does it represent liberty, or does it represent something else? It depends.

And this is something I want to get into quite a bit, again, is the connection between libertarianism and transhumanism. What will it be? What will it represent, this possibility for the individual, first of all, to live longer, have more capacities, have greater abilities? These enhancements, right, these enhancements which could make us into super humans? Or will it end up being something that's controlled by a small elite and that will, therefore, probably end up constraining us even further? That's a big theme in the book.

WOODS: Yeah.

RECTENWALD: And as you know, I'm not a Luddite, so I don't reject transhumanism out of hand. But I do reject the idea that it necessarily is a liberating thing that, based on enhancements and all these things, that we'll become super humans. We may become sub-humans based on it. It depends.

WOODS: Well, even a tamer thing, just technology itself.

RECTENWALD: Yes.

WOODS: There are some people who think that technology is necessarily liberating. Now, it has the great potential to be liberating, and obviously I would rather live, for example, in a world that has the internet than one that doesn't.

RECTENWALD: Right.

WOODS: But at the same time, okay, I think the Internet has shown us something about mankind that maybe we suspected but didn't really want to know, which is that you can no longer say, well, people just don't have access to information. Well, yeah, now they do. I mean, at your fingertips, you can read anything. You can find out anything. You can study anything. And no one wants to [laughing]. I mean very, very, very few. But what they do know how to do, though, is that if everybody's profile picture shows them wearing a mask, then they know to wear a mask. Or if their profile picture has this or that symbol on it, well, they know that they should put that symbol on it. So it is a way of generating conformity far more than it should have been, frankly. It should have been the opposite.

RECTENWALD: Absolutely. And then you have people that are searching unusual information or things that are out there and that are actually verifiable, but yet, if you mention them, that you immediately get dubbed a conspiracy theorist, when in fact, now some of these things are conspiracies, but you're not a theorist; you're a conspiracy empiricist, that you're

actually finding empirical data to support some of these things that are conspiracies. You know, a conspiracy is just an undertaking by several people in connection with each other and in agreement with each other to effect a particular end. And so these things are finally easily discoverable, and yet every time you mention them, you're a conspiracy theorist. And I'd like to introduce a new term: conspiracy empiricists.

WOODS: Yeah. Well, just think of the last time you and a few friends conspired to play a joke on somebody, right? That was a kind of a conspiracy. So you're telling me that, yeah, people will get together to play practical jokes on each other, but they won't get together for their own financial gain? [laughing] Pretty unlikely.

RECTENWALD: Yeah, exactly.

WOODS: And then that reminds me of what the late Butler Schaffer used to say, which was that I'm not interested in conspiracy theories; I'm interested in the facts about conspiracies. That was always the way he put it. Well, any final words?

RECTENWALD: Just that I'll see you outside of Houston there for the Ron Paul symposium.

WOODS: Yeah, looking forward to that tomorrow, and I assume our paths will actually cross tonight, so that's going to be it's going to be great. And I hope people will check out the book we've been discussing, which is *Thought Criminal* by Michael Rectenwald. I've linked to it on the show notes page, TomWoods.com/1771. Thanks again, Michael.

RECTENWALD: Thanks, Tom. Thanks for having me.