

**CEI** and *Reason* magazine have a long and happy relationship. Throughout the years, CEI analysts have contributed substantially to the libertarian publication's pages. *Reason* Science Correspondent **Ronald Bailey** is a CEI Adjunct Fellow. And *Reason*'s current ranks include three former CEI Warren Brookes journalism fellows: Bailey, **Brian Doherty**, and **Jesse Walker**. Now, to celebrate its 35th anniversary, the magazine has published the anthology, ***Choice: The Best of Reason***, edited by the magazine's editor, **Nick Gillespie**, who recently spoke with the *Monthly Planet*'s editors about the anthology and the changes in the world since he took over the magazine. This is a longer version of an interview in the October 2004 issue of *Monthly Planet*.

**CEI:** What inspired *Reason* to put together this collection? What criteria did you use for selecting the articles?

**Nick Gillespie:** We celebrated our 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary last year—*Reason*'s first issue appeared in May 1968, the great month of student unrest throughout America and Europe. In December, we published our anniversary issue, as we had already started pulling articles together, and the opportunity to put together a collection and sell it to a publisher presented itself. Part of it was the desire to showcase what we had done in the past decade—particularly in the past five years since I'd been in charge—to show the ethos of the magazine and how it's shifted, particularly in the post-Cold War era. Putting aside 9/11 just for a moment, the world changed with the end of the Cold War, as has libertarian politics and longstanding libertarian alliances with and attitudes toward conservatives, liberals, leftists, and rightists.

One of the criteria for inclusion is the question of how have stories in *Reason* reoriented things away from the traditional left-right political spectrum and dealt with issues in terms of choice vs. control, and that shift is more important in post-Cold War era. Historically, it has been said that libertarians have shackled up with the right wing, putting up with the more theocratic, socially repressive impulses because fighting communism was more important. It's a different world, and we often find ourselves equally at loggerheads with both the Right and the Left over the question of choice vs. control.

**CEI:** How did you settle on TV comedian Drew Carey to write the introduction and disillusioned leftist columnist Christopher Hitchens to provide the foreword?

**Gillespie:** One of the "distinguishing characteristics"—to use a Clinton-era term—of *Reason* magazine is that we cut across the traditional political spectrum of right and left. As a result, we looked for people from various, unexpected places on the political spectrum to write the introduction.

Drew Carey, long a big fan and supporter of the magazine, was an obvious choice; and an interview that another writer and I had with him a few years ago appears in the collection.

Hitchens is a fascinating character. He understands that the political landscape has changed at least twice in the post-Cold War era. The first occurred with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the absolute, ironclad verdict of history against communism and centrally planned command-and-control economies. The second was the rise of Islamic terrorism or Islamism as a counterforce. He has also admired the magazine, and we thought it would be provocative if we had him talk about the magazine at the beginning of the collection.

**CEI:** In your article "All Culture, All the Time," you note that, "we have been experiencing what can aptly be called a 'culture boom': a massive and prolonged increase in art, music, literature, video, and other forms of creative expression." In addition to the increased cultural choices available to individuals, what effects do you believe this boom is likely to have on other aspects of life, such as work habits, living arrangements, and public policy?

**Gillespie:** In a "Simpsons" episode, Homer is chosen as a citizen astronaut and flies to outer space. One of the things the space mission does is conduct experiments on ants. The ants get

loose, and one of them says in a word balloon, “terrible, terrible freedom.” In many ways, that is real outcome of the culture boom—terrible, terrible freedom.

For the first time in human history, masses of people can make a huge number of choices. We can choose what we look like—whether through fashion, plastic surgery, or other forms of body modification. We can choose who we live with and who we sleep with, because many of the social and legal prohibitions that barred many types of couplings a mere 20 years ago are now gone. We’re more mobile, and we have more money, and it’s more possible to live the type of life we want, wherever we want. We have this terrible, terrible freedom to pick and choose, to live however we want. That is an incredible liberating, illuminating, and fascinating development. But it’s also a terrifying one for those who are fixated on controlling or regulating other people’s lives—socially, politically, or economically. And it is a very bad time to be one who wants to be in charge of other people.

This explains why figures of authority have to have a very different relationship with those traditionally their subordinates—from priests, politicians, professors, even the stockbrokers. Fifty years ago, stockbrokers were gods—they could impart secret information to you if you were of the right class or had the right connections. Now you can know as much as or more than they do and execute a trade for \$8.

This type of shift in power relations is ubiquitous—and it is exciting (though horrifying for some people). But it’s really an effect of this broader-based shift, which comes from technological advances, from economic advances, and in many ways from educational advances.

**CEI:** What about the charge that culture might become so fragmented that society comes to comprise groups of people who aren’t conversant with each other? This complaint is already current regarding cable news, which, some claim, allows people to tune in only to views that reinforce their own.

**Gillespie:** People always worry about the loss of a common culture. Even before cable news, you used to hear this charge in critiques about academia. You’d hear that academics were becoming too specialized—English professors, chemistry professors, and physics professors couldn’t talk to each other because they were so fragmented or specialized. For those who believe in a division of labor, such a development is one of the lynchpins of progress. I don’t worry about that too much.

When you start talking about a common culture, however, it’s true that mass audiences are smaller than they used to be. “Seinfeld” dominated that 90s in terms of cultural hegemony. However, at its peak, “Seinfeld” had an audience share that would not have even placed it among the top ten shows in the late 1960s, when the number one show, “The Beverly Hillbillies,” had an audience approximately three times as large, proportionally. My point is that one of things we have now is the right of exit from communities, from politics, and from culture that we don’t like. We can’t minimize that, and we should not see it as a bad thing to say you can walk away from a world you don’t like and don’t find interesting. If you own the part of the world that people are leaving, you’re going to be a bit worried.

I’m the grandson of four immigrants, and they were a forerunner of this. They left old Europe—they left Ireland and Italy. They had a right of exit, and not everybody did. And I’m pretty glad that they had that right of exit. I would never deny anyone the right of exit, even if they wanted to leave *Reason* magazine. So the right of exit that is encoded in a “fragmented culture” is a good thing. It is not a breakdown of something, but really the emancipation of people. For the first time people can go somewhere else, and they do, so we should celebrate and recognize that.

The fears of the breakdown of a common culture are grossly exaggerated. The Web is probably the place where people worry about this the most. If you look at a site like [Lucianne.com](http://Lucianne.com) or [FreeRepublic.com](http://FreeRepublic.com), which are hard-right sites that are very ideologically motivated, the people

have a rabidly conservative point of view. Those people read *The New York Times* more than an Upper-West Side Manhattanite would, obsessively looking for mistakes. They engage mainstream culture more than anyone. It's just wrong to say that consume niche culture cut themselves from the world—especially in terms of politics. Fox News watchers are not ignorant of popular culture. In fact, they are very aware of it. Most of the time, the fragmentation argument is a bugaboo that really doesn't make sense.

**CEI:** Could you comment on the romanticized view in so much of popular culture—for example, in movies like *Erin Brockovich* or *The Insider*—of lawyers and government bureaucrats as selfless defenders of the common good?

**Gillespie:** What's interesting is that in movies and popular culture, the plot revolves around a single engaging character. By same token, we also know a larger-than-life businessman is always the villain. In a movie, when a businessman first enters, and there's a crime to be solved, you know that this CEO, not the butler, is the culprit. And you can single out a number of examples of this phenomenon, because big corporations are evil.

The rise of that motif, however, has had virtually no effect on commerce, and we have as many real-life businessman heroes. For example, some critics pillory Bill Gates, but the American people admire him. Virgin Atlantic CEO Richard Branson is another example of an admired CEO.

Overall, I don't worry too much about the popular representation—or misrepresentation—of commerce. I have three-year old son who can tell the difference between televised fiction and real life. He knows you can't smack someone over the head with a sledgehammer and expect him to walk it off. I think the vast majority of viewers are the same way—they can watch *Erin Brockovich* and know that it's fiction.

**CEI:** In "Rage On: The Strange Politics of Millionaire Rock Stars," *Reason* Associate Editor and former CEI Brookes Fellow Brian Doherty notes that, "rock and the larger pop music scene are so clearly a function of the wealth, innovation, and leisure time thrown off by capitalism that it should be nothing less than mind-boggling that pop stars themselves mutter incessantly about toppling the very system that pays them so well." A similar statement can be made about Hollywood. Was Schumpeter right?

**Gillespie:** Schumpeter was right about a lot of things. One was identifying the central dynamic of capitalism as creative destruction, meaning that capitalism is not about distributing a preexisting set of goods more efficiently than socialism. It is about the constant remaking in response to consumer demand and supplier creation. This gale of creative destruction is constantly changing the world. It all goes back to this question of the right of exit, which is horrifying to people in power. If you are top of the heap, the only way you can go is down. Unlike in previous eras, it's harder than ever to freeze the system when you are on top of the hill.

I was just reading the latest *Forbes* 400 list. Of those who were on the list in 1982, when it was first published, only approximately 50 remain. None of these people have gone to the poorhouse, but for those of us in the *Forbes* 500 or 600, it's certainly nice to know we have a shot at going up a few slots.

In terms of the self-loathing, I am not sure that it is as strong in Hollywood as it is in rock music. I think Schumpeter was right in the sense that people very quickly lose sight of how they became successful. There is little appreciation for and understanding of creative destruction and how difficult it is to stay at the top of something. This the second or third generation born into a system in which the means of ascent or the way people rose up through hard work and industriousness is often lost. Their parents and grandparents smoothed over the rough edges of their origins, and, as a result, these people don't understand how they got where they are and how they might stay there. They take a snapshot of a particular system and say, "This is unfair that I've got all this advantage and others don't."

**CEI:** John Stossel, in his interview with Jacob Sullum, discusses how unfounded scare campaigns have captured the American imagination—we now fear everything from hot dogs to various helpful chemicals. How do you think this trend can be fought?

**Gillespie:** One of the things that Stossel has done—and I think both he and places like CEI and *Reason*, the magazine and the think tank, have done very well—is to disseminate a counter-narrative. They're not simply providing more information, but a better understanding of things like risk. You can't just simply point out that Alar, for example, was a phantom risk. It is also important to speak in terms of a framework, or in terms of a mindset. You say, "Look, this is a repetitive story. Something we have taken for granted and is important to our day has become loathsome to us, and is now a huge risk." Whether it's phthalates, or cyclamates, or saccharine, or NutraSweet, you point out flaws in this specific example you also tell them this is a story that people have used to control and regulate your choices, your lifestyle, and your desires. Always be skeptical.

I think we are in a golden age of skepticism, partly because of the work of Stossel, CEI, and *Reason*. But it's also because we have a much freer marketplace of ideas thanks largely to technology. Because of desktop publishing, it's now easier and simpler to get the stories out to a wide audience. The Internet and the World Wide Web have made distribution easier. The rise of cable has not only led to a proliferation of the number of channels and sitcoms you can watch, but also the number of viewpoints you can hear. All of these advances have led to a skepticism that will never be total and never should be total, but it has helped cut down on the number of the scares that we have seen.

**CEI:** In "The Battle for Your Brain," *Reason* Science Correspondent and CEI Adjunct Fellow Ronald Bailey states that breakthroughs in brain science face major hurdles because "most of the debate over neuroethics has not centered around patients' or citizens' autonomy, perhaps because so many of the field's critics themselves hope to restrict that autonomy in various ways." In what other fields do you think innovation could be stifled by this fear of letting individuals decide whether and how to adopt new technologies?

**Gillespie:** We've seen this in almost every field in which there is a breakthrough moment and individuals are suddenly empowered. It is the stock reaction of the establishment and people who have something to lose—generally power or regulatory control.

For example, when the World Wide Web became a mass phenomenon in the mid-1990s, you saw Congress and the Clinton Administration grappling to control it with the Communications Decency Act. The World Wide Web is a mass empowering technology that allows individuals essentially to own a printing press and disseminate information in an unparalleled, powerful way. The Communications Decency Act would have controlled speech on the Internet. We're extremely lucky that the worst provisions of the act were struck down by the courts, because it would have applied essentially broadcast standards of speech to the Internet, and that would have been horrible.

You see such struggles for control in other places, like the financial field, where regulations on day trading and regulations that prohibited people from directly buying goods and services like stocks and bonds were very slow to change. In any field where there is innovation, the established powers have something to lose. They wrote the previous legislation, and they will make the case to write the next era of legislation.

What I think has generally changed is that people are much more comfortable with the idea of individuals being in more substantial control. For example, people are more inclined to favor Social Security privatization. Over the past 20 years there has been a real shift in the way people think about retirement. It went from being pension plan both funded and administered by your employer or union and, through some magic formula, you get kicked out a check for life after you retire. What has happened is that at various points, people have been introduced to the idea that

you can take control of your retirement savings both inside and outside your pension, and you can manage it as efficiently as anyone else.

And I think you'll see this in many different areas. This is one of the great intellectual battles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It goes back to the 20s and 30s, when Hayek and Mises argued against those who maintained that if someone were not in control, there would be total chaos. Crops wouldn't grow in the fields. There would be no harvests, so no food would be processed, brought to the store, or distributed. Society needs someone in charge of setting prices and doing this and that. Mises and Hayek helped show that societies are generally spontaneously ordering and self-regulating. To get things done, you need to allow people to make important decisions freely and at the local level. We're standing on their shoulders as we become more comfortable with autonomy and giving other people autonomy.

**CEI:** Socialism, as it was known for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, is now dead. What is the biggest threat to freedom in the world today?

**Gillespie:** That is an interesting question. We don't have an actual party line at *Reason* on the war on terror. Everyone on staff pretty much agrees that the war needs to be fought—how that maps onto Iraq is another question. The quick answer is to say Islamism, because Islamism is not simply a religious doctrine, but is something that is shared by many people. It is the greatest threat not only how it affects the Middle East, or how it is a potent force as a religion, but how it is really a reaction to the modernity, autonomy, and the liberation of people from social control—not Islam per se, but *Islamism*—and fundamentalist Islam in particular.

Both John Kerry and George Bush have said we're in a new Cold War with Islam. I don't think we are, because I don't think the anti-modernity movement that Islamism represents is as potent a force as Communism was. And part of that is because international communism as incarnated in the Soviet Union—and before that in the mix of Soviet Union and China—was part of a forward-thinking Western tradition within the European enlightenment movement, a sort-of dark twin of classical liberalism.

In that way, I don't think Islamism is the problem, but rather people in the West who have become fearful of technology and of creative destruction and the unending change in innovation that characterizes good Western and global society. Many beneficiaries of the gains of freedom over past 30 and even the past 300 years will worry there is an end of history; we're at the brink of something, so they want to shut things down. You see that mindset in the environmental and other leftist movements, and you see that also in movements on the Right—for example, with people who say the family is on the precipice, despite indicators that the family is actually stronger, or that we'll run out innovation and run out of progress. It's a human impulse to want to be alive at the height of civilization or just as things are collapsing. People are worried, to paraphrase John Kerry, that they will be the last to die for a mistake, so they want to freeze everything the way it is.

I'm a technological optimist. My parents were children of immigrants, born in the Depression, and growing up under grinding poverty. I know that my life has been much, much richer than theirs was. I have a three-year-old and a 10-year-old, and I know that they will have many more options than I had. And I see no reason why that can't progress indefinitely unless the forces of reaction and control manage to convince enough people that this is as good as we've had it, or we had it better 25 years ago, and we have to hold the line against the future.

**CEI:** One of the most interesting articles in *Choice* is "Kroger Babb's Roadshow" by Joe Bob Briggs (November 2003). Briggs profiles the king of 1940s and 1950s exploitation movies, alleged "educational" films that treated such then-taboo subjects as sex and drugs. Briggs describes Babb's films as "the last wave of 19<sup>th</sup> Century medicine shows—part biology lesson, part sideshow, part morality play, part medical 'shock footage.'" In June, Jon Haber in *Tech Central Station* compares Babb with Michael Moore, whom he credits of having "the Babb-like audacity to

take on such an untouchable subject [as the Columbine high school massacre] in an exploitation manner...Moore's innovation was to provide viewers not with forbidden (no longer) sex, drugs, and gore, but with 'documentaries' that pandered to political preconceptions." Do you find the comparison appropriate? Could the boundaries between information and entertainment become so blurred as to make phenomena like this commonplace?

**Gillespie:** I watched *Bowling for Columbine*. What was so fascinating was that at the end, Moore was grasping for an explanation for gun violence in America. He couldn't supply an answer for it. He recognized at various points in the movie that it wasn't an issue of gun laws, and it isn't an issue of gun availability, because he goes to Canada, where guns are just as available as they are in the U.S., but violence is much lower. He never provides a good answer. You can read *Bowling for Columbine* as a self-deconstruction of the gun control argument. In that way, it is a fascinating document. Moore is essentially throwing up his hands and saying, "I can't explain this! The one thing I know is that more gun laws aren't going to change anything."

Going to Kroger Babb, he used social conventions not just to combat censorship, but also to please an audience. Even in a very restricted circumstance, he was able to figure out a way to give the audiences exactly what they wanted. Because those watching his "Mom and Dad" or any of his sex education/hygiene movies wanted titillation. And everyone was in on it. The cops were in on it. The audiences were in on it, and the moviemakers were in on it. Kroger Babb is a triumph of the human spirit—like the Pony Express delivering a message over a harsh landscape, he got it to people who wanted it. In a way, Michael Moore is like that—it gets complicated because of questions of interpretation—but he is using modern technology and conventions to deliver stories that people want to hear; and he's done that spectacularly with his latest movie *Fahrenheit 9/11*. I am less interested in content as opposed to the medium, format, or ability to disseminate information.

In terms of information vs. entertainment, we live in age of stories and conscious narrative. And we have information overload, because everywhere you go, especially when compared to 10 years ago, you can get vast amounts of information on virtually any topic. Elitists, both on the Right and the Left, might say that we have dumbed down American culture. In fact, what has happened is that everyone has become a critical reader because you must filter everything. If you are bombarded by 150 channels, you become much more conscious of rhetoric and of narrative strategies. You become aware of the ways in which people put their information in a particular format to convince you, persuade you, or dissuade you. I don't worry about line between entertainment and news being blurred; they always have been. What is different about the current moment is that people are much more conscious and discriminating, and are much smarter readers.