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OPINION

2,000 Libertarians Come Together at FreedomFest in Memphis



Rainer Zitelmann
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In Memphis, 2,000 libertarians gathered from Wednesday to Saturday for FreedomFest, which was launched by economist Mark Skousen in 2007. “The idea behind FreedomFest,” explains Skousen, “is that I have felt that we have been losing the battle for freedom for some time. So, I came up with the idea of creating a national gathering of freedom lovers where once a year we meet to learn from each other, network and socialize, and celebrate liberty (or what’s left of it).”

He quickly established the event as “the world’s largest gathering of free minds,” an independent organization with no political party affiliations. Adding to the festival’s appeal is that it is held in conjunction with several other events – the Global Financial Summit (an investment conference) and the Anthem Film Festival (the largest libertarian film festival in the world). Each year there is a celebrity speaker. In the past, William Shatner (Captain James T. Kirk in Star Trek) and boxing legend George Foreman have appeared. This year it was Mike Rowe from the TV series Dirty Jobs.

Memphis has a very high crime rate, with official statistics registering 1,750 crimes per 100,000 residents – only three American cities have higher crime rates. This was a state of affairs that football coach Bill Courtney touched on in his indictment of the American justice system. Although the U.S. sends more people to prison than any other country, crime is constantly on the rise. The problem, he said, is the 70 percent recidivism rate. He showcased private initiatives aimed at getting ex-prisoners into jobs, which have reduced the recidivism rate as low as eight percent. Sometimes it starts with

simple things, such as an initiative to get homeless people to take jogging classes: “At the beginning, only a few took part, later there were hundreds. Just learning the discipline of getting up at 6 every morning made a difference.” His message: “Don’t wait for the government. It will not solve the problems. Let’s start ourselves.” He is proud of the fact that his projects get by without any government support: “Not one government dollar was involved.”

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“Wokeism” was the subject of numerous speeches, including one from Vivek Ramaswamy. The 38-year-old is the youngest candidate for the 2024 Republican Party presidential primaries. The New York Times called him an anti-woke candidate. The problem, he said, is that more and more Americans define themselves as “victims.” He also opposes ESG guidelines, which he believes are leading to the politicization of the economy and ultimately amount to the abolishment of the free market economy, because entrepreneurs and consumers will no longer decide what to produce and where to invest. “Capitalism is the best system!” he exclaimed – a conviction that, for all their differences, united all libertarians at FreedomFest.

Steve Forbes took to the stage and criticized the U.S. and Europe for increasingly turning to “modern socialism.” By this he means: In the past, socialists nationalized private property. Today, the same goal is being

pursued through ever more state regulation. This, he explained, undermines private property until only an empty shell remains. Increasingly, it is politicians and civil servants – and not companies and consumers – who decide what is produced. Central banks, he continued, are acting more and more like planning authorities in socialist countries. As Forbes sees it, central bank policies are increasingly undermining currencies.

The transformation of the economy today is primarily taking place under the banner of the fight against climate change, which was the topic of Michael Schellenberger's speech. He does not deny climate change, but believes that its effects have been exaggerated by falsified statistics and unsubstantiated worst-case scenarios. He also points out the contradictions of many governments' policies: in Germany, for example, the government has decided to phase out nuclear power plants, leaving the country dependent on other countries for imports of electricity generated from burning coal.

The topic of one session was whether or not to raise taxes on the rich in the USA. Economist Lanny Ebbenstein argued that taxes on the rich should be increased to 50 percent. His argument: even when the tax rate was 70 percent or higher, the U.S. economy experienced very strong growth, while in times of low taxes, it has tended to stagnate. The economist Arthur Laffer, who became famous as an advisor to Ronald Reagan and whose name became associated with the "Laffer Curve," which states that lower taxes lead to higher tax revenues and more growth, vehemently disagreed.

Ebbenstein's mistake: He confuses marginal tax rates with taxes actually paid. In the periods of very high tax rates he cites, there were so many tax saving schemes that hardly anyone paid the high tax rates he uses as an argument. Example: The top marginal rate of tax in 1962 was 91 percent. After deductions and credits, only 447 out of 71 million taxpayers actually paid any taxes at the top rate.

There were also speakers from other countries, such as 38-year-old Gloria Alvarez, who recently ran in Guatemala's presidential election but lost to two left-wing candidates. The left now rules in most Latin American countries – recently winning in Brazil, Colombia, Peru and even Chile. According to Alvarez, the real reason for the socialist candidates' success across Latin America is the failure of right-wing governments, which have often been thoroughly corrupt and only concerned with defending privileges. "Privatization," she explained, has usually meant "selling" former state-owned enterprises cheaply to friends.

Tax receipts, Alvarez complains, are misused, largely funding inflated bureaucracies and trade unions – only two percent of government spending, she points out, is invested in the important area of internal security. The rule of law, she says, must be massively strengthened and this share increased to 50 percent. At the same time, she advocates the legalization of marijuana and prostitution, because it is only organized crime that benefits from bans – and the police and courts cannot focus on really important tasks. By advocating the right to abortion and the legalization of drugs, libertarians such as Alvarez distinguish themselves from the traditional right, but in the field of economic policy, she advocates a flat tax and a considerable reduction in the role of the state and more capitalism. Her thesis: the state is too strong where it should be weak – especially in the economy – and too weak where it should be strong, i.e. in the area of internal security. Less state interference in the economy and more money for police and justice, is her solution.

There was a heated discussion about the new nationalism in the USA and whether it is a danger or not. Bryan Caplan, a libertarian who advocates Open Borders, believes nationalism is a major threat. All around the world, nationalism is a danger, whether in Russia, China or the USA, he claimed. Rich Lowry, in opposition to Caplan's position, argued that at a time when the left is trying to divide society through "woke" identity politics, there is a

loyalty that holds the country together, and that is the commitment to the nation.

One of the event's major highlights was the launch of a new video series: Steve Forbes on Achievement by Steve Forbes and izzit.org. Heroes of Capitalism might be a better title, as Forbes [profiles](#) ten entrepreneurs and highlights what we can learn about the market economy from their lives.

The Anthem Film Festival offered 32 films, 15 panels, and four standalone speeches on topics including free speech, entrepreneurship, the fight against oppression, Covid lockdowns, Bitcoin, Calvin Coolidge, and the importance of fatherhood. The Exiles, a film produced by Steven Soderbergh, won the award for Best Documentary Feature, while the award for Best Short Documentary went to To My Father, a moving story about Troy Kotsur that is being talked about as a potential Oscar contender. The Unredacted, a film that was canceled by several major film festivals after protests erupted at Sundance, won the Anthem Grand Prize.

Rainer Zitelmann is the author of the book "[In Defense of Capitalism](#)."