

# The Liberty Road Trip Everyone Should Take

Rainer Zitelmann's *The Origins of Poverty* argues that economic freedom, not socialism, lifts nations from poverty, using global case studies to show how incentives drive wealth and happiness.

By *Mark Anthony*



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**A**re some people just rich—and others poor—by dint of factors such as having been born to rich (or poor) parents?

That is the deterministic view of the left—the polite word for the adherents of the doctrines of Karl Marx—who believe that economic status is static at best and unfair at worst and that inequality must be addressed by making everyone equally poor.

Of course, the adherents of Marx never quite express it that way. Instead, they say everyone will have an equal share of everything produced by the labor of everyone, for the sake of the common good.

It sounds very nice, if you don't think about it too much. Or read books such as Rainer Zitelmann's just-released [\*The Origins of Poverty\*](#).

The book is a tour in the literal sense as well as a tour de force in defense of what works to better the human condition and what does not. It is presented as a kind of travelogue, beginning in April of 2002 in Zurich, Switzerland, and ending in late 2024 in Buenos Aires, Cordoba, and Mendoza, Argentina. The author visits and reports on conditions and outcomes in 30 different countries. He asked ordinary people to give him their views on what economic freedom means to them.

The author calls this his “Liberty Road Trip” or “Liberty Journey” in the Foreword to *Origins*.

Zitelmann, who holds a Phd in history and political science, did his doctoral dissertation on the economic and social policies of Adolf Hitler's National Socialist regime and is the author of [How Nations Escape Poverty](#) (2024) and [In Defense of Capitalism](#) (2023), among dozens of other works.

[\*The Origins of Poverty\*](#) can be thought of as *another* sequel to Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, considered by many to be the anticipatory rebuttal to Marx's *manifesto*.

Interestingly, Smith's book was published in 1776—the same year as the *Declaration of Independence*—and both expressed congruent ideas about opportunity creating wealth via the unfettered exercise of human ingenuity. Jefferson famously characterized this in romantic terms as the “pursuit of happiness,” while Smith expressed it in economic terms, but both were explaining the same thing.

People are happy when they are free.

And they act in accordance with incentives—and disincentives. When there is opportunity, which can be considered synonymous with incentive, people tend to take advantage of the opportunity to better themselves and their condition. This results in more rather than less happiness and wealth.

Conversely, when there is little or no opportunity—another way of saying disincentives—people tend to give up and become unhappy because they perceive that their own initiative and talent and willingness to work are not only irrelevant but likely to result in negative consequences for them.

Zitelmann's book compares countries where opportunity (and thus, happiness) is greater—such as Switzerland—with countries where it has been stifled, as in Zimbabwe. The Swiss are, he writes, among the happiest people on Earth because Switzerland ranks high in such areas as “property rights, judicial effectiveness, fiscal health, and government integrity.” These are among the factors that incentivize the creation of wealth and general prosperity. Anyone who is productive is rewarded and protected.

People are less happy in countries that lack such incentives and protections.

Why work when the “reward” is confiscation of the fruits of one’s labor? Why invest in a business when one knows ahead of time that the government is hostile toward business? What does it matter to make any effort at all when all that matters is what novelist Ayn Rand called “pull,” by which she meant the ability to use government to enrich oneself at the expense of others?

This brings up an important point that is a recurring theme of Zitelmann’s books: leftist economists assume not only that wealth isn’t earned but that its creation is a *zero-sum game* in which “capitalists”—to use the Marxist snark term—cheat or defraud others of their wealth. But capitalism increases wealth generally—a point also made by Smith in *Wealth of Nations*. One man’s gain is not another man’s loss—because the transaction adds cumulatively to everyone’s wealth within the system.

Cars are a fine example of this phenomenon.

When they first appeared in the late 1800s and into the early 1900s, they were hand-built indulgences for the extremely affluent. Very few had cars, and thus very few cars were sold. Henry Ford standardized car parts and mass produced cars at a cost so low anyone who worked at the Ford plant could afford to buy one. Ford realized that lowering costs increased his profits because more people could buy his cars.

Ford got rich—but in a very real way, so did his workers.

Everyone was happier.

An especially interesting chapter in *Origins* focuses on the author’s trip to Vietnam in 2022. In his youth, Zitelmann wrote that he admired communism: “All my sympathies lay with the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam. I wrote articles on the Vietnam War in my school newspaper and sold National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam pamphlets at my school when I was 14 years old.”

But when he visited the country many years later, he was astonished to discover that ordinary Vietnamese admired America and the principles of the free market. Even the government realized communism wasn’t making the people happy—just poor.

“At the Sixth Party Congress in December 1986, the country’s leaders adopted a comprehensive package of reforms known as Đổi Mới (“renewal”). As in China under Deng Xiaoping, private property was allowed and the party increasingly focused on the development of a market economy. Đinh Minh Tuấn emphasizes the role played by Võ Văn Kiệt, who had already carried out market economy reforms in Hồ Chí Minh City in 1983 before Đổi Mới began. From August 8, 1991, until his resignation on September 25, 1997, Võ Văn Kiệt was Prime Minister of Vietnam. He was one of the driving forces of the Đổi Mới economic reforms, supported privatization and called for the end of special privileges for army and party leaders. Under his aegis, Article

21 was also inserted into the Vietnamese constitution, thereby guaranteeing the protection of private ownership of the means of production against expropriation.”

Result? Happier, more prosperous Vietnamese.

Just a sample of the case studies in *Origins* that constitute a refutation of everything contained in that miserable book written by Marx that has caused so much unhappiness, poverty—and worse—around the world.

It ought to be read by everyone who wants to know what makes people happy—and wealthy.

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