

THE MORAL LIBERAL

Competition in the Marketplace of Libertarian Ideas

Reflections on the International Students for Liberty Conference (ISFLC)

By Sandy Ikeda

I just returned from the eighth International Students for Liberty Conference (ISFLC), which took place February 13–15 in Washington, DC. According to ISFLC’s website, “last year’s event featured over 1,200 attendees from 26 countries,” and while I don’t have the official head count of registered participants for this year’s event, my best guess is well over that number, including six bright students from my own Purchase College.

The turnout is quite impressive when you think that, as I’ve been told, 15 years ago you could have fit the entire membership of Students for Liberty (SFL) in a single conference room.

The rise of the SFL mirrors the rapid growth of the “liberty movement.” Things are very different today from when I was in college.

Back in the day...

In the mid-1970s, if you wanted to study Austrian economics as an undergraduate, there were really only two choices: Hillsdale College in Michigan or Grove City College (GCC) in Pennsylvania. Turns out I chose both. I spent my freshman and sophomore years at Hillsdale, where I studied under Ed Facey, Stuart Butler, Madsen Pirie, and Eamonn Butler, and then my junior and senior years at Grove City, where I studied under Hans Sennholz and became acquainted with his wife, Mary. (I also had contact with a freshman named Pete Boettke, whose textbook I now use in my economics classes, and I roomed with a young man named Alex Chafuen, the long-time president of the Atlas Network).

My first exposure to an organization dedicated to free-market economics was the one I now have the honor to write and lecture for, the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE). It was toward the end of my senior year at Grove City in 1980, when, along with about a half-dozen other students from GCC, I traveled to FEE’s former headquarters in Irvington-on-Hudson to meet Leonard Read, Bob Anderson, Reverend Edmund Opitz, Paul Poirot, and Bettina Bien Greaves, who pretty much constituted the “founding fathers” of free-market think tanks.

And when I graduated in 1980, there were really only a handful of organizations of national repute that were devoted to promoting classical-liberal scholarship or policy. Just before beginning the PhD program at New York University (NYU), I attended a weeklong seminar at Dartmouth College sponsored by the recently established Cato Institute. It was there that I had the privilege of meeting Murray Rothbard, Leonard Liggio, Ralph Raico, Roy Childs, Ronald Hamowy, and Walter Grinder. In 1984, I was lucky enough to spend a summer at the Institute for Humane Studies — in Menlo Park, California, in those days — and got to know John Blundell,

Christine Blundell, Greg Rehmke, Jeremy Shearmur, and Randy Barnett. And when I got to NYU, I studied with Fritz Machlup, Ludwig Lachmann, Israel Kirzner, Mario Rizzo, Jerry O'Driscoll, Larry White, and Roger Garrison and learned from a host of extraordinary fellow grad students who went on to have important academic careers, including Don Lavoie, Don Boudreaux, George Selgin, and Roger Koppl.

(The other important free-market-oriented institution at the time was the Heritage Foundation, but my contact with it has been more limited.)

Competition and innovation

I know that's a lot of names to drop, but my point is that I can do it here in a few column inches. In my 20s, I could personally meet nearly all the day's top classical liberal thinkers (including F.A. Hayek and Henry Hazlitt, just to drop two more names), which would be hard to imagine doing now. Trying to list all of today's classical liberals would take at least an entire column, and I would be leaving out many that I'm not aware of.

In my introductory economics classes, there are certain basic principles that I like to convey that help to establish a framework for the economic way of thinking. One is that competition is a process of discovery and innovation, not merely of trying to become more efficient at doing the same thing.

Competition spurs innovation because even in an increasingly wealthy economy, resources are limited, and you can't fund every nice-sounding idea that comes along.

For three decades after it was founded in 1946, FEE carefully cultivated a consistent message of freedom and peaceful cooperation through free markets. That persistence slowly began to bear fruit in the 1970s. So in the early 1980s, with so few organizations around, it's impressive that the people of FEE, with only their strong ethical principles to guide and constrain them, were able to maintain sound and principled economic thinking and to deliver high-quality publications and seminars. But in the long term, just as in the marketplace for ordinary goods and services, competition is the true regulator in the marketplace of ideas.

FEE seminar graduates and *Freeman* readers began to establish their own think tanks and policy institutions. The number of organizations grew through the 1990s and 2000s to meet the increasing demand for alternatives to collectivist and interventionist thinking.

At ISFLC, I saw gathered in one place Randians and anti-Objectivists, social liberals and social conservatives, rugged individualists and bleeding hearts, minarchists and anarchists, online educators and instructors from brick-and-mortar universities, classical liberals both political and nonpolitical, organizations for and not for profit, religious libertarians and atheists, and groups specializing in particular issues: drug legalization, tax reform, feminism, justice, environmentalism, police militarization, and Bitcoin. Back in the day, these issues would have been covered by the few organizations I've named; indeed, back in the day, most of these issues weren't widely discussed or didn't even exist. Competition breeds innovation.

Oh, and ISFLC was an *international* meeting. According to the website, “SFL has grown to include 50,000 students, 1,400+ student groups, 600+ student leaders, 50+ conferences for 10,000+ attendees, and 300,000+ resources on every inhabited continent.” (I wouldn’t be surprised if SFL were to begin a chapter in Antarctica.)

Competition and cooperation

Another basic principle I teach is that competition and cooperation are not opposites; in fact, competition is really the only way for large numbers of people to effectively cooperate and use scarce resources.

And the liberty movement is getting very large.

Of course, large numbers alone are often a misleading indicator of competition. Numbers combined with diversity of all kinds, however, are a good formula for promoting competition and cooperation. Competition is both a result of diversity and a generator of diversity. That diversity sets the stage for rivalry.

There is indeed rivalry in true competition, but with large numbers — and, again, today we’re talking about tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of hard-core libertarians and classical liberals — that rivalry for scarce resources serves to deepen the knowledge, sharpen the message, and heighten the effectiveness of each. It’s the best way to regulate (yes, I said regulate) those resources and to avoid waste.

Unlike collectivist social philosophies, libertarianism recognizes and embraces that kind of competition and genuine diversity, even if it means constantly having to come up with better ideas and more effective ways to present them and make them stick. Failure is always an option and disappointment and success go hand-in-hand in the competitive process. And on the demand side, for the liberty movement to flourish, people need to listen to and discuss the opposing views, both within and without the movement, of anyone who is willing to talk civilly about their ideas.

There is no better example of voluntary, peaceful cooperation than what I saw at ISFLC. It took my breath away to see a buzzing convention hall full of exhibitors’ tables run by young people surrounded by hundreds of even younger people *while at the very same time* in the huge ballroom upstairs many hundreds more lined up to snap a picture with one of the headline speakers. According to this year’s conference catalog, there were 23 exhibitors and an additional 35 participating organizations.

With such competition, cooperation, and innovation on both the supply side and the demand side of the liberty movement, I’m feeling optimistic. It’s much easier to see today that liberal ideas can continue to make significant inroads into the larger world of ideas, the place where genuine change begins, and to persuade growing numbers of people that liberty is the way to lasting peace and justice.

Here’s to next year!

