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Bow Ties and Slam Poetry: This Is Libertarianism in 2015

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By David Weigel

Feb. 17, 2015

“I’m on that f*** Jim Crow flow,” says Matthew La Corte. “I’m Thoreau meets Van Gogh after doing three lines of blow.”

It’s Saturday night—Valentine’s Day, if you want to make an easy joke out of it—at the eighth International Students for Liberty conference. In the bellows of the Marriott Wardman Park, La Corte, a bow-tied Hofstra University senior, is delivering libertarian slam poetry. He is framed by easels of libertarian paintings, varying from pure abstraction to the hammer-head metaphor of “Angel Drone,” a drone that was also an angel. La Corte’s audience, a few dozen libertarian students and organizer Jeffrey Tucker, had chuckled at the curse word, then hushed up.

“I’m melting clocks, I’m listening to Bach, I have visions of Tupac,” says La Corte. “I move people, call me the tire, in Hofstra attire, I aspire to inspire.” Halfway through, after quoting Beyonce, he pivots to “serious shit” and changes up his meter.

“There are young girls being sex trafficked in this city as we speak,” he says. “There are kids out there starving and can’t even stand on their feet. There are child soldiers who can’t even spell the word defeat.”

No one moves. When La Corte finishes, everyone applauds. The equally bow-tied Tucker, who had kicked off the event by singing a sixth century ballad in the original Latin, thanks La Corte—“my double”—and ushers up Naomi Brockwell, an “extraordinary figure,” opera singer, and polymath host of the Bitcoin Girl web series.

“I would say that if you want to change society, you have to focus on the culture,” says Brockwell.

“You believe that art is the foundation for change in society?” asks Tucker, through a grin. “It’s more important than policy studies?”

Tucker and Brockwell belt out a jokey chorus of “Night and Day”—he’s the Tony Bennett to her Lady Gaga—and then another undergrad arrives to sing a stripped-raw cover of Neil Young’s “Cortez the Killer.” This is libertarianism in 2015. It’s not to be confused with the libertarianism outside the door, at the Charles Koch Institute’s overflowing table of internship info; not to be confused with the faux jail cell set up by Young Americans for Liberty, to flog its prison reform campaign.

At most other gatherings of young politicians, in February 2015, there’d be at least some focus on electoral politics. There was almost none of that at the Students for Liberty conference. Libertarian was their counter-culture; it contained multitudes. Most of them had only ever been involved in politics during the presidency of Barack Obama. Many of their fellow refuseniks had been attracted to the Occupy movement. They were not, but it was perfectly natural for them to start progressive outreach clubs on campus, or anti-war campaigns, or campaigns to decriminalize drugs. Vicente Fox, the former president of Mexico, came to their conference—of all the confabs that invade Washington—to call the drug war “an absolute failure.” Of course he did.

The counter-culture tendency of libertarianism was old, with deep roots in the anti-Vietnam War movement, embodied by writers like the late Karl Hess. In recent years, as the duo of Ron and Rand Paul spread the libertarian gospel into Republican politics, reporters have noticed sub-cultures like New Hampshire’s Free State Project and its annual PORCfest, a “libertarian Burning Man” where Bitcoin and silver pieces are preferred to “fiat currency.”

That had grown wildly in the Obama era, and so had the libertarian counter-culture on campus. The opening of the conference on Friday night was the only time most attendees gathered in one space. They did so to hear Edward Snowden, who addressed them via video link and accepted an honorary “alumnus of the year” prize. Just as many students, nearly a thousand—with a ratio of around three men to two women—stuck around to hear Ron Paul give a short speech.

“A few years ago, we could have fit everyone in the first few rows,” marveled moderator Nick Gillespie, the black-clad editor of Reason.com.

Paul took questions; the awkward side of diversity revealed itself. The first question came from a Russian student who was angered by Paul’s skepticism of the Ukrainian government and its western backing. The second came from an American who wanted Paul to repudiate race-obsessed newsletters that were published under his name.

The tenor of those questions, Paul’s annoyed answer (“For me to say I’m gonna disavow everything I wrote in a newsletter, that’s foolishness”), and whether any of this was legitimate, was debated all weekend. It turned out, for example, that the newsletter question came from a

student who'd previously pronounced herself "ready for Hillary" (Clinton), and tweeted a photo of herself clutching Texas Democratic Senator Wendy Davis's memoir.

Was she an interloper? Not at all—she was an example of how much the new libertarianism could absorb. Anyone walking the halls of the Marriott could see campaign-ready haircuts, campaign-terrifying mohawks, band t-shirts, and bow ties fighting for majority status with neckties. After a lunch put on by the Center for a Stateless Society, a group of left-libertarians with dyed hair, made their own rounds of the conference. One of them, Bobby Persons, wore a coat decorated with two signs.

Smash capitalism for gender liberation!

If you see a Rothbard on the road, kill him.

No one was much bothered by the indictment of capitalism; most people seemed to get the dual joke about the Buddha and a founding father of modern libertarianism. Rebecca, a trans woman who'd joined the convoy to the conference from Appalachian State University, remarked bitterly that she was "here to impress a girl," and talked about how irritating some of the more conservative libertarians could be.

"Last night we're at a party and there's a guy in a \$3,000 suit talking about how oppression is him being taxed on his condo," said Rebecca. "Well, I have a scar on my head from where a couple of rednecks hit me with a bottle, yelling 'queer' at me as they sped by on a truck. I started to argue, and he started telling me go get a job. I had enough of that, and I just got up and left. He said after me: 'I hope we get a Republican president so he gets rid of all these social welfare programs.' Like that was an appropriate thing to say to another human being."

Rebecca was getting worked up, but just a few paces away, she and the other Stateless students found a booth of left-libertarian, anti-capitalist literature. For \$1 they could pick up pamphlets with titles like "Free Market Anti-Capitalism" and "No Copyright" and "Ten Common Objections to Market Anarchy and Ten Responses." For no cost, they could find allies. Some of them already had.

The Stateless students did not make up a majority at the conference, but there were more of them than there were faithful, straight-up politicians. Americans for Prosperity, the behemoth grassroots organization founded by David Koch, organized a panel that promised to teach "tools of the trade." Only one student showed up for it.

Meanwhile, a panel about how Bitcoin could "advance wellbeing in society" packed a room with more than 100 people. "Life satisfaction refers to a person's cognitive evaluation of his or her life as whole," said moderator Robert Patterson, as he explained the disruptive power of cryptocurrency and the germ-carrying menace of paper money. Down the hall, the Cato

Institute's climate scholar Patrick Michaels was telling a similarly packed room that they were giving scientists and statisticians too much credit when they credited them for doing good.

"The government exists to exist," he said, "to perpetuate itself. Do you think there would be no such thing as interwebs without DARPA? Come on!"

The Cato Institute was funded by some of the same donors as AFP; the Charles Koch Institute had put on the Bitcoin panel. Considerable amounts of money were being spent to inform young libertarians about life beyond the state. They were more radical, with more boundless ideas of what "liberty" meant, than the politicians who'd come to talk to them.

In another part of the Marriott, libertarian-minded Rep. Thomas Massie of Kentucky found himself in a friendly but insistent circle of students who asked increasingly obscure questions. Jeffrey Grisillo, the Pennsylvania state chair of Young Americans for Liberty, kept encouraging Massie to question the current thinking on intellectual property rights.

"If you arrange a thing so that one person with limited resources has some inventions," said Grisillo, "you're saying someone else with the same resources can't use them in the same fashion. That's a great injustice."

Massie wasn't convinced. "You disagree with Ron Paul, Thomas Jefferson, and Ben Franklin," he said. "I understand the libertarian arguments against property. If you read Bastiat, though, the whole experiment is about owning what you produce. Some people write books, some people invent stuff. I understand the libertarian argument, but it smells a little like socialism to me to say nobody owns their property."

Shortly after this, from a stage he shared with Michigan Rep. Justin Amash, Massie got no static. He got waves of applause as he described the success of his legislation for legal hemp growing. "I like to tell people it's rope, not dope," said Massie. Amash happily attacked his own party's foreign policy, and insisted that libertarians were changing it.

"There aren't enough votes to do a clean reauthorization of the PATRIOT Act now," said Massie. "That's thanks to you guys!"

There was no presidential straw poll. If there was, Rand Paul would win it. The young libertarian of 2015 could find politics on his own. It was more important that he just rebelled—that he bought a cryptocurrency, that he nullified a jury, or that he signed up on Jeffrey Tucker's Liberty.me web forum to talk pop culture or ways to hack water heaters and shower heads so that the regulators' damage was undone. (One tip from Liberty.me: Add phosphate to your detergent.) Why should progressivism get all the good rebels?

"People who are young now, up to age 40, grew up in a sort of libertarian atmosphere, so far as rock music was concerned, so far as the culture was concerned," said Deirdre McCloskey, a libertarian economist who transitioned from male to female at age 54, as she sat talking to the

founders of a libertarian feminist start-up. “They’re not as tight as we who grew up in the 50s are.”