



30 years on, Swedish scholar revisits Friedman's 'Free to Choose' in new film

By [Richard Sincere](#), Charlottesville Libertarian Examiner

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Beginning in August, PBS television stations around the country will have the opportunity to broadcast a new documentary film, *Free or Equal*, presented by Swedish free-lance writer and Cato Institute senior fellow [Johan Norberg](#).

Free or Equal revisits and distills some of the ideas found in Milton Friedman's 10-part documentary series, *Free to Choose*, originally produced in 1980, focusing on the Nobel laureate's views about the struggle between freedom and equality. Its release also coincides with a yearlong run-up to the [centenary](#) of Friedman's birth.

In an interview with the [Charlottesville Libertarian Examiner](#) on Friday, April 29, after a [special preview screening](#) of *Free or Equal* at the Cato Institute's Hayek Auditorium, Norberg said that "I was an admirer of the [*Free to Choose*] series. When I was developing my own ideas on some different subjects, I was quite impressed by this."

Still relevant after 30 years

As the 30-year anniversary approached, Norberg explained, "we thought, 'How can we update this and show that these ideas are extremely relevant to the kind of discussion that we're having [today] about spending, taxation, debts, bailouts, stimulus packages, all those things?'"

Compressing the ten hours of Friedman's original series into the sixty minutes of *Free or Equal* required some creativity on the part of Norberg and the producers.

"I really had to skip most of our ideas to be able to do that, but we figured that it's important to just get it out there and try to touch upon those important principles," he explained. "Then if people are interested, we're doing other things and a lot of other people are doing great things on expanding these ideas and getting them out there."

This documentary, he added, is "in a way, a teaser."

Vantage points

Norberg and his crew traveled to three continents and several different countries both to do research and to film on location, sometimes from the same vantage points that Friedman used in *Free to Choose* three decades ago.

“The most important stops along the way,” Norberg said, were the United States, Sweden, and Hong Kong, “because we thought that we should pick some sort of extremes in the way we’re thinking of political/economic alternatives.”

Free or Equal is not Johan Norberg’s first film.

“I have made films before,” he noted, “but mostly they’re based on my books. I’ve written a book on globalization and I made a documentary about that [*Globalisation Is Good*]. I wrote a book on the financial crisis, and I made a documentary about that [*Overdose*].”

It is a challenge, Norberg added, to make a documentary film, which requires a different sort of process than writing a book does.

“The processes are different,” he explained, because “what you’re doing when you’re writing is constantly expanding on your subjects and finding different things that you have to explain. Then you write a chapter about that, you do more research and so on.”

In contrast, “it’s really the opposite when you’re doing a documentary,” Norberg continued. “You have the ideas and then you’re trying to narrow it down, you’re trying to simplify it as much as possible, and make sure that you try to cover as much as [you can] in very, very little time.”

There is, he said, “almost nothing left of a book when it’s on the screen for an hour.”



Teenage anarchy

Norberg came to libertarian ideas after a period as an adolescent anarchist in his native Sweden.

“I started out as an anarchist in high school, neither left nor right, just generally opposed to authority and big things, big government, and big business,” he said.

He chuckled and explained:

“What made me more interested in classical liberal and libertarian ideas was my meetings with other anarchists and realizing that a lot of them really thought that, ‘Yeah, we want freedom for everything but not if people really start a factory or employ people because then we’re going to go over there and punch them.’”

At that point, he thought, “Hmm, that’s not really according to my principles.”

He was reaching for other ideas and, in a time before the World Wide Web and the Internet, he found them in the library.

He first discovered “the Manchester liberals -- Cobden and Bright -- and Adam Smith,” and then he found “modern libertarians” like Friedman and Nozick, as well as [Ayn Rand](#), “slowly and steadily realizing that I probably agree more with them.”

Ask PBS

In the months between now and August, when *Free or Equal* hits people’s homes, Norberg will be lecturing about the ideas in the film and about Milton Friedman himself, and also will be releasing [clips from the movie](#) and “sending them around the world.”

While *Free or Equal* has been made available for PBS stations to broadcast, “it’s up to individual stations around the country” to choose to use it, Norberg explained.

If people are interested in seeing the film on TV, he said, they should call or email their local PBS program directors and request that they schedule *Free or Equal* for broadcast in their communities.

“That will help to get it out,” Norberg said.

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