

In Galt They Trust

Ayn Rand hated both God and Ronald Reagan. Something to consider for the Tea Partiers. After all, she'd hate them, too.

GODDESS OF THE MARKET: AYN RAND AND THE AMERICAN RIGHT BY JENNIFER BURNS • OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS • 2009 • 384 PAGES • \$27.95

AYN RAND AND THE WORLD SHE MADE BY ANNE C. HELLER • NAN A. TALESE • 2009 • 592 PAGES • \$35

When the novelist, philosopher, and social critic Ayn Rand died in New York in 1982, her world had been reduced to a small group of sycophantic disciples, ironically dubbed “The Collective.” Twenty-plus years later, though, the circle of Rand’s influence is arguably wider than ever. While Rand has never lacked for book sales—the nature of her fiction virtually guarantees a self-renewing audience of underappreciated adolescents and self-righteous business executives—at present, her work is exerting far more political influence than it has enjoyed since the earliest days of American libertarianism. As Jonathan Chait of *The New Republic* and others have explained, Rand’s denunciations of government taxation and regulation as “looting” and her moral defense of capitalism are crucial to conservative rhetoric these days, especially within the militant “Tea Party” movement.

What a coincidence, then, that two well-researched, serious books on Rand should appear this year. Jennifer Burns, a University of Virginia historian, has penned a fine account of Rand’s life that particularly focuses on her place in the pantheon of the American Right, while veteran magazine editor Anne C. Heller

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(her resume ranges from *The Antioch Review* to *Lear's*) has written a more conventional biography that thoroughly explores the heretofore darker corners of Rand's life, including her childhood and adolescence in revolutionary Russia. While neither are Rand disciples (although Burns, unlike Heller, was given access to Rand's private papers, zealously guarded by her institutional monument, the Ayn Rand Institute), both defend her philosophical originality and her literary talent, and both view her as a tragic figure whose greatness was spoiled by her intolerance for dissent and her abusive private behavior toward her closest associates and potential allies. They also think she has been vindicated by her posthumous impact on the libertarian movement and a variety of writers and entrepreneurs, including the founders of Wikipedia and Craigslist.

But much as Rand craved appreciation for her work (as sadly reflected in the worshipful eyes of The Collective and her bitterness about every negative book review she ever received), it's hard to imagine that she would have been terribly happy about its current appropriation by a motley assortment of conservative populists, who mix quotes from *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* with Christian Scripture and the less-than-cerebral perspectives of Sarah Palin and Glenn Beck. In her own view, Rand was nothing if not a systematic philosopher whose ideas demanded an unconditional acceptance of her approach to metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, psychology, literature, and politics.

Rand's famous intolerance should not be dismissed as simply the psychological aberration of a flawed genius. She feared, for good reason, what lesser minds might do with the intellectual dynamite of her work when divorced from its philosophical context. The prophetess of "the virtue of selfishness" made rigorous demands of herself and all her followers to live self-consciously "heroic" lives under a virtual tyranny of reason and self-mastery, and to reject every imaginable natural and supernatural limitation on personal responsibility for every action and its consequences. Take all that away—take everything away that Rand actually cared about—and her fictional work represents little more than soft porn for middle-brow reactionaries who seek to rationalize their resentment of the great unwashed. This is why Rand was so precise about the moral obligations and absolute consistency demanded both of her fictional "heroes" and her acolytes. She hated "second-handers," people who borrowed others' philosophies without understanding or following them.

Rand's biography is rather remarkable. She was born as Alissa Zinovievna Rosenbaum in the proto-revolutionary year of 1905, the daughter of a wealthy Jewish chemist in St. Petersburg. After a precocious childhood spent in a luxury and privilege that was somewhat undercut by the innate

insecurity felt by all Russian Jews, Alissa struggled toward adulthood amid the steady dispossession of her father's livelihood and property by the Bolsheviks (an early prototype for John Galt, her father refused to work for the state). Having come to hate both the God of Old Russia and the State of the USSR, she escaped Russia in 1926 as a budding Soviet film critic by convincing the authorities that her value to the international revolution would benefit from a brief sojourn in Hollywood. It was a trick: Once in America, she never considered living anywhere else.

Rand arrived in Hollywood with a new name (the origins and meaning of which have been a source of eager and inconclusive debate among her acolytes), a worldview mainly derived from Friedrich Nietzsche, and a fierce determination supported by equally fierce self-regard. A chance encounter with Cecil B.

DeMille gained her a toehold in the film industry as a copy-writer (after a brief stint in the wardrobe department), and a glimpse of a handsome young actor named Frank O'Conner eventually gained her the husband she alternately adored and disrespected for 50 years.

For nearly two decades Rand lived a dual life, characterized by frantic and

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sporadically successful fiction writing and the drudge film work necessary to make ends meet. Her first novel, *We the Living* (a semi-autobiographical anti-Soviet tale), and her first play, *The Night of January 16th* (a heavily Nietzschean courtroom drama about a heroically selfish criminal), gave her little purchase outside the film industry. But the 1943 publication of *The Fountainhead* changed everything. At first (according to both biographers), the book was notorious mainly for its rape scene—a disturbing reflection of the author's lifelong view of sex and romantic love as inherently involving conquest by men and surrender by women, with both possessing powerful, dueling egos. Gradually, though, it created Rand's enduring cult following and marked her definitive transition from the highly ideological fiction writer of *We the Living* to the polemicist utilizing fictional forms that would be fully revealed in her didactic masterpiece, *Atlas Shrugged*. *The Fountainhead* also demonstrated the evolution of her world view from an essentially Nietzschean one, focused on adoration of creative, "productive" individuals and contempt for the human herd, to a systematic philosophy she later dubbed "Objectivism."

The hero of *The Fountainhead*, iconoclastic architect Howard Roark, reflected this evolution. Beginning as an entirely self-referential and supremely arrogant

genius (not to mention rapist), Roark, being prosecuted for dynamiting a public housing project whose design by him had been thoroughly adulterated, delivers an extended courtroom manifesto mirroring his creator's celebration of rationalism, egoism, and absolute property rights. Roark's "closing argument," a précis of Rand's own thinking on the "virtue of selfishness" and its requirements, won his acquittal from a jury cleverly vetted by his attorney to be "hard-faced." And it was in every way a precursor to what Rand considered her life's crowning achievement, "Galt's Speech" in *Atlas Shrugged*, published 14 years after *The Fountainhead*.

Of all Rand's books, it is *Atlas Shrugged* that remains most influential today. Galt's 60-page radio address to a dystopic, socialist America, offering on behalf of the "thinkers" he has led "on strike" to save the country in exchange for the adoption of a thoroughly capitalist system, is the source of contemporary conservative threats to "Go Galt" by withholding productivity from a society peopled and governed by parasites and "looters." Galt and the other capitalist heroes of *Atlas Shrugged* were endlessly eloquent in attributing every social evil to "altruism," the belief that any human being owed any sacrifice to any other, as reflected in the two great ideological errors of religion ("the mysticism of the mind") and socialism ("the mysticism of the muscle").

But it was in the long, painful process of creating *Atlas Shrugged* that Rand, according to both Burns and Heller, began to show emotional and behavioral traits that not only curtailed her influence during her later life, but betrayed her own philosophy of supreme reason, self-mastery, and respect for the autonomy of others.

The primary evidence usually cited for Rand's betrayal of her own principles is the now-infamous and frequently creepy love affair she conducted for 14 years with her youthful "intellectual heir," Nathaniel Branden, nee Nathan Blumenthal, beginning in 1954. Reflecting Rand's views on romantic love as the reification of one's idealized self (and thus as an ethical imperative), the couple insisted their spouses explicitly condone, and keep secret, their relationship. Before and after Rand's death, Branden (a name chosen by Blumenthal to exhibit his love for Rand, and an anagram, according to Heller, for the Jewish formulation "ben Randen," or "son of Rand") and his wife, Barbara, whose friends and relatives heavily populated The Collective, together built a small empire of Objectivist discipline and instruction. Most of this empire was centered in the Rand-authorized Nathaniel Branden Institute, which began as the vehicle for live lectures by Branden and Rand herself on topics ranging from Aristotle to literary theory. It eventually sponsored "classes" in which students around the country would gather around a tape recorder to listen to Their Masters' Voices.

In both biographies, Rand's relationship with the Brandens is treated as largely spoiling her life and her subsequent influence. Her emotional and intellectual dependence on their worshipful regard for her, their busy and successful proselytizing activities through the institute and the official house organ, *The Objectivist*, and their hostility to Rand's critics drew her into an ever-tightening and paranoid circle. By the late 1960s, there was virtually no subject imaginable that did not have an authorized Objectivist point of view, enforced pitilessly by Branden—including such unlikely subjects as classical music (Bach: bad; Beethoven: good). The weekly Saturday night meetings of Rand with The Collective in her small, smoke-filled Manhattan apartment turned into hellish criticism and self-criticism sessions in which unlucky members were challenged to “check their premises” and measure every detail of their lives against Objectivist principles and the heroic figures of Rand's novels. Indeed, Rand's characters ultimately became more vivid and relevant to her and her followers than the people they encountered in actual life. As Burns observes,

When [Rand] stopped writing novels she continued to live in the imaginary worlds she had created, finding her characters as real and meaningful as the people she spent time with every day. Over time she retreated even further into a universe of her own creation, joined there by a tight band of intimates who acknowledged her as their chosen leader.

This “universe of her own creation” collapsed in 1968 when she discovered that Branden, her own John Galt and the man to whom she had dedicated *Atlas Shrugged*, had been carrying on a clandestine affair with a much younger and decidedly non-intellectual woman, exposing himself as the very antithesis of the systematically rational and ideal-loving *Übermensch* Rand adored. Indeed, she had been spending long hours during the early to mid 1960s counseling him about his emotional and sexual problems (with her, and with his own wife), while seeking to lure him back to her bed, unaware that his inability to be her lover in any sense of the word disguised a long pattern of deception.

Rand's subsequent and highly public (though oblique, since she never acknowledged her affair with him) excommunication of the Brandens from her movement and her life roiled Objectivist circles for years. It also provided a loyalty test even more rigorous than full fidelity to Rand's philosophy and polyglot opinions. Well after Rand's death, her many detractors were fed a rich diet of scandal and hypocrisy when the Brandens, long divorced, published their own memoirs and disclosed all the sexual details of Nathaniel's twice-weekly trysts with Rand, conducted in every available corner of Rand's own apartment (while her once-adored husband, Frank, sat in quiet but tormented exile in a

neighborhood bar). Barbara, who had reconciled with Rand weeks before the fading genius's death, made a particular impression with her *Passion of Ayn Rand*, subsequently dramatized in a sexually explicit cable television movie, an ironic if probably unconscious echo of its subject's strong roots in the film industry.

Once revealed after her death, Rand's unheroic personal life, combined with her ideological self-isolation from anyone questioning her authority on any subject, consolidated her reputation among her followers as someone to be admired from afar and emulated selectively. Burns's book pays particular attention to her frosty relationship with the libertarian movement that viewed her work as a—perhaps the—crucial formative influence. She repeatedly denounced the nascent Libertarian Party of the early 1970s as “hippies,” “scum,” and “plagiarists,” in no small part because of their selective appropriation of her philosophy. As her own productivity declined in the years just prior to her death, and as Objectivism became a fixed system, she seemed to fear the “looting” of her work by self-styled admirers even more than the “looting” of her income by the state.

Rand went to especially extravagant lengths to deny any association with American conservatism. In 1962, she hurled this anathema in *The Objectivist Newsletter*: “Objectivists are *not* ‘conservatives.’ We are radicals for capitalism; we are fighting for the philosophical base which capitalism did not have and without which it was doomed to perish.” She absolutely loathed the central organ of American conservatism, *National Review*, saying this in 1964:

I consider *National Review* the worst and most dangerous magazine in America... [b]ecause it ties capitalism to religion. The ideological position of *National Review* amounts, in effect, to the following: In order to accept freedom and capitalism, one has to believe in God or in some form of religion, some form of supernatural mysticism.

And she particularly hated the man who became the Holy Father of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century U.S. conservatism, Ronald Reagan. In 1976, as Burns reports, she urged readers to oppose his campaign for president. “I urge you, as emphatically as I can, not to support the candidacy of Ronald Reagan,” she wrote, calling him a conservative in “the worst sense of the word,” because he backed a mixed economy and opposed abortion rights.

Rand's disdain for religion was as integral to her philosophy as her disdain for anything that remotely smacked of socialism. That's made very clear in what she regarded as the most important writing of her life, Galt's speech in *Atlas Shrugged*: “[T]here are two kinds of teachers of the Morality of Death: the mystics of spirit and the mystics of muscle, whom you call the spiritualists and the

materialists, those who believe in consciousness without existence and those who believe in existence without consciousness. Both demand the surrender of your mind.”

To Rand, those who accepted “enslavement” to God—or for that matter, such conservative totems as family or tradition—had no moral standing to pose as fighters against socialism. This premise, more than any personal weaknesses, probably best explains her violent opposition to partial appropriation of her philosophy to suit the needs of the appropriator. As she said in 1966, “There can be no compromise on basic principles. There can be no compromise on moral issues. There can be no compromise on matters of knowledge, of truth, of rational conviction.”

Unfortunately for Rand’s posthumous wishes, the appropriation of her philosophy among today’s populist conservatives is full of compromises and incongruous combinations. From the other side of the divide on the American Right, Joe Carter of the influential Christian conservative journal *First Things* recently had this to say about the indiscriminate scrambling of right-wing memes in the Tea Party movement and beyond:

[T]he truth is the vast majority of the right subscribes to a form of libertarian populism inflected with social conservative attachments—an unholy hybrid of Ayn Rand, William Jennings Bryan, and Morton Downey, Jr.

That certainly sounds like the Tea Party movement, where participants demand all sorts of contradictory things for contradictory reasons, mostly lower taxes and larger government benefits for “deserving” people. And a Republican Party that now counts the Tea Party folk as one of two pillars—along with the Christian Right—of its popular support, all worshipping at the shrine of Ronald Reagan, is hardly a political institution that Rand could have in any way supported. If, against all her expectations, there is an afterlife, the adoption of Rand’s work by people she would have intensely disliked must be sheer hell. She is probably a most unhappy ghost at the tea party. ■