
Ayn Rand: A Centennial Appreciation

BY CHRIS MATTHEW SCIABARRA

Born in Russia on February 2, 1905, the late novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand would eventually emigrate to the United States and make an indelible mark on intellectual history. (She died in 1982.) As we celebrate the centennial of her birth, it is fitting to recall Rand's unique contribution to the defense of capitalism as expressed in her magnum opus, the best-selling novel *Atlas Shrugged*.

In 1945, when Rand began outlining that work, she made a self-conscious decision to create a "much more 'social' novel than *The Fountainhead*."¹ She wished to focus not simply on the "soul of the individualist," which *The Fountainhead* had dramatized so well, but to proceed "from persons, in terms of history, society, and the world." This new "story must be primarily a picture of the whole," she wrote in her journal, making transparent the cluster of relationships that constitute society as such:

Now, it is this *relation* that must be the theme. Therefore, the personal becomes secondary. That is, the personal is necessary only to the extent needed to make the relationships clear. In *The Fountainhead* I showed that Roark moves the world—that the Keatings feed upon him and hate him for it, while the Tooheys are consciously out to destroy him. But the theme was Roark—not Roark's relation to the world. Now it will be the relation.²

Atlas Shrugged explores these relations in every dimension of human life. It traces the links between political economy and sex, education and art, metaphysics and psychology, money and moral values. It concentrates on the union of spiritual and physical

realms and on the concrete means by which certain productive individuals move the world, and by which others live off of their creations. It shows the social importance of the creative act by documenting what would happen if the prime movers, the "men of the mind," went on strike.

Most important, however, *Atlas Shrugged* provides a manifesto for a new radicalism—not a political radicalism per se, but a *methodological* radicalism, a radical way of thinking on which political and social change is built. As we celebrate the Rand centenary, it is fitting to explore the implications of Rand's radicalism.

"To be radical," Karl Marx said, "is to grasp things by the root."³ Unlike Marx, however, Rand repudiated communism and its root, the "basic premises of collectivism" it embodied. Rand's attack was "radical in the proper sense of the word." As she explained: "Radical' means 'fundamental.' Today, the fighters for capitalism have to be, not bankrupt 'conservatives,' but new radicals, new intellectuals and, above all, new, dedicated moralists."⁴

The analytical power of Rand's radical framework went beyond a search for roots. In seeking to understand the *system* of statism, Rand showed how various factors often mutually support one another in sustaining its irrationality. She explores how coercive relations are at war with human beings and with life itself; they are "*anti-man, anti-mind, anti-life*."⁵

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Mind-Body Integration

Rand's case for capitalism is a metaphysical and moral case built on a total and unequivocal rejection of the mind-body dichotomy and all the false alternatives it engenders. In her philosophic journals, Rand explained how her novel was meant to “[v]indicate the industrialist” as “the author of material production.”⁶ But underlying this vindication was Rand's desire to secularize the spiritual and spiritualize the material:

The material is only the expression of the spiritual; that it can neither be created *nor used* without the spiritual (thought); that it has no meaning without the spiritual, that it is only the means to a spiritual end—and, therefore, any new achievement in the realm of material production is an act of *high spirituality*, a great triumph and expression of man's spirit. And show that those who despise “the material” are those who despise man and whose basic premises are aimed at man's destruction.⁷

In Rand's view, the “spiritual” does not pertain to an other-worldly faculty. It refers to an activity of human consciousness. Reason, as “the highest kind of spiritual activity,” is required “to conquer, control, and create in the material realm.”⁸ She did not limit material activities to purely industrial production. She wished to “show that *any* original rational idea, in any sphere of man's activity, is an act of creation.”⁹ This applies equally to the activity of industrialists and artists, businessmen and intellectuals, scientists and philosophers. Each of these spheres is accorded epistemological significance—and supreme respect.

By connecting reason and production, thought and action, theory and practice, fact and value, morality and prudence, Rand intended to uncover the “deeper, philosophical error” on which these various dichotomies were based. As such, *Atlas Shrugged* was designed to “blast the separation of man into ‘body’ and

‘soul,’ the opposition of ‘matter’ and ‘spirit.’”¹⁰ Rand rejected the metaphysical dualists who had bifurcated human existence. She proclaimed in her journal that “Man is an indivisible entity.” Mind and body “can be considered separately only for purposes of discussion, not in actual fact,” she explained. Thus, in the projection of her “ideal man,” John Galt, there is “*no intellectual contradiction and, therefore, no inner conflict*” between mind and body.

The Sanction of the Victim

Galt's revolution *against* human fragmentation is also a revolution *for* those who have been victimized by it and by the altruist morality that feasts on self-immolation. Throughout *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand showed how altruism is used by some (the “looters”) to instill guilt in others (the “producers”), by putting the virtues of the latter at the service of the former. She argued that the altruist's demands for individual self-sacrifice to a “common good” require the “sanction of the victim.”¹² The creators have for too long implicitly collaborated with their exploiters. That Galt grasps this principle, and that Hank Rearden and Dagny Taggart do not, sets up the main plot conflict in the novel. When



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Rearden begins to understand the implications of his actions, and the vast social consequences of a reckless moral code, he refuses to participate in his own martyrdom or to condone the government's confiscation of his property. He tells his persecutors: “Whatever you wish me to do, I will do at the point of a gun. If you sentence me to jail, you will have to send armed men to carry me there—I will not volunteer to move. If you fine me, you will have to seize my property to collect the fine—I will not volunteer to pay it. If you believe that you have the right to force me—use your guns openly. I will not help you to disguise the nature of your action” (479).

By withdrawing the “sanction of the victim,” the men of the mind strike out against the altruist core of statist political economy. But it is the “pyramid of ability” that explains why the strike works so effectively by draining the economy of talent. Those at the top

of their intellectual craft contribute the most to those below them, while those at the bottom free-ride on the achievements of the innovators above them. Rand did not view this as a static class pyramid, for she believed that individuals can rise to levels consonant with their developed abilities. When human beings relate to one another on the basis of these abilities, exchanging value for value, a benevolent harmony of interests becomes possible. When “need,” rather than ability, becomes a criterion for the acquisition of values, it sets off a degenerative social process in which the “needs” of some place a moral claim on the lives of others. This is the evil of altruism, says Rand; it becomes a pretext for oppressing the most creative individuals in society.

Cultural and Political Decay

Moral and social deterioration go hand in hand with cultural and political degeneration, in Rand’s view. In the dystopian society of *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand contrasted the “symphony of triumph” that is Richard Halley’s “Concerto of Deliverance” with the “dreary senselessness of the art shows” in vogue. And yet it is the senseless that receives public adulation and government subsidies. As the literary leader of his age, Ralph Eubank declares: “No, you cannot expect people to understand the higher reaches of philosophy. Culture should be taken out of the hands of the dollar-chasers. We need a national subsidy for literature. It is disgraceful that artists are treated like peddlers and that art works have to be sold like soap” (141).

This is the same cultural figure who asserts that “Plot is a primitive vulgarity in literature”—a claim like that of Dr. Simon Pritchett, who adds: “Just as logic is a primitive vulgarity in philosophy.” And Mort Liddy, who proclaims: “Just as melody is a primitive vulgarity in music” (134).

As another sign of the cultural and philosophic bankruptcy of the society portrayed in *Atlas Shrugged*, we are introduced to Pritchett’s book, *The Metaphysical Contradictions of the Universe*, which “proved irrefutably” that “Nothing is absolute. Everything is a matter of opinion” (265). And then there is Dr. Floyd Ferris of the State Science Institute, which produces the top-secret “Project X,” an apparatus of death.

Ferris is the author of *Why Do You Think You Think?*—a book that declares that “Thought is a primitive superstition” and that “Nothing exists but contradictions” (340–41).

Rand made it clear that such books flourish in this degraded society and that their floating abstractions have actual implications: “You think that a system of philosophy—such as Dr. Pritchett’s—is just something academic, remote, impractical? But it isn’t. Oh, boy, how it isn’t!” (265).

The ultimate concrete testament to the deadly implications of a culture that denigrates reality, logic, certainty, principles, ethics, rights, and the individual is the fatal voyage of the Taggart Comet, a train that disappears into the eternity of a tunnel, each of its passengers sharing “one or more” of the ideas of a nihilistic age.

Rand also showed that such nihilism could never triumph if its death premises were fully articulated. Those ideas can gain currency only when rationalized as means to glowing “social” ends. Rand illustrated how the use of a certain *political* language serves the thoroughly corrupt material interests of those who wield political power. “The State Science Institute is not the tool of any private interests or personal greed,” we are told; “it is devoted to the welfare of mankind, to the good of humanity as a whole—” (819). These “sickening generalities” and Orwellian slogans, repeated over and over again by the politically privileged, are the veneer that covers up the looting of the productive and the development of weapons of mass destruction and torture.

Every government bill, every political organization, is a study in euphemisms. Corporations slurping at the public trough, while using antitrust rulings to crush their competitors? That’s the “Anti-Dog-Eat-Dog Rule” in action. Then there are companies like the “Interneighborly Amity and Development Corporation” or the “Friends of Global Progress,” which campaigns for the “Equalization of Opportunity Bill,” the forced “social” sharing of productive assets. “The Bureau of Economic Planning and National Resources” and other government agencies focus on “Essential Need” Projects. “The Unification Board,” the “Railroad Unification Plan,” the “Steel

Unification Plan,” the “Order of Public Benefactors” all aim for “the democratization of industry.” Such acts in the “public interest” destroy *private* property, genuine *social* accountability, and *individual* responsibility. Rand documented, painfully, how the destruction of the market economy and its specialization and division of labor is, ultimately, a destruction of the “division of responsibility.” In a statist social order, where everybody owns everything, nobody will be held responsible for anything. “It’s not my fault” is the statist’s credo.”¹⁴

This irresponsibility is only one aspect of the *process* by which a statist economy implodes. In *Atlas Shrugged*, the economic system careens from one disaster to another, as the “men of the mind” withdraw their sanction from a government that regulates, prohibits, and stifles trade. Statist politicians attempt to exert more and more control over the machinery of production. To no avail. In the end, directives are issued, like Number 10-289, which attach workers to their jobs, order businesses to remain open regardless of their level of profit, nationalize all patents and copyrights, outlaw invention, and standardize the quantity of production and the quantity of consumer purchases, thereby freezing wages and prices—and human creativity.

The “pyramid of ability” is supplanted by the “aristocracy of pull.” A predatory neofascist social system, which survived parasitically, must ultimately be destroyed by its own inner contradictions, incapacitating or driving underground the rational and productive Atlases who carry the world on their shoulders.

Rand’s radical legacy, as presented in *Atlas Shrugged*, led her, in later years, to question the fundamentals at

work in virtually every social problem she analyzed. She viewed each problem through multidimensional lenses, rejecting all one-sided resolutions as partial and incomplete. On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Rand’s birth, it is important to remember that her conception of human freedom depended on a grand vision of the psychological, moral, and cultural factors necessary to its achievement. Hers was a comprehensive revolution that encompassed all levels of social relations: “*Intellectual* freedom cannot exist without *political* freedom; *political* freedom cannot exist without *economic* freedom; *a free mind and a free market are corollaries.*”¹⁵



1. Ayn Rand, *Journals of Ayn Rand*, ed. David Harriman (New York: Penguin Dutton, 1997), p. 390.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 392.

3. Karl Marx, “The Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” in *Early Writings*, trans. and ed. T. B. Bottomore; foreword by Erich Fromm (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963 [1843]).

4. Ayn Rand, “Conservatism: An Obituary,” in Ayn Rand, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (New York: New American Library, 1967), p. 200.

5. Ayn Rand, “Is Atlas Shrugging?” in *ibid.*, p. 151.

6. *Journals*, p. 550.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 551.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, p. 550.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 551.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 512.

12. Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, 35th anniversary ed. (New York: Dutton, 1992 [1957]), p. 454. Subsequent quotes from the novel are indicated by page numbers in the text.

13. *Journals*, p. 507.

14. *Atlas Shrugged*, p. 222.

15. Ayn Rand, *For the New Intellectual: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 25.