

Ayn Rand and the World She Made

by Anne Heller

Double Day, 2009
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Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right

by Jennifer Burns

Oxford University Press, 2009
\$18.45, 384 pages
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For an author whose novels have consistently sold in the hundreds of thousands for more than half a century, Ayn Rand is a remarkably understudied figure. Rand is still largely ignored by scholars, who refuse to take her novels or ideas seriously, despite her enormous influence. Barbara Branden's 1986 memoir *The Passion of Ayn Rand* has been the only significant biographical treatment until now, but as the ex-wife of Rand's lover Nathaniel Branden, she was hardly a disinterested observer.

The near simultaneous publication of these two books by Anne Heller and Jennifer Burns rectifies this deficiency. Heller's book is a stunning portrait of Rand's life and offers considerable insight into her extraordinary personality and achievements. Burns' book, which has its origins in a PhD dissertation, is focused more squarely on her intellectual influence, in particular, her role as the 'ultimate gateway drug to life on the right' (Burns, 4). Despite the inevitable overlap, the two books are complementary and deserve to be read together.

It would be difficult to overstate

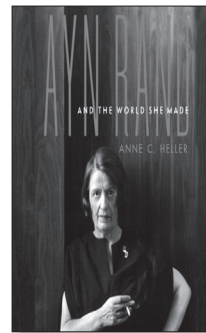
Rand's role in the emergence of the post-War libertarian right. Rand was almost a lone voice in making the case for limited government in the 1940s (Burns, 100), and her novels and later non-fiction writing played a major role in paving the way for the libertarian movement that took off in the 1970s, alongside the scholarly revival of classical liberalism led by the members of the Mont Pelerin Society. Her influence on the post-War American right is exemplified in the title of Jerome Tuccille's 1972 political memoir *It Usually Begins with Ayn Rand*. Her influence was not limited to the United States and spread as far afield as Australia. The libertarian Workers/Progress Party had its origins partly in Ayn Rand study groups. A young Greg Lindsay was introduced to the 1949 movie of Rand's novel *The Fountainhead* by film critic Bill Collins (Collins' favourite film). This was Lindsay's first introduction to libertarian ideas and set the stage for the founding of The Centre for Independent Studies in 1976.

Rand had a singular understanding of the power of literature to communicate ideas, and from the beginning saw her writing as a vehicle for presenting and promoting her worldview. Rand was not interested in literature for its own sake but for its power to persuade others and shape the world. Rand was a formidable intellect and few could match her in debate. She was particularly successful in engaging younger readers, especially on college campuses, where she

acquired a following in the 1960s and 70s that would shame most contemporary celebrities. As Burns (p. 198) notes, Rand 'filled in the gaps universities left unattended,' providing the intellectual and moral clarity that was no longer to be found in higher education. For many readers, her novels were life-changing experiences. Her books, especially *The Fountainhead*, relied heavily on word-of-mouth promotion for their success, which more than offset the often terrible reviews they received in established media.

While Rand understood the power of ideas better than most, she also misunderstood the process by which ideas develop and propagate. Rand acknowledged no intellectual debts and allowed for no interpretation of her ideas. Especially in later life, Rand was convinced of her infallibility and became increasingly dogmatic.

The dogmatism was shared by many of her acolytes, who were encouraged to believe that Rand was the greatest thinker of all time and that Rand was the sole arbiter of all philosophical and other questions. Only she and her acolyte-lover Nathaniel Branden were permitted to claim the mantle of 'Objectivist.' All others were mere 'students of Objectivism,' the name given to her philosophical system. Rand saw any unauthorised or unapproved use of her ideas as plagiarism, contributing to irreconcilable conflicts with others and increasing her intellectual and social isolation, despite her literary success.

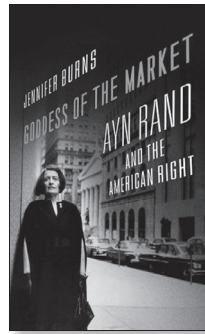


Rand's attempt to control the use people made of her ideas by asserting they were her personal intellectual property inevitably failed. While she served as an introduction to libertarianism for many, most ultimately found Rand's closed philosophical system unsatisfying and moved on to embrace classical liberal or libertarian ideas more broadly. It is profoundly ironic that Rand had nothing but contempt for the libertarian movement and its intellectuals, even though she did more than any other individual to inspire them. Rand routinely denounced libertarians as 'plagiarists,' 'monstrous,' 'disgusting' and 'scum.' Classical liberal intellectuals such as Hayek were 'pure poison' and a 'pernicious enemy.' She increasingly refused to engage or debate with others, claiming that the 'epistemological disintegration of our age has made debate impossible' (Burns, 217). The influence of Rand's ideas came despite rather than because of her approach to promoting them.

Both books document the encounters between Rand's inner circle, known as The Collective, and Murray Rothbard's Circle Bastiat, an informal grouping of like-minded students of Ludwig von Mises. Rothbard was convinced of Rand's brilliance, but also became a fierce critic of her personality cult, noting that 'the adoption of her total system [was] a soul-destroying calamity' for many (Burns, 152). It was Rothbard who perhaps first noticed the contradiction that while Rand celebrated individualism, her individualist

heroes were necessarily of one mind. There was no tolerance for diverse intellectual, philosophical, ethical, or moral positions in Rand's worldview. This led her to maintain absurd positions, such as her claim that 'there are no conflicts of interest among rational men' (Heller, 337).

Both authors do an outstanding job describing Rand's exceptional personality and intellect. However, there is a unifying explanation for Rand's life and ideas that may have escaped the notice of both authors. It is almost certain that Rand had Asperger's Syndrome, a condition



that has only come into greater awareness since the early 1990s (see Tony Attwood's *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome* for a sympathetic treatment). It is possible that neither author knew enough about Asperger's to make the necessary connections,

but there is abundant evidence for this proposition, particularly in Heller's description of Rand's childhood. It is perhaps just as well that neither author explicitly considers this possibility, because it would be all too easy to pathologise Rand, leading to a reductionist psycho-biography that would have done disservice to her ideas and influence. Rand is another instance of the extraordinary potential and creativity of people with atypical neurology, as celebrated in Tyler Cowen's recent book, *Create Your Own Economy* (Rand is a notable omission from Cowen's speculative list of historical figures with Asperger's). It is doubtful that a neuro-typical person could have single-handedly produced

such a radically unconventional and socially-unacceptable system of ideas centred on the power of human reason.

While Rand's ideas have obvious limitations, their influence remains pervasive. The responses of governments to the recent global financial crisis have disturbing parallels with the actions of the authorities in *Atlas Shrugged*, not least the public vilification and scapegoating of entrepreneurs and business. Sales of the book have surged during the crisis. Rand had a remarkable understanding of political economy, and *Atlas Shrugged* can be read in part as an exercise in applied public choice theory. Far from being an apologist for big business, Rand recognised that it was more often than not eagerly complicit in collectivist policies. This realism was sharply at odds with Rand's romantic fantasy of striking entrepreneurs 'stopping the motor of the world.' Like Hayek, Rand understood that even the smallest accommodations with collectivism were significant and could ultimately doom us all, but the romantic in her could also never completely give up hope in the future of liberty.

Reviewed by Stephen Kirchner