



Ayn Rand, Jack London, and a Fountainhead of Philosophy

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Two of the most fascinating novelist-philosophers of the twentieth century were Jack London (1876 - 1916) and Ayn Rand (1905 - 1982). Both of them had dramatic defining experiences in their early lives that powerfully influenced their worldviews, and they both idealized masculine heroes and identified with heroic ambition and accomplishment.

Jack London's character Martin in his semi-autobiographical novel *Martin Eden* seems almost like one of the protagonists in an Ayn Rand novel. Jack described his motives this way: "He wanted to glorify the leaders of forlorn hopes, the mad lovers, the giants that fought under stress and strain, amid terror and tragedy, making life crackle with the strength of their endeavor."

Both Ayn Rand and Jack London were philosophic thinkers and passionately provocative intellectuals. Because people's beliefs are strongly affected by the circumstances of their early lives and upbringing and experiences, it is understandable how these two famous writers arrived at dramatically different political philosophies. This contrast is fascinating, since both of them championed and highly valued individualism.

Jack London grew up in poverty in the Bay Area of Northern California. He set off at a young age to earn a living by working on sailing ships. He became intimately concerned later in his life with the rights of working people, and concluded that socialist fairness was the best political philosophy. Ayn Rand, in contrast, considered any form of "collectivism" to be anathema, so she passionately opposed any kind of what she regarded as socialism.

Ayn (rhymes with 'mine') was born in Russia. When she was 12 years old, a workers' revolution brought the repressive era of the ruling Czars to an end. This revolution began in early 1917 in the city of Petrograd (now known as St. Petersburg), where she lived with her family. This violent revolution was caused by deep frustration and anger at terrible economic and social conditions that pertained in Russia at the time. These conditions were made much worse by the country's very costly efforts to fight the aggression of industrialized Germany during World War I. This revolution spread throughout Russia and resulted, among other things, in the disbanding of the repressive czarist police and the repeal of limitations on freedom of expression, association and the press.

Later in 1917, this worker revolution was co-opted by the communist Bolshevik Party and its leader, Vladimir Lenin. The nascent movement to establish parliamentary democracy was thereby overthrown by this political faction because pressing problems had not been resolved. Desperately needed reforms had not been made to the economy, and entitled classes owned most of the land, and the war had precipitated a severe food crisis and economic disorganization.

The destabilization of a country's political order can lead to drastically undesirable and calamitous consequences, and patriots should recognize this truth and join together with other responsible people to help ensure that democratic government of the people, by the people and for the people is not eroded to the point that despots come to rule.

Propaganda disseminated by the Bolshevik Party advocated a "proletarian dictatorship". After Lenin instigated an armed insurrection in October 1917, a civil war ensued and communists asserted control. They signed a treaty to end the Soviet involvement in World War I. In this agreement, the Soviet Union gave up the Baltic States and

Finland and Poland and Ukraine. Not long thereafter, Lenin began a campaign to ruthlessly crush all domestic opposition.

Ayn Rand's disgust with the sad state of affairs in Russia was accompanied by her idealistic views of the United States as a beacon of freedom, individualism, fair opportunities and protected rights. She took a ship to New York in 1925, and regarded her departure as a breaking of the chains that had enslaved her in oppressive Russia. She was ready for a life of freedom of expression and a concerted focus on the important things in life.

Ayn believed strongly in "Objectivism". This idea holds that the physical reality of the universe exists independent of our perceptions of it. She asserted that we attain objective knowledge of reality by using our senses to perceive it, and our logical and rational abilities to make sense of it. She felt that the proper moral purpose in the life of any human being is to pursue one's own happiness and rational self-interest. She regarded selfishness as a great virtue, and believed dogmatically that the only social system that is consistent with her moral conceptions would be one that fully respects individual rights, and she asserted that laissez-faire capitalism is the best way to achieve such goals.

In championing individualism, and in harboring her deep antipathy toward any form of what she termed collectivism, Ayn Rand was ideologically uncompromising. She became disillusioned by U.S. politics in the 1930s because she regarded the New Deal as a despicable form of socialism.

In 1964, she wrote a book entitled *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism*. The title was one of the most controversial elements of the book. She acknowledged that the term selfishness as it is typically used does not describe a virtuous behavior, but that what she meant by selfishness was more precisely that it is a "concern for one's own interests", which should be regarded as an overarching virtue. This line of reasoning was an ethical contention that was correlated with economic fundamentalist doctrines that posit an "invisible hand" operates for the greater good of all people in minimally regulated capitalist economic systems. This, as history and experience reveals, turns out to be demonstrably untrue in many different regards.

Applied to modern circumstances of increasingly extreme economic and social inequalities and inequities, and existential challenges like disastrous destabilization of the Goldilocks conditions of the global climate, radical selfishness is ultimately unacceptable. And political parties that mainly obstruct progress toward a fairer, saner and sustainable world are intolerable. The greater good is becoming more and more crucial, and the alleged superior rights of elitist individuals to rip off the vast majority of people and get away with paying low tax rates are socially, ethically, morally and ecologically wrong, as are arrogant efforts to prevent reforms of corruptly rigged systems,

Rand was an intellectual, and her ideas are well constructed, but in her biases she rationalized many behaviors that helped empower elite groups and enable misguided economic policies that have had extremely damaging impacts on people and our political system and the environmental commons.

Her ideology equating self-concern with virtue essentially presupposed that self-interested motives and ego drives are an expression of noble and pure aspects of the human soul and spirit. Hogwash! Those who are intimately familiar with the motivations and activities of successful people recognize that success itself is a measure frequently associated with vice more than it is with virtue, especially in the dog-eat-dog ruthlessness of unfair competition and political and economic corruption.

Success, as John Steinbeck was so acutely aware, is often the result of behaviors that are far from virtuous. Readers of *Cannery Row* are sometimes surprised by the poignant observations of the book's central character that the traits leading to success in our society are often vices such as greed, meanness, egotism and excessive preoccupations with narrow self-interest, while the traits leading to failure may be the result of virtues like kindness, honesty, openness and generosity.

Howard Roark, Ayn Rand's protagonist in her famous novel *The Fountainhead*, gave a dramatic speech in which he stated: "Look at history. Everything we have, every great achievement has come from the independent work of some independent mind. Every horror and destruction came from attempts to force men into a herd of brainless, soulless robots. Without personal rights, without personal ambition, without will, hope, or dignity. It is an ancient

conflict. It has another name: the individual against the collective. Our country, the noblest country in the history of men, was based on the principle of individualism. The principle of man's inalienable rights."

As a critique of Rand's extreme philosophies, it is hard in all sincerity to imagine that anyone could regard capitalism, as Ayn Rand did, as a system that "demands and rewards the best in every man". Today, as economic inequalities in the U.S. grow ever more extreme, the rewards are being disproportionately concentrated in the hands of the few, and certainly not merely in the hands of the most deserving.

Jack London saw things differently from Ayn Rand because he viscerally recognized the extensive social ills associated with the oppression of workers, industrialization, urbanization and widespread corruption in politics. He saw that an idealized Brotherhood of Man did not arise "out of the decay of self-seeking capitalism". Appallingly, "capitalism, rotten-ripe, sent forth that monstrous offshoot, the Oligarchy." This rule by the Few crushed labor movements and subjected workers to ever-more difficult circumstances and economic insecurity in order to give more and more power and privileges and profits to the wealthy, who ruled with an "Iron Heel". This was far from ideal for individual freedoms or self-respect or fair-minded justice.

Ayn Rand believed that 'collectivism' and taxation were forms of slavery. She saw them as being oppressive of successful industrialists and creative non-conformists and others that she regarded as being the most noble. Jack London was more intimately familiar with the scandalously ruthless ruses of 'robber barons' during the Gilded Age, and with their distinctly less-than-virtuous exploitation of workers and use of the capitalist system to make huge profits at the expense of workers and society.

J.P. Morgan, as an example, had gained enormous wealth after the Panic of 1857 by investing in depreciated securities. Then he indulged in an immoral degree of irresponsible profiteering during the Civil War, as revealed by his involvement in the "Hall Carbine Affair". In this scurrilous gambit, he purchased thousands of dangerously defective rifles and later resold them to the government as new carbines, even though they tended to blow up in the face of those who used them. Many such unethical strategies by ruthless industrialists and financiers resulted in the accumulation of great quantities of wealth, but it could hardly be said that these were noble acts or that those who perpetrated them were particularly deserving of their wealth.

According to J.P. Morgan, riches are "the reward of toil and virtue." Ha! Anyone who closely studies some of the unethical means by which J.P. Morgan gained his riches would strongly disagree. The dastardly "Hall Carbine Affair" was just the start of a career that involved significant breaches of the public trust. Another exceedingly rich man, John D. Rockefeller, voiced support of J.P. Morgan's contention, going so far as to state that riches are "a gift from Heaven signifying, <This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.>" Oh, right, right, right -- God loves rich people the most!

Eugene Debs scoffed at these self-congratulatory perspectives. Debs, the labor leader who ran for president five times in the early twentieth century, once stated, "Riches are the savings of many in the hands of a few!" This characterization sounds much more accurate to me than the presumption that those who have most of the wealth in the world are mainly virtuous people who God likes best!

Ayn Rand has become a hero to people who support the Tea Party and the political right wing today, as evidenced by the 2010 movie version of her 1957 novelistic ode to unfettered capitalism, *Atlas Shrugged*. This is ironic because most conservatives actually loathed her during her lifetime. For today's conservatives to lionize Ayn Rand, they indulge in dishonest historical revisionism. Rand was, after all, an atheist, a feminist, an outspoken supporter of abortion rights, an opponent of the Vietnam War, and a critic of crony capitalism. The film *Atlas Shrugged* was financed by a wealthy CEO, and it was targeted to appeal to anti-government fervor and reactionary people in the Tea Party and other regions even more dangerously on the far right fringe.

"Rand advocated reason as the only means of acquiring knowledge; she rejected faith and religion", states Wikipedia. "She supported rational and ethical egoism and rejected altruism." Wikipedia adds, "Although she opposed libertarianism, which she viewed as anarchism, she is often associated with the modern libertarian movement in the United States."

The main reason conservatives have embraced Ayn Rand in recent years is because of her idea that all taxation should be voluntary. Conservatives also love her philosophical opposition to the regulation of industry, and to government financing for roads or other infrastructure, and to all forms of welfare, unemployment insurance, assistance for poor people, and social safety net programs.

Back when the Republican Party had a shrewd more integrity and much more honesty and responsible behavior, the Party was courageous enough to tell people what its platform actually was. Wisconsin Republican Paul Ryan was a lead architect of the conservative agenda and budget plans. Ryan was reportedly a devotee to Ayn Rand's fiscal ideas and her laissez faire capitalistic philosophies. Ryan's plans comported with Rand's worldviews. They called for cuts in spending for Medicare, Medicaid and a whole host of housing, food and educational support programs, and would leave the middle class and the poor and the most vulnerable Americans much more insecure. In addition, about half of the savings that would have been achieved by these austere and corrupted plans would have been given to the wealthiest people in the form of lower tax rates on the highest levels of income.

Any Rand once wrote, "To sell your soul is the easiest thing in the world. That's what everybody does every hour of his life." Workers of the world should sensibly unite against injustices inherent in laissez-faire capitalism.

Rand wrote in her first novel *The Fountainhead*, as frequently paraphrased, "The question isn't who is going to let me; it's who is going to stop me." Howard Roark, who is Ayn Rand's hero in *The Fountainhead*, actually responded to a question, "My dear fellow, who will let you?", with the arrogant rejoinder, "That's not the point. The point is, who will stop me?"

Yes, my fellow Americans, who is going to stop Supreme Court Republicans and red state legislatures from taking away the voting power of millions of Americans, and women's reproductive rights, and civil liberties and human rights? Who is going to take back our country from the "secession caucus" and the Koch network of billionaires and dastardly organizations like the State Financial Officers Foundation that is intent on eviscerating sensible regulations and obstructing remedial climate action? Who is going to counterbalance the right wing fringe of conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones and a**hole politicians like Ted Cruz and Josh Hawley and Jim Jordan and Marjorie Taylor Greene?

Ayn Rand once sensibly observed, "You can avoid reality, but you cannot avoid the consequences of avoiding reality." The Republican Party and the American people are learning this lesson, and it is not a happy circumstance. The fate of our constitutional republic hangs in the balance, and the Republican Party is posing a clear and present danger to the health and endurance of our two-party system.

Note that state treasury officials in red states have joined together in the Republican-led organization called the State Financial Officers Foundation, which allies itself with fossil fuel industries "to weaponize state treasurers' offices against federal appointees, regulations, and corporate policies that address climate change." In doing so, it is aggressively opposing banks and giant investment companies like BlackRock that have stated climate risks should be taken into consideration in corporate America.

According to a watchdog organization, "The State Financial Officers Foundation is a key node in a network of political groups waging a coordinated attack on climate policy." They are waging this attack against climate action in league with "a complex web of conservative groups linked to the fossil fuel industry". These groups include the Heartland Institute, a think tank with a history of denying climate science, and the Heritage Foundation and ALEC, both of which receive generous funding from the Koch network of scheming oil billionaires and others. They are helped in their anti-social and anti-environmental crusade by influential conservative media personalities like Glenn Beck. The State Financial Officers Foundation has also reportedly hired a firm founded by Leonard Leo to help coordinate their activities. Leo is known for his woe-engendering success in helping stack federal courts with conservative judges who oppose climate action and push a wide constellation of other right-wing agenda goals -- like depriving women of reproductive rights and preventing the passage of gun safety measures and promoting corporate profiteering over environmental protections and the greater good.

Make no mistake about it, however, our national politics has been a kind of perverted one-party system in many ways. Big Money has pervasive influence in our politics and national decision-making, so as a result, in really big

issues, it does not much matter which party is in power. Big Money has the most deciding influence in all matters related to banking regulation and the social safety net and environmental protections and tax policies. This is why our top national priorities have been primarily beneficial to multi-millionaires and billionaires, especially since 1980.

A radical contrast has materialized today, however, between Republicans and Democrats with regard to the future of our nation. Republicans are pandering to super-rich people so blatantly that they propose to slash taxes on rich people even further, despite the fact that tax rates on rich people have been reduced repeatedly in the past few decades until they are now nearly the lowest in more than 90 years. To couple this overarching strategy of pandering to the wealthy with deep cuts in the social safety net and public education and social programs that help protect people and the environment may be shrewd, but it is wrong-headed and astonishingly risky. It is outrageous to see Republicans champion such narrowly focused and unfair national plans.

President Barack Obama, on the other hand, made some efforts to reform our tax system to reduce the huge tax breaks for rich people. He proposed wiser investments and public policies that are fairer and more progressive for the vast majority of Americans. As President, Joe Biden has finally succeeded in August 2022 in signing an Inflation Reduction Act that will reduce some prescription drug prices by sensibly negotiating prescription drug prices with the wildly profiteering Big Pharma, and also invest in climate actions and reduce the national debt by assessing a minimum tax rate of 15% on all corporations doing business in the U.S. Every single Republican opposed this legislation, to their deep discredit.

Women, students, young people, racial minorities and the most vulnerable Americans are being abandoned by Republicans, who are undermining public education and national infrastructure and the social safety net in order to advance their narrow agenda. This GOP strategy is another form of power abuse by the rich. It should stoke a revolutionary zeal in Americans to oppose such initiatives.

The Occupy Wall Street movement in the U.S. and abroad tapped into a growing sense of frustration and anger, and it cultivated the hope that the 99% of people will be able to use the power of their numbers to prevent the richest 1% from gaining ever-lower tax rates and ever-more influence than everyone else.

In the years after Obama became president, the most vociferous elements on the American political scene were the Tea Party and the House Freedom Caucus. Rabble-rousing Tea Party supporters ironically were duped into supporting policies contrary to their own best economic interests. The shrewd propaganda of billionaires like the notorious Koch brothers of Kansas is partially to blame for this misguided error of perception and energy.

Demagogues often appeal to right-wing populism for support. The Tea Party was considered a populist grassroots movement, but deeper inspection reveals it to be driven by corporate "astroturfing", a form of deceptive political advocacy and propaganda that disguises the efforts of rich people in orchestrating support for their own self interest at the expense of those they fool into supporting them. An old poll showed that 79% of Tea Party supporters were white, 61% were male, 40% were 55 or older, and 44% identified themselves as born-again Christians. Such a narrow demographic can hardly be regarded as ideal in formulating policies for the greater good of the majority of people in our country, or in the world!

Jack London was a passionate advocate of collective bargaining rights and other rights for workers, and of power for those oppressed in class struggles. There are many problems in today's twenty-first century societies, and it would be most sensible for us to champion fairer and more open-minded ideas to cope with them most effectively.

Better education is called for in our schools, and we should rightly choose to elect representatives who are honorably committed to governing with a top goal of a healthier society. American citizens should be given a better grasp of truths and realities, instead of obnoxiously repetitious doses of extreme ideologies and propaganda. Jeffrey Sachs noted that better education in science is needed, declaring in *Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet*, "The subject is basic and universal. It transcends our many differences in religion and political ideology."

When we understand more clearly, we will be able to find more common ground to create a more providentially positive world.

Conclusion

In the USA today, instead of honorably trying to create a fairer society, conservatives and their system-rigging Big Money supporters are deviously and diabolically using the politics of division and demagogic tomfoolery to scurrilously stoke culture war conflicts to get support from an outraged resentment-radicalized political base that feels victimized and is indoctrinated to believe that the blame for woes belongs on moderates and liberals.

After riling up the passions of the right-leaning crowd, the exploiting conservative Party drastically betrays the best interests of the vast majority of Americans by pushing maniacally to give more perks, benefits, money and power to the few by opposing every initiative that would improve the lives and prospects of the people. They demonize the "Radical Left" and engage not only in blame shifting but also in shrewd fear mongering and gender discrimination and racist dog whistles, and they staunchly oppose women's reproductive rights and family planning, as well as improvements in economic fairness, social security and increases in ossified minimum wages. They torpedo working people's collective bargaining power, and give big deficit-financed tax breaks to the top dogs at the cost of shackling social spending and cutting social safety net programs while dangerously driving up national debt obligations.

In doing this, they sacrifice the public health and well-being and general welfare on the tarnished altar of their greed for money and domineering power.

The lavishly-financed political organizing that yields these pathological outcomes is an extremely narrowly focused form of treachery against the common good. The many ways they get away with this masterful manipulative selling their rabid supporters down the river to unnecessarily harsh fates is explained in excruciating detail in *SEE CLEARLY: Sanity During Insane Times: Book Twelve of the Earth Manifesto*. In particular, see the essays that it contains (1) *The Con Goes On: A Triumphant Coup by Crooked Conniving Crony Capitalists*, and (2) *Demagoguery and the Dangers of the Demise of Democracy*, and (3) *Core Values of Democracy - and How to Thwart Threats Against These Values*.

Ayn Rand would have ridiculed the old philosophical question, "If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make any noise?" A falling tree naturally propagates sound waves, and if a human being were nearby to hear it, that person would surely confirm that the falling of the tree made noise. Without any person or animal there to perceive the sound and subjectively identify it as noise, it would not alter the fact that sound waves had been propagated. This conundrum presents a kind of false dichotomy, for sound waves are neither exclusively a characteristic of sound having been propagated nor of the mind of an independent percipient being that hears the sound.

Philosophy is vitally important when it addresses crucially important ideas. Questions of the nature of whether or not falling trees make noises, or of abstruse epistemological and logical questions, are diversions from the importance of striving to comprehend vitally important matters using honest and fair-minded analysis, philosophical introspection, intuitive understandings, noble vision and big picture ideas. I heartily recommend that readers peruse other Earth Manifesto publications!

Truly,

Dr. Tiffany B. Twain

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SaveTruffulaTrees@hotmail.com