



## Ayn Rand, Jack London, and a Fountainhead of Philosophy

An Earth Manifesto publication by Dr. Tiffany B. Twain

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 he concluded that socialist fairness was the best political philosophy. Ayn Rand, on the other hand, considered any form of "collectivism" to be anathema, so she passionately opposed any kind of socialism.

Ayn (rhymes with 'mine') was born in Russia. When she was 12 years old, a revolution by working people 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 significantly worse by the country's extraordinarily 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 opinion and 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.

Propaganda disseminated by the Bolshevik Party advocated a "proletarian dictatorship". After Lenin instigated an armed insurrection in October 1917, a civil war ensued and the communist movement asserted control. A treaty was signed that ended 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. Rand 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, so she asserted that laissez-faire capitalism is the best way to achieve such goals.

In championing individualism, and in harboring a 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" that should be regarded as an overarching virtue. This line of reasoning was an ethical contention correlated with fundamentalist economic doctrines that posit an Invisible Hand operates for the greater good of all people in laissez-faire capitalist economic systems. This, as history and experience reveals, turns out to be demonstrably untrue in many different regards.

Rand was an intellectual, and her ideas are well articulated, 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 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 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, not particularly in the hands of people who are most deserving.

Jack London saw things differently from Ayn Rand because he viscerally recognized the extensive social ills associated with industrialization, urbanization, the oppression of workers, and widespread political corruption. 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 increasingly difficult circumstances and 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 dignity, freedoms, self-respect or fair-minded justice. This is why 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.

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 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. He also engaged in callous profiteering during the Civil War, as revealed in the "Hall Carbine Affair". In this scurrilous ruse, he purchased thousands of dangerously defective rifles and later resold them as new carbines to the government at a big profit, even though they sometimes 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 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 - Part I*. 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 zeal and reactionary people on the political far right.

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.

Unsurprisingly, the Wisconsin Republican Paul Ryan, a lead architect of the Republican Party's budget plans during the Obama years, was a devotee to Ayn Rand's fiscal ideas and her anarchic capitalistic philosophies. Ryan's plans comport closely with Rand's worldviews. He strived to cut spending for Medicare, Medicaid and a whole host of housing, food and educational support programs, even though they would have the uncompassionate impact of leaving the middle class and the poor and the most vulnerable Americans with far less security. In addition, about half of the savings that would have been achieved by these radical plans would have been given to the wealthiest people in the form of lower tax rates on the highest levels of income.

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 are slashing 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 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.

Barack Obama, on the other hand, made some efforts to reform our tax system to moderately reduce the huge tax breaks rich people receive. He proposed wiser investments like those in clean energy, and public policies that are fairer and more progressive for the vast majority of Americans.

Students, young people, racial minorities, women 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.

Ayn Rand acolyte Alan Greenspan took over as head of the Federal Reserve in 1987, and this unleashed the spark of free market fever upon America. At that time, writes author Lynn Parramore: "People in U.S. business schools started reading Ayn Rand's kooky novels as if they were serious economic treatises and hailing the free market as the only path to progress. John Galt, the hero of *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), captured the imaginations of young students like Paul Ryan, who worshiped Galt as a superman who could rise to the top through his vision, merit and heroic efforts. Galt became the prototype of the kind of 'super-manager' these business schools were supposed to crank out. Since the '80s, the top salaries and pay packages awarded to executives of the largest companies and financial firms in the U.S. have reached spectacular heights. This, coupled with low growth and stagnation of wages for the vast majority of workers, has meant growing inequality. As income from labor gets more and more unequal, income from capital starts to play a bigger role. By the time you get to the .01 percent, virtually all your income comes from capital — stuff like dividends and capital gains. That's when wealth (what you have) starts to matter more than income (what you earn)."

"Wealth gathering at the top creates all sorts of problems. Some of these elites will hoard their wealth and fail to do anything productive with it. Others channel it into harmful activities like speculation, which can throw the economy out of whack. Some increase their wealth by preying on the less well-off. As inequality grows, regular people lose their purchasing power. They go into debt. The economy gets destabilized. (Thomas Piketty, and many other economists, count the increase in inequality as one of the reasons the economy blew up in 2007-'08.)"

"By the time you get to 2010, U.S. inequality, according to Piketty's data, is quantitatively as extreme as in old Europe in the first decade of the 20th century. He predicts that inherited property is going to start to matter more and more in the US as the super-managers — the Jamie Dimons and so on — bequeath their gigantic hordes of money to their children."

"The ironic twist is this: The reason a person like the fictional John Galt would be able to rise from humble beginnings in the 1950s is because the Gilded Age rentiers lost large chunks of their wealth through the shocks of the Great Depression and the deliberate government policies that came in its wake, thus loosening their stranglehold on the economy and society. Galt is able to make his fortune precisely because he lives in a society that isn't dominated by extreme concentrated wealth and dynasties. Yet the logical outcome of an economy in which there is no attempt made to limit the size of fortunes and promote greater equality is a place in which the most likely way John Galt could make a fortune is to marry an heiress. So it was in the Gilded Age. So it may be very soon in America."

"Which brings us back to Friedman's view that people naturally get what they deserve, that reward is based on talent. Well, clearly in the case of inherited property, reward is not based on talent, but membership in the Lucky Sperm Club (or marriage into it). That made Friedman a bit uncomfortable, but he just huffed that life is not fair, and we shouldn't think it any more unjust that one person is born with mathematical genius as the other is born with a fortune. What's the difference?"

"Actually, there is a very big difference. It is the particular rules governing society that determine who amasses a fortune and what part of that fortune is passed on to heirs. The wrongheaded policies promoted by libertarians and their ilk, who hate any form of tax on the rich, such as inheritance taxes, have ensured that big fortunes in America are getting bigger, and they will play a much more prominent role in the direction of our society and economy if we continue on the present path."

"What we are headed for, after several decades of free market mania, is super-inequality, possibly such as the world has never seen. In this world, more and more wealth will be gained off the backs of the 99 percent, and less and less will be earned through hard work. Which essentially means freedom for the rich, and no one else."

Lynn Parramore further observed: "Libertarians have always been flummoxed by inequality, tending either to deny that it's a problem or pretend that the invisible hand of the market will wave a magic wand to cure it. Then everybody gets properly rewarded for what he or she does with brains and effort, and things are peachy keen. Except that they aren't, as exhaustively demonstrated by French economist Thomas Piketty, whose 700-page treatise on the long-term trends in inequality, *Capital In the Twenty-First Century*, has blown up libertarian fantasies one by one."

"To understand the libertarian view of inequality, let's turn to Milton Friedman, one of America's most famous and influential makers of free market mythology. Friedman decreed that economic policy should focus on freedom, not equality. If we could do that, he promised, we'd not only get freedom and efficiency, but more equality as a natural byproduct. Libertarians who took the lessons from his books, like *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962) and *Free to Choose* (1980), bought into notions that capitalism naturally led to less inequality."

"Basically, the lessons boiled down to this: Some degree of inequality is both unavoidable and desirable in a free market, and income inequality in the U.S. isn't very pronounced, anyway. Libertarians starting with these ideas tend to reject any government intervention meant to decrease inequality, claiming that such plans make people lazy and that they don't work, anyway. Things like progressive income taxes, minimum wage laws and social safety nets make most libertarians very unhappy."

"Uncle Milty put it like this: A society that puts equality -- in the sense of equality of outcome -- ahead of freedom will end up with neither equality nor freedom. ... On the other hand, a society that puts freedom first will, as a happy by-product, end up with both greater freedom and greater equality. Well, that turns out to be spectacularly, jaw-droppingly, head-scratchingly wrong. The U.S. is now a stunningly unequal society, with wealth piling up at the top so fast that an entire movement, *Occupy Wall Street*, sprung up to decry it with the catchphrase, "We are the 99 percent."

"How did libertarians get it all so backwards? Well, as Piketty points out, people like Milton Friedman were writing at a time when inequality was indeed less pronounced in the U.S. than it had been in previous eras. But they mistook this happy state of affairs as the magic of capitalism. Actually, it wasn't the magic of capitalism that reduced inequality during a brief, halcyon period after the New Deal and World War II. It was the forces of various economic shocks plus policies our government put in place to respond to them that changed America from a top-heavy society in the Gilded Age to something more egalitarian in the post-war years.

"The Great Depression got rid of some of the extreme wealth concentration in America, and later the wealthy got hit with substantial tax shocks imposed by the federal government in the 1930s and '40s. The American rentier class wasn't really vaporized the way it was in Europe, where the effects of the two World Wars were much more pronounced, but it took a hit. That opened up the playing field and gave people more of a chance to rise on the rungs of the economic ladder through talent and work."

"After the Great Depression, inequality decreased in America, as New Deal investment and education programs, government intervention in wages, the rise of unions and other factors worked to give many more people a chance for success. Inequality reached its lowest ebb between 1950 and 1980. If you were looking at the U.S. during that time, it seemed like a pretty egalitarian place to be (though blacks, Hispanics and many women would disagree).

The Occupy Wall Street movement in the U.S. and abroad tapped into a growing sense of frustration and anger, and it promoted a hope that the 99% 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.

Throughout most of the Obama presidency, the most vociferous element on the American political scene was the Tea Party, which was ironically duped into supporting policies that were contrary to their own best health and economic interests. The shrewd propaganda of billionaires like the Koch brother billionaires of Kansas is partially to blame for this misguided error of perception and energy.

The Tea Party was considered a populist grassroots movement, but deeper inspection reveals it to have been driven by "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. One early poll showed that 79% of Tea Party supporters were white, 61% are male, 40% were 55 or older, and 44% identified themselves as born-again Christians. Trump supporters have a similar profile. 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!

Better education is called for in our schools, and much greater fairness in choosing our elected representatives. American citizens should be given a better grasp of truths and realities, instead of repeated 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

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!

Yours Truly,

Dr. Tiffany B. Twain      July 1, 2019 (first composed in 2014 or so.)