

"...dangerous diseases require a desperate remedy."

-- ~~Buffy Splawater~~ Guy Fawkes, whose Day it is.

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 "Who Cauldron Bubbles?" asked Al Lewis indignantly.  
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### RAND OPERA

I have been taken to task by more than one club member recently, when I happened to mention that I felt something less than enthusiasm for Ayn Rand's "philosophy," for not having read all of that monstrous insult to literature and eyesight called ATLAS SHRUGGED. It seems that, however poorly written and ineptly constructed this epic ulcer may be, it contains the gospel for all thinking men of our time. It may not be visible from the outside, but it is there, like the proverbial fortune sewn into the lining of the charwoman's cummerbund. It is useless to say that it is not, for all right-thinking men have espied it there, and who am I to gainsay these feckless spearheads of modern thought?

The proponents of all these self-protecting little intellectual frenzies -- whether Dianetics or Birchism or cat-coddling -- inevitably think in the same pattern: you can't really know what they stand for unless you read the proper Koran; if you have done this and still reject their Ideas, you are either invincibly ineducable or an enemy bent on the destruction of decent men. There is little or no weighing and consideration of your adverse arguments, for there can be no adverse arguments. Against gospel, there never are.

What the enthusiastic advocates of Single-Taxism or Rosicrucianism or whathaveyou fail to understand is that their enthusiasm usually results from their own inexperience in shit-detection. A moldy cross-section off the top of a deep and rich idea may appear a wondrous thing to those who have never plumbed the idea to its fullest depths through a firm grounding in literature, philosophy, or, simply, life. Thus, most torch-bearers for "new" social, economic, or philosophic concepts are the very young and naive, who fail to discern that almost always someone involved with their heartily espoused idea is living very well off their money and that of individuals like them. The first hallmark of the intellectual swindle is the new concept that has numerous books or courses to sell on itself. This is the most immediate noticeable difference between Randism and, say, a real philosophical innovation like Existentialism.

Another is the cheapening and vulgarizing of essentially complex ideas: an easy way to do-it-yourself psychiatry or an everyman's answer to national economic problems. An awesome example of how simple-minded concepts of very involved programs and theories can lead to disaster and painful re-education to reality is, of course, found in America's subscription before 1929 to real laissez-faire business and investment practices. That a hard core of grim-eyed individuals still tout for these practices merely underlines the sad point that, for many people, simple ideas and goals are all they ever grasp. It is like a monkey taught to play "Dixie" on a piano who can recognize "Dixie" whenever he hears it, but to whom all other music and tunes are so much abstract noise.

Still, back to this Rand book, ATLAS SHRUGGED. I'm afraid I must bluntly admit that I shall never read the thing. Most people of intellectual consequence never will. Shit can usually be recognized by the smell; it is not necessary to subject the whole deposit to a prolonged analysis to determine that no part of it is, in fact, mamma.

However, to attract those too dull or too sensitive to probe the solid intestines of this swollen gut of a book, something called the Nathaniel Branden Institute (Inc.) -- which, of course, has "lecture courses" and the like to sell -- has published a throwaway "Fact Sheet" which outlines the Rand ideas in an attempt at reasonable sobriety. It does a honey of a job of verifying the suspicions most of us had long since drawn from such dark corners of culture as saw the Rand notions aired and advocated. Hank Stein has done me the service of loaning me a copy of this and asking me for a reaction.

In all fairness to the Randers, I feel I should not rephrase their arguments as set forth on this sheet in my own admittedly jaundiced terms. Accordingly, I shall copy the full text of "What is Objectivism?" -- a seven-point breakdown of the Rand ideas, which, I should perhaps mention at this rather belated point, are called "objectivism" -- and merely append my reactions on the right-hand side of the page, opposite each point.

WHAT IS OBJECTIVISM?

COMMENT

(The following statement is excerpted from Nathaniel Branden's opening lecture in his series, "Basic Principles of Objectivism.")

Who is Nathaniel Branden?

"If I were asked to summarize the philosophy of Objectivism in a single sentence, I would say that Objectivism holds:

a) that existence, reality, the external world, is what it is, independent of man's consciousness, independent of anyone's knowledge, judgement, beliefs, hopes, wishes or fears -- that facts are facts, that A is A, that things are what they are;

Awfully overstated, but basically Rand, Karl Marx, Jean Paul Sartre and I agree on this rather primitive point.

b) that reason, the faculty that identifies and integrates the material provided by man's senses, is fully competent to know the facts of reality;

Sounds reasonable.

c) that man's perception of the facts of reality must constitute the basis of his value-judgements, that just as reason is his only guide to knowledge, so it is his only guide to action;

It is not, of course, his only guide to action, nor should it be.

d) that man is an end in himself, not a means to the ends of others, he must live for his own sake with the achievement of his rational self-interest as the moral purpose of his life, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself;

Hard-core stuff here; the payoff. Basically an excuse for selfishness and limitless aggrandizement.

e) that no one has the right to seek values from others by the initiation of physical force;

Meaningless as stated; how does one seek "values" by "force?"

f) that the politico-economic expression of these principles is laissez-faire capitalism, a system based on the inviolate supremacy of individual rights, in which the exclusive function of government is the protection of rights;

But the government's protection of citizens' rights is precisely why a thousand laws exist against laissez-faire capitalism.

g) that the absence of these principles from mens minds and actions is responsible for the present state of the world."

What does this prove? The present state of the world was never better, and it improves abundantly.

I think the head-on collision between Branden-Rand's final point and my comment on it is at the crux of my disinterest in examining Objectivism further. Despite the grinding poverty still to be found in too many parts of the world, most men everywhere, including this country, have never lived better in history. And the world standard of living is climbing every day. Most of this simple, World Almanac fact is the result of strong government control of the economic structure and means of production in nearly every part of the globe. It is hard, in the face of this, to see in Randism anything more than a loud gripe of the loaded or would-be loaded that they aren't being permitted to hang onto everything they make, or -- more importantly -- to have their obvious worth materially evident in an overwhelming contrast between their lot and that of lesser, mediocre, failed men. That a lowly factory worker can, if he likes, drive even a Cadillac as the result of government protection of his union's rights is anathema to Objectivists and their ilk, and why the word, "object," is so prominent in the name of their new "philosophy" -- they do object, and loudly. To the whole Twentieth Century, in fact.

I hope the Randists will not be too shocked or dismayed when I quietly remark in conclusion that the Rand "philosophy" will have no impact whatsoever on this country or the world, and that it will be one with Coueism and Dianetics in fifty years, by then long since replaced with a dozen other gimcrack adolescent dogmas. The reason for this is, that far from being something new and revolutionary in philosophic thought, Randism is simply selfish Existentialism, just as Naziism was, precisely as self-described, a nationalistic socialism -- or selfish socialism.