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Ayn Rand's Ghost Does Not Haunt The Trump Administration

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“Who is Donald Trump?”

To paraphrase the opening line of *Atlas Shrugged*, the mainstream media remains on a manic quest to define the incoming president. It once again goes off the rails.

The *Washington Post* recently featured a long article by James Hohmann trying and failing to make the case that *Ayn Rand-acolyte Donald Trump stacks his cabinet with fellow objectivists*. The usually incisive Jonathan Chait, at *New York Magazine*, tells us *How Ayn Rand's Theories Destroyed 'Never Trump' Conservatism*.

Ayn Rand wrote two really gripping pulp novels and has long been an object of enduring fascination to a small number of enthusiasts. Rand is vaguely associated, in the popular imagination more than reality, with the libertarian movement. Rand's worldview, which she called Objectivism, was not libertarian. Libertarians have a fraught relationship with Ayn Rand.

Libertarians sometimes ally with the right in the cause of a smaller, less intrusive, government. Libertarians reject many of the other tenets of the right and are, in turn, rather marginalized ... as Gary Johnson's ~3% vote haul demonstrates.

Conservatives have long abjured Ayn Rand.

The left finds this intramural politics confusing. Progressives tend to collapse many key distinctions within the Vast Right Wing Conspiracy. These distinctions are much clearer from inside the conservative coalition. Let's help them out.

The *Washington Post*'s James Hohmann recently devoted many column inches to trying, and failing, to paint the Trump administration as somehow Randian. His headline notwithstanding there's virtually no evidence that Donald Trump is an Ayn Rand “acolyte.”

Hohmann notes a report by *USA Today*'s Kirsten Powers, which, in full goes: “Trump described himself as an Ayn Rand fan. He said of her novel *The Fountainhead*, ‘It relates to business (and) beauty (and) life and inner emotions. That book relates to ... everything.’ He identified with Howard Roark, the novel's idealistic protagonist who designs skyscrapers and rages against the establishment.”

Hohmann's article goes on to note that three of Trump's cabinet appointees show appreciation of Rand's works. Rex Tillerson called *Atlas Shrugged* his favorite book in a 2008 feature for *Scouting Magazine*. Andy Puzder named his private equity fund in honor of a Rand hero, one of whose friends stated that he reads Rand in his spare time, and he recommended to his six children that they read "Fountainhead" first and "Atlas Shrugged" later. Rep. Mike Pompeo told *Human Events*, in 2011, "One of the very first serious books I read when I was growing up was *Atlas Shrugged*, and it really had an impact on me...."

Trump is further implicated with Rand by having spent 90 minutes meeting with the distinguished retired banker (and transitional Cato Institute president) John Allison. Allison really is a notable Ayn Rand enthusiast. That was unlikely to have been the substance of their meeting.

Implications abound of some enthusiasm for Rand by Peter Thiel. Note, however, that Thiel told *Wired Magazine* "If I had been libertarian in the most narrow, Ayn Rand-type way I would never have invested in Facebook." Not exactly a ringing confession of Objectivist Faith.

Hohmann reported, yet oddly dismissed as a mere "interesting wrinkle," incoming White House chief strategist Steve Bannon's anti-Rand stand (original emphasis):

Stephen Bannon, who will be Trump's chief strategist in the White House, has been sharply critical of Rand. He outlined his world view in a 2014 speech delivered by Skype to a conference held inside the Vatican. In it, he said that there are two strands of capitalism which he finds very disturbing.

"One is state-sponsored capitalism. And that's the capitalism you see in China and Russia," he said, according to [a transcript posted by BuzzFeed](#) last month. **"The second form of capitalism that I feel is almost as disturbing is what I call the Ayn Rand or the Objectivist School of libertarian capitalism.** And, look, I'm a big believer in a lot of libertarianism. I have many, many friends that are a very big part of the conservative movement ... However, that form of capitalism is quite different when you really look at it (compared) to what I call the 'enlightened capitalism' of the Judeo-Christian West. **It is a capitalism that really looks to make people commodities, and to objectify people, and to use them almost."**

Hohmann also notes that House Speaker Ryan moved from a youthful enthusiasm for Ayn Rand to repudiation:

Speaker of the House Paul Ryan also used to be an outspoken booster of Rand, but he distanced himself in order to advance his political ambitions.

In a 2005 speech, Ryan said that Rand was required reading for his office staff and interns. "The reason I got involved in public service, by and large, if I had to credit one thinker, one person, it would be Ayn Rand," [he told a group](#) called the Atlas Society, according to a New Yorker profile by Ryan Lizza.

By 2012, looking beyond his safely-red House district to the national stage, the Wisconsin congressman claimed that the idea he was inspired by Rand is "an urban

legend. “I reject her philosophy,” Ryan told National Review. “It’s an atheist philosophy. It reduces human interactions down to mere contracts and it is antithetical to my worldview. If somebody is going to try to paste a person’s view on epistemology to me, then give me Thomas Aquinas...Don’t give me Ayn Rand!”

Hohmann charges, but furnishes no evidence, that Ryan changed his position “to advance his political motives.” Interesting use of innuendo.

I read *Atlas Shrugged* as a college freshman. A year or so later I read *The Fountainhead*. *Atlas Shrugged* kept me up all night devouring it. Rand possessed what literary advisor and Master Wizard Shawn Coyne might call genre conventions down cold. She wrote pulp fiction. Great pulp fiction!

Rand’s “philosophy,” which she called “Objectivism,” did not stick with me. It stuck with few libertarians. Her influence on conservatives wilted after *National Review*’s Whittaker Chambers shrugged. Follow along.

I found something near-heroic and perversely beautiful about Rand’s fatally flawed work. She published her two massive novels in a certain era. In that era many cultural arbiters accorded moral legitimacy — even superiority — to what Rand called “collectivism” (presumably, socialism). Many arbiters even connived at collectivism’s most virulent and grotesque manifestation: Communism.

Rand’s use of pulp fiction to provide a counternarrative was contrarian and interesting. It raised her to cult status.

As Brian Doherty recently wrote, also addressing the imputation of Randism to Trump, in *Reason Magazine*:

Rand was not at all a supporter of the rich and successful as such against the worker; she made the case for the heroism and necessity of anyone who produced, who made the world better through their creative and/or physical effort and made their fortune via free trade, not via political pull.

One thus can understand the innocent appreciation expressed by Trump, Tillerson, Puzder, Pompeo and Allison for the writings of Ayn Rand. It would be a mistake to make too much of their praise.

The key thought leaders of what became the libertarian movement had, at best, volatile relations with Rand. The conservative movement anathematized her. Whittaker Chambers, in the near-canonical *National Review*, wrote a long and influential review panning *Atlas Shrugged* shortly after its publication:

Its story ... reports the final stages of a final conflict ... between the harried ranks of free enterprise and the “looters.” These are proponents of proscriptive taxes, government ownership, labor, etc., etc. ...

Since a great many of us dislike much that Miss Rand dislikes, quite as heartily as she does, many incline to take her at her word. It is the more persuasive, in some quarters, because the author deals wholly in the blackest blacks and the whitest whites. ... This kind of simplifying pattern, of course, gives charm to [the] most primitive story known as: The War between the Children of Light and the Children of Darkness. ...

The Children of Light are largely operatic caricatures.

...

The Children of Darkness are caricatures, too; and they are really oozy. ... (And neither Right nor Left, be it noted in passing, has a monopoly of such dreamers, though the horrors in their nightmares wear radically different masks and labels.) ...

So the Children of Light win handily by declaring a general strike of brains, of which they have a monopoly, letting the world go, literally, to smash. In the end, they troop out of their Rocky Mountain hideaway to repossess the ruins. It is then, in the book's last line, that a character traces in the air, over the desolate earth, "the Sign of the Dollar, in lieu of the Sign of the Cross, and in token that a suitably prostrate mankind is at last ready, for its sins, to be redeemed from the related evils of religion and social reform....

...

[A] materialism of the Right and a materialism of the Left first surprisingly resemble, then, in action, tend to blend each with each, because, while differing at the top in avowed purpose, and possibly in conflict there, at bottom they are much the same thing.

For those who wish to dig deeper into the parallel universe birthed by Ayn Rand, Adam Weiner, writing at *Politico*, provides an invaluable contribution with *The Most Dangerous Political Book You've Never Heard Of*. Weiner resurrects the deep taproot from which Rand, he argues, drew. He reminds us of the writings of a (once sensational, now forgotten) Russian novelist.

Weiner, too, greatly exaggerates the impact of Rand's thought on American politics.

The fundamental idea underlying her objectivism was a twin ideology known as rational egoism—the belief that rational action always maximizes self-interest. And Rand, who wielded the phrase “second-hander” as a cudgel against her enemies, had herself borrowed this idea from the scribblings of her countryman, a Russian writer named Nikolai Chernyshevsky, whose 1863 utopian novel, though critically mocked, became an inspiration for Rand's generation of the early 1900s. That's not all Chernyshevsky is known for. Rand's aversion to socialism is well-documented, but in Russia, that same Chernyshevsky novel became a user manual for revolutionaries, starting with the author's radical contemporaries and ending with Vladimir Lenin and his Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

Which means that, although he is all but forgotten now, Chernyshevsky was one of the great destructive influences of the past century: first in his home country, where his writing helped spawn the Soviet Union, and now, of all places, in the United States,

where his rational egotism continues to reverberate in American political and economic thought.

As the great H.L. Mencken once wrote in his *In Defense of Women*, as I have often quoted but it bears repeating, “the whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed (and hence clamorous to be led to safety) by an endless series of hobgoblins, most of them imaginary.” Most of the populace has grown bored with the “alt-right” imaginary hobgoblin.

Solution? Concoct a new “producer vs worker class war” hobgoblin! The kind words for Ayn Rand’s novels spoken by the president-elect and a very few of his associates represent very few clams from which to make a chowder implying that the Trump administration is inflected by a contempt for workers.

Meanwhile, the media continue to bury the lede. The lede — the most important aspect of this story, not merely an “interesting wrinkle” — is that White House strategist Steve Bannon, Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, and authoritative conservatism anathematize Ayn Rand.

Steve Bannon: “However, that [Randian] form of capitalism is quite different when you really look at it (compared) to what I call the ‘enlightened capitalism’ of the Judeo-Christian West. It is a capitalism that really looks to make people commodities, and to objectify people....” Paul Ryan: “[Objectivism] reduces human interactions down to mere contracts and it is antithetical to my worldview.” Whittaker Chambers: “[A] materialism of the Right and a materialism of the Left ... are much the same thing.”

Inauguration day is fast approaching. Hysteria, masked as journalism, wears thin. Time for fair-minded journalists to get off it, end their giddy detour, and begin a real assessment of the incoming Trump administration.

Such a assessment might well begin with a simple question:

“Who is Donald Trump?”