

# *The New* R E P U B L I C

## **Ayn Rand's Long Journey to the Heart of American Politics**

Jennifer Burns | August 14, 2012

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In the heyday of her celebrity, it often seemed that the only appropriate public response to Ayn Rand was dismissal. In 1961, *Newsweek* magazine sent a reporter to investigate the growing circle of devotees clustered around the right wing novelist. Visiting the New York City headquarters of Rand's Objectivist movement, the reporter declared the Russian-born Rand an "apparition" with a "glare that would wilt a cactus." After a similar pilgrimage, a writer for *Life* magazine forthrightly concluded that Rand was the leader of a cult. A review of Rand's essay collection *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* in *The New Republic* simply referred to Rand as "Top Bee in the communal bonnet, buzzing the loudest and zaniest throughout this all but incredible book."

And yet, some fifty years later, Rand is the avowed intellectual inspiration of presumptive GOP Vice Presidential nominee Paul Ryan. Ryan offers no apologies for interest in Rand's philosophy and makes little effort to hide his allegiances. Just how did Rand travel from the fringes of a 1960s subculture to the heart of American politics?

It clearly wasn't via the traditional institutions of mainstream conservatism. The original mandarins of the conservative movement, from William F. Buckley, Jr. to Whittaker Chambers, all roundly rejected her atheistic philosophy of selfishness and her assertion that capitalism was a moral system.

Rather, Rand made her fortunes among the young foot soldiers of the right in the 1960s, who thrilled to her iconoclastic rejection of mainstream values. Rand's Objectivism, as she called her comprehensive philosophical system, attacked all American pieties but one: The national creed of getting rich. This put her in perfect step with the anti-authoritarian mood of the times—while offering the additional benefit, unlike your average hippy guru, of not threatening her followers' material fortunes.

But Rand's philosophy would have gone nowhere if it were confined to its original adherents. The early Objectivists were decidedly insular, and hardly the most effective evangelists of their cause. Objectivism was first promoted in New York City and across the nation by the Nathaniel Branden Institute, named after Rand's best student and designated "intellectual heir." When Rand and Branden had an explosive falling out in 1968, fueled by the end of their long-running, secretive extramarital affair, the movement splintered. (The affair shocked Rand's followers, though it shouldn't have: Rand dedicated her 1957 opus *Atlas Shrugged* to both her husband and Branden, which was clue enough that he was more than the apple of his teacher's eye.) In the wake of the break-up, Objectivism's infrastructure collapsed.

But this actually turned out to be the saving grace of Rand's legacy. Her ideas were subsequently seized by a broader audience of libertarians who would inject her free market ideology into the political mainstream. The Randian founders of the Libertarian Party were little more effective than Objectivists at winning the ear of a broader public, but they did attract Ed Crane and Charles Koch to the cause. Together, Crane and Koch would found the Cato Institute in 1974. Cato joined a growing phalanx of pro-business, right-wing think tanks that, over the course of the 1970s, would refashion the intellectual consensus around the desirability of free markets and unregulated capitalism. As the political climate shifted away from Great Society liberalism, with even Democrats embracing a more market friendly "neoliberalism," the ideas of Rand came to seem ever more plausible.

When Rand passed away in 1982, she was no longer capable of serving as the gatekeeper to her ideas. (The prurient details of Rand's personal life, which may have served as a deterrent to some, also no longer seemed relevant.) Rand had always insisted that her ideas were a package deal. Libertarians who borrowed her political ideas but didn't buy her epistemology were "a monstrous, disgusting bunch of people," "plagiarizers," and "scum." Conservatives were far, far worse. "Futile, impotent and culturally dead," conservatives could only "accelerate this country's uncontested collapse into despair and dictatorship." Despite their agreement on capitalism, unlike most conservatives Rand was a forthright atheist who supported abortion rights and opposed the Vietnam War. After her death, her philosophy was liberated from its origins; it was now possible to mix and match bits and pieces of Rand's ideology to better fit the emerging conservative worldview.

Indeed, it was during the 1980s, when Rand was no longer around to raise a ruckus, that conservative intellectuals and politicians from Jack Kemp to George Gilder to Ronald Reagan began expressing admiration for her work, combining her economic ideas with their social conservatism. While Rand's aging original followers feuded among themselves over her philosophical legacy, conservatives who had encountered her in college quietly folded her into their canon as they grew into power. (Alan Greenspan was among the few original adherents who managed to cross over into mainstream political success; his meteoric rise helped further to dispel the odor of fanaticism that once marked the Randian right.)

But the true public blossoming of Rand's philosophy came with the arrival of the Tea Party in 2008 which transformed this subterranean undercurrent of conservative interest in Rand into a blaring declaration of love. Before the Tea Party, Paul Ryan had been one of the few conservatives willing to openly embrace Rand as a formative influence. Most conservative politicians preferred to cite thinkers like F.A. Hayek or Milton Friedman, who were both more high-brow than Rand and neutral on the topic of religion. But the very aspects of Rand that made journalists shudder in the 1960s—her angry division of the world into “producers” and “looters,” her cheesy novels—made her into a Tea Party favorite. Protestors at Tea Party rallies waved signs asking “Who is John Galt?” (a reference to the hero of *Atlas Shrugged*) and used Randian logic to argue that health care reform was immoral.

It may seem incredible that fictional plotlines are being used to critique policy, but it's important to recognize that Rand has remained popular precisely because she was a bestselling novelist rather than a dry theorist. Rand waved off specific questions about how her policy proposals—like the abolition of taxation—would work, emphasizing her role was to inspire her readers to high moral purpose. With Galt's Gulch, the capitalist Shangri-la of *Atlas Shrugged*, she brought to life the dream world of the successful striver surrounded by equals and unencumbered by the poor, the weak, or the unlucky. Only in this fictional world could her heroes duck the hard questions of fate and chance, for in Rand's novels, everyone gets what they deserve.

By selecting Ryan, Mitt Romney is gambling that the radical free market capitalism of Ayn Rand has moved definitely from the fringes to the mainstream of American life. It is worth keeping in mind, however, that another Republican once embraced Rand: 1964 Presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. Like Ryan, Goldwater tried to shave off Rand's atheism, emphasizing his Episcopal roots and

disagreeing with her atheism. Yet his campaign speeches rang with the romantic capitalism of Rand's novels; one of his speechwriters was a full-fledged Objectivist.

And it turned out that, thrilling as Rand's ideas might have sounded to a reader wrapped up in her fictional world, few voters were interested in translating her capitalist utopia into reality. Of course, the culture of Washington has clearly changed in the fifty years since then; Romney is clearly hoping that the culture of the American public has changed as well. Before long, we'll know whether his assumption is fact or fiction.

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