

Why Rothbard Endures

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This week we celebrate the life of Murray N. Rothbard, born on the second of March 1926, a Tuesday, in the Bronx.

And what a Bronx it was, teeming with brilliant intellectuals, dedicated Communists, and rock-solid middle-class Americans like David and Rae Rothbard. The family would later become friendly with their apartment building neighbor in Manhattan, one Arthur F. Burns. Burns, an economist at Columbia, was destined for a political career at the Council of Economic Advisers under Eisenhower and as Federal Reserve chairman, appointed by Nixon. Tellingly, Burns was also the man who later nearly sabotaged Rothbard's dissertation at Columbia. By the standards of academic economists, he certainly reached the height of his profession.

Yet we might ask how many people remember or read Burns today as opposed to Rothbard.

The answer is that virtually nobody remembers Arthur Burns. But Rothbard, like his mentor Ludwig von Mises, is far better known and far more widely read today than at any time during his life. There is both poetic justice and a degree of melancholy in this, as Murray suffered the slings and arrows of his detractors just as surely as he enjoyed the friendship and respect of his countless colleagues and readers. For Murray and his beloved wife, Joey, childless but enormously social creatures, the books and ideas themselves became the offspring and legacy. Both have grown in the intervening years.

For any serious thinker, the ultimate reward must be found in the longevity of one's work. Is it still read and considered five or ten years hence? Twenty-five years? A century later? By this measure, Rothbard surely is far more successful than his antagonist Arthur Burns. Even posthumously, Rothbard is a lightning rod. Burns is a footnote. We know Rothbard will be read across the twenty-first century. We know decisively that Burns will not.

How prolific was Rothbard? Surely the sheer volume of words he wrote surpasses nearly any writer in the twentieth century. Henry Hazlitt once remarked at age seventy about having written every day of his life since age twenty; he estimated his lifetime output at roughly 10 million words. Rothbard, despite living only to sixty-nine, surely exceeded Hazlitt by a wide margin. Make no mistake, Murray was still writing at a brisk pace when he died.

A discussion of his oeuvre is too long for any article. His bibliography alone spans sixty-two pages, complete with thirty full-length books and one hundred book chapters. His published scholarly articles, some lost to time and microfiche, are conservatively estimated at one thousand. And his popular articles, including op-eds, movie reviews, political analysis, and sports commentary, are innumerable.

It is hard to imagine anyone today matching his staggering scholarly work across economics, history, philosophy, sociology, political theory, and law. A sliver of his writing would make a great career for a professor working in today's hyperspecialized, "stay in your lane" world of academia.

Yet the volume and erudition of his work alone do not explain his enduring appeal. Rothbard tapped into something deeper, and whether we call it integrity or intransigence, he possessed it in spades. Rothbard's remarkable career underscores a critical but often overlooked point: *almost everything interesting and innovative and valuable in the world happens on the margins*. We see this in technology and business, in arts and literature, in education and medicine, in politics and government, and in any part of life where new thinking threatens the status quo. We certainly see it in the world of ideas.

This is why nothing good comes from tired and compromised sources like the *New York Times* or *The Atlantic*, nothing worthwhile comes from DC think tanks or risk averse academics, and nothing interesting comes from court intellectuals or dissolute pundits on TV. This is why the most original and compelling writers today use Substack or Medium and the most dangerous thinkers are found on YouTube or small podcast platforms rather than cable outlets. Rothbard took on the established economic and political thinking of his day without hesitation, using the alternative venues and platforms available to him at the time.

Murray was always outside the status quo, on the margins. It made him what he was.

Serendipitously, and usually by necessity, Rothbard spent his career writing at the outer bounds of then current thought and scholarship. Working at the margin, combined with his blistering intelligence and capacity to retain knowledge, was his comparative advantage. As with Mises, an easier path would have changed everything.

Had Rothbard's PhD not been delayed by Burns, he might never have spent nearly fifteen years at the Volker Fund. This time spent writing and researching, as opposed to working on the kind of academic papers he would have been expected to write to support tenure at a university, transformed both his understanding of Austrian economics and his writing style. It set him on a course of writing for both lay and academic audiences, which ultimately made him far more influential than any professor. And most importantly, it gave him time and support to begin his *magnum opus*, *Man, Economy, and State*, which transformed the trajectory of his career and presaged an Austrian revival. His path gave him freedom and time, the two most valuable commodities for any intellectual hoping to make fearless and radical contributions.

Professors seeking tenure, by contrast, tend to be timid creatures looking to add their small bit to the existing literature. They also tend to have mortgages. Had Rothbard sought a traditional academic position, as his Ivy League credentials and publications certainly warranted, who knows whether the "full Rothbard" would have emerged? Similarly, had he become comfortably ensconced at the Cato Institute, the politics and compromises of DC think tank-dom would have created pressure to mute both his anarchism and his harsh denunciation of the US empire.

A comfortable Rothbard may never have produced *Power and Market*, where he made his full case for privatized defense. He may never have issued the blistering challenge to small government liberals found in *Anatomy of the State*. He might never have tackled the toughest issues, like self-defense and proportional justice, in *The Ethics of Liberty*. Instead,

he almost single-handedly built a new normative system of anarcho-capitalism from the loose foundations of political anarchism and *laissez-faire*. Only his unbridled independence allowed him to argue comprehensively against the predatory state as harmful to liberty by its very existence.

Will there be another Rothbard in our lifetimes, in this dumbed-down digital age of sound bites and dopamine hits and preening superficial intellectuals? We should hope so. Consider how Mises viewed the state of intellectual affairs in the mid-twentieth century, evidenced by flashes of pessimism in his memoirs. Coming from prewar old Vienna, America in the 1960s must have seemed a cultural wasteland. Yet that same decade, the Age of Aquarius, produced Rothbard's aforementioned *Man, Economy, and State* and breathed new life into Misesian thought. Just as Mises revived Menger and Böhm-Bawerk, Rothbard revived the essence of the Austrian school and gave it a footing in North America. He found its pulse, and he rooted it once again in praxeology. Mises praised Rothbard's book, but he never imagined the renaissance his name and work would enjoy over the decades following his death, in large part due to Rothbard's efforts. So we cannot afford the luxury of pessimism today. New voices and thinkers will continue to emerge, and "another Rothbard" may well be toddling around the Bronx today in diapers. But even if a hundred young Rothbardians are needed to fill his shoes, this should not deter us.

Rothbard's work continues to gain purchase today not only because of his genius and insights, but because he focused so singularly on the ideas themselves rather than on the accoutrements of intellectual life. It's not only that he never sold out, but something more: it simply never occurred to him. For Murray, the work *was* the point.

Rothbard endures. He endures because he never flinched from asking hard questions or giving hard answers. It is hard to imagine any thinker today matching the depth and breadth of this writing, his sweeping scholarly reach, or the sheer blinding intelligence he brought to any intellectual venue. Instead of succumbing to the zeitgeist, he *moved* it. Ignore his critics and read Rothbard for yourself. You will find a happy warrior and a mind like a diamond.