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Ayn Rand and the perversion of libertarianism

Lance Klafeta

1992

The political controversy of the late 19th century was: whether socialists (all those who believed in the individual's right to possess what he or she produced) should engage in the political process, seize control of the state, and use the state apparatus to achieve liberation; or, whether a worker's state was inherently contradictory, counter revolutionary, and would only lead to the creation of a new ruling class whose interests would still clash with those of the ruled that the state should be abolished allowing for no transitional stage of any kind during which power may have the chance to reconsolidate itself.

The situation has recreated itself with amazing similarity almost exactly a century later.

Non-libertarian parties the world over (those who see authoritarian centralization the bulwark of civilization) are bankrupt, economically and intellectually. The only viable intellectual current today falls under that ambiguous term — 'libertarian'.

Today there exist beneath this umbrella as many splinter groups as there were a hundred years ago under the umbrella of socialism.

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Retrieved on December 3, 2009 from www.spunk.org.

This article appeared in issue #34 of *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* (available for \$3.50 postpaid from B.A.L. Press, P.O. Box 2647, New York, NY 10009).

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Two distinct trends, a right and a left if you will, are clearly discernible.

One group, clearly the largest with a hierarchical organization modeled on the other political parties, believes, like most Marxists, in constitutional parliamentary republican democracy.

They believe that the state is a necessary guarantor of individual safety and the product of the individual's labor, and in gradual progress toward a free society through participation in the political process.

The other group, much smaller and far more splintered, reject the state as necessarily a tool of class domination and exploitation.

This group believes that what Bakunin said a hundred years ago is as true today, "If you took the most ardent revolutionary, vested him in absolute power, within a year he would be worse than the Czar himself."

The first group is in all fairness a direct inheritor of the ideals of the American Revolution. In modern times, however, it has only two roots: (1) the Austrian school of economics represented by Ludwig Von Mises; (2) the philosophy of Ayn Rand.

Von Mises never considered the libertarians. He answered the Marxists and the Keynesians and defended laissez-faire capitalism at a time when no one else would. His justification for capitalism was empirical — the greatest good for the greatest number.

Ayn Rand, however, attempted to offer a moral justification of capitalism by substituting the word 'capitalism' for the libertarian meaning of the word 'socialism'. She then attributed all of the ills of capitalism to government interference with the market and all of the world's wealth to the minds of the men whom the world considered the robber barons.

The contrast between Ayn Rand's 'Objectivism' and libertarianism is deeper than mere substitution of terminology, however. Several of her propositions or axioms place her clearly outside of the libertarian tradition.

Her justification of the state is derived from a Hobbesian state of nature theory:

“...a society without an organized government would be at the mercy of the first criminal who came along and who would precipitate it into chaos and gang warfare...” [The Virtue of Selfishness, 152; pb 112]

“If a society provided no organized protection against force, it would compel every citizen to go about armed, to turn his home into a fortress, to shoot any strangers approaching his door — or to join a protective gang of citizens who would fight other gangs, formed for the same purpose, and thus bring about the degeneration of society into the chaos of gang rule, i.e., rule by brute force, into perpetual warfare of prehistoric savages.” [Ibid., 146; pb 108]

Ayn Rand’s belief in the inherent depravity of human nature which renders us forever incapable of living without rulers and not descending to the level of ‘savages’, clearly places her outside of the libertarian tradition which views human nature as essentially good, capable of indefinite improvement through the experience of freedom and the exercise of reason.

Her knowledge of anthropology is as embarrassing as her understanding of history. For example, in regards to her conception of who are the savages, she describes America as, “...a superlative material achievement in the midst of an untouched wilderness, against the resistance of savage tribes.” [For The New Intellectual, 58; pb 50]

To Rand, the essential characteristic of the state is that it possesses a monopoly on the use of retaliatory force. How does she justify this monopoly or national sovereignty? She accepts it as a given, something not requiring a justification, and demands that an-archy, the negation of the proposition, justify itself.

Her concept of national sovereignty is then something transcendental, existing separate and apart from individuals. and beyond the right of the individual to accept or reject according to his or her own reason.

These propositions clearly place Ayn Rand's philosophy closer to Hobbes, Hegel, and Marx, than to libertarianism.

The state, according to Miss Rand, must hold a monopoly on the enforcement of contracts and the settling of disputes between individuals, at least whenever this arbitration is not accepted by both sides voluntarily. She fails to consider that the enforcement of contracts by the state fundamentally alters the nature of free agreements. Agreements are made on terms which otherwise might not be, because they are justiciable.

The terms of "free agreements" under law are titled in favor of lenders over debtors, landlords over tenants, employers over employees, in a way which would not exist in a "free market." This leveraging of power is not 'objective' at all. Depending purely on legal convention, creditors may have debtors imprisoned, tenants may be evicted without notice and their effects confiscated, one human being may own another or the land on which another lives and works, all to varying degrees.

To understand Ayn Rand's psychology it is helpful to know her background. She was born to a wealthy St. Petersburg family in 1905. The position of her family in Czarist society must have been considerable. At a time when the lives of most Russians had changed little since feudalism, her family was wealthy enough to afford a French Governess and take regular vacations to the Crimea.

It should be noted that wealth in Czarist society was almost wholly a measure of one's favor with the government. There were few if any Horatio Alger stories about individuals who lifted themselves out of serfdom without the patronage of the Czar.

At the age of twelve, she must have been very upset when those nasty workers took over her father's business. Her family fled St. Petersburg for the Crimea and the protection of the White Army.

to the Bolshevik cause, willing to give them the benefit of the doubt in hopes that seizing state power would only be a transitional stage toward the development of the stateless/classless society.

Many sincere lovers of liberty now flock to the standard of the Libertarian Party, as they did the Bolsheviks, completely ignorant of the history of the last century. As Santayana said: “Those who forget the mistakes of the past are doomed to repeat them.”

What should be done? It should be obvious that government enforcement of private contracts is not libertarian any more than is taking state power to set people free. Libertarianism is and always will mean socialism — the self emancipation of working people.

Libertarians must stop courting the Republican right and return to their intellectual roots. By standing outside of the political process we deny the state legitimacy, and like the state torturers in *Atlas Shrugged*, they will come and beg for libertarians to take over.

Remembering the experience of the Spanish libertarians, and heeding the advice of John Galt, libertarians must refuse state power even when begged. The state can never be a tool of liberation. Only its complete and utter collapse will allow for the emergence of non-statist institutions, libertarian coops, communes, and free markets, to flourish and displace the political state once and for all.

This experience rendered her forever incapable of seeing land reform or any struggle of oppressed and exploited people as anything more than hatred for the good and lust for the unearned.

She shared with Marx the bourgeois ideology that only a few people were capable of running things. The masses ought to be happy to have a job working for bosses. Any suggestion that an enterprise could be run by the employees without having someone in charge was to her absurd.

She shared with Godwin and Kropotkin the belief that the individual is born *tabula rasa* — a blank slate, and all human knowledge is derived from sense experience. She then proceeded, however, to completely dismiss environment and socialization as the determining factor in the development of character.

People were to her good or evil, brilliant or indolent, depending solely on their volition. People should be judged by their actions with equal severity regardless of their condition. Though she insisted that the United States was not and never had been a completely free country, she granted no such thing as extenuating circumstances when judging an individual and had no qualms upholding the power of the state to inflict capital punishment.

A far more sinister legacy of Ayn Rand to libertarianism is that of a moralizing autocrat who gathered about her an inner circle which she ironically called, “The collective.”

Outwardly, this collective professed egoism and individuality. They were to be the vanguard of an intellectual renaissance. The price of admission to this group, however, was slavish conformity of one’s life and professed philosophy to Ayn Rand’s whims and eccentricities. For example, she did not like men who wore facial hair or listened to Mozart, and if you didn’t give them up you were unfit for Rand’s inner circle.

This is particularly sinister if one considers that Karl Marx, believed by millions to be the very symbol of liberation, was also an autocrat who, though professed to be the ultimate champion of democracy, resorted to extraordinary means to maintain control

of the International Workingmen's Association. He even moved its headquarters to New York to exclude the libertarian influence.

Today Ayn Rand is gone, but like Marx a century ago, hers is the primary influence on the largest libertarian organization existing. Even the pledge which all Libertarian Party members must sign is taken directly from her admonition, "I hereby certify that I do not believe in or advocate the initiation of force as a means of achieving political or social goals."

In spite of their pledge to non-violence, many libertarians are frustrated with election laws and media censorship. An argument which circulates among libertarians of the right is that, if they were more threatening, the government may take steps to accommodate them as it did the black civil rights movement.

Ayn Rand's writings are not entirely consistent on the point of non-violence either. In *The Fountainhead*, Howard Roark resorts to the use of dynamite. In *Atlas Shrugged*, Ragnar Danneskjold engages in piracy on the high seas and even shells a factory which has been nationalized. In a clandestine rescue mission, Dagny Taggart shoots a guard who stood in the way of her desired end.

In the event of economic upheaval, ruined by unemployment and inflation, tenants and home owners may refuse to make rent and mortgage payments. The unemployed may seize vacant land and begin to farm, and factory workers may realize they can run things without stock holders.

It would not be at all surprising if there were to emerge within the libertarian right, groups committed to direct action and counter revolutionary violence, even a coup d'état.

Imagine a charismatic and autocratic personality at the center of such a group and you have the Objectivist Lenin.

Like the Marxists and right libertarians, Lenin and the Objectivists are professed republican democrats. Lenin and the Bolsheviks promised that if given power, they would immediately convoke a constituent assembly. When they realized, however, they

would not hold a majority in such an assembly they turned against the idea of such an assembly.

Can anyone doubt that the cultist mentality which characterizes most of Miss Rand's followers could lead to the creation of a group of self appointed avengers of the capitalist class? That they would suppress strikes, demonstrations, and factory take overs? That they would not execute people for crimes against the libertarian state?

Ayn Rand believed in a republican form of government with a cleverly constructed constitution which would deny the majority of the power to infringe on the rights of a minority as she conceived them. If the majority supported a general strike against rents and mortgages and supported the factory takeovers, would not the clandestinely organized Objectivist libertarian party be tempted to dispense with democracy in order to enforce what they conceived of as the rights of the dispossessed bourgeoisie?

In all fairness it must be admitted that Ayn Rand herself would never sanction such actions, but the same argument is made everyday by western Marxists that Marx would probably not have sanctioned many of Lenin's actions and would certainly not take credit for the Soviet Union.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks won power by promising, "Land to the peasants!" "Factories to the workers!" When they took power, however, they immediately set about liquidating the factory committees and nationalizing the land. They crushed work place democracy by installing armed guards in the factories, and even returned former owners to their positions as employees of the worker's state.

Leon Trotsky stopped the practice of soldiers electing their officers from their ranks and even restored former Czarist officers to their ranks in the Red Army.

When the Russian Revolution began few people clearly understood the gulf which separated the state socialists from the libertarians. Many dedicated libertarians like Alexander Berkman, rallied