

## Rand, Ayn (1905–1982)

Novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand, founder of the philosophic system known as Objectivism, was a quintessential counterculture thinker. She often said that she was challenging 2,500 years of traditionalist, Judeo-Christian culture by proclaiming a secular standard of morality for human life and declaring rational self-interest as the means to its achievement. According to Objectivism, reality is what it is, independent of what human beings think or feel, and reason is the only means to knowledge. In novels such as *We the Living* (1936), *The Fountainhead* (1943), and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), Rand dramatized her views that individual rights are essential to survival in a social context, and that laissez-faire capitalism is the only social system consonant with such rights. In these and other works, she celebrated the fully integrated individual, who recognizes no conflict between mind and body, reason and emotion, thought and action, or morality and prudence.

Rand was born Alisa Zinov'yevna Rosenbaum on February 2, 1905, in St. Petersburg, Russia. Her father's pharmacy was confiscated by the Soviets after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, and the family moved to Crimea. She returned to St. Petersburg to study philosophy and history at the University of Petrograd (later St. Petersburg State University), earning her degree in 1924.

In February 1926, having been granted a visa to visit relatives in the United States, she traveled to New York and Chicago—and resolved not to return home. Moving to Hollywood in hopes of becoming a screenwriter, she changed her name to Ayn Rand and found odd jobs as a script reader. She married the actor Frank O'Connor in 1929 (the couple would remain together until his death in 1979) and became a U.S. citizen two years later.

Given her background, Rand's advocacy of capitalism was no mere apologia for the American status quo. She was a radical critic of what she characterized as the mystical, altruist, and collectivist roots of contemporary culture and the "New Fascist" statist politics that it made possible. In nonfiction anthologies such as *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1964) and *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (1966), Rand maintained that government inter-

vention had been the cause of socioeconomic injustice and instability, including militarism, monopolies, business cycles, and ever-increasing social fragmentation along material, racial, ethnic, sexual, generational, and other lines. Conflict among groups was inevitable in the current system, argued Rand, requiring the sacrifice of some groups for the benefit of others and leading to the triumph of groupthink in social life.

Rand's advocacy of free-market capitalism suggested little common ground with the radical left counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. And while she repudiated the New Left for its "Hegelian" and "Marxist" ideology, and the hippie student rebels of the 1960s for their "emotionalism," "subjectivism," and "nihilism," her work had a certain kinship with the counterculture revolt against authoritarianism and social conformity. Rand shared with the student rebels an opposition to the Vietnam War and the military draft, and she joined in their rejection of social hypocrisy. At the same time, Rand contended that counterculture activists of the time merely reflected the bankruptcy of the establishment by blaming science, technology, and capitalism for the woes of society and by proposing an "anti-Industrial Revolution" as the antidote.

Despite the disdain that Rand heaped on the counterculture, students of the 1960s ranked her as among those who had most influenced, or were most admired by, that generation. Among writers, Rand was tied for sixth place with feminist Germaine Greer, behind satiric novelist Kurt Vonnegut, Lebanese American poet Kahlil Gibran, journalist Tom Wolfe, French philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus (tied for fourth place), and Beat poet Allen Ginsberg.

Many in the counterculture responded favorably to Rand's attacks on intellectual, political, and educational elites. Her influence would extend to popular artists of the era, including rock musicians such as Neil Peart, drummer and lyricist for the band Rush, which paid tribute to "the genius of Ayn Rand," and comic-book artists and writers Steve Ditko and Frank Miller, whose stories expressed a Randian politics of rebellion.

Although Rand rejected many of the collectivist social and political claims of 1960s sexual liberationists, she also influenced a generation of individualist feminist writers (such as Joan Kennedy Taylor, Wendy McElroy, and Sharon Presley) and gay libertarian writers (including those affiliated with the Independent Gay Forum) who were inspired by her heroic vision of individual authenticity. Ayn Rand died in New York City on March 6, 1982.

Chris Matthew Sciabarra

See also: Feminism, Second-Wave; Gay Liberation Movement; New Left.

### Further Reading

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