



Ten Years After

Ten years ago, the first two books of my “Dialectics and Liberty” trilogy were published. *Marx, Hayek, and Utopia* and *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical* came out in the same week of August 1995, giving its author the appearance of prolificity. Prolific or not, it would take another five years for that trilogy to be completed with the publication of *Total Freedom: Toward a Dialectical Libertarianism*.

A Trilogy Conceived

The trilogy was conceived back in the early 1980s, as I pursued my doctoral studies in political theory, philosophy, and methodology at New York University. I had benefitted greatly from an Objectivist and libertarian education through both independent study and study with some of the finest Austrian economists of the day who taught at the college. And I was learning daily that there was an indissoluble connection between theory and practice. My libertarian convictions were matched by an equally passionate commitment to activism as well. I was a founding member of the NYU branch of Students for a Libertarian Society, and eventually became Chair of the Student Board of the national organization. And I joined others in Washington Square Park in protest against President Jimmy Carter’s reinstating of draft registration—handing out pamphlets to gentlemen who were dressed impeccably enough to have been FBI agents.

Around this time, I had also come into contact with one of the foremost Marxist scholars of his generation: Bertell Ollman. Author of *Alienation*, which is the book on “Marx’s conception of man in capitalist society,” Ollman took a surprising interest in my work on Ayn Rand, Murray Rothbard, and F. A. Hayek. He recognized in Rand a master polemicist. He was acquainted personally with Rothbard from their days in the anti-Vietnam War Peace and Freedom Party. And in 1959-60, he had worked as a Volker fellow for Hayek at the University of Chicago. It was partially due to Ollman’s immense respect for these modern libertarian theorists that I chose to study with him and to designate him as my doctoral thesis advisor.

But it was Ollman’s defense of dialectical method that most intrigued me. Ollman presented that method as an eminently reasonable orientation toward contextual analysis of complex social phenomena.

Dialectics was no inexorable waltz of thesis-antithesis-synthesis; it was a means of understanding the relationships among seemingly disparate factors treated as part of a larger, integrated system. It was a means of understanding such factors in terms of their past origins, their present manifestations, and their potential future implications.

For Ollman, inquiry is the necessary first step in the analysis of social problems. In trying to understand any given social problem, one must first discover and investigate the various factors at work in the larger context within which that social problem is manifested. But a thorough investigation of one social problem often reveals a host of connections to other problems. Grasping the relationships among these problems—how they “fit” together and how they reflect or perpetuate a larger system—is a requisite aspect of the analysis. By engaging in various processes of abstraction, the theorist is able to integrate into a more comprehensive picture the different aspects that each process reveals.

I soon realized that these very techniques of analysis were instances of an eminently Aristotelian art—the art of context-keeping. And I saw that art on display in the works of thinkers who had nothing to do with the Marxist worldview that Ollman expounded.

For example, Rand’s analysis of the social problem of racism was, for me, an instance of dialectical theorizing. Rand traced the roots and implications of racism from many different perspectives. From the vantage point of psycho-epistemology, Rand saw a crude “anti-conceptual mentality” at the core of all forms of tribalism and collectivism, including racism. From the vantage point of ethics, Rand saw in racism the obliteration of individual identity and responsibility. In the realm of culture, Rand traced the multiculturalist battles of “ethnicity” (which she viewed as an “anti-concept”) to the

same irrational collectivism. And in the realm of politics, she argued that tribalism and statism reciprocally presupposed one another. For Rand, the modern mixed economy was a tribal war writ large; racism was merely one form of the vast social fragmentation that state intervention had created and perpetuated.

A careful study of other theorists in the broader classical liberal and libertarian traditions soon revealed a similar dialectical dexterity at work. Rooted in the works of Aristotle, the father of dialectics, such an orientation was not the exclusive province of Hegelians and Marxists. And so, I sought to reread the history of social theory, particularly the history of classical liberalism and libertarianism, in an attempt to explore the role of dialectics in the defense of liberty.

For too long, I had listened to both conservatives and Marxists who condemned libertarianism as an “atomistic” ideology, which had abstracted the individual from all social and historical context, and which had built a notion of freedom like nonsense upon stilts. But my study of thinkers in the classical liberal and libertarian pantheon showed that, *at their best*, the defenders of the free society were profoundly dialectical, profoundly *radical*, in their understanding of the necessary preconditions and consequences of freedom.

By the time the mid-80s had rolled around, I had projected a trilogy of works that would reconstruct the history of ideas so as to elucidate the workings of the dialectical imagination in that broader libertarian tradition. A graduate paper on Rand’s dialectics served as the basis for a long-term book project that would delve not only into the structure of Rand’s thought, but also into its historical origins in her own engagement with the various Silver Age Russian dialectical traditions to which she had been exposed as a youth. And my doctoral dissertation extended that focus by examining the works of Karl Marx, Hayek, and Rothbard.

The Marx-Hayek sections of the dissertation became *Marx, Hayek, and Utopia*; the Rand research eventually became *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical*. And *Total Freedom* merged the Rothbard sections of the dissertation with a fuller history, formal definition, and defense of dialectics.

Getting Published

Getting these books published proved almost as monumental as researching and writing them. For example, *Marx, Hayek, and Utopia* was first accepted for publication in 1989 by a West German publishing house, Philosophia Verlag, which eventually went bankrupt. I took back the rights to the book and eventually secured a contract with the State University of New York Press, which published it as part of its series on the Philosophy of the Social Sciences. By the time it appeared in the same August 1995 week as my second book, *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical*, Germany had become a united country.

The trials and tribulations of getting the first full-length scholarly study of Rand's work published by a university press could be the subject of a book in itself. Such academic publishers were impressed with the quality of the scholarship but not very impressed with Ayn Rand as a subject worthy of study. And a few trade presses were impressed with the commercial potential of Ayn Rand as a subject, but scared off by the scholarly content of the book I had authored. With over 30 publishers refusing to even look at the manuscript, I eventually found two presses that competed for a contract. At first, Temple University Press had placed the book in formal review but the process was sidetracked by the efforts of a noted Objectivist scholar who recommended against publication—unless I promised to drop my insistence on any “Russian” connection or “dialectical” subtext to Rand's work. I defended myself against this scholar's charges, telling the press, in essence, that if I were to adhere to the reviewer's wishes, I'd have to rename the book: *Ayn Rand: The*. Temple eventually overruled the reviewer. Perturbed by an inability to block the publication of my book, that reviewer wrote to me personally and vowed to struggle against my work for the ‘damage’ it would do to Rand's scholarly reputation. The fact that she didn't have much of a scholarly reputation to begin with didn't seem to dawn on the reviewer.

By the time Temple finally accepted the book, however, Penn State Press had given me an offer I couldn't refuse. Working with its remarkable Director, Sandy Thatcher, I found the publication process to be an exercise in pure joy. After its publication, the book was demonized by a group of naysayers, many of whom refused to read it on principle. Some threatened lawsuits. But sales climbed and the book eventually became one of Penn State Press's most successful titles. It is now in its seventh printing. Just as I had stood on the shoulders of those who had come before me in Rand scholarship, so too had my book paved the way for new scholarship in the field. Indeed, the press was so delighted by the impact of my work that the Director invited me to edit a volume on Rand and feminism for its “Rereading the Canon” series. *Feminist Interpretations of Ayn Rand*, which had its own share of controversy, came out four years later, co-edited by Mimi Reisel Gladstein and me.

Bittersweet Memories

I have a few bittersweet memories connected to these first two volumes of my “Dialectics and Liberty” trilogy. I had chosen to dedicate my first book on Marx and Hayek to my mother; she was eventually diagnosed with lung cancer, and spent five years battling the advancing disease. I had chosen to dedicate my Rand book to my Uncle Sam, who was like a second father to me; he was eventually diagnosed with prostate cancer, and died in 1994, a year before the book saw the light of day. I confess that it left me with a dilemma for my third book, *Total Freedom*: Who would be sentenced to the next dedication? I decided to dedicate it to my sister, brother, sister-in-law, dear friend Matthew, and dog Blondie, in the hopes that there would be strength in numbers. Alas, each of them survives till this day, five years after the publication of that culminating volume of the trilogy.

Still, I remember how, in April 1995, I had to find Herculean strength to keep myself afloat—dealing not only with my own chronic, congenital intestinal disease but caring for my mother too, who was in the last stages of her life. In that same week, I was grappling also with the culmination of a two-year romantic relationship. And in the midst of all this, I was putting the finishing touches on the galleys of my books. In the wee hours of April 21st, Mom took her final breaths, while we stood by. Days before she had fallen into a coma, she had told me for the umpteenth time how proud she was of me and my work. And I had told her how proud I was to have had a mother who had taught me all the important values that would sustain me for the rest of my life.

As both my Uncle Sam and mother had hoped, my books were published. And though they generated much criticism, they also brought me into contact with a whole network of newfound colleagues and friends who lent their support and cheered my efforts—even if they didn't agree with all of my conclusions.

As I reflect on the tenth anniversary of the first two books in this trilogy, I am much more interested in the enormous task that lies ahead: Putting my notion of a “dialectical libertarianism” to work for the cause of freedom. It is a notion that requires us to view freedom as an extension of a certain *context* of philosophical, psychological, psycho-epistemological, ethical, and cultural conditions that nourish it and sustain it. Indeed, in freedom, as in life, *context matters*.

Ten years later, I can say this as one who appreciates more than ever the personal context in which my own work came to fruition, the context that gave it meaning, and made it possible.

WE THE SHEEPLE... by Richard McGrail email - rnmcgrail@yahoo.com.au

