

Liberal Read

No 22 | April 2023

Atlas Shrugged

BOOK REVIEW

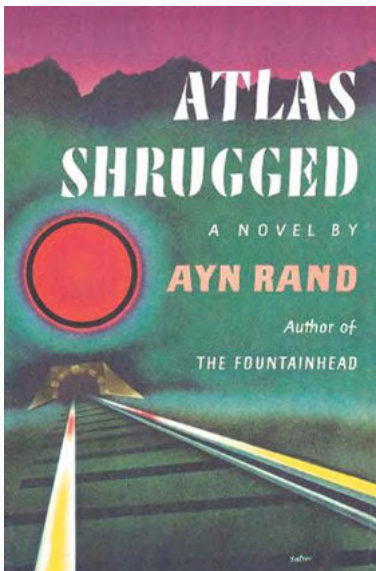
Ayn Rand
Atlas Shrugged
1957

By Mathilde Berger-Perrin

A series of crises has put many liberal ideas under question. Inspired by a popular commercial concept, Liberal Reads are packaged in an easily accessible format that provides key insights in 30 minutes or less. The aim of Liberal Reads is to revisit and rethink classical works that have defined liberalism in the past, but also to introduce more recent books that drive the debate around Europe's oldest political ideology. Liberal Reads may also engage critically with other important political, philosophical and economic books through a liberal lens. Ideological discussions have their objective limits, but they can still improve our understanding of current social and economic conditions and give a much needed sense of direction when looking for policy solutions in real life problems.

Liberal Read

Atlas Shrugged



What would happen, in a world where interventionism is rife, and where the masses feed off the creativity and production of a few, if all the entrepreneurs, scientists, businessmen, artists, and working elites went on strike? What if we stopped the motor of the world? What if Atlas, the Greek mythological figure carrying the world on his shoulders, got fed up and simply decided not to care anymore?

Such is Ayn Rand's proposal in *Atlas Shrugged*. Published in 1957, it has often been considered one of the most influential and controversial American novels of the 20th century. In the traditional scheme of strikes, workers collectively stop their activity to show their worth to the elite. Rand reverses this scheme with a *what if*: what would a society deprived of capitalist values (e.g., free enterprise, private property, individual rights) look like? And how would those who see the fruit of their labor be taken away from them react? For Ayn Rand, who fled the USSR in the 1920s and embraced the American ideals of the Founding Fathers, such a society is simply not worth living in. Her entire life has been dedicated

to defending freedom in all forms, proposing a resolutely individualist perspective on life. In 2009, a year after the financial crisis that was considered by some as the final nail in the American capitalist coffin, *Atlas Shrugged* sold as many copies as the Bible in the United States. But what is it about?

As the world sinks into an unprecedented economic crisis, Dagny Taggart, vice president of a railway company, struggles to keep her trains running. The most competent people around her are disappearing. Francisco d'Anconia, a businessman, blows up his mine. Ellis Wyatt abandons his oil extraction site "as he found it." A renowned professor of philosophy resigns. A music composer leaves with the score of his last concerto. Dagny finds hope for her railways in a revolutionary alloy developed by Hank Rearden of Rearden Steel. Rearden is prosecuted by the National Institute of Science, which takes him to court. He wins – the State cannot afford to deprive itself of such an innovation. Rearden and Dagny fall in love and begin looking for the mysterious inventor of a revolutionary engine, which has been abandoned.

In the meantime, because of Directive 10-289 passed under a state of emergency, public restrictions, rationing, and nationalizations are in full swing, and shortages and accidents have begun. Employees are forced to continue working, manufacturers are compelled to remain operational regardless of the production costs, and everyone is ordered to continue consuming. Prices, wages, and profits will be frozen and set by the Coordination Bureau. All new inventions and goods are forbidden, all intellectual property rights must be given to the nation as an "emergency patriotic contribution." The politics of emergency look for goods and ideas to feed upon, rather than let the innovators find

solutions. But no one cares. After all, “Who is John Galt?,” a popular saying that means “whatever.”

The young engineer hired by Dagny to reconstruct the mysterious motor flees as well. Dagny flies a plane and chases him, but she then crashes into a secret canyon. In this, she finds “Galt’s Gulch,” an Atlantis where the men of reason have retreated. John Galt, the inventor of the coveted engine, welcomes her into this prosperous society, away from the looters.

Dagny, convinced that she can still save the outside world, returns to find desolation and despair. In the midst of this chaos, the head of state, Mr. Thompson, is about to make a statement on the radio about the world crisis, but Galt manages to get on air. Galt reveals, in a lengthy speech, that this state of the world is no less than the result of the hypocritical altruistic morality directed against value-creating men. “All the men who have vanished, the men you hated, yet dreaded to lose, it is I who have taken them away from you.” This is what happens when they flee; this is the selfish, productivist morality that one should adopt. Galt is imprisoned and tortured, but Dagny and her allies manage to free him. Finally, the residents of Galt’s Gulch return to society: “the road is cleared.”

Bureaucracy as a villain

Twentieth-century literature and cinema are no strangers to depicting the absurdity of bureaucracy, with Franz Kafka being the obvious point of reference. However, for Rand, bureaucracy is not a metaphysical nightmare, but a very down-to-earth one – bureaucrats stop men from realizing their purpose on this earth by shackling the latter’s productivity. In *Atlas Shrugged*, the bureaucrats oppose anything resembling technical and moral progress – both being the same for Rand. Welsey Mouch, the embodiment of the evils of bureaucracy according to Rand, yells “we can’t afford to move! So we’ve got to stand still. We’ve got to stand still. We’ve got to make those bastards stand still!”

As an example, Rand describes the absurd “Project X” launched by the government. Project X represents an innovation campaign that has basically no chance of succeeding because no risks are taken, existing only as a political signal. This “white elephant” is snubbed by all the righteous entrepreneurs, precisely because they chose this life to achieve results.

As far as red tape is concerned, the infamous Directive 10-289 is the embodiment of bureaucratic evil. Workers are condemned to stay in their jobs, with quitting becoming a felony. All companies are obliged to stay operational, regardless of the context. All patents and copyrights are to be relinquished to the State, and innovation is banned. All companies are to produce the exact same volume of goods as the previous year, their prices are not be changed, salaries are frozen. Facing what full-blown economic interventionism would look like could be an intellectual exercise for the reader. For Rand – and the New Deal, or John F. Kennedy’s economic policy are no exception – any intervention on a free economy is a step toward tyranny. In her system, there are no free men without a free economy.

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and progressing. In her novel, CEOs and industrialists are not immune to this temptation. James Taggart, Dagny's brother, uses his ties with Mouch, his "man in Washington," to incapacitate a rival railway company. Orren Boyle does the same to win a tender on social housing. For Rand, the power of bureaucrats favors the rise of *crony capitalism*: the marriage of interest between businesses and civil servants, who work out arrangements to distort competition and unfairly favor those with the right connections. While Rand never theorizes crony capitalism as such, she advocates total separation between the state and economy. The giving of power to institutions outside of the market, but also the ability to regulate it, may give way to tendencies that are even worse than those they are supposed to prevent.

The Galt's Gulch, or a liberal utopia

One of Rand's *tour de force* is to present to the reader the flip side of the decrepit world she has conjured: "Galt's Gulch," a liberal and capitalist garden of Eden. When Dagny first opens her eyes after her plane crash, John Galt is waiting for her: "We have ceased burdening the weak with our ambition and have left

them free to prosper without us. It is evil to be an employer? We have no employment to offer. It is evil to own property? We own nothing." The men and women of reason retreat into a harmonious valley, where no person or house is alike. "We are not a state here, not a society of any kind—we're just a voluntary association of men held together by nothing but every man's self-interest," explains Galt. The place is private and intends to remain so. The inhabitants swear by an oath: "I swear—by my life and my love of it—that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine." This mantra is not easy to adopt: Dagny, like others, needs to "deconstruct" the altruistic morals she was raised with.

Only one rule remains: nothing is free. This is the virtue of capitalism according to Rand: mutual interest allows the absence of conflict. In Galt's Gulch, the only public good is a "private joke": a large dollar sign, erected by one of the locals. Buying, renting, lending, and swapping – all transactions are about win-win consent. If nothing is free, everything has a value: work, knowledge, objects, and money itself. One source of income is a tax, but it is collected "outside." Ragnar Danneskjöld, a kind of Robin Hood for the rich, collects the taxes (which are, in Rand's world, confiscatory by definition) from the inhabitants of the ravine and transfers these to their bank accounts.

A capitalist utopia? Not quite. There are monopolies there, and no profit. There is only one land owner. However, all are relieved to no longer produce for the greatest number, with a necessarily disappointing counterpart. By producing only what is necessary, the

inhabitants of the Gulch free themselves of time, which is the most precious value of all – and not money, as in the outside world. They are able to widen the range of their talents, basically: they cultivate their garden without depending on the gaze of others and producing for those who hate them. To the detriment of the outside world, treatises on economics, concertos, or revolutionary innovations are born in this valley. But what happens in Galt's Gulch, stays in Galt's Gulch. For all, the creation and satisfaction drawn from one's work is a characteristic of happiness. The work ethic overcomes greed. Apprentices are trained to surpass the masters, and we willingly submit to the game of competition.

This utopia is a parenthesis of serenity that only men and women of reason can enjoy. In this regard, Rand clearly nods toward Aristotle, the only philosopher she claims she is inspired by: the Gulch is a virtuous place as its inhabitants are virtuous. All then share the same morality: that of objectivism, Ayn Rand's philosophy, whose virtues are rationality, productivity, and self-esteem. This is the key to harmony without authority: between men of reason, spontaneous order is not chaotic. What is at stake here is less a model for an ideal society, but a model for an ideal human being: a cheat code to "live on this earth," as Rand liked to say. Should men cease to be virtuous and rational, then police (or any coercive public power), overproduction, and profit are necessary for peaceful coexistence.

Moreover, in the valley, unlike in the outside world, no one stops progress: state-of-the-art equipment makes producing energy, telephone networks, machines possible. Notably, as early as 1957, Rand anticipated the revolution that shale gas would become, as it is discovered in the novel by Ellis Wyatt and "privatized" in the gulch. In short: we work better, to work less. Dagny discovers a new world, blessed with revolutionary inventions, starting with a hologram that causes her accident, as it hides the valley with a mirage, as in a James Bond movie.

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Rand, for whom the government limits itself to the monopoly of coercive violence, does not even see

its point. The only authority here, that of wisdom: a judge, whose rational decisions were ignored in the outside world, ensures the resolution of disputes. Far from a society atomized by egos, individualism is what makes life in society possible. No resentment, no injustice, is possible if everyone's interests are preserved.

What is tremendously powerful in this utopia is that it makes the reader realize that the outside world, materially and morally decrepit, is not a dystopia. It is what the world we live in is in danger of becoming. In most science fiction novels, utopias hark back to our present world, while the initial settings are futuristic. In *Atlas Shrugged*, this logic is inverted. If the society of the novel ceased to be corrupt, a minimal state and economic capitalism would be its organic consequence.

Money makes the world go round

Another of the novel's moral big bangs is the unabashed glorification of money. Francisco d'Anconia, another of the novel's heroes, says: "Money is the material shape of the principle that men who wish to deal with one another must deal by trade and give value for value. Money is not the tool of the moochers, who claim your product by tears, or of the looters, who take it from you by force. Money is made possible only by the men who produce."

In this, money is "the barometer of the virtue of a society," as it gives a value, recognized by all, to human production and to the use they make of them. Money exists to regulate relationships between men and replace violence. Hence, to place a high value on money in our lives is to place it on the human spirit and effort. If there is no "free lunch," it is because work always has value.

Happiness is also not necessarily synonymous with enrichment. Rand examines how the money was made, not in what proportion. In *Atlas Shrugged*, it is the difference between Hank Rearden, who makes money by virtue of his invention, and the businessman Orren Boyle, who gets rich with it.

Objectivism, or freeing humankind from guilt

Atlas Shrugged should be read as a blueprint for Rand's philosophical theory, *objectivism*. The premises are devastatingly simple: reality exists outside the human perception, and human reason is the only way to comprehend it. Therefore, using one's reason is the only way to live on earth according to human nature. The consequence of these premises is that an individual is an end in itself: there is no higher purpose for any individual than to be happy on this earth. Religion and altruistic values are the crippling factors of guilt. Based on this, the best political system for humans to coexist can only be capitalism, as it protects private property and enables individuals to act freely.

Through John Galt's speech, Ayn Rand presents selfishness as a virtue. She invites her reader to check their moral premises: why should altruism be moral? To her, an individual's function on earth is to be happy. Their productivity (artistic, scientific, or otherwise) is the gateway to happiness and a sense of pride. Altruism simply denies that, so it denies human nature according to Rand. "We are on strike against the doctrine that life is guilt," says John Galt. "For centuries, the battle of morality was fought between those who claimed that your life belongs to God and those who claimed that it belongs to your neighbors—between those who preached that the good is self-sacrifice for the sake of ghosts in heaven and those who preached that the good is self-sacrifice for the sake of

incompetents on earth. And no one came to say that your life belongs to you and that the good is to live it.”

Altruistic morals, according to her, have no rational foundations: should they be questioned, they will inevitably point toward mysticism. Hence her disregard for religion, and passionate hatred for any moral code, including political, that would lead to interventionism. The scars of her youth in the nascent totalitarian USSR has led her to see socialism as intrinsically evil.

Selfishness (i.e., acting rationally according to one’s own self-interest) is a quality for heroes. The elite that disappear from the world in *Atlas Shrugged* do so because life in an altruistic society is no longer worth living. They needed to create a parallel reality so they can live according to their values. As in some kind of Bildungsroman, Dagny Taggart is torn between the altruistic desire to help a world where everyone is losing their senses and the selfish, strong figures she falls in love with (Rearden, John Galt). Eventually, both worlds were reconciled.

Fighting for liberal values through literature

This novel of thousands of pages is an apology of progress, capitalism and, most of all, the human mind. Rand herself said “this is a mystery story, not about the murder of man’s body, but about the murder – and rebirth – of man’s spirit.” Rand created something never seen before in literature, a novel where entrepreneurs are heroes. In this, she also highlights the tendency to fear progress and the attachment to the status quo of a society that we still witness nowadays should it be with nuclear energy, vaccines, or AI. Rand, is a resolute (some will say over-the-top) defender of liberal values, pushing them to theses that may seem to be extreme to the common knowledge but is perfectly rational in her views: the virtue of selfishness.




Rand used fiction to demonstrate the absurdities and dangers of socialism and of an altruistic moral that we embrace without understanding why. By picturing the world deprived from its prime movers, she shows that a liberal society is not a zero-sum game, where some people become rich at the expense of others. Men of reason, as she says, are motivated by a “purpose of life” to create, not to dominate. Those she calls “looters” tread on the freedom of others. Conversely, socialism is precisely a zero-sum game: a society where goods are to be redistributed is an unfair one. This is what makes *Atlas Shrugged* an antidote to complexes and guilts, showing that individualism and capitalism are actually the most moral views on society.



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