

Ayn Rand, the Russian-born novelist and philosopher, died in 1982. But in this Bush-Obama season of fantastical government growth and encroachment into all areas of human activity, Rand has become a Banquo's ghost at the banquet of politics, an antistate spirit haunting politicians and commentators who thought her free-market worldview was safely buried by the fall 2008 financial collapse.

Signs of the Rand revival abound. The surprisingly large anti-government Tea Party protests have been chock-a-block with signs such as "Atlas Is Shrugging" and "The name is Galt. John Galt." Sales of Rand's classic *Atlas Shrugged* have soared in 2009, above a level that was already extremely impressive for a 1,000-page, critically unloved, 52-year-old novel. Two major publishing houses brought out new biographies of Rand almost simultaneously this fall. And after decades of Hollywood development limbo, *Atlas Shrugged* may finally be hitting the screen soon in the form of a cable mini-series starring Charlize Theron.

Rep. John Campbell (R-Calif.), who gives out copies of *Atlas Shrugged* to departing interns, and Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.), who says Rand inspired his political career, both have said recently that the age of Barack Obama reminds them of the statist dystopia portrayed in the novel. Ryan—who stresses that, as a Catholic, he is not a full-fledged adherent to Rand's philosophy of Objectivism, which embraces atheism as well as *laissez faire*—says that as he looks around Washington these days he can't help but think he's seeing a lot of Wesley Mouch, the sleazy lobbyist in *Atlas Shrugged* who rises through his connections to become a *de facto* economic dictator.

"What's happening now is Americans are awakening to see [that] this enduring principle of self-government and individualism is being taken away," Ryan says. "I really believe the entire moral premise of capitalism is being shaken to its core because of the acceleration of government right now, and that's waking people up."

Ed Hudgins, director of advocacy with the Atlas Society, an organization that promotes Rand's philosophy, says that when he looks at House Financial Services Committee Chairman Barney Frank (D-Mass.) and federally owned mortgage lender Freddie Mac, he thinks of another *Atlas Shrugged* character: banker Eugene Lawson, who in Hudgins' words "destroys his bank and a good part of the state of Wisconsin because he's making loans based not on sound business practice but on the basis of need."

Many political bloggers this year have preferred to invoke one of Rand's heroes by spreading the idea that more and more people may soon be "going Galt"—that is, following the example of Atlas Shrugged hero John Galt by going "on strike" against an overly statist America.

And it isn't just Rand devotees who are seeing her shadow across the landscape. As *The Economist* noted in February, "Whenever governments intervene in the market...readers rush to buy Rand's book. Why? The reason is explained by the name of a recently formed group on Facebook, the world's biggest social networking site: 'Read the news today? It's like 'Atlas Shrugged' is happening in real life.'" To Rand's fans, the U.K. *Guardian* explained in March, "the Obama administration's support for beleaguered homeowners and banks...smacks of tyrannical socialism, forcing the strong and successful to prop up the weak, feckless and incompetent." Everyone seems to agree: Ayn Rand is back, and more relevant than ever.

But will those who are freshly encountering or rediscovering Rand really embrace her radicalism? As important as she remains to the post-World War II American political and intellectual scene, Rand comes with baggage that slows the spread of her ideas, making it difficult for an explicitly Randian political/intellectual movement to gain traction.

More than ever, Rand's uncompromising and unconservative (though hyper-free-market) vision rubs violently against the realities of contemporary American politics of both right and left. That her ideas are spread mostly via novels, and not nonfiction or polemics, renders reader reaction to her hard to replicate. Despite the obvious signs of a Rand resurgence, from Congress to Tea Parties, from biographies to political chatter, from Main Street to Hollywood, it remains highly unlikely that the author's ideas will become remotely as successful in politics as they are in publishing. The American Atlas may be grumbling, but he isn't shrugging yet.

*Atlas Shrugged* portrays a world reduced to terrifying dysfunction by a government fanatically dedicated to managing and manipulating the economy in the name of fairness and helping the needy. It's a scenario that many see as scarily similar to America in 2009.

As in *Atlas Shrugged*, the U.S. is suffering through a shrinking, staggering economy. One of its major transportation industries is falling into the calcifying hands of government management (trains in *Atlas*, autos now). Pull and connections in the nation's capital are often more important than productivity in determining whether a business will thrive. The most heeded political voices are calling for one-sixth of the economy to be subsumed by the state in the name of universal health coverage. The political leader of the United States identifies "selfishness" as his own

greatest moral failing and says that the country's biggest sin is not caring enough for the "least."

For millions of readers worldwide, *Atlas Shrugged* has generated more than just fondness for a corking and unusual tale; the book commonly inspires a life-changing adoration. But from the beginning it also has met widespread intellectual contempt, even from sources that might be expected to endorse Rand's free market views. In *National Review*, for example, Whittaker Chambers famously argued in 1957 that *Atlas Shrugged* was suffused with "a voice...commanding: 'To a gas chamber—go!'" Also in 1957, *Time* slammed the novel as a "weird performance...not so much capitalism as its hideous caricature." More recently, a character on *South Park* declared, after reading *Atlas Shrugged*, that "because of this piece of shit, I am never reading again." The joke works because *Atlas Shrugged* is widely understood as a cultural totem of bizarre, cultish unreadability, often by those who have never tried to get through it.

While complaints about Rand's prose and character development are perennial, the nub of *Atlas* hatred isn't literary: It's the idea that Rand's work is positively evil, celebrating a raw selfishness and glorying in a lack of compassion for anyone who fails to be a heroic producer, or even so much as disagrees with any aspect of Rand's complicated system of epistemology and ethics. As Gore Vidal wrote in *Esquire* back in 1961, Rand's "'philosophy' is nearly perfect in its immorality, which makes the size of her audience all the more ominous."

When *The New York Times* made one of its contributions to the copious body of journalism branding 2009 as the Year of Rand, the paper hooked its story to Rand fan John Allison, chairman of a successful Southern bank, BB&T, which had been forced to take federal bailout money. The article went straight to where Rand's moral rhetoric hits America square in the gut. Allison complained to the *Times* that if a child fights to defend what's his against another kid, he's apt to be told to share rather than defend his property. "To say man is bad because he is selfish," he concluded, "is to say it's bad because he's alive."

Right there is the Rand her enemies love to hate: the woman who named one of her books *The Virtue of Selfishness*, who allegedly championed the haves against the have-nots. This year in *The New Republic*, Jonathan Chait slammed Rand as the fountainhead of the idea that the rich deserve their wealth. This caused him to turn what was supposed to be a review of two serious new books about Rand into a disquisition on the theme that sometimes luck rather than accomplishment earns people wealth in the modern world, which is not a point that Rand would dispute. Neither is it at all relevant to her belief that people deserve whatever they earn, so long as they are not robbing others.

The most concrete indication of the Rand revival is the increasing number of Americans laying down money to live in her world. During one week in late August, for example, *Atlas Shrugged* sold 67 percent more copies than it did the same week a year before, and 114 percent more than that same week in 2007. According to Kara Welsh of Rand's imprint, New American Library, the company shipped 25 percent more copies of *Atlas Shrugged* in the first half of 2009 than it did for all of 2008, for a total so far this year of more than 300,000. That means that only around 40 new novels in 2009 sold more total copies, according to Publishers Weekly sales figures on 2009 bestsellers. Even the hardcover of *Atlas Shrugged* has sold nearly 20,000 copies this year, a number that would make it reasonably successful as a new hardcover novel, let alone one that's been available for half a century.

"Certain novels have stood the test of time," Welsh says, comparing *Atlas Shrugged* with the likes of 1984 or *To Kill a Mockingbird*. "Her works stand with those kinds of classics that consistently sell, all the time, regardless of what's going on in media and going on in the world. This year has seen a big spike in sales, but yes, she's absolutely an author whose works consistently sell."

Is this jump in interest for an always popular author a sign of the political zeitgeist? David Boaz, an executive vice president at the libertarian Cato Institute, crunched some numbers from the book sales measurement service Bookscan and found that the biggest *Atlas Shrugged* sales spikes occurred not in reaction to government moves such as bailouts or stimulus spending but in close connection with major media mentions spelling out Rand's contemporary relevance.

Writing on the [Cato@Liberty](#) blog, Boaz fingered a January 9 Wall Street Journal essay by Stephen Moore as the turning point. "The sales in late 2008 are very similar to those in 2007, with a Christmas bump that was higher in 2008," Boaz wrote. "But sales started to diverge after January 9, suggesting that it was in fact the Wall Street Journal essay that kicked them into high gear." An "even bigger peak in early March," he argued, may be "a case of self-fulfilling prophecy and the accumulating effects of media buzz. [The Ayn Rand Institute] put out its press release about soaring sales on February 23."

Cultural heat is often generated not spontaneously at the individual level but by public discussion. Rand's publisher Welsh agrees: "The media coverage has driven the consumer to seek these books out more. Media coverage and media mentions are really what's driving the sales."

In the gold ribbon of buzzworthiness that is Hollywood, life has been pulsing again in the decades-long saga of getting *Atlas Shrugged* filmed. With Rand fan Angelina Jolie, long rumored to star as railroad heroine Dagny Taggart, begging off the project, the producers are now preparing to turn *Atlas Shrugged* into a mini-series on the new cable channel Epix, possibly starring Charlize Theron. (In Hollywood, nothing is fact until the cameras roll—or until after they finish rolling. *Atlas Shrugged* is not yet at that stage and may never come to fruition.)

In *Atlas Shrugged*, mystery man John Galt persuades people of great ability and original thought in every important field of business, science, and the arts to “go on strike” from society. They are encouraged by Galt, in Randian parlance, to “remove the sanction of the victim” from a world ruined by overgoverning altruists. These “Atlases” retreat to a rationalist libertarian paradise hidden in Colorado, known affectionately as Galt’s Gulch. In March 2009, popular right-wing blogger Michelle Malkin (who picked up the idea from another blogger, Helen Smith) started reporting anecdotes of Americans “Going Galt,” mostly by keeping their businesses or incomes from growing enough to enter a higher tax bracket.

In a world of runaway regulators, where free markets are blamed for outcomes that are more appropriately pinned on government actions and moral hazard, is *Atlas* shrugging? Are creators willfully abandoning the weight of the world, which in Rand’s terms requires action more dramatic than limiting your income? A question that would occur to a fan of the novel is: How would we tell? The whole key to “going Galt” is that no one knew you were doing it; in that lay the novel’s mystery.

The Atlas Society’s webpage defines “going Galt” more mildly than what Rand’s characters actually did. Instead of ceasing all productivity to starve statist parasites, the society advocates the intellectual recognition of certain Randian truths. These include “asking in the face of new taxes and government controls, ‘Why work at all?’ ‘For whom am I working?’” The Atlas Society also suggests that Rand lovers should start by “recognizing that you’re being punished not for your vices but for your virtues,” “recognizing that you do not need to justify your life or wealth to your neighbors, ‘society,’ or politicians, or bureaucrats,” and “taking the moral high ground by explicitly rejecting as evil the premise of ‘self-sacrifice’ that they sell to you as a virtue.”

While Malkin has come up with a handful of self-reported examples, and blog comment threads on the subject of “going Galt” generally include a person or two who claims she or an acquaintance is deliberately working less, the evidence is anecdotal at best. No macroeconomic

indicators, or convincing stories of Rand-level heroes jumping ship from the culture, point to any mass or even significant fringe abdication of productivity for philosophical reasons. And given that most of Obama's initiatives have been driven by deficit spending, not taxation, it's unlikely we'll see any statistically detectable signs of tax avoidance of the sort you'd expect from a Galt-leaning culture.

Cliff Asness is an investment manager of the Connecticut-based money management firm, AQR Capital Management, and a trustee of the Atlas Society. He has been annoyed enough by Obama to do something corporate executives rarely do: publicly condemn the president's policies. Despite his intimate connections with many other productive people and their money, several of whom also have Randian sympathies, he has seen zero sign of anyone "going Galt." Asness adds: "Even if I wanted to 'go Galt,' I wouldn't know how. First I'd have to build a projector thing that makes no one see our valley [as in *Atlas Shrugged*], and I don't know how to do that. But if you take an economist's approach, going Galt would look a lot less dramatic than in the novel. It would look like early retirements, less work, not no work. I don't think it would look like a bunch of gorgeous geniuses moving to a valley in Colorado."

Another development marking 2009 as a year of unusual Rand interest is the publication of two serious biographies of her by scholars who are not Objectivists. One is *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (Oxford University Press), by the University of Virginia historian Jennifer Burns; the other is *Ayn Rand and the World She Made* (Nan Talese), by Anne Heller, formerly a fiction editor at *Esquire*. (See "Ready for Her Close-Up," page 60.)

Both authors say it's merely fortuitous that their books have been preceded by a wave of press about Rand. Each tells me she was initially a little nervous about her controversial and much-derided subject. But they discovered that both academia and the New York literary community were filled with curiosity about Rand, if not love for her philosophy and prose.

Burns notes that people often read and love Rand without becoming dedicated warriors for *laissez faire* and reason. "The fact that people are able to read her without digesting her system is one of her strengths," she argues. "It makes her acceptable to a broad range of readers rather than a narrow band willing and able to accept her fully integrated philosophical system as a guide to their life."

But now that the Rand revival story is linking *Atlas Shrugged* with the contemporary wave of anti-Obama/anti-big government thinking, Burns says, "Atlas is being rebranded more explicitly

as a bible of right-wing America. Maybe in the future people will come to that book with that association locked in.” If that happens, the current mania may end up making Rand’s books less appealing, not more.

Heller, the former fiction editor, admires Rand’s command of the 19th-century Dickensian epic melodrama, which was rooted in passionate concerns about society and economics. She notes in the current context that “as Ludwig Von Mises said, Rand writes about bureaucrats better than anyone else. That kind of smarminess of bureaucratic-speak— ‘we’re doing this for your own good’—is very much in evidence these days.” As Asness of AQR Capital Management says, “We still don’t know if Rand’s heroes are realistic. We can debate that. But I’d say these days that the jury is in that her villains are pretty realistic.”

For Rand’s popularity to achieve political traction, Randism will have to move beyond the strange preoccupation of a few politicians and the full-time passion of two specialist think tanks. Her ideas will need to become the guiding principle for a significant voting bloc or politically active movement. And that is a difficult problem for Objectivism, which as an organized movement never managed to convert the millions of cash-paying Rand customers into active “radicals for capitalism,” to use the author’s own self-description.

Rand’s relationship with attempts to turn her philosophy into a political force was ambivalent. When her disciple and lover Nathaniel Branden first started an official lecture series to systematize and spread her ideas in 1958, Rand was at first skeptical, then an enthusiastic helper. Later, after their affair ended badly, she squashed the operation entirely and chose to largely retreat from such efforts.

When you look at the 2009 revival, it seems as if the Republican Party or the right wing broadly conceived would be the natural political home for Rand. The few politicians who talk her up are Republicans. But dating back to National Review’s attack on *Atlas Shrugged* in 1957, the intellectual gatekeepers of the conservative movement have mistrusted or even hated Rand.

In March, National Review published a series of short reactions to the “going Galt” meme. Most were highly critical. In one, Joseph Bottum, editor of the Christian conservative journal *First Things*, called Rand “the flotsam and jetsam of ages past” and said that “William F. Buckley Jr. and National Review did the world a favor, all those years ago, by throwing the randy Randians overboard. Do we really have to let them climb back on the ship now?” Hillsdale College historian Bradley J. Birger hit on the most significant divergence between Rand and the

right-wing rank and file when he called her “offensive, ignorant, and devoid of faith, hope, and love.” Rand’s militant atheism—and her vision of government’s proper role, which has no room for wealth redistribution of any sort, making almost every GOP politician a looter and moocher—makes it hard to imagine her as a thought leader for the modern political right.

Still, the Atlas Society’s Hudgins perceived signs of a more Randian right at this year’s Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), a modal gathering of young right-wing activists. “Of 1,757 respondents,” Hudgins wrote in a March essay at the Atlas Society’s website about a poll of conference attendees, “a whopping 74 percent said their most important goal was ‘to promote individual freedom by reducing the size and scope of government and its intrusion into the lives of its citizens.’ Only 15 percent answered ‘to promote traditional values by protecting marriage and protecting the unborn.’ And 10 percent at most wanted ‘to secure and guarantee American safety at home and abroad regardless of the cost or the size of government.’”

Rep. Ryan thinks the GOP needs to embrace Rand’s particular approach to politics—not merely stressing the practical benefits of freedom but arguing for its moral necessity. “We have an opportunity,” he says, “to make a choice clearly once and for all in the next two elections, and we owe it to the American people to give them a clear choice: Do you want a collectivist welfare state or do you want to get back to being a free market? We need to make a moral, not just practical or statistical, case.” Ryan admits he’s not sure the Republican Party as a whole is ready to make that argument with Rand’s uncompromising passion.

Whatever parallels one can detect between *Atlas Shrugged* and the current political moment, they are surely not precise. Statist nightmares that afflicted the America of the novel have not afflicted ours. Obama may be managing General Motors, and Goldman Sachs may be thriving through political pull, but nothing like the book’s “Directive 10-289,” which essentially nationalizes the entire economy and freezes everyone in his occupation, has been proposed.

Rand knew, and most of her fans knew, that her point was not to be literally prescient. Rand adored high drama and outrageous gestures, and she delighted in depicting the evil end points where she thought her intellectual enemies’ premises and beliefs would lead.

Political relevance for Rand’s work—translating the message of *Atlas Shrugged* into something useful in everyday life—is tricky. The *Atlas Shrugged* devotee who wants to change the world might note with disquiet that in the novel’s world, nothing got better until everything collapsed,

with Eddie Willers, Rand's stand-in for the average right-thinking, good-hearted, but not superbright American, weeping before a stalled train beneath an uncaring night sky.

Rand started as a novelist, and it is as a novelist that she still has the most effect on Americans' lives. How the hundreds of thousands reading Rand for the first time this year will react to her will be personal, variable, and difficult to quantify; these readers probably will not end up propagating a new wave of small-government politics.

As Rand's 1943 novel *The Fountainhead* illustrated, lives worth living and loving can, and ultimately must, be forged in a world whose political and philosophical powers are opposed to individuality and liberty. In a society of ever-growing government where each individual's ability to move the levers of political power is vanishingly small, that part of Rand's message will remain the most relevant.