GODLESS CAPITALISM: AYN RAND AND THE CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT

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Modern Intellectual History / Volume 1 / Issue 03 / November 2004, pp 359 - 385
DOI: 10.1017/S1479244304000216, Published online: 21 October 2004

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S1479244304000216

How to cite this article: JENNIFER BURNS (2004). GODLESS CAPITALISM: AYN RAND AND THE CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT. Modern Intellectual History, 1, pp 359-385
doi:10.1017/S1479244304000216

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This essay examines the relationship between the novelist/philosopher Ayn Rand (The Fountainhead, Atlas Shrugged) and the broader conservative movement in the twentieth-century United States. Although Rand was often dismissed as a lightweight popularizer, her works of radical individualism advanced bold arguments about the moral status of capitalism, and thus touched upon a core issue of conservative identity. Because Rand represented such a forthright pro-capitalist position, her career highlights the shifting fortunes of capitalism on the right. In the 1940s, she was an inspiration to those who struggled against the New Deal and hoped to bring about a new, market-friendly political order. As a second generation of conservatives built upon these sentiments and attempted to tie them to a defense of Christian tradition, Rand’s status began to erode. Yet by the late 1960s, Rand’s once-revolutionary defense of capitalism had become routine, although she herself remained a controversial figure. The essay traces the ways in which Rand’s ideas were assimilated and modified by key intellectuals on the right, including William F. Buckley, Jr, Whittaker Chambers, and Gary Wills. It identifies the relationship between capitalism and Christianity as a fundamental dilemma for conservative and right-wing thinkers. By treating Rand as an intellectual and cultural leader of significant import, the essay broadens our understanding of the American right beyond the confines of “mainstream” conservatism, and re-establishes the primacy of the 1930s, and 1940s, to its ideological formation. Responding to a paucity of scholarship on Rand, the essay offers an analysis and summary of Rand’s ideas, and argues that despite her outsider status, Rand’s work both embodied and shaped fundamental themes of right-wing thought throughout the century.

In 1954 New York, two titans of the twentieth-century American right came face to face. Fiery pro-capitalist ideologue Ayn Rand, author of the best-selling novel The Fountainhead (1943), met a young William F. Buckley, Jr, fresh from the notoriety and success of his God and Man at Yale (1950). As Buckley recalled in later years, upon meeting him Rand declared in her imperious Russian accent, “You arrh too eentelligent to bihleef in Gott!” It was, to say the least, an inauspicious beginning to an acquaintanceship that would span many decades. The pious

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Buckley never quite recovered from his immediate dislike of Rand, while she never lost her sense that Buckley’s religiosity ruined an otherwise valuable fellow traveler. Beyond the clash of two proud and ambitious personalities, the first Rand–Buckley encounter encapsulates many of the dynamics of right-wing thought in the twentieth century. In Buckley, Rand saw the first glimmers of a religious conservatism that would soon co-opt the anti-statist ideals she had been promoting for her entire career. What Buckley encountered in the person of Rand was a nearly pure incarnation of the putative “Old Right,” for Rand had formed her positions in the ideological matrix of the 1930s and 1940s. Yet Rand was far from a dusty relic of the past, as her continued appeal over the century would demonstrate. Buckley himself quickly grasped that in Rand he faced a formidable competitor for the loyalty of the anti-statist forces in America. And there was no question of collaboration, for Buckley was convinced that as an atheist, Rand missed the central truth his conservatism had to offer: that religion was the only viable foundation for victory over the collectivist madness of Stalin’s terror. But neither could Rand simply be dismissed, for her works of radical individualism advanced controversial arguments about the moral status of capitalism, thus touching upon a core issue of conservative identity. In 1957, Buckley declared open warfare on Rand in the pages of his journal National Review, publishing a scathing review of her second novel, Atlas Shrugged. Yet this rebuttal proved insufficient, and National Review returned to the subject of Rand and her relevancy to conservatism with two articles in 1961 and a cover story in 1967. When it came to dealing with Rand, Buckley wheeled out the big guns, enlisting conservative luminaries such as Whittaker Chambers, Garry Wills, and M. Stanton Evans to deliver their judgments. As distasteful as the outspoken Rand might be to Buckley, it was clear that she could not be safely ignored.

Debates over Ayn Rand remained contentious for conservatives throughout the 1960s because her pro-market ideology, and its popularity, exposed the fault lines upon which modern American conservatism rested. The publication of Atlas Shrugged, her magnum opus, brought to the surface uncertainties about how capitalism—and justifications for it—fit into the conservative program. Responding to Rand compelled conservatives to wrestle with a profound set of dilemmas about the nature and meaning of the market economy. Was capitalism a fundamental part of the conservative program or simply a necessary evil? The answer might be a delicate blend of both, but Rand’s intoxicating novels threatened to overwhelm such subtleties with polemical sophistries. Furthermore, Rand’s vast popularity meant she could conceivably eclipse conservatives in the public eye. Therefore, managing Rand and containing her influence were critical projects if the editors at National Review were to retain any control over the movement they were so carefully nurturing into maturity. The process by which conservatives attempted to repudiate the atheistic Rand
was an inverse of the larger process whereby anti-government, individualistic, pro-capitalist ("libertarian", if you will) thought allied itself with an aggressive Christian outlook and tried to disown its secular roots. While conservatives might try to reject Rand root and branch, in many cases they ended up echoing her arguments and conclusions, albeit in a more modulated voice. An examination of Rand’s career, and conservative relations with her, shows how the conservative movement as a whole managed to absorb Rand’s embrace of the market while preserving the primacy of Christian ethics. Consideration of Rand also re-establishes the significance of the 1930s and 1940s to conservatism broadly considered. To date, historians have generally portrayed the ideas that Rand represented as of little concern to Buckley and the “New Conservatism” he embodied. Recent scholarship on the right reinforces this impression by focusing extensively on the 1960s. Yet conservatism had deeper roots than this, and the legacy of these early origins was manifest throughout the century.

Conservatism as it was assembled under the flag of Buckley’s *National Review* was a rather hybrid creed. When he founded the magazine in 1955, Buckley

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2 Terminological clarity is elusive when discussing the historic right in America. I use “New Conservatism” here as it was used generally in the 1950s, as reference to a reassertion of conservative beliefs in the wake of World War II. This is not to be confused with the “New Right,” a term which scholars generally employ when discussing either the Goldwater movement of the 1960s or politically active Christians in the 1970s. I reserve the term “Old Right” for phenomena of the pre-war period.

3 Recent scholarship has begun to emphasize the importance of libertarianism, a belief system which Rand both embodied and influenced. This new literature has also delineated the role of corporations and businesspeople in the development of conservative ideology. See Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–1960* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), and Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001). Although most treatments of the 1960s acknowledge her influence, academic work on Rand herself remains scarce. For this reason, I will briefly sketch key features of her thought in this piece.

4 The most useful definition of conservatism, and the one I will employ here, is that given by George H. Nash. He defines conservatism as the postwar political and social movement which opposed liberal reform efforts and encompassed three main impulses: libertarian anti-statism, anti-communism, and reverence for tradition (usually rendered as explicitly Christian). I also employ the term “right-wing” to refer to persons and thought which might share some but not all features of this trinitarian conservatism. So, in other words, all conservatives are right-wing, but not all those on the right are conservative (e.g. Rand). George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement Since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976). Nash discusses Rand as an episode in the conservative process of “fusion.” Nash concurs with Buckley’s opinion that Rand was successfully “read out” of the movement, but does not explore the ambiguity surrounding her work or the deeper issues she raised (ibid., 142–5).
deliberately sought to weld the established libertarian, anti-New Deal critique with a renewed appreciation for Christian tradition. Yet this accord did not come easily, and debates raged wildly about the issue of “fusionism,” or the desirability and practicality of joining Christian advocacy with a defense of capitalism. While all could agree with anti-communism, traditionalists like Russell Kirk disliked the libertarian emphasis on the free market and individual liberty. Libertarians fought back fiercely, refusing to cede any ground to traditionalists and their talk of “virtue.” Buckley and one of his editors, Frank Meyer, struggled to keep the peace and to convince everyone that they belonged in one alliance. Into this debate, Rand came like an ideological time capsule from the libertarian fringe of the 1930s. Her unreconstructed defense of capitalism and business made no concessions to religion or to the post-New Deal, welfare state consensus that had emerged. *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) explicitly endorsed capitalism and promoted a comprehensive system of pro-market ethics in a way that Rand’s previous blockbuster, *The Fountainhead* (1943), had not. It articulated a set of values that conservatives wanted desperately to disavow, combining anti-government rhetoric, staunch pro-capitalism, and atheism into a particularly noxious mixture. Yet if Rand had so clearly misconstrued conservatism, then why spill so much ink? Beyond the articles he published throughout the 1960s, Buckley took potshots at Rand during his public appearances. In 1967, he sneered to an audience at the New School for Social Research, “is there anyone more boring?”

Buckley’s jab at Rand contains a clue to this puzzle, for he clearly expected his audience to know who she was and what she stood for, thereby implicitly acknowledging her public stature. It is difficult to exaggerate Rand’s popularity or her ubiquity in 1960s popular culture. Sales figures for her novels tell part of the story. Within five years of publication, *The Fountainhead* had sold 400,000 copies, and it broke the million mark soon thereafter. *Atlas Shrugged* was even more popular, quickly surging into the million-copy range. And neither book’s success was ephemeral, for decades after publication both continued to sell over 100,000 copies annually, making Rand’s novels the stuff of publishing legend. Moreover, Rand was not simply a novelist, but she was also a popular guest on national TV shows and radio programs, a favorite of political cartoonists, a syndicated columnist, a frequent lecturer at college campuses, and, as of 1962, the publisher of her own periodical, *The Objectivist Newsletter*. Her fictional characters quickly passed into conversational parlance and her political slogans

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surfaced in magazines and newspapers across the land. For the staff of a magazine that struggled to break into the 50,000 circulation range, Rand’s capacity to draw an audience had to be a bit aggravating.7

Yet it was not just popularity that the Buckleyites craved; they aspired to respectability as well. Here, Rand’s successes hit another sore spot. Given the media’s interest in the “New Conservatism,” and Rand’s considerable cultural presence, it was quite possible that she might be anointed by liberals as a spokesperson for conservatism, and then be used to discredit their entire program. Such dangers had arisen before, in the early 1950s, when liberals such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, eagerly took upon themselves the task of defining who was and who was not a true “conservative.”8 Buckley and his writers had bridled at this interposition on their own ideological formations, and had fought long and hard to present a united, coherent front to their liberal adversaries. But even as they pilloried liberals, they clearly wished to be taken as worthy opponents, and even as they mocked professors, their desire for intellectual respectability was clear.9 It was obvious that Rand would be of no help in this effort, for popular as she was, her overwrought literary style ensured that she would never be respectable among the country’s intelligentsia. Even worse, she might confirm the liberal stereotype that conservatism was nothing more than an ideological cover for the naked class interests of the haves. But the most important reason to reject Rand was her hostility to religion, because it meant she had fundamentally misunderstood what conservatism was all about.

Nonetheless, the task of disowning Rand was formidable, because she had been a significant presence on the right-wing scene since long before Buckley entered Yale. Many leading conservatives, particularly those of a libertarian bent, had been profoundly inspired by her early work and continued to find her a valuable ally in the struggle against statism. Furthermore, while her strident atheism set her apart from many on the right, key features of Rand’s thought mimicked the dynamics of conservative ideology and ensured that her work would have continued relevance in the years ahead. Like the Catholic conservatives of National Review, Rand advanced a vituperative critique of liberalism, depicted a world consisting of moral absolutes, and touted the wisdom of the people against an overweening elite. While her advocacy of pure laissez-faire might owe much to the nineteenth century, she presented her arguments in a twentieth-century form.

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7 At the time of Chambers’s review, the National Review had 18,000 subscribers; in 1961 it had 54,000; and in 1964 it reached a high point of 90,000. John B. Judis, William F. Buckley, Jr.: Patron Saint of the Conservatives (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 140, 221.
9 Judis, William F. Buckley, Jr., 140.
that dovetailed easily with the rhetoric of the burgeoning conservative movement. This symmetry, and Rand’s contribution to the broader development of right-wing thought, can be seen most easily in the way her anti-communist attitudes shaded imperceptibly into pro-capitalism. In her early work, Rand focused on establishing the moral depravity of communism, drawing heavily on her own experience in Russia. Later she shifted into portraying the positive aspects of the American system, focusing on what she identified as the intrinsic moral nature of capitalism. Rand advanced both these ideas under the rubric of “individualism vs. collectivism,” which allowed her to construct a series of theoretical arguments about the good society that were not religious in nature. Rand was not the first to develop this binary of individualism vs. collectivism, which was widespread at the popular level in the 1940s, but she did much to popularize and shape its form.\(^\text{10}\) She was also one of the first to argue against communism and in favor of capitalism on purely ethical grounds. Long before the evils of communism were widely known, Rand maintained its ideals were fundamentally corrupt, and she likewise insisted upon the beneficence of capitalism when such attitudes were far out of the mainstream. In large part, her career was shaped by the penalties she paid for being an early advocate of unpopular ideas that would later pass into conventional wisdom. In order to understand why National Review reacted to Rand with such vehemence, it is necessary to see how deeply embedded she was in the pre-war conservative world, and how her work embodied core themes of conservative ideology. Rand was particularly vexing because she was only partially wrong. In many ways she looked like a friend to conservatism, which made establishing a clear policy on her ideas all the more imperative.

In 1936, long before there was a cold war, Rand established herself as a cold warrior with the publication of her first novel, *We The Living*, a bitter indictment of life in Soviet Russia. In contrast to later anti-communist writers, Rand, a lifelong atheist, did not base her arguments on religion.\(^\text{11}\) Instead, she fictionalized her own history to depict the hopelessness and despair of life under collectivism. Rand, who had emigrated from Russia in 1926, knew from firsthand experience

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\(^{10}\) See, for example, Rand’s printed debate against Oswald Garrison Villard, former editor of the *New York Evening Post* and *The Nation*, on the theme “Collectivism or Individualism—Which Promises Postwar Progress?,” syndicated in the series “Wake Up America” (October 11, 1943), distributed by Fred G. Clark, American Economic Foundation.

\(^{11}\) Rand was born into a middle-class Jewish family. Upon arriving in the United States, she changed her name from the unmistakably Jewish “Alissa Rosenbaum” to the androgynous, Nordic sounding “Ayn Rand.” While there is no evidence to suggest that Rand deliberately wished to cover up her Jewish roots, the name change did embody her belief that history and tradition should have little impact on the course of an individual’s life. Despite this, it is a notable feature of Rand’s career that with the exception of her husband, nearly all her close associates were secular Jews.
what cost revolution could exact. Her father’s business had been nationalized in the first wave of communist reforms, plunging the family into dire poverty. This experience instilled in Rand a deep suspicion of government and a passionate desire to tell the truth about what communism was—to her, a corrupt system built entirely upon theft. She wrote to her agent: “No one has ever come out of Soviet Russia to tell it to the world. That was my job.” We The Living follows the fate of three young Russians who struggle against the injustices and violence of totalitarianism. Ultimately, Rand argues it is impossible to lead a life of integrity or meaning in a society that demands man must live for the state. While the novel is concerned with communism on the surface, its deeper theme invokes the problem of the individual against the collective. With these baseline ethics, Rand attacked communism because of its very principles. As one character tells a Party member, “I loath your ideals.” Because the basic unit of value for Rand was the individual, she argued forcefully that any system which prioritized the common good over the lives of individuals was ethically bankrupt. Rand’s systemic critique of communism laid the groundwork for her later dismissal of liberalism, which, she argued, fundamentally shared the ideals of communism. This early recognition of communism’s evils gave Rand considerable credibility and moral stature on the right.

By 1940, Rand’s fealty to the ideals of individualism led her to Wendell Willkie’s presidential campaign, where she imbibed a strong dose of traditional American laissez-faire, the hoary creed of William Graham Sumner and Andrew Carnegie that was fast becoming radicalized by the ascendancy of the Roosevelt administration. The Willkie campaign provided a gathering place for the slowly germinating conservative movement that stood opposed to the New Deal. Rand was drawn into a network of unregenerate individualists, including the economist F. A. Hayek and the writers Albert J. Nock, Isabel Paterson, and Rose Wilder Lane. The political atmosphere of the New Deal transformed these thinkers, causing

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them to fear that any accommodation with government could result in the dangerous state expansion typified by Roosevelt’s programs. Under the pressures of the New Deal, what would earlier have been no more than a traditional affection for limited government was fast becoming a deeply felt anti-statism. This dislike of big government was linked to a keen appreciation of capitalism or, as the more politic among them had it, “free enterprise.” The banner year for this circle was 1943, which brought the publication of Rand’s *The Fountainhead*, Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom*, Paterson’s *God of the Machine*, Lane’s *The Discovery of Freedom*, and Nock’s *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man*. Although Rand’s and Hayek’s books were the only ones to attain immediate success, the others went on to become sleeper classics that heavily influenced mid-century conservatives.\(^\text{15}\) Rand would carry on the legacy of these earlier thinkers, albeit with her own innovations. While she shared their basic political orientation, she disagreed with Lane’s and Paterson’s friendliness towards religion and went on to celebrate what Nock attacked as “economism.”\(^\text{16}\) Hayek she regarded with suspicion because he supported limited planning. Nonetheless, these relationships broadened Rand’s perspective on the United States and helped form her political judgments. In this period she also dipped into more mainstream economic theory, profiting greatly from Carl Snyder’s *Capitalism the Creator: The Economic Foundations of Modern Industrial Society* (1940).\(^\text{17}\) Snyder, a well-known economist and statistician at the Federal Reserve Bank, argued in this book that capitalism was the chief mechanism by which societies moved from “barbarism and poverty to affluence

\(^\text{15}\) Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* might well be taken as a theoretical exposition of the themes Rand’s novel embodied. Both agreed that seemingly benevolent impulses to social planning in fact masked a dictatorial power grab, drew on their experiences in totalitarian Europe to reflect on American politics, and employed an absolutist, “slippery slope” logic to predict that socialism would lead inevitably to communism and then totalitarianism. Nock is well known to students of conservative thought, but Lane and Paterson are not. Lane’s life and work are described in William Holtz, *The Ghost in the Little House* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), and Paterson’s career is briefly sketched by Stephen Cox in the foreword to a 1993 reissue of God of the Machine (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1943, 1993). Libertarians fete all three women as foremothers of their movement. See Jim Powell, “Rose Wilder Lane, Isabel Paterson, and Ayn Rand: Three Women Who Inspired the Modern Libertarian Movement,” *The Freeman* (May, 1996).

\(^\text{16}\) Nock coined this word to identify a world view that “interpreted the whole of human life in terms of the production, acquisition, and distribution of wealth.” Albert J. Nock, *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1943), 111.

\(^\text{17}\) Details on Rand’s political awakening are taken from *Biographical Interview with Ayn Rand conducted by Barbara Branden*, Interview # 14, tape # 8, Side 1, “Activities in Politics: 1926 to 1952, The Conservatives,” pp. 351–5. Ayn Rand Papers, Ayn Rand Archives, Irvine, CA.
and culture.”

His vision of creative and beneficent capitalism would soon find its way into Rand’s fiction. The laissez-faire doctrine she absorbed from Snyder, her libertarian friends, and general newspaper reading was also reinforced by her own biography, for Rand’s career embodied the Horatio Alger story. Like countless self-made men, Rand came to believe fervently in the gospel of success.

These ideas and influences were manifest in Rand’s wildly popular second novel, The Fountainhead (1943), which established her as a towering figure among her political associates. In a time of right-wing ascendancy, it is difficult to envision just how enervated the movement was in the 1940s: there was no Buckley, no Ronald Reagan, no Barry Goldwater, no National Review. People who identified themselves as conservatives lacked any discernible program or institutional base. But there was Ayn Rand, and her best-selling novel of unmistakable political import, The Fountainhead. In this book, Rand celebrated the freedoms of American capitalism while also warning that there were diabolical forces afoot that threatened liberty. The novel follows the career of the brilliant architect Howard Roark, who embodies Rand’s idea of the heroic individual. Unlike the characters in We The Living, Roark finds ample room for his genius in America. Perceiving his work to be fundamentally representative of his soul and character, Roark refuses to modify his radical, avant-garde designs to gain popularity. He suffers early professional setbacks but emerges triumphant by the end of the novel because he has never compromised his own individuality. The Fountainhead departs from Rand’s first novel because it is clearly a didactic parable, rather than an attempt to portray life under totalitarianism. Each character symbolizes a certain range of human characteristics that is then linked to a specific political position. Rand took special care to skewer liberals throughout the novel. As she wrote to a friend just after its release, “When you read it, you’ll see what an indictment of the New Deal it is, what it does to the ‘humanitarians’ and what effect it could have on the next election—although I never mentioned the New Deal by name.”

Rand even modeled her arch-villain Ellsworth Toohey on the British socialist Harold Laski, thereby situating her tale of the individual vs. the collective within current politics.

In the dramatic climax of the novel, Roark gives voice to Rand’s anti-statism when he dynamites a government-funded housing project that has been built based on his adulterated architectural plans. He remains unrepentant about the

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19 Rand to DeWitt Emery, May 17, 1943, Letters, 73.

destruction and insists that the entire project was morally flawed because it set a collectivity against an individual. Defending himself in court, Roark rejects the idea of any social obligation to the poor. While he is speaking specifically of the housing project he designed, his sentiments encode a general rejection of progressive taxation or government welfare projects. Roark argues:

> It is believed that the poverty of the future tenants gave them a right to my work. That their need constituted a claim upon my life. That it was my duty to contribute anything demanded of me. This is the second-hander’s credo now swallowing the world. I came here to say that I do not recognize anyone’s right to one minute of my life. Nor to any part of my energy. Nor to any achievement of mine. No matter who makes the claim, how large their number or how great their need.21

Luckily for Roark, a jury composed of virtuous American everymen agrees with his defense, and he is acquitted of any crime. The carefully selected jury demonstrates Rand’s faith in the level-headed common sense of the average American: it is composed of two executives of industrial concerns, two engineers, a mathematician, a truck driver, a bricklayer, an electrician, a gardener, and three factory workers. Although her novel centered on the esoteric profession of architecture, with the jury Rand extended her conception of work as spiritual craft to any individual who took pride in his or her profession, no matter how humble. With its suspicion of government projects, resolute belief in populist wisdom as superior to the counsel of Machiavellian experts, and reflexive patriotism, Rand’s novel adumbrated many basic themes of right-wing thought. It proved a heady brew indeed for those who chafed at the policies of the Roosevelt years.

While *The Fountainhead*’s success established Rand as a considerable intellectual force on the right, its popularity also pulled her out of the rapidly expanding conservative political orbit. After moving back to Hollywood in 1945 to help with the screen adaptation of *The Fountainhead*, Rand fell out of contact with many of her Willkie-era friends (although she became active in California right-wing politics).22 Soon after, *The Fountainhead*’s emotive power attracted

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22 Rand’s Hollywood career is fascinating, but beyond the scope of this essay. In the 1920s and 1930s, Rand was a screenwriter for several major studios. In 1949 she testified as a friendly witness beforeHUAC. *The Fountainhead* movie, which starred Gary Cooper, opened in 1949 and was also drawn into the fight against communism. The Committee for Constitutional Government distributed postcards touting the film and encouraging families to see it together as an educational experience. Box 143-33-C4, Ayn Rand Papers. For a discussion of the film and its contribution to Cold War discourse, see Robert Spadoni, “Guilty by Omission: Girding The ‘Fountainhead’ for the Cold War (Ayn Rand),” *Literature-Film Quarterly* 27/3 (1999), 223–32.
her a unique constituency in the form of Nathaniel and Barbara Branden, two college students who were avid admirers of her fiction. The Brandens, who would go on to be her primary intellectual collaborators in the years ahead, fell quickly under Rand’s sway and did little to challenge her opinions.\(^{23}\) From 1950 until the publication of *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand isolated herself from wider society, socializing predominantly with the Brandens and their relatives. She was thus largely absent from the critical discussions about the nature and meaning of conservatism that dominated the early and mid-1950s. As conservatives struggled to extract moral meanings from totalitarianism, and to bolster religion in a society they believed had gone fundamentally astray, Rand focused exclusively on her own fictional world. After all, she had long ago made up her mind about the evils of totalitarianism and what must be done to combat it. Her opinions sprang from experience, not theology. And experience had taught her that America was the promised land because it allowed unprecedented political and economic freedom, not because it enjoyed divine favor. This freedom had made possible her meteoric rise from impoverished immigrant to literary sensation. Rand, wealthy now from sales of *The Fountainhead*, knew at first hand the blessings of the market. With the same sense of mission that had inspired *We The Living*, she turned to the political and economic ideologies of her new homeland.

*Atlas Shrugged*, much more so than *The Fountainhead*, was essentially a vindication and defense of American capitalism. During its composition, she wrote that the novel’s theme was “those who are antibusiness are antilife.”\(^{24}\) Like its predecessor, *Atlas Shrugged* offers a dystopian vision of a world on the brink of ruin due to years of liberal policy making and leadership. The aggrandizing state has run amok and collectivism has triumphed across the globe. Facing exploitive tax burdens and unbearable regulation, the creative minds of America have “gone on strike” and throughout the course of the story, all competent individuals in every profession disappear. The man masterminding this strike, John Galt, appears halfway through the 1,084-page novel. He faces off against—and falls in love with—one of Rand’s dynamic female characters, Dagny Taggert, the gorgeous and brilliant head of Taggert Transcontinental Railroad. Besides melodrama and dime-store romance, the novel is studded with nuggets of politically instructive detail. Some are sheer capitalist fantasy: upon arriving at Galt’s secret hideaway, Dagny learns that all the money she has paid in taxes over her working lifetime has been collected into a secret bank account and will now be returned to her. Others are more cutting, such as her caustic descriptions of Washington insiders.

\(^{23}\) The two were Canadians *née* Nathaniel Blumenthal and Barbara Weidman. After becoming deeply involved with Rand, they married and changed their surnames to Branden.

\(^{24}\) Rand to John Chamberlain, November 27, 1948, *Letters*, 413.
and a young man with “an odor of public payroll.” Galt’s vision of the future United States, to be restored after the corrupt liberal government has fallen under its own weight, represents a flat-out rebuttal of every major policy initiative of the twentieth century. Galt’s band will abolish income taxes, foreign aid, social welfare programs, and will return currency to the gold standard.

Rand’s depiction of capitalism in Atlas Shrugged is simultaneously nostalgic and visionary. When the competent go on strike, they retreat to Galt’s Gulch, a refuge nestled deep in the mountains of Colorado, where they recreate a nineteenth-century world. Residents of the valley are on a first-name basis with each other, and attend Chautauqua-type lectures at night. The former head of Sanders Aircraft is a hog farmer, while a federal court judge supplies the eggs and butter. This affectionate picture of small-town America rests side by side with Rand’s definition of capitalism as the ultimate cerebral achievement, a social system that calls for constant innovation, learning, and a commitment to rationality. In a manner remarkably apropos to the late twentieth-century knowledge economy, Rand conceptualized money as mind made manifest: “Wealth is the product of man’s capacity to think,” claims one of her characters. Many of Rand’s protagonists have an entrepreneurial bent and accumulate wealth through an ingenious invention or by making a scientific breakthrough. Even Dagny, whose railroad is the emblematic old-economy business, is successful because she has an outstanding conceptual grasp of the marketplace and is the only executive who understands the potential of new technologies to improve her operations. Reprising the Protestant work ethic, Rand also suggests that money has a direct relation to values: “Money is the product of virtue, but it will not give you virtue, and it will not redeem your vices.” For Rand, the market not only rewarded virtue, it regulated vice. Without the interference of government, the market would evenly distribute its rewards to those who were deserving and punish those who did not make use of their talents. For this reason, Rand dismissed the dangers of inherited wealth. If an heir was not worthy, he

or she would soon be stripped of all financial advantage. Because it operated on pure reason and rewarded only objective achievement, Rand saw capitalism as inherently self-regulating.

As in *The Fountainhead*, so the ethics of *Atlas Shrugged* posit self-interest as the highest good, and explicitly reject sacrifice or obligation. Entrants to Galt’s Gulch take the following oath, reminiscent of Roark’s courtroom speech: “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.” Rand’s heroes are a diverse band of “producers,” including industrialists, artists, and scientists, whom she intends to embody moral truths. These producers lead moral lives because they do not extract resources from others, but rather depend on their own talents and ingenuity to advance. Although all their actions are guided by selfishness, there is room in Rand’s world for self-interest that accrues goods to the commons, as exemplified by Reardon Metal. Henry Reardon, owner of several steel mills, is the only man able to bring to market a new material that will make trains safer and provide inestimable boons to industrial society as a whole. Through Reardon, Rand advances her belief that innovation and progress will happen in the private sector, and only be inhibited by government. If the greater good of Reardon Metal does somewhat undercut her emphasis on selfishness, Rand is careful to emphasize that any social benefits capitalism creates are secondary effects, and rightly so. Social welfare should never be a goal of private enterprise, but rather the profit motive should be acknowledged and celebrated as a spur to creativity. If the profit motive is considered selfish, then so be it: Rand gladly celebrates selfishness as humanity’s highest moral calling.

As she elaborated these already controversial ideas in *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand was often deliberately provocative, even inflammatory. Beyond simply presenting capitalism as a moral system, she seemed to take an adolescent delight at sending up traditional conventions and mores. One of her admirable characters proudly assumes the nickname “Midas” Mulligan. Another declares Robin Hood to be the most contemptible symbol known to man, and makes a practice of stealing humanitarian aid intended for poor countries, giving it instead to the productive rich. A third discourses upon “money, the root of all good.”

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29 Ibid., 680.

30 Ibid., 387–91. It should be noted that this speech was among the most popular parts of the book; Rand granted countless requests for reprints. Rand was a favorite content provider for business owners who sought to spread the gospel of free enterprise. For a description of organized business campaigns against unions, see Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise*. Politically engaged small business owners like those who contacted Rand were also committed backers of Barry Goldwater, whose candidacy she supported. See Perlstein, *Before the Storm*, 4–6. Also see n. 48 below.
her efforts to portray the ideals of selfishness, Rand often ended up glorifying singularly unappealing characters. Radical individualism might look noble in the case of Howard Roark, a single male professional. But it did not come off quite the same in the married Henry Reardon. When Reardon’s mother worries what will befall the family if he is sentenced to jail, Reardon tells her, “I don’t know and I don’t care,” and then walks out on Thanksgiving dinner to visit his mistress. That same evening, he tells his feeble brother, “Whatever affection I might have felt for you once, is gone. I haven’t the slightest interest in you, your fate or your future.”

While Rand implies that Reardon’s family deserves the treatment they receive, what remains is Reardon’s cold manner and Rand’s depiction of this as a proper course of action. Rand called her literary style “Romantic Realism” and maintained that the goal of her fiction was to portray life as it could be, not as it was. To this end, she developed a series of sharp polarities between her characters. Her heroes are always fair of form and strong in jaw line, while her villains are correspondingly flabby and shifty-eyed. Since Rand meant to demonstrate on both a personal and a social level the result of faulty ideals, she was often merciless with her characters, depicting their sufferings and failings with relish. In one noteworthy and repellent scene, she describes in savory detail the personal flaws of passengers doomed to perish in a violent railroad crash, openly suggesting their deaths are warranted by their ideological errors.

The spoofing of liberals in The Fountainhead was positively gentle compared to the vicious caricatures of Atlas Shrugged.

Rand eagerly awaited the reviews in 1957, but she was to be sorely disappointed. While virtually no one had seen her coming in 1943, now it seemed legions were prepared. The New York Times Book Review, which had generously praised The Fountainhead, featured a scathing review of Atlas Shrugged by ex-communist Granville Hicks, who declared: “loudly as Miss Rand proclaims her love of life, it seems clear that the book is written out of hate.” For the most part, reviewers did not primarily object to Rand’s political or moral views, or even her adulation of the superior man. What they focused on instead was the tone and style of the book as a whole. Echoing Hicks’s comment, the Saturday Review wrote: “the book is shot through with hatred.” Other frequent complaints concerned Rand’s repetition and her habit of overdrawing the contrasts between good and evil characters. In many cases, Rand inspired a particularly visceral reaction.

31 Rand, Atlas Shrugged, 439, 441.
32 Ibid., 566–8.
were often savage and mocking commentaries, rather than literary assessments. As *Time* asked, “Is it a novel? Is it a nightmare?” Such spleen may have been due to Rand’s own renunciation of charity as a moral obligation. After all, she had voluntarily opted out of the traditional expectations of politeness or courtesy. Or, it may have been due to the book’s prodigious length, which taxed even the most enthusiastic commentators. Occasional reviewers doled out grudging praise for Rand’s dramatic flair, but found such strengths overshadowed by her hectoring tone. Most glumly agreed that whatever its faults or merits, the novel was likely to outsell even *The Fountainhead*.

Over at *National Review*, Whittaker Chambers went for the jugular. In an article entitled “Big Sister is Watching You,” Chambers deemed *Atlas Shrugged* “a remarkably silly book” and announced that “the news about this book seems to me to be that any ordinarily sensible head could possibly take it seriously.” He noted Rand’s popularity and her promotion of conservative ideals such as anti-communism and limited government, but argued that because she was an atheist, her underlying message was faulty and dangerous. The book began by “rejecting God, religion, original sin, etc. etc.” and in so doing created “a materialism of the Right” which differed little from “a materialism of the Left.” According to Chambers, Rand was foolish to think that collectivism, an essentially godless philosophy, could be defeated by anything other than religion. Without the guidance of religion, Chambers believed, societies would be led astray into the hubris of socialism and dictatorship. Rand’s work, in fact, foreshadowed this outcome, for it was marked by strong fascist elements and ultimately pointed to rule by a “technocratic elite.” But it was not just this criticism that marked the review: far more striking was the article’s vituperative tone. The insults came thick and fast. Rand’s writing was “dictatorial” and had a tone of “overriding arrogance”; she was certainly not sufficiently feminine, hinted Chambers, speculating that “children probably irk the author and may make her uneasy.” And in a stunning line that must have been particularly galling to the Jewish Rand, Chambers intoned: “from almost any page of *Atlas Shrugged*, a voice can be heard, from painful necessity, commanding: ‘To a gas chamber—go!’ At base, it was a clash of two radically different versions of human nature. Rand’s world view was fundamentally optimistic, and her novel showed mankind, guided by rationality alone, achieving heroic deeds. Chambers, fresh from the traumas of the Hiss trial, saw rational man as a doomed and helpless creature trapped in dangerous utopian fantasies of his own creation.

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Yet there was another source of the viciousness. Chambers was fully conscious that Rand’s ideas put conservatism, as Buckley was trying to promote it, under grinding strain. This current of thought ran just below the surface of the review. In his article, Chambers argued that Rand’s book was materialist not simply because she was an atheist, but because she was a capitalist. He wrote that if Rand’s fictional world ever became real, the only value would be hedonism, leading to cultural degradation and a “general softening of the fibers of will, intelligence, spirit.” This would happen because “a free enterprise system . . . [is] in practice materialist (whatever else it claims or supposes itself to be).” The observation came in passing, but it cut to the heart of the conservative problem with Rand. By spinning out the logic of capitalism to its ultimate conclusion, she highlighted all the contradictions that had lately caused such ferocious infighting among conservatives. Her novel showcased the paradox of defending free-market capitalism while at the same time advocating Christianity. But it was just this combination that made conservatism distinctive and, Buckley and his allies believed, was both morally defensible and politically expedient. Books like Rand’s, however, might undermine or redirect the whole venture. If this was what capitalism meant, how could a Christian possibly support it? Chambers, long a student of dialectics, grasped these contradictions in an instant. He sensed immediately that Rand’s ideas had to be quarantined if conservatism was to maintain its careful balancing act between capitalism and Christianity.

Chambers’s evisceration of Rand reflected both the new importance religion had assumed for conservatives in the 1950s, and the tension they felt over the issue of capitalism. Communism was by now always and everywhere “godless,” making the presence of a strident atheist intrinsically problematic. But godless capitalism was, potentially, even worse. While postwar conservatives promoted laissez-faire capitalism as superior to the liberal welfare state, they did not wish to glorify the pursuit of wealth, or fall into what Nock had termed “economism.”37 To National Review conservatives, Rand represented a dangerous departure from the libertarian tradition, which had simultaneously bemoaned the rise of government and the degradation of a society oriented solely to commercial concerns. By contrast, Rand argued that economic life was the highest good, that in the striving and struggling to forge a career and make a living mankind achieved its highest potential existence. She sought to free capitalism of the stigma it had acquired during the Depression and to protect it from the disdain of intellectuals and religious believers alike. Her capitalism was a market infused with spirit that came complete with its own laudable moral code, not a cold system of

37 See n. 16 above.
exploitation. While this idea might seem ridiculous to book reviewers, it would prove to be a compelling vision to millions of Americans.

As it turned out, this vision even had its attractions for Chambers. In 1959, two years after he had attacked Rand, Chambers had nearly crossed to her side of the fence. Starkly, he told Buckley: “I am not a conservative.” In a series of remarkable letters to Buckley, Chambers attempted to clarify his position vis-à-vis National Review and its assorted agendas. He wrote: “I am a man of the Right. I am a man of the Right because I mean to uphold capitalism in its American version. But I claim that capitalism is not, and by its essential nature cannot conceivably be, conservative.” Although Chambers, a Quaker, retained a deep sense of personal religious belief, in the political realm he chose to endorse capitalism, giving in to his fundamentally historicist sense that in capitalism lay the future. If such was the case, it was futile to fight and impossible to maintain a position that was both pro-capitalist and truly conservative. For this reason, Chambers wished to separate himself from the program that Buckley was developing. In his review of Rand, Chambers’s comments had focused mainly on the materialism of capitalism, and how that stood in opposition to religion. Now, he tried to explain to Buckley how capitalism’s intrinsic dynamism posed a challenge to those who sought to preserve the past. And he evinced a Rand-like appreciation for the market’s innate flux: “Conservatism is alien to the very nature of capitalism whose love of life and growth is perpetual change.” Although he was fascinated with the transformative power of capitalism, Chambers’s valuation of the market was tinged with ambiguity. In a passage replete with Spenglerian undertones, he told Buckley: “I am pro-capitalist; I would only retard for an instant, seek to break the fearful impacts of change, hold back lest the rush of development (in a multitude of frightful forms) carry us to catastrophe, as, in fact, seems almost inevitable.” Yet if capitalism might carry us to catastrophe, Chambers, an ex-Communist, was sure that the alternatives were worse. It was capitalism that must be defended, against its enemies both conservative and liberal. Only a few years earlier, these ideas and insights had lain dormant beneath his attack on Rand. Now fully manifest, later in 1959 they led him to resign from National Review, much to Buckley’s dismay.

39 Ibid., 229.
40 According to Buckley’s biographer, he never fully comprehended the grounds of difference between himself and Chambers. See Judis, William F. Buckley, Jr., 167, 177.
Although Buckley viewed Chambers’s review as the party line on Rand, it was far from the last word on the topic.\textsuperscript{41} The attention-grabbing article set off reverberations across the right-wing community. Many libertarians, in particular, were incensed. Supporters of laissez-faire had fought for years to be on equal footing with the Catholics of National Review, and these debates were still contentious in 1957. John Chamberlain, who had reviewed \textit{Atlas Shrugged} favorably in \textit{The Freeman}, was one high-profile defender.\textsuperscript{42} But he and other libertarians were disappointed in Rand, too, for if the conservatives had needlessly attacked her, it was also true that she had failed to make any accommodations to them. In a letter to \textit{National Review}, Chamberlain lamented: “if Miss Rand had chosen to admit just one vocal and practicing Christian in her Fellowship of the Competent . . . there would have been no outcry against \textit{Atlas Shrugged}.” He praised her “magnificent” exposition of freedom and averred that he would continue “the lugubrious task of persuading people to read it in spite of themselves.”\textsuperscript{43} Although a number of readers cancelled their subscriptions in outrage, the controversial article was invigorating for \textit{National Review}. Chambers’s bold pronouncements helped the magazine stake its claim as the arbiter of the conservative mainstream. Buckley professed that conservatism was free of any formal litmus tests for membership, but the \textit{Atlas Shrugged} review signaled that definitive boundaries would nonetheless be drawn.

Despite this attempt at excommunication, Rand retained a considerable following among the \textit{National Review} audience. In 1960, Buckley accepted an article on Rand written by poet and anti-collectivist polemicist E. Merrill Root, an English professor at Earlham College and the author of \textit{Collectivism on Campus} (1956) and \textit{Brainwashing in the High Schools} (1958). At \textit{National Review}, Root was considered something of a second-string writer. But Buckley needed to keep stalwart foot soldiers like Root happy and engaged, and letting him write on Rand was the perfect solution. In his article, “What About Ayn Rand?”, Root openly challenged \textit{National Review}'s policy on Rand and lauded her heroic vision of life.

\textsuperscript{41} Buckley referred to the article whenever he was asked about Rand in subsequent years. \textit{National Review} also reprinted the article in its Thirty-Fifth Anniversary Issue (Nov. 5, 1990).

\textsuperscript{42} John Chamberlain, “Reviewer’s Notebook: Atlas Shrugged,” \textit{The Freeman} (Dec., 1957), 53–6. Another defender was Isabel Paterson, who felt the review to be unconscionably mean-spirited and possibly libelous. See Paterson to Buckley, Jan. 2, 1958, “Paterson, Isabel (1958),” Box 6, William F. Buckley, Jr., Papers, Yale University Library. Robert LeFevre of the Freedom School was also upset by the review. E. Merrill Root to Buckley, Jan. 31, 1960, “Root, E. Merrill (1960),” Box 11, Buckley Papers.

and her celebration of man as creator. He was copious in his praise, calling her “a life-giving sun among her planets” and “our most original artist-philosopher.” He praised Rand for “her brilliant skinning alive of all the phonies of the earth,” noting that she and the conservatives held many common enemies: “cheapjack existentialists,” relativists, behaviorists, positivists. Root’s article then descended into improbable assertions that Rand was an “unconscious” Christian and that her novels showed the deep imprint of theism. Like Chambers, Root was troubled by Rand’s irreligion, but he chose to wish it away, rather than directly attack it. Unlike Chambers, he proved unable to conceptualize the contradictions that lay under the surface.

Root’s article drew an almost immediate response from Garry Wills, who represented the more cosmopolitan and sophisticated new guard at National Review. The Jesuit-educated Wills missed entirely the populist appeal of Rand, and found Root’s review “painful” to read, he wrote Buckley privately. He begged to be given space for a response. It seems that neither Buckley nor Wills had read either of Rand’s novels, although they had looked at John Galt’s famous 57-page speech in Atlas Shrugged as a précis of her thought (Rand herself identified this as the most important part of the book). But even if they weren’t familiar with her oeuvre, Wills and Buckley both knew enough to see that Rand needed to be restrained. Wills wrote to Buckley:

I read the speech you referred me to, hard as it is to wade through gibberish. This is something too serious, it seems to me, to take a soft stand on. I know you always have a lunatic fringe to placate; and on the economics level that is all right, [but] allowing any connection to be established, in any one’s mind, between National Review and Ayn Rand is a betrayal of National Review’s stance and past record.

Buckley replied: “I cannot agree with you more, that one cannot afford to confuse our two theses.” The divergent responses to Rand among National Review’s staff did not merely follow the libertarian–traditionalist continuum, but also reflected differences based on religion, educational background, and social class that affected the wider conservative constituency. The better-educated writers, such as Wills and Chambers, found little of redeeming value in Rand. By contrast, Root spoke for National Review readers who approached conservatism from a less intellectual angle. Many of Rand’s most ardent admirers were small businessmen from the Midwest, who were untroubled by Rand’s atheism or her style and saw

46 Wills to Buckley, Feb. 10, 1960, “Wills, Garry (1960),” Box 12, Buckley Papers.
47 Buckley to Wills, Feb. 15, 1960, Box 12, Buckley Papers.
her as an inspiration. Thus the problems surrounding Rand also pointed to the
difficulties of welding a coalition between well-educated, urban Catholics and
more populist, pro-business Midwesterners who were relatively unconcerned
with religious orthodoxy.

Responding to Root’s article in February 1960, Wills demolished Root’s facile
argumentation, and then honed in on the more important issue at stake. “The
simple equation of capitalism with conservatism is not only naive, it is fatal,”
Wills wrote. He argued: “it is treason, betrayal from within, for conservatives
to endorse any fanatic who agrees with certain methods which conservatives
must use to implement their view of man.” Here was exactly what Rand
would have disagreed with: the idea that “certain methods” (i.e. free markets
or capitalism) must be used, whatever their underlying morality or implications
if fully elaborated. Whereas Rand saw capitalism as the ultimate fulfillment of
human nature, Wills had a much more limited appreciation of its function.
According to Wills, “political and economic freedom” was the basic grounds on
which man must come to know himself, but it was no route to “beatitude.”
Wills denied that capitalism was the true foundation of conservatism, promoting
“history” instead as “the first principle of conservatism.” But if the two were not
identical, they were hardly incompatible. Capitalism was simply a handy tool
that American conservatives would use to shape the world according to their
view of man, which was deeply informed by Catholic conceptions of original
sin. Even so, it was an imperfect method that certainly did not deserve the
turgid praise Rand bestowed upon it. According to Wills, the true conservative
“knows a ‘captain of industry’ can be as ruthless as the leader of a commune.”
He finished with a call to duty. Root was wrong, Rand and her ilk must be
resisted: “The narrow fixations of Miss Rand, the logorrhea of Mr. Root, should
meet with more strenuous opposition from conservatives than from any other
group of thinkers, especially when such chaos takes to itself the unearned title of
conservatism. The conservative’s job is to see complexity, to continue standards,
to learn from history.”

48 See n. 30 above. There was significant overlap between the followers of Rand and
Goldwater. Rand corresponded frequently with the campaign and one of Goldwater’s
main speechwriters, Karl Hess, was heavily involved in the Objectivist movement. See
Paul Richard, “Writer Rests His Pen, Turns to Blowtorch,” Washington Post (Nov. 21,
1967), B3.
49 Garry Wills, “But is Ayn Rand Conservative?”, National Review (Feb. 27, 1960), 139.
50 For the Catholic influence at National Review, and in the conservative movement more
generally, see Patrick Allitt, Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950–
Movement Since 1945.
While Rand was odious in Wills’s sight, she had unknowingly provided a useful service to conservatism. Due to her presence, a consensus was gathering. Whatever conservatism’s relationship to capitalism, it was not to be the answer Rand proposed. Yet neither was it to be the one that Chambers ultimately found, for Wills seemed confident that capitalism and conservatism could be complementary to one another. More so than the others, Wills spelled out the reasoning behind this conclusion. And if the exact relationship couldn’t be pinpointed, Rand could always be kept at bay by sheer invective.

For her part, Rand was happy to return the insults. In December 1960, she gave a lecture at Princeton University entitled “Conservatism: An Obituary.” She scorned the label “conservative”, preferring to be called a “radical for capitalism.” Much of her criticism was sheer anger at compromisers. Rand insisted that the only effective defense of capitalism was a wholehearted one. Unlike Chambers, she found conservatives not unclear or confused about their ultimate stance towards capitalism, but rather full of cowardice:

The moral treason of the “conservative” leaders lies in the fact that they . . . do not have the courage to admit that the American way of life was capitalism, that that was the politico-economic system born and established in the United States, the system which, in one brief century, achieved a level of freedom, of progress, of prosperity, of human happiness, unmatched in all the other systems and centuries combined.51

Any compromise ceded both moral and rhetorical ground to liberals: “collectivism, the ancient, frozen, status society is offered to us in the name of progress—while capitalism, the only free, dynamic, creative, society ever devised, is defended in the name of stagnation.”52 Cowardice led conservatives to misrepresent the essence of capitalism, which impeded their ability to defend it. If capitalism were only celebrated for its true merits, as her fiction attempted to do, its defense would be simple. According to Rand, it was the very genius of capitalism that it stood opposed to all traditional morality. But conservatives “are paralyzed by the profound conflict between capitalism and the moral code which dominates our culture: the morality of altruism . . . Capitalism and altruism are incompatible; they are philosophical opposites; they cannot co-exist in the same man or in the same society.”53 What Rand called “altruism” was essentially indistinguishable from Christian ethics. Hence, like Chambers, Rand understood that capitalism opposed conservatism on two main grounds. Conservatism supported established tradition while the market demanded

51 Rand later published an essay based on the lecture, from which these quotations are taken. Ayn Rand, Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal (New York: Penguin Books USA, 1967), 194.
52 Ibid., 198.
53 Ibid., 195.
change; and conservatism called for Christianity, whereas such ethics were fundamentally crippling to capitalism. Although they differed in their estimation of religion, Rand and Chambers concurred on these fundamental points.

As Rand’s popularity surged in the 1960s, she became impossible to ignore. In the wake of *Atlas Shrugged*, she became a media sensation and a star of the college lecture circuit, appearing to capacity crowds and attendant campus controversy. Her original fan base had been business people, but as the decade wore on, Rand drew to her banner increasing numbers of libertarians, anarcho-capitalists, and so-called “hippies of the right.” The dogmatism and moral certainty of her novels proved especially appealing to adolescents, many of whom were marked lifelong by this early encounter. Although conservatives repudiated her atheistic philosophy, in so doing they allowed Rand to carve out a vital niche as spokesperson for the secular right. Secular and Jewish right-wing youth who were put off by Christian-inflected conservative rhetoric flocked to her lectures and the trademarked courses on “Objectivism” offered by the Nathaniel Branden Institute. Rand labeled her philosophy Objectivism because she taught that values were absolute and could be rationally, objectively determined. Accordingly, Objectivism promoted capitalism as a system that grew naturally out of the self-interested ethics her novels depicted. Through her periodical *The Objectivist* (1962–71), Rand kept readers appraised of her views on current events and literature, providing a forum for the real-world application of her philosophical ideas. On most issues, she took a fairly predictable right-wing line, although her justifications for such positions were often idiosyncratic and linked to her larger agenda of promoting rationality. Once again, Rand was headed in the same direction as the conservatives, but for very different reasons. She stood in solid opposition to what she called “today’s intellectual trend,” including relativism, behaviorism, civil rights, and the welfare state. Rand was also a vigorous opponent of campus political activism and lifestyle experimentation.

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54 The most famous representative of this group is Alan Greenspan, who continues to speak of Rand as an important mentor. Also see Rebecca E. Klatch, *A Generation Divided* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), and *Women of the New Right* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1987), and John A. Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics* (New Brunswick, N J: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 238. It is by no means insignificant that Rand was particularly attractive to youth. Although few retained equal levels of devotion in maturity, as Karl Mannheim argues, a person’s “natural view of the world” is often formed in the ages from 17 to 25 and thus an early encounter with Rand could have longstanding impact. Karl Mannheim, “The Problem of Generations,” in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. Paul Kecskemeti (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), 291.

55 *The Objectivist* replaced *The Objectivist Newsletter* (1962–5) and was later superseded by *The Ayn Rand Letter* (1971–6).
The former she opposed for being a distraction to the intellectual mission of the university, the latter because drugs and sexual promiscuity encouraged irrational thought and impulsive behavior.\(^{56}\) By contrast, Rand taught her students that reason was the only means to the good. She insisted that all her political stances flowed directly from the ideas she had expressed in her fiction, and that she had created a fully integrated philosophical system free of contradictions or error. If ideology was dead on the left, Rand had certainly resurrected it on the right.

*National Review* was not blind to these developments, and returned to Rand yet again in 1967, a year which marked the zenith of her national fame. This time, Buckley tapped M. Stanton Evans to write the review. Evans, a protégé of Buckley’s who had graduated from Yale in 1955, was a respected young activist who had been instrumental in the founding of Young Americans for Freedom, an organization of young conservatives that was sponsored by Buckley but heavily influenced by Rand.\(^{57}\) At the time of the review, he was an editor at the *Indianapolis News*. Buckley wrote to Evans that he wanted a “definitive” piece on Ayn Rand which would “demonstrate to people of commonsense that her ideological and philosophical presumptions make her an inadequate mentor.”\(^{58}\) The magazine’s cover in October featured a portrait of Rand rendered as a stained-glass window, surrounded with dollar signs, along with the headline “The Movement to Canonize Ayn Rand.” (In point of fact, the dollar sign was Rand’s personal totem, and she wore a gold dollar sign pin for many of her public appearances.)

This prominent *National Review* story covered many of the themes Wills had raised six years earlier, but it granted Rand a far greater measure of praise and authority. It also, paradoxically, revealed how many of Rand’s beliefs had been absorbed by *National Review* conservatives even as she remained, officially, *persona non grata*. Evans clearly shared some of the instinctive liking for Rand felt by young conservatives in the 1960s. He was untroubled by her defense of capitalism and her attack upon government regulation, accepting it as conventional wisdom. She had, Evans wrote, “an excellent grasp of the way capitalism is supposed to work, the efficiencies of free enterprise, the central role of private property and the profit motive, the social and political costs of

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56 Rand opposed civil rights to the extent that civil rights leaders advocated government intervention to achieve their goals. On many college campuses, Objectivist students held counterdemonstrations to student protestors. The Rand-inspired Committee for the Defense of Property Rights at Columbia University even distributed “Abolish SDS” buttons and literature. Ayn Rand Archives, Box 5-01-18A.

57 For more on Evans’s career, and Rand’s influence upon YAF, see Andrew, *The Other Side of the Sixties*, 65, 61–2.

welfare schemes which seek to compel a false benevolence.” He also admired her polemical fire and consistency, and defended her against Chambers’s accusation that she was an unconscious Nazi. Evans’s review reflected the more relaxed attitude of National Review in its maturity. It also indicated how capitalism had become less of a charged topic for conservatives as the arguments surrounding fusionism faded into the background. Partially, this reflected the libertarians’ success at redefining capitalism as a moral economic system, specifically when contrasted to communism or socialism. Rand herself had been harping on this theme for decades, and by the late 1960s, her arguments had been picked up by numerous politicians, businesspeople, students, and journalists. This openness to capitalism also reflected the experience of a new generation who had grown up in the flush prosperity of the 1950s.

Evans went on to argue that despite these features, Rand remained a dangerous figure for conservatives because she mixed her good qualities up with the bad: namely, atheism. Rand’s work raised several “central dilemmas of the era,” such as “Can faith in God be reconciled with liberty for man? Is Christian belief compatible with libertarian attachment? Is Capitalism anti-Christian?” These questions were no longer deeply problematic, and failed to exercise Evans the way they had Chambers and Wills. Evans seemed confident that a general consensus on each had already been reached. The only hitch was that Rand answered all of these questions incorrectly. Evans urged that conservatives make judicious use of Rand, all the while being careful not to swallow her argument whole. Now that a strident defense of capitalism was considered fairly standard by conservatives, her atheism, which had been the original ground of Buckley’s dislike for her, remained the fundamental problem. Chamberlain’s lament about the missing Christian in Atlas Shrugged seemed ever more prescient. These developments aside, whatever critical issues Rand raised would soon be theoretical in nature, for her career went into rapid eclipse soon after. In 1968, the Objectivist movement imploded in a series of personal schisms and Stalinesque purges. Rand fell into a deep depression and ceased most public activities and publishing. Yet if Rand


60 Jerome Himmelstein erroneously claims that it was the Christian conservatives who were able to reshape capitalism as a moral system. As the debates surrounding fusionism in the 1950s make clear, it was the Christians who had the most trouble with capitalism, and it was the libertarians who argued against them that capitalism should be regarded as a moral system. Rand was the most vigorous, but not the sole, expositor of this argument. Himmelstein, To The Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 45.

61 The trouble began when Nathaniel Branden terminated his longstanding affair with Rand. Details of these events and the relationship are given in Nathaniel Branden, My Years With
was no longer an institutional presence, she remained a powerful ideological influence, and in the 1970s echoes of her thought could be heard throughout the Nixon and Ford administrations. But as far as National Review was concerned, Rand had come to the sorry end she deserved.

Almost fifty years after the Chambers review, Buckley still relished his self-declared victory over her. In 2003, he published a work of historical fiction, Getting It Right, which was significantly oriented to Rand and Objectivism. In this novel, set in the 1960s, Buckley’s secular Jewish protagonist, Leonora Goldstein, is an ardent Objectivist. She is romantically involved with another misguided young conservative, Woodroe Raynor, who works for the John Birch Society. Over the course of the book, both Leonora and Woodroe recant their ideological foolishness, deciding to forsake their extremist positions and work instead for mainstream, National Review-style conservatism. At the novel’s conclusion the two are engaged and, to boot, Leonora is planning her conversion to Catholicism. Buckley’s novel intends to narrow the circle of acceptable conservatism, but at the same time underscores its diverse and unwieldy origins. Although National Review is the clear winner in this battle, it is Objectivism and the John Birch Society that inspire the young recruits and bring them into the right-wing scene. Significantly, Buckley does not probe the ideological tensions that separate National Review, the John Birch Society, and the Objectivists. Rather, it is sexual deviance that alerts both youths to the error of their ways. Leonora leaves Objectivism when she learns of Rand’s extramarital affair with Nathaniel Branden, and Woody’s disillusionment begins with intimations of homosexuality that surround General Edwin A. Walker, a John Birch favorite. For Buckley, right-wing politics are still not enough: only the Catholic Church can keep youth from falling into profound error.

The novel covers much the same territory as Chambers’s, Wills’s, and Evans’s discussions of Rand, but excises any mention of capitalism, the most contentious issue historically. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, capitalism has almost faded from view, and is taken for granted not simply as a conservative ideal, but as a generalized desideratum of the post-communist world. As examination

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of conservative reaction to Rand demonstrates, however, it was not always so. Because Rand represents such a forthright pro-capitalist position, her career highlights the shifting fortunes of capitalism on the right. In the 1940s, she was an inspiration to those who struggled against the New Deal and hoped to bring about a new, market-friendly political order. As a second generation of conservatives built upon these sentiments and attempted to tie them to a defense of Christian tradition, Rand’s status began to erode. Because she clung so tenaciously to her atheism and her heroic vision of capitalism, she was soon a liability to conservatism as envisioned by the newly powerful National Review. In 1957, Chambers set the terms of the debate with his controversial review of Atlas Shrugged. The fulcrum then swung the other way with the populist effusions of Root’s pro-Rand article, which drew Wills’s wrath. Finally, conservative opinion settled into a kind of stasis with Evans’s 1967 article and Rand’s subsequent personal disintegration.

This resolution, however, did not come without cost. It is notable that tension over the issue of capitalism propelled two of conservatism’s brightest intellectual stars, Garry Wills and Whittaker Chambers, right out of the movement. In the early 1970s, as Chambers had done earlier, Wills distanced himself from Buckley and National Review, partially because he believed its advocacy of capitalism to be incompatible with Catholic social ethics. When confronted with Rand’s work, both men understood immediately that while she might appear to be simply a lightweight popularizer, her work touched upon the deepest structures of conservative thought. Rand forced both writers to consider how a creed oriented to transcendence would respond to the mundane realities and potentially devastating outcomes of the marketplace. While they might mock her style, Chambers and Wills recognized that Rand gave powerful voice to ideas that threatened to overwhelm their own allegiances. Eventually, the two major architects of conservative policy on Rand became disenchanted with their own formulations. If conservatism in the 1950s had not tied itself firmly enough to capitalism for Chambers’s taste, by the 1970s its identification with the market was deep enough to repel Wills. Although they differed in their reasons for leaving the conservative fold, Wills’s and Chambers’s encounters with Rand were part of a larger process whereby both men concluded it was untenable to rest upon an intellectual program so rife with contradictions.

In Getting It Right, the eventual drawing of Leonora into the movement symbolizes conservative success at neutralizing Rand while relying on the ardor she inspired. Leonora’s fictional conversion points to a real-world similarity between the dogmatism of Objectivist and Catholic ethics, which both lay claim to

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65 Wills was also dissatisfied with the conservative reaction to civil rights. For an able discussion of his career, see Allitt, Catholic Intellectuals, Chap. 7.
absolute truth. This progression also mimics the broader success conservatives had in integrating capitalism into their larger agenda of revitalizing Christian values and tradition. At first, such a combination seemed impossibly jarring, but repetition would help the problem fade. And as a newly modified, state-regulated capitalism showered the country with riches and a grateful religious revival swept the land, the two seemed more compatible than theoreticians might argue. Moreover, conservative success at managing Rand, and denying her full membership benefits of the coalition, helped pave the way for later celebrations of the market. If capitalism could be modulated, or its ultimate logic inhibited by the strictures of Christianity, then it could fit right in with motherhood, apple pie, and other emblems of the American way.

In reality, it was more often the case that conservative youth moved from religion to Objectivism than vice versa. See Jerome Tuccile, *It Usually Begins with Ayn Rand* (New York: Stein and Day, 1971).