Bell the man

ELAINE SHOWALTER

JENNIFER BURNS

GODDESS OF THE MARKET

Ayn Rand and the American Right

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In 1941, Ayn Rand wrote out her political and philosophical credo, the unpublished Manifesto of Individualism, which she included as a rebuttal to the Communist Manifesto. Living in New York in the 1930s, she had been appalled by the credules left-wing intellectuals and activists who embraced the Marxist indoctrination she had rejected when she left Soviet Russia in 1926. Her argument, as Jennifer Burns sums it up in her important study Goddess of the Market, was that every individual had the right to live a life of happiness, and the pursuit of happiness, and the "role of society, and its only purpose," was "to ensure these individual rights." Not only defending capitalism but also declaring it to be "the noblest, cleanest, and most idealistic system of all," Rand proclaimed that the time had come for believers in freedom and liberty to come together. She issued a rousing call to action: INDIVIDUALISTS OF THE WORLD, UNITE!

Apparently Rand saw nothing comically oxymoronic in this slogan; a sense of humour was not among her gifts. But Burns's passionate intellectual history makes a persuasive case that Ayn Rand was no joke; she was an original and forceful thinker, and a gifted manipulator of fictional conventions for ideological ends. With unlimited access to the personal papers, journals and hagi archives at the Ayn Rand Institute in Irvine, California, Burns analyses Rand as a significant theorist whose ideas influenced twentieth-century American conservatism, from the economist Alan Greenspan, the Reagan administration and the neoconservatives to web entrepreneurs.

In many ways, she believes, "Rand is a more active presence in American culture now than she was during her lifetime." But, she concludes, Rand was also an anomaly, "a rationalist philosopher who wrote romantic fiction", and a woman who, "for all her fealty to reason...was subject to powerful, even overwhelming, emotions."

"These powerful emotions, among other factors, altered the trajectory of Rand's career, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and the role of society, and its only purpose"...to ensure these individual rights..."Not only defending capitalism but also declaring it to be "the noblest, cleanest, and most idealistic system of all,"..."Rand proclaimed that the time had come for believers in freedom and liberty to come together. She issued a rousing call to action: INDIVIDUALISTS OF THE WORLD, UNITE!"..."As Ayn Rand herself wrote..."..."She needed silence, privacy and order to write; she pricked her thumb with a needle to stay mentally sharp; and demanded that Frank wear "a small bell on his shoe so she could hear him come and go." In 1950, she answered a letter from Nathan Blumenthal, a freshman at UCLA who had memorized The Fountainhead, to no mean task of devotion. Nathaniel and his blonde girlfriend Barbara Weidman became surrogates of their social group, the "small bell on his shoe so she could hear him come and go." In 1950, she answered a letter from Nathan Blumenthal, a freshman at UCLA who had memorized The Fountainhead, to no mean task of devotion. Nathaniel and his blonde girlfriend Barbara Weidman became surrogates of their social group, the "small bell on his shoe so she could hear him come and go.""..."Burns argues that Rand's "quest for intellec- tual recognition was doomed from the start" by her lack of a PhD or an academic affiliation, her authorship of mass-market fiction, and her relentless attacks on the stupidity of the professoriate. Being a woman could not have helped her either. Yet Rand was hostile towards the women's movement, and regarded feminism as a weak version of Marxism with women as the "oppressed" group. Her most sympathetic comment on a modern woman was probably her obituary of Marilyn Monroe in the LA Times. In the end, Ayn Rand, the super-rationalist, was betrayed by her emotions as tragically as any Hollywood star.

became a melodramatic, ceremonial, and almost farcical affair. Although he was twenty-five years younger, he was mesmerized by her. In 1955, she announced to their spouses that she and Nathaniel needed a sexual relationship, and that they would meet for this purpose twice a week at her apartment, while Frank went off to the neighbourhood bar. The four months of secret from the disciples, who did not raise eyebrows even when Rand's second bestseller, Atlas Shrugged (1957), about a strike of the creative elite, was dedicated to both Nathaniel and Frank. The sexual elements of the affair declined and ended by 1959, and Nathaniel devoted himself to teaching Objectivism in his Nathaniel Branden Institute. But in 1964, at the age of thirty-four, he started a secret affair with a beautiful young student named Patrescia Scott. At the same time, Rand, by then fifty-nine, wanted to restart their sexual relationship. Was it her last-gasp assertion of feminine allure? Did she suspect his lack of desire for her? In any case, Nathaniel tried to stall her and avoid offence. He told her that he felt sorry about Barbara, that he was overworked, and that he had a mysterious sexual block. Undaunted, Rand set out to analyse his problems. This went on for some years; by 1967 their relationship had become "purely therapeutie. Finally, there was an explosive climax. In July 1968, he wrote her a letter declaring her age as the sexual obstacle. Rand was outraged, but not totally convinced. It was Bar- bara, by then divorced from Nathaniel, who broke the news to her in August that he had been sleeping with Patrescia for the past four years. Rand summoned him, slapped him in the face three times, and threw him out, with a parting curse: "You'll be impotent for the next twenty years". But he was not. Although Rand communicated both Brandens, Nathaniel's sexual life and his career flourished without her. He set up as a therapist and became a "leader of the self-esteem movement". Rand's books continued to sell; she was much in demand as a speaker at universities and on television talk shows. But without Branden's lectures and promotional skills, Rand's control of Objectivism declined, and she became a fixture in the cultural or- thosphere. Frank's death in 1979 left her bereft, and after her death from lung cancer in 1982 - she "had smoked two packs of cigarettes a day for decades" - the lurid memoirs of the Brandens shocked and alienated many of Rand's most devoted followers. Despite her wide political influence, the enthusiasm of her followers, the energy of her Institute, and the efforts of historians, her restoration remains outside the realm of academic respectability as a writer and a philosopher.

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