

In the Ayn Rand Archive

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THE AYN RAND ARCHIVE is located in a part of Irvine, California that looks like the future as Ayn Rand might have dreamed it. Office parks stretch as far as the eye can see. Nature has been thoroughly tamed and subjected to man's dominion: paved, bulldozed, trimmed, uprooted, replanted. All the businesses are chain stores. Besides the ubiquitous palm trees and the quirkily named John Wayne Airport, it is the geography of nowhere. I loathed Irvine instantly. But here was the vineyard where I would toil for nearly eight years, the carefully guarded and privately held Ayn Rand Archives.

When the superstar novelist of heroic and selfish capitalism died in 1982, she left her estate in its entirety to Leonard Peikoff, her most faithful student and designated "intellectual heir." To Rand and the Objectivist faithful, the sometime philosophy professor Peikoff was the anointed one and the carrier of the Objectivist flame; to the more cynical, he was simply the last man standing when Rand's bitter and bilious life came to an end. In 1985 Peikoff established the Ayn Rand Institute (ARI), a nonprofit organization dedicated to spreading Rand's ideas. For a while ARI was located in Marina del Rey, a beachy community close to Los Angeles. But Peikoff sought an environment more conducive to Rand's promotion of ethical selfishness and unfettered capitalism, and he found it in Orange County. Also home to Knott's Berry Farm and the original little old ladies in tennis shoes, since the 1960s Orange County has been a hotbed of right-wing activity, from anticommunism to radical libertarianism. The glitzy presence of UC Irvine, home to a top-ranked department of literary criticism, had left Irvine's ideological climate unchanged and seemed to have factored little into Peikoff's decision.

When I was beginning my doctoral studies in the history department at UC Berkeley, the Institute had just announced the formation of an archive, but its status remained obscure. There was a

newsletter, but the archive was not officially open. I wrote anyway, asking if I could come. Given the insular nature of the Objectivist world and its hostility to outsiders, I was fairly sure that I would be denied entry, or even a response. So it seemed an amazing stroke of good luck when I received a swift response, asking when I would like to schedule an informational phone call and then a first visit.

What I didn't know then is that my request coincided with an era of glasnost at ARI, so to speak. After years of sending copies of Peikoff's latest tome and a high-handed cover letter to all philosophy departments in the country, ARI had shifted tactics and realized that academic respectability could not be so easily bought. Instead, it had to be cultivated and grown. Much as Ayn Rand did during her life, ARI began focusing on young people, mentoring aspiring academics and funding established scholars willing to promote an Objectivist perspective. Though I received no money from ARI while writing my dissertation (or any other organization beyond UC Berkeley, where I was a student), I benefited from this more open climate. After more than twenty years, ARI appeared to have realized that its circle-the-wagons mentality had backfired, perpetuating the idea of Objectivism as a bizarre cult rather than a valid intellectual position.

As an outsider, then, I held the golden key of mainstream respectability. When I wrote to the archive, I was a doctoral student in history interested in how Rand fit into the broader turn to the right in American politics and society over the twentieth century. I wanted to tease out her connections to the conservative and libertarian movements, find out why she was so popular and how she became so influential. The archive was critical to my project because there was no scholarly book on Rand and little reliable published information about her. Only by using the Ayn Rand Archives could I deflate the myths and pry away the legend that had surrounded Rand for decades. Though I wasn't interested in the cultish psychodynamics of Randland, my sojourn at the ARI and the eventual publication of my book, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (Oxford University Press, 2009), would nonetheless take me deep into that world.

The archive was located within the bowels of the ARI in the most nondescript of office parks. The archive had no fixed position within the Institute, and over the eight years I was a regular visitor, the configuration of the space would change and shift. The Institute grew larger, but the archive grew smaller, losing ground to a number of other reputation-burnishing initiatives the Institute embarked upon.

The one constant was Jeff Britting, the head archivist. Short of stature, Jeff is a dapper man who carries his slightly bulky frame with grace and ease. His dark hair is wavy and well coiffed, his clothes well pressed and sensible. Dapper also describes Jeff's attitude. He is always businesslike and efficient, and though occasionally the stresses of his work would show through, he had about him an indefinable sense of amusement. His "sense of life," as an Objectivist would say, seemed lighthearted. Around Jeff swirled a constantly changing cast of characters, from upper level ARI brass to local volunteers to teams of contract workers who came to help with the more complicated and labor-intensive archival projects.

Then there were the interns, who were connected to the OAC (Objectivist Academic Center) next door. The OAC is ARI's answer to the NBI (Nathaniel Branden Institute), the famed Objectivist school of the 1960s. It brings college students in for a summer and conducts seminars in the fundamentals of Objectivist philosophy and its application to the world today. The men were invariably smokers. The women, a veritable fleet of Dagnys and Dominiques, favored pencil skirts, bare legs, and spiky heels. Coming across me huddled over my sandwich and pretzel sticks in the break room, swaddled in three sweaters to fight the fierce air conditioning, they would toss their hair contemptuously and click past.

The negative force field between me and the interns was part of my larger discomfort with the archive. In the kitchen I incredulously noted signs admonishing users to keep the common space clean for all. I was deeply suspicious of Jeff Britting. I returned his small talk in kind, but I couldn't shake the feeling I had wandered into some type of fundamentalist religious nuthouse. On the surface,

Jeff seemed perfectly normal, even affable. He left me to my own devices, surfacing occasionally to let me know about some new archive of interest or another project he was cooking up. Still, he was an Objectivist, I reminded myself, and among the most hard-core there could be. He worked for the Ayn Rand Institute! Was he expecting me to turn into an Objectivist? Hoping I would? Didn't being an Objectivist mean he and the others viewed me and my worldview as utterly false and without redeeming value? In their eyes, wasn't I a whim-worshipping subjectivist ruled by irrational premises?

Certainly in some areas I felt safe: no one was going to question my irreligiosity, my personal style or habits; there was no trace of sexism in anyone's attitude, ever, and clearly the fact that I was getting a PhD at Berkeley held great weight. I even felt relatively in sync politically with the archive. I started my research during the era of the Patriot Act, and as I drove back and forth to the archive listening to the notoriously lefty public radio station KPFA rant about the latest infringement on civil liberties, I would think to myself: where is Ayn Rand now that we need her so badly? (Of course, it is debatable whether Rand's hawkish patriotism and desire to defeat Islamic "barbarism" would have overruled her civil-libertarian side, but I fancied the latter impulse would hold sway.)

Still, almost until the day I stopped writing, I expected to be informed that my access to the archive had been rescinded. I was immediately wary anytime anyone asked about my project. I tried to mask my emotions with a businesslike attitude. But my antennae were always up. When Jeff asked if I had been involved in any Objectivist groups as an undergraduate at Harvard, I felt he was somehow testing me. I hadn't, and said so, and wondered if that was the wrong answer. Later, when I discovered in the files a querulous and condescending letter from a Harvard Objectivist group upbraiding ARI for some error or other, I felt sure it had been the right answer. Still, I remained perpetually on guard. Jeff later told me his question had nothing to do with the letter, which he had never seen. But in those early days, I was perpetually on guard, ready to interpret or over-interpret the most innocuous of comments.



I had every reason to be paranoid. In keeping with the founder's personality, Objectivism had been riven with breaks, purges, and schisms from its earliest days. Rand was known to break off life-long friendships based on someone liking the wrong kind of movie or novel, or a single comment that revealed a "malevolent" sense of life. The most famous break of all had come in 1968, when Rand publicly denounced her two closest friends and business associates, Barbara and Nathaniel Branden.

It had started as a love story of the oldest kind: student and teacher. Nathan Blumenthal was a nineteen-year-old UCLA student, and Rand was a bestselling novelist, author of *The Fountainhead*, a paean to the creative powers of the individual. He wooed her first with fan letters. She responded with an invitation to her house. He came for all-night conversation, and next to introduce his girlfriend, Barbara Weidman. Before long they were all deep in a fittingly Platonic love triangle. Rand's husband Frank O'Connor, a passive yet handsome man with a penchant for flower arranging, stood to the side as she tutored the youngsters in her philosophy during marathon weekend sessions. Less than a year after their first meeting, she followed them to New York City, dragging Frank along too. In 1953 Barbara and Nathan married and became Mr. and Mrs. Nathaniel Branden, a name of their own invention that fittingly incorporated the name of their idol. The affair between Ayn and Nathan began two years later.

In the beginning, it was the epitome of Objectivist rationality: both Frank and Barbara consented to their spouses' liaison, convinced that sex was the logical result of their intellectual connection. But Rand was no exponent of free love, and she insisted it all be kept secret. The weekly salons continued and grew; Alan Greenspan became a regular. When *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand's magnum opus, was cruelly panned by reviewers in 1957, Nathan started the Nathaniel Branden Institute to spread Rand's philosophy. Rand became ever more famous and wealthy and began publishing nonfiction

along with her own newsletter and magazine. Nathan and Barbara emerged as stars in the Objectivist firmament. Their tape-recorded lectures were heard in hundreds of cities across the country and the world. As Rand's first designated "intellectual heir," Nathan pioneered Objectivist psychotherapy, an alternative healing modality (to say the least) that celebrated judgment of self and others, along with the rational mastery of emotions.

But Nathan had trouble mastering his own emotions, particularly when it came to the feelings stirred by Patrecia, an attractive model who liked to gaze adoringly up at him from the front row of his lectures. He offered her private lessons in Objectivism, and gamely posed for pictures at her wedding. But before long, love conquered reason. Rand knew something had changed, but it took Nathan four years to confess.

Nineteen sixty-eight was the year of the "Objecti-schism," a rupture that resonates to this day. Filled in on Nathan's dalliance and the web of deception that had supported it, Rand denounced both him and Barbara Branden in *The Objectivist* for unspecified crimes against rationality. They fled to California, where Nathan soon emerged as a figure of some standing in the self-esteem movement. The Objectivist movement fragmented brutally, in an upheaval complete with loyalty oaths, threatened lawsuits, and denunciations of friend and family. Rand folded the Institute and retreated to private life.

The publication of Barbara's tell-all memoir in 1984, two years after Rand's death, reopened all the wounds. Leonard Peikoff trumpeted his refusal to read the book and insisted that true admirers of Rand would follow his lead. The furor over Barbara's book mapped onto another growing divide within the Objectivist movement, between those who believed that Objectivism, in the words of philosopher David Kelley, was an "open system" and those like Peikoff who defended Objectivism as a closed system. According to Peikoff, the fundamentals had been articulated by Rand, and it was the task of her legateses to explain and teach Objectivism, not adapt or revise it.

The hermeneutic difference was inseparable from how one viewed Rand's personal life. To Peikoff, it was irrelevant and evidence of bad faith to point out the deficiencies or flaws in Rand's character. They weren't even deficiencies or flaws, properly understood; Rand's habit of breaking with friends, according to Peikoff, was defensible as the enactment of high principle.

On the other side were those like Kelley and Barbara Branden, who maintained a respect for Rand's philosophy even as they proved willing to confront the unpleasant sides of her personality. For all her Rand boosterism, Barbara Branden didn't hesitate to draw a connection between Rand's dogmatism and her philosophy, suggesting that Objectivism could be psychologically dangerous to those who swallowed it whole. In his own tawdry memoir, published a few years after Barbara's, Nathan made much the same point.

Even before the memoirs, Barbara and Nathan were despised by Peikoff and his crew. Peikoff and Barbara Branden are first cousins but have not spoken since 1968, when Peikoff cut off contact. After the memoirs, they became even more repellent to each other. In 1989, Peikoff ejected Kelley from ARI over philosophical differences, among them his receptivity to Barbara's book and his willingness to address a libertarian group. (Though libertarians loved Rand, she considered them "plagiarists" and mindless "hippies of the right.") Kelley went off to found the Institute for Objectivist Studies, now the Atlas Society, an organization that parallels ARI with its own website, magazine, and summer seminars. Time has done little to mellow the split and has only entrenched the parties in their own positions.



Now here I was, twenty-odd years later, deep in the most personal of Rand's artifacts, reading her diary entries, financial statements, love notes to her husband. It seemed impossible that I would not set a foot wrong and be banished forever.

I also knew—or thought I knew—that the archive itself was implicated in the rewriting of Objectivist history. The official story of

Rand's life, a drippy documentary film and companion volume entitled *Ayn Rand: A Sense of Life*, mentioned Nathaniel Branden only in passing and omitted entirely any mention of Barbara Branden or NBI. Years before, the estate had mined the archive for materials published in two volumes, *Letters of Ayn Rand* and *Diaries of Ayn Rand*. A sharp-eyed reader and independent scholar, Chris Sciabarra, had noticed the published material differed from earlier excerpts released by the estate, and published several articles detailing his observations. It was thus an open secret by the time I arrived that books published under Rand's name had been heavily edited by her estate.

Surely, I thought, if anything would get me kicked out of the archive it would be mentioning the bowdlerization of Rand's works. So I was shocked one day when a visiting Objectivist scholar—of the official ARI type—began harrumphing over a copy of the *Journals of Ayn Rand*. He sighed, he snorted, he shifted in his chair and shook his head. I ventured a feeler and received an earful. "It's ridiculous!" he practically shouted. "Why do this! Why make these changes?" Jeff glided up to our table and tsk-tsked. That was before I got here, he explained with a shudder, a kind of archival dark ages before the professionals had arrived. Now, the estate made the originals available to scholars. There is even talk of doing an official concordance, he told us, to establish where the published version differed from the archival materials.

I would like to say that this moment marked a true turning point, a moment when I finally started to trust Jeff and to believe his loyalty lay with the historical Rand, warts and all, not the slick, gilded legacy manufactured by the rest of ARI. But in truth it took longer than that. Jeff remained a cipher to me. Occasionally he would lapse into Randianese—"I'm context dropping," he told me during one stressful conversation about archival matters—but most of the time he hid his Objectivist side well. When I discovered an angry letter he'd written to a conservative magazine that had criticized Rand, complete with the ranting tone of the best sixties Objectivists, I was shocked, as if I'd discovered an adulterous love letter written by a friend.

When I finished my dissertation, I delayed sending it to him as long as possible, though I'd signed an agreement that said I would share whatever product my research produced. In addition to fearing that my fair-minded but critical dissertation would get me kicked out of the archive, I was suffering from a more generalized paranoia—common to graduate students, I later learned—that some nefarious rival would scoop my research. Once again, I wasn't entirely off base. Not only was there an active community of amateur Rand scholars out there who would gladly scatter my dissertation across the tubes, but I had learned another author, Anne Heller, was working on a biography of Rand. Heller had not been given access to the Ann Rand Papers, making me doubly protective of the material I had. When Jeff finally let me know it was time to cough up the dissertation or face the consequences, I crossed my fingers and mailed it off. He promised me no one else would view the manuscript, and he kept his word. It took me some time to appreciate how carefully he kept my dissertation under lock and key.

It was only four years later that I finally began to trust Jeff fully, during the critical weeks before I submitted my book manuscript. With the text mostly stable, I was finally ready to request formal permission to use material from the archive. Much of the material I had used was in the public domain or published, but there were critical excerpts from Rand's unpublished writing that I needed the estate's permission to use. This material exhumed a Rand long hidden from view in the official publications—including references to other thinkers she had been reading and vestiges of sexism, homophobia, and racism (all unremarkable sentiments common in her day, but at variance with latter-day Objectivist sensibilities) that had been purged from the official record. First I tried to submit a permission request with the quotations I wanted listed, but the response was quick: the estate would need to see the manuscript in its entirety.

I held my breath and handed over a thumb drive. Jeff printed up two copies and disappeared into the labyrinth of the ARI back offices. He read one first, overnight. He reported back to me with glowing eyes. The manuscript had met the most important test: it

was a serious, scholarly treatment of Rand. He was sure the other ARI reader, who remained anonymous, would also see it that way. It was then I realized that Jeff had been on my side all along. For years, he had been subtly working behind the scenes to ease my path to publication. He maintains, “I was simply doing my job.” But the estate-approved reader, as it turned out, was also a Jeff-approved reader—or at least a reader who satisfied his standards of justice and objectivity. And shortly thereafter I had my permission rights, signed in the spidery handwriting of Leonard Peikoff himself.

Perhaps the most unfortunate part of my arrangement with the archive was how it restricted my interactions with the broader Objectivist community. I knew I had the brass ring of archival documentation within my grasp, and I wasn’t going to do anything to jeopardize it. There is a long list of ARI personae non gratae that I, too, felt obligated to avoid. An interview with the wrong person, a stray bit of malicious gossip, and I would have been out of a project.

Once the book was in press, there was no need to worry. And that was when the fun really began.



The picture was a winner. New Year’s Eve, 1967. Dressed to the nines in tuxes and jewels, Ayn, Frank, Nathan, Patrecia, Alan Greenspan, and Greenspan’s date are seated around a table at the Plaza Hotel. Patrecia is smiling radiantly, her blonde hair teased and sprayed into a classic late-sixties bouffant. Branden is tense, but he’s making a good show of it. Ayn, too, looks strained. Most of all she looks old—her eyes are deep, her neck sags, her body slumps. The photo exposed the whole insanity of the 1960s Rand cult: here was Rand celebrating her favorite holiday with her husband, her putative lover, and her lover’s lover, yet failing to grasp the dynamics under the surface. Anyone looking at this photo would have seen the obvious. There is a parental older couple, joined by the two younger pairs. Nathan is with the bombshell at his side (at the time, they had been together for three years); Greenspan and his date are holding hands. The idea that Nathan held a secret passion for Ayn is

preposterous on the surface. Yet from the inside looking out, Rand was blind to the reality.

I wanted the picture in my book, badly. It seems odd in the age of Facebook tagging, but to get a photo in a book is no simple matter. I needed permission not only from the owner of the physical photograph, but from each individual featured in the photograph. Nathaniel Branden was cooperative, Patrecia, Ayn, and Frank were dead, and as a public figure Greenspan had fewer privacy rights. That left the last woman in the photo, whom I shall call Sandra. I sent a letter and followed up with a phone call.

Sandra was delighted to hear from me. In fact, it all seemed part of God's plan that I had called. She had recently reconnected with both Brandens, she gushed to me, and it was so wonderful. That had been a hard time in her life, she recalled. Now she was a Christian, and she could see that getting mixed up with a bunch of atheists was a mistake. But she had few regrets about dating Greenspan—in fact she was positively rhapsodic about him. He was so patient with her, so kind. She remembered going to his apartment, where he would teach her math, and help her, and guide her. Eyeing the picture, I was unsurprised by Greenspan's willingness to minister to Sandra's mind. She giggled—in the photo, we're holding hands! she reminded me.

I hummed along, affirming her musings on the power of love and the dangers of Objectivism. It was a sunny day, and I sprawled across my bed, thinking how similar all the Objectivist stories from the 1960s were. No one had come out unscathed. The worst off were those who went to "Objectivist therapy" with Branden. To call Branden's innovations "therapy" is to be ironic, for as the survival literature attests, Branden created a kind of antitherapy that left his patient-victims severely scarred. His method, derived from Rand's teachings, placed a premium on moral judgment and the rational control of emotions. "Never fail to pronounce moral judgment," Rand instructed readers of the *Objectivist Newsletter*. The hero of *Atlas Shrugged*, John Galt, hectors his radio audience: "Any emotion that clashes with your reason, any emotion that you cannot explain or

control, is only the carcass of that stale thinking which you forbade your mind to revise.” Brought into the therapeutic setting, these two principles wreaked havoc, as even Branden came to admit. His post-Rand writing on self-esteem, Branden once told an interviewer, was a way to make amends for the psychic damage he had done as an Objectivist therapist.

Sandra prattled on about Greenspan, who had been a special Rand favorite. Rand dubbed him “the Undertaker,” a reference to his dour affect, but she deeply respected his work in economic forecasting. Greenspan had given her research material for *Atlas Shrugged*, and he had been a regular at her Saturday night salons throughout the 1950s and 1960s. But he’d never gone into therapy with Branden. Nor had he repudiated Rand, even as he rose in the ranks of the Republican Party and became the regulator in chief of the nation’s economy. He was, however, particularly cagey about his past with her. Despite all the strings we pulled and connections we managed to get on our side, neither Heller nor I convinced Greenspan to sit for an interview. I did get a short e-mail out of him, answering a number of factual questions.

After about forty minutes of reminiscences about Greenspan, I brought Sandra back to the photograph. How did she feel about publishing it? She wasn’t sure, she thought that part of her life should stay closed, she had made up with everyone and felt great and didn’t want to open it up. We negotiated a bit—what if she wasn’t identified by name? Could we call her “unknown woman”? “Friend”? After some inconclusive discussion I said I’d let her think about it and call back.

She called me back instead, a few weeks later. By then I’d given up on the picture, because the estate had proved far less generous with pictures of Rand than excerpts of her writing. All the pictures I’d hoped to use, carefully selected from enormous albums held at the archive, were off limits. I was left with digital versions scarred by the letters FPO (“for placement only”) across the front. Instead, I was pointed to the four most flattering pictures of Ayn Rand ever taken, publically available on the ARI website.

But Sandra had a copy of the photo, she now claimed. That very photo? From the Plaza Hotel? I grilled her. Oh yes, she had put it in a frame and covered it with hearts and flowers, she cooed. I couldn't tell exactly what she meant. Had she taken the FPO photocopy I had sent her and framed it? Or had my last call sent her burrowing into old boxes and files to find the 1967 original? Certainly my last call had affected her deeply. She'd been making tape recordings, she told me, talking all about her time with Greenspan and what it meant. The photo she would send to me right away, and I was free to use it. Then her voice shifted slightly. By the way, did I have a phone number for Alan? She'd tried all the Greenspans in New York but hadn't found him.

Now it all fell into place: the crafty edge to her voice, her new willingness to share the photo, the references to God's plan. Her whole life was making sense: she had reunited with the Brandens, healed the past, and now God was bringing her back together with her long-lost love, Alan Greenspan, whom she must have watched from afar for so many years from her home in North Dakota. If only she had parlayed those math lessons into a marriage proposal! Well, she probably wasn't the first delusional stalker Alan Greenspan had dealt with, I reasoned, handing over his office number. She promised to send the picture.

Weeks later, it had yet to arrive, and my editor was becoming increasingly anxious over the photo insert, which had been delayed for this all-important photo. I called Sandra again. This time, she explained, a voice from her television had cautioned her against publishing the photo. I thanked her anyhow and hung up.



This fiasco was followed by a more promising nibble of interest from an Objectivist who identified himself as an Amazon Top 500 reviewer. I didn't know it then, but Neil Parille was a leader of sorts among a certain faction of Objectivists, those I called "neo-Objectivists." Broadly speaking, there are two types of Objectivists that inhabit the nether world of the Internet. The Orthodox

Objectivists, who orbit around ARI, are wedded to the infallibility of Ayn Rand and the world-changing nature of her philosophy. The Orthodox police the boundaries of their community carefully and relish casting out those who fail to grasp the profundity of Rand's thought. According to one of my readers who inadvertently attempted to join an Orthodox listserv, those who admit to reading a biography of Ayn Rand are verboten. During her lifetime, Rand placed great emphasis on "the sanction of the victim," which in her fiction meant the willingness of business heroes to collaborate with their government regulators (hence the heroism of the capitalists' strike in *Atlas Shrugged*). Today, this principle persists in the Orthodox refusal to read any works critical of Rand, lest they "sanction" the evil of belittling the master.

The second broad grouping, the neo-Objectivists, pay lip service to the genius of Ayn Rand but are primarily interested in attacking the Orthodox. They see themselves as freedom fighters battling the forces of dogmatism and superstition, and in many ways they are. My sympathies lie clearly with their efforts to bring Rand down to earth and point out the harmful and just plain silly aspects of her philosophy. But I have to wonder about their zeal for combat with such a flimsy enemy. Disputes in this community loop ceaselessly along well-worn paths of the Branden affair and the perfidy of Leonard Peikoff and the Ayn Rand Institute. The neos have legitimate grievances and complaints, and they couch their attacks in the service of the greater good of Ayn Rand's reputation. But it is hard to escape the conclusion that many of these websites are animated by what seems a deeply personal gripe against Peikoff and anyone associated with him. The neo-Objectivists have their own orthodoxy, in which the other side can do no right. And they love nothing more than a good fight, finding meaning in the battle as much as the outcome.

Though both groups seek to win over the casual Rand reader, they acquire the ultimate prize when one side converts an enemy leading light. Much like the ex-communists of the 1950s, the recent converts enthrall their new allies with tales of the depravity and

duplicity that mark the other side. Diana Hsieh is one Objectivist who passed from neo-Objectivism to Orthodoxy, and on her blog *NoodleFood* she uses her time in the enemy camp as the ultimate trump card.

The publication of my book was meat for the piranhas on both sides. The first review of my book on Amazon—Neil Parille’s—clocked in at five stars. The second, penned by an Orthodox reader, rated me with one star. Over time, the Orthodox seemed to learn that one star was overkill and only destroyed their own credibility, especially when juxtaposed with the growing number of four and five star reviews. Instead, they would give me three stars and a terrible review (according to my favorite one, I was but an “ignorant bimbo” in over her head).

My book validated the general worldview and intellectual approach of the neos, but it was most important to them as bloodsport, for it enabled them to attack their favorite enemy in the world, James Valliant. A Los Angeles-area lawyer, Valliant is also author of *The Passion of Ayn Rand’s Critics*, a vigorous defense of Rand that can only with charity be called a book. *The Passion of Ayn Rand’s Critics* is a prosecutor’s brief against Barbara and Nathaniel Branden, collecting in one venomous screed all the accumulated rage and denial of the Orthodox community. *The Passion of Ayn Rand’s Critics* is also noteworthy for being the first book to sample from the Ayn Rand Archives, and it includes several painful-to-read diary entries written by Rand during her breakup with Branden. Though Valliant intended these passages to puncture the legend of Nathaniel Branden, what they reveal instead is the desperate rationalization of a woman unable to comprehend the social or emotional world around her.

Though I disliked the one-sided emphasis of Valliant’s work, I did find it valuable for offering a corrective counterpoint to the equally one-sided version of history promoted by Nathaniel Branden. It is possible to read both of Nathaniel Branden’s score-settling memoirs about his affair with Rand (*Judgment Day: My Years with Ayn Rand* and the considerably toned-down reissue *My Years With Ayn Rand*) and forget that Branden lied to Rand’s face for nearly five

years. Branden makes it somehow seem Rand's fault that she placed so much trust in him—and gave him such a prominent place within the Objectivist community—that he couldn't possibly tell her the truth about his feelings.

Thus, when Valliant sent me a lengthy critique of my book, I couldn't resist responding. Valliant laid out all the Objectivist arguments against my book, the primary theme being that I exaggerated how much Rand had changed over her lifetime, because she was, in truth, a paragon of consistency and logical rigor. What impressed me more was that the review was free of the animus that had marked his earlier work. I typed up a response and both parts were published on an Orthodox-friendly website, much to the surprise and consternation of the neos.

While I enjoyed stirring the pot by treating Valliant with respect rather than scorn, and wanted to follow the Objectivist discourse generated by my book, as a full-time college professor I simply did not have the time to keep up with the pace of discussion. Objectivist websites are jammed with threads upon threads, most of which devolve quickly into intramural warfare. When a combatant posted a breathless comment on my website asking me to weigh in on a heated debate over the origin of a long-debunked rumor that Rand (née Alissa Rosenbaum) named herself after her Remington-Rand typewriter, it was weeks before I managed to track down the original posting and figure out the germ of the controversy. By that time, everyone had moved on to other topics anyway.

My only unpleasant face-to-face encounter with an Objectivist came at FreedomFest in Las Vegas, a convocation of free-market types gathered at Bally's to hear presentations like "What's Really Going On inside the World's Most Powerful Central Bank," "Is Marijuana Reform the Only Issue That's Moving in a Libertarian Direction?" and "The Battle for the Soul of America: The Philosophy of the Founders vs. Progressivism." I had just finished my talk on Rand and libertarianism and was wandering blissfully through the exhibits area collecting pamphlets on offshore tax havens and the evils of alternative energy when a tall man came up from behind me. "I'm friends

with Bob Hessen,” he told me rather menacingly. “It’s utterly disrespectful of you to ignore his comments on your book!”

Bob Hessen was a member of Rand’s inner circle who had been purged multiple times for a variety of sundry offenses, including liking the wrong movie and selling the wrong book through his mail-order service. Before the final purge, while he was acting as Rand’s secretary, he convinced her to give him drafts of her writing she planned to throw away. Hessen earned a PhD in history from Columbia, published several books on business history, and later became a fellow at Stanford’s Hoover Institution. In the early 1980s, he and Barbara Branden had combined their Randiana into a huge Butterfield auction, netting millions.

When I applied for a postdoctoral fellowship at the Hoover, I had asked Bob to support my application but received no response. Later he’d turned up at my office with a stack of papers, including research material sent to him by Anne Heller. Bob told me he’d started a vicious campaign against Heller when she first announced her plans to write a biography of Rand, only to be won over when they finally spoke. Now he was about to give me a transcript of the interview Heller had conducted with him, something she certainly would not have liked. I suggested instead that we do our own interview.

Bob was not quite a hoarder, but his home did feature several worm tunnels through dangerously stacked piles of paper. Rather than brave the office or study, we decamped to the kitchen where he repeated almost verbatim the same material he had told previous interviewers. But we had a good time; he offered to give me Ayn’s recipe for beef stroganoff, and I baked him some banana bread as a thank you. Still, from his erratic behavior with Heller, his strange e-mails (always in super-sized font), and the wary reaction of the Hoover secretarial staff when he visited my office, I knew Bob was a wild card.

And the wild card had surfaced here in Las Vegas. “Bob is a scholar, a historian!” his friend boomed at me. Why hadn’t I adopted the changes Bob suggested, he wanted to know. I wasn’t entirely surprised by this ambush, since I’d heard a few earlier rumblings. Bob

had attended one of my first book talks, where he enthusiastically helped me hawk copies and announced, “This is the best book ever written about Rand, and I’ve read them all!” He had also given me a manila envelope with about twenty pages of corrections (again in super-sized font). A few weeks later, at another book talk, someone had asked me about Bob Hessen’s claim that my book was full of errors. My publicist and editor had also fielded an angry series of e-mails from Bob. The problem with Bob was that he was good at sending e-mails, but bad at receiving them, or remembering he’d received them. I’d written to him, but the messages apparently hadn’t gone through.

Now I tried to explain to his irate friend that books cannot be changed overnight. Bob had caught a number of misspellings and typographical errors that had been sent to the printer for future editions, but that did little to change the books already in circulation. I let the point slide that many of Bob’s “corrections” were debatable differences of interpretation that I chose not to accept. We went back and forth with claim and counterclaim for several minutes, and I thought I had my antagonist almost calmed down; his voice was quieter, his sentences less declarative and more expository, his face less flushed.

Then suddenly it all flared again. “And we want respect!” he shouted, jabbing his finger at me. The issue now was a tag line from my book, where I identified Rand as the ultimate “gateway drug” to life on the right. The phrase had its levity, to be sure, but to me it was the best metaphor for Rand’s historic role as a writer who introduced her readers to a whole new ideological and intellectual world they had never known before. This point was missed entirely by my antagonist, who found the term unacceptably pejorative. You don’t understand, I thought, I *like* drugs. Instead, I said lamely, “I think it’s a generational thing.” “I was born in the sixties!” he yelled indignantly. At that I explained I was late to a book signing, turned on my heel, and left.

FreedomFest also gave me a chance to meet the Brandens, who had become almost mythic figures in my mind. The two were slotted

to participate in a Q&A at a special “Ayn Rand Day.” Barbara still looked glamorous and was as sharp as ever. She sported a large inlaid Star of David on the lapel of her pink pantsuit. The years had been harsher to Nathaniel, who was still handsome but stared vacantly across the table at lunch. He was accompanied by a younger assistant who helped him eat and pose for photographs. Given his apparent disconnect from reality, I was sure the Q&A would be a disaster. But once on stage with a microphone before him, Branden transformed. His voice became deep and rich; he flattered Barbara and joked ironically about the joys of sharing a stage with his ex-wife; he spoke stentoriously about the continuing importance of Rand. I was reminded of what NBI veterans said about him—“a great showman”—and the comparison several made to Elmer Gantry. Clearly, picking up on the critical tone of my writing, Branden had been merely playing senile to avoid talking to me. But age has not stopped his relentless self-promotion or his skill at profiting off the legacy of Rand. A few weeks after Freedom Fest I received an offer for a Branden iPhone app that would send me daily inspirational quotations, followed shortly by an invitation to join him on Facebook.



As *Goddess of the Market* neared its year anniversary of publication, I arranged a lunch date with Jeff Britting in Berkeley. I hadn’t seen him since he’d pushed the manuscript through, and we both wanted to debrief the other on what had happened since. We’d become close over the years, as he’d watched and cheered me through the cycles of academic life, engagement and marriage, and a cross-country relocation.

Instead of catching up, we got into our deepest and most honest conversation yet, about Rand, Objectivism, ARI, and the dynamics of Rand’s historic legacy. Freed of my anxiety about the book manuscript, I began to grill Jeff about the Institute and how he understood his work. “We have to be more than a lightning rod,” Jeff told me. To me, it seemed clear that the older generation at ARI had inherited a sort of siege mentality from the stresses of NBI. But things were

different now, he argued. His goal, he told me, was “to engage . . . to bring something important to other people for their consideration.” According to Jeff, this was an attitude shared by the current head of ARI, “the CEO of Objectivism,” Yaron Brook. As I had observed, unlike his predecessors Brook has proved willing and able to step outside the Objectivist ghetto, doing the rounds of Fox TV, reaching out to the Tea Party, and spearheading ARI branches in Washington, DC and New York.

Still, Jeff had a well-thought-out defense of Rand and an explanation for the dark sides of sixties Objectivist subculture. *Atlas Shrugged* could be misread, he noted, particularly its ending in a segregated community—the famous retreat of the producers to Galt’s Gulch. For some readers, this had made it difficult to connect Objectivism to a social context. As he explained all this to me, he sighed a deep and gusty sigh—the sigh of a passionate idealist wrestling with his creed. There were also problems with the characterization of John Galt, or at least how that character was understood, Jeff told me, noting that Rand’s readers “can get a peculiar misdirection, get something as a cue that isn’t a cue.” He offered a more nuanced version of the standard ARI line that Rand cultists had only themselves to blame. Speaking of Roy Childs, an anarchist libertarian who was a fierce critic of Rand back in the day, he noted that Child’s narrative of Rand “is very embedded in his own narrative, his own life.” Many who wrote about Rand, whether they ultimately affirmed or rejected Objectivism, were motivated by a sort of “wounded defensiveness,” Jeff argued perceptively. More important than Rand was the self they brought to the table; “they are critiquing, in effect, a mirror,” he concluded.

As I listened to Jeff talk, it occurred to me that he was a sort of neo in Orthodox clothes. He had gotten beyond the gates and was working to transform Objectivism from within. Though he is viewed with mistrust by both sides of the community—the neos assume anyone working for ARI is evil, and the Orthodox wonder why those who don’t pledge allegiance to Rand should get any assistance at all from the archive—Jeff has done more than anyone else to advance the

cause in which he believes. Jeff is a figure rare in both the academic and think-tank worlds, for he is a committed ideologue brave enough to engage regularly with those who scorn his beliefs. With time he will be understood as a central figure in the transformation of Objectivism from a freakish right-wing sideshow to a consequential ideology with long-term impact on how we understand markets, morality, and the legitimacy of the American welfare state.

Here I use the term Objectivism broadly, for the narrow band of Rand readers who adopt her philosophy wholesale will always marginalize themselves through their own fanaticism. But the ideological intensity that surrounds Rand is indeed a mirror—not only of the neos and the Orthodox, but of our present moment. Those who joust about Rand's typewriter on the Internet are bit players in a larger drama that has seen capitalism transform from an economic system promising utilitarian rewards of efficiency, growth, and profit to a social system encrusted with the values, ideals, and utopian energy once claimed by the left. At the beginning of her career, during the 1930s when socialists and communists dominated the intellectual world, Rand stole a page from the enemy playbook. She began cranking out romantic novels of capitalism, forged an airtight philosophical system to carry her ideas forward, and with Branden's help began retailing it all to the youth.

Just as Rand dreamed, nearly thirty years after her death capitalism has become the root of a cultural system of belief in which one can spend an entire lifetime, shifting from Objectivism to libertarianism to anarchism to classical liberalism to conservatism to neo-conservatism and back again. That the custodians of this legacy are the faithful like Jeff Britting is testimony to the stark divide between the intellectual worlds of the right and the left. Objectivism brings to the surface not only the secret fissures in the self, but the broad cracks in our supposedly collective assumptions about what kind of writer is intellectually defensible and who belongs in the canon of American literature and political thought. Outside the nationally known universities that bear the imprimatur of the good and the true lie worlds upon worlds, whole universes of meaning that offer

a radically different take on markets, morality, and the role of government. Since publishing *Goddess of the Market*, I've traveled to libertarian conferences and visited countless conservative campuses where capitalism and free markets are unquestioned goods, the basic architecture of a shared mental world. I come to explain the historic contours of the Right and how Rand fits in, but most of my audiences know this already. In the stew of right-wing beliefs they feast upon, Rand is a primary ingredient.

Objectivism also highlights some terrible ironies about the nature of belief. I've heard Rand compared to L. Ron Hubbard countless times, and it is never an analogy I accept—primarily because Rand is far more intellectually substantive and culturally important than Hubbard. But there is another more important distinction between the two. Hubbard tried unabashedly to create his own religion, but he did not for one second buy into the scheme he sold to others. The tragedy of Rand is that not only did she create her own religion, as the legions of true believers who persist to this day so effectively demonstrate—but she believed in her own religion, truly and deeply. She taught a creed of selfishness and radical individualism that boomeranged upon itself to culminate in a creed of Stalinesque conformity. She died alone, having driven off all those who once mattered to her most. It turned out, as Rand always claimed, that Objectivism is its own avenger.