

Book Reviews

Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right

by Jennifer Burns

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Every great man nowadays has his disciples, and it is always Judas who writes the biography. . . . Formerly we used to canonise our heroes. The modern method is to vulgarise them.
—Oscar Wilde, “The Critic as Artist” (1891)

Ayn Rand (1905–1982) was a great novelist and philosopher, who, in her lifetime, attracted what could be called “disciples,” and it *was* Judas who wrote the biography. Mr. and Mrs. Judas, in fact, as the first biography was *The Passion of Ayn Rand* by Barbara Branden (1986), followed by ex-husband Nathaniel Branden’s memoir, *Judgment Day: My Years with Ayn Rand* (1989).¹ The Brandens broke with Ayn Rand and her philosophy in 1968, and their accounts of her life are riddled with the bias and smears one would expect from embittered ex-disciples. Whereas formerly they coauthored a book in which they treat Rand as a hero,² in these later works they vulgarize her.

Jennifer Burns’s *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* is the first biography to appear since the Brandens’.³

As Burns has no personal ax to grind, is a professor of history, and had nearly unprecedented access to the Ayn Rand Archives, those interested in Rand had reason to expect Burns’s book to tell much about the life and thought—especially the political thought—of the author of *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. And although, in the 21st century, it may be too much to expect an academic biography that “canonizes”⁴ Rand, it is reasonable to hope for a portrayal that steers clear of vulgarization. Unfortunately, those who have such expectations will be disappointed.

What readers might have expected—what such a book could have been—is a presentation of the development of Ayn Rand’s political thought and its basis in her more fundamental philosophy, a history of her political activities and interactions with others on the right explained largely in terms of her philosophy, and a discussion of how she compares to others on the right in terms of essentials. The successful execution of such a project would not require agreement with Rand’s philosophy or political views; but it would require at least a basic understanding of, and interest in, her philosophical fundamentals and her arguments for her political ideas. Burns, however, has no grasp of or interest in Rand’s philosophical ideas or arguments, and chose to write a different sort of

biography. Consider just a few of the book's major problems:⁵

(1) *Burns's determinism*. In his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Karl Marx wrote: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."⁶ Although I could not discern Burns's own political views in the pages of her book, and I assume she is not a Marxist generally, she is a determinist with respect to the *source* of a person's ideas. As Burns describes them, Rand's political views are not the result of her own, firsthand thinking and a genuine attempt (whether successful or not) to arrive at the truth; rather, they are consequences of external forces. At the outset of the book, Burns writes: "Rand's defense of individualism, celebration of capitalism, and controversial morality of selfishness can be understood only against the backdrop of her historical moment: All sprang from her early life experiences in Communist Russia" (p. 2). Taken on its own, this could simply be an imprecise formulation of the fact that every thinker has a historical context and that every good thinker treats his observations and experiences as facts to be considered and explained. But, in fact, throughout the book (and especially in the early chapters), Burns treats Rand's experiences as causes determining her views. For instance: "Consistency was the principle that grabbed her attention, not surprising given her unpredictable and frightening life" (p. 13); and: "At Petrograd State University Alisa [Rand's given first name] was immune to the passions of revolutionary politics, inured against any radicalism by the travails her family was enduring" (p. 15).

In addition to asserting that some of Rand's ideas were caused by her social experience, Burns implies that others were caused by her encounters with the ideas of other thinkers. One instance of this is Burns's unsupported claim about Rand's relationship to the noninitiation of force principle. Understood in the context of Rand's distinctive epistemology and ethics—including her unique understanding of the role of the mind and the nature and consequences of force—this is arguably an original feature of her political philosophy and an advance in philosophical support for individual freedom.⁷ But that is not how Burns sees it. Ignoring such fundamentals, Burns implies that Rand simply got this idea from earlier thinkers, dusted it off, and placed it in the center of her political theory. "The noninitiation principle, sometimes called the nonaggression principle, can be traced to thinkers as varied as Thomas Aquinas, John Locke, and Herbert Spencer. Placing it at the center of her natural rights theory, Rand breathed new life into an old idea" (p. 118). Unfortunately, and typically, Burns provides no discussion of the details of Rand's views, nor of those of Aquinas or Locke or Spencer, by which we could assess this statement. She simply asserts it, as she does most of her claims pertaining to Rand's political ideas and the sources that allegedly caused them.

(2) *Politics without philosophy*. Related to Burns's determinism and her consequent failure to appreciate Rand's originality is Burns's disregard for fundamental philosophy. Rand argued repeatedly and consistently that political philosophy occupies the upper floors of any philosophical edifice (most emphatically her own), resting on the more fundamental branches: metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Burns,

however, consistently ignores this foundation and Rand's emphasis on it. She treats Rand's political philosophy as opinions divorced from any philosophical foundation. The book is, in fact, a constant stream of opinions—those of Rand and those of sundry libertarians and conservatives whose opinions Burns compares to Rand's.

Although Burns claims to be “less concerned with judgment than with analysis” (p. 4), her book demonstrates the opposite to be true. Time after time, she presents Rand's views on some issue with insufficient care or analysis, only to assert in conclusion some arbitrary negative judgment.⁸ A particularly egregious instance of this occurs late in the book, in a discussion of environmentalism. Burns devotes three quarters of a paragraph to the content of Rand's 1970 “The Anti-Industrial Revolution,” and then comments: “As usual Rand was unwilling to accept the claims of a political movement [i.e., environmentalism is about clean air] at face value, convinced that hidden agendas [i.e., the destruction of technology] drove the environmental movement” (p. 262). In light of the now widely known nature and antics of 21st-century environmentalists, Rand deserves applause for her astonishing (though unfortunately Cassandra-like) prophetic powers. Burns, however, grants no justice and begins the next paragraph with the ludicrous statement: “Nature was not benevolent to Rand, but a force to be kept at bay by man's reason” (p. 262). (To whom is nature benevolent? To those who don't keep it at bay via reason?) Burns then attempts to tie Rand's opposition to environmentalism to her early experiences in Russia (alleging that it arose from her desire to avoid regression to her Petrograd existence), and devotes *two* paragraphs to

Rand's possible influence on the environmentalist *Whole Earth Catalog* (founder Stewart Brand “thought Rand was an exciting figure”) (p. 262).

Burns treats Rand's HUAC testimony in equally shoddy fashion. This was an especially infuriating section for me, as I have written a book on the subject, presenting in detail Rand's arguments in defense of the various points of her testimony, including (most significantly here) why she concluded—and was correct to conclude—that the film *Song of Russia* was Communist propaganda.⁹ But Burns is not interested in arguments. She devotes about a paragraph to Rand's testimony, and then criticizes it—focusing on the same nonessential exchange in the testimony that so many others quite unfairly have focused on (whether Russians ever smile)¹⁰ and repeating an erroneous claim that has been leveled against Rand since the 1940s: “What is most striking about the testimony,” Burns blithely asserts, “is how slow Rand was to understand that *Song of Russia* was not Communist propaganda, but American propaganda about a wartime ally” (p. 124).

On the rare occasions when Burns attempts to dig deeper and provide more than mere opinion, what she finds underneath are . . . more opinions. And, given her determinism, what else *could* she conclude but that Rand's opinions are supported by other opinions—all of which ultimately rest on ideological biases produced by outside forces. All of us have them, on the Marxist view. For example, Burns provides a relatively detailed (for the book) and particularly inept discussion of Rand and Hayek (pp. 103–106). She correctly points out that Rand objected to Hayek's views (in part) on ethical grounds, but implies that Rand's views were based on her feelings, which

must be wrong because Hayek felt that his views did rest on moral grounds:

Rand also objected to Hayek's definition of individualism, which she felt lacked moral grounding. Using wording Rand herself favored, Hayek defined individualism as 'respect for the individual man *qua* man' and rooted it in Christianity, classical antiquity, and the Renaissance. . . . Hayek would have been surprised at Rand's contention that his individualism had no moral base. His work was motivated by a deep sense of spiritual crisis, and for an organization of economists the Mont Pelerin Society [to which he belonged] was unusually sensitive to questions of morality (p. 105).

Rand did not "feel" that Christianity or antiquity or motivation "by a deep sense of spiritual crisis" or the like fails to provide a foundation for individualism. She *knew* it. She demonstrated it in myriad ways and showed that individualism could be supported only on a base of egoism and reason. Clearly, when Rand objected that Hayek's conception of individualism lacked a moral base, she meant that he failed to provide a demonstrably *true* moral foundation—the *kind* of moral foundation that actually supports individualism and freedom rather than undercuts them. She meant that Hayek's attempt to support political freedom with conventional (especially Christian) ethics was doomed.

Burns does acknowledge that "Rand and Hayek had very different understandings of what was moral" (p. 105), but she does not bother to ask and answer what those differences are, or how Rand came to her conclusions, or why Rand insisted so fervently that such questions matter. To Burns, Rand and Hayek had roughly the

same political opinions—they were both pro-freedom of one sort or another—and they both used the same language. They may have differed on why they supported freedom, but surely they could have banded together to fight for common goals—if not for Rand's unreasonable demands for consistency and proof.

(3) *Burns's selectivity*. What a biographer selects for inclusion is by that fact granted importance and relevance, and affects how the subject in question is portrayed. Burns's choices in this respect not only further reveal her disregard for philosophical ideas, but they also portray Ayn Rand as something out of a soap opera.

Goddess of the Market claims to be about Rand as a political figure and her connection to the American Right. Yet the book pays relatively little attention to what is distinctive about her political thought and a great deal of attention to her personal life. Crucial aspects of Rand's political theory—such as the evil of the initiation of force, the distinction between economic and political power, and the principles underlying such ideas—are given short shrift in ways already indicated. This neglect makes pointless the cavalcade of conservatives and libertarians marched before readers in the pages of this book. Without considering the deeper philosophy supporting Rand's politics, one cannot appreciate the differences between her ideas and those of other figures on the right.

But even worse, from the perspective of selectivity, is the attention Burns pays to personal, nonpolitical, nonphilosophical material, which has no (or certainly a more muted) place in a study of Rand and the American Right. It should astonish anyone who reads this book that Burns devotes more space to Rand's affair with Nathaniel

Branden than, for example, to her theory of rights or her philosophical criticisms of conservatism and modern liberalism.

On this latter subject, and as an illustration of the sort of crucially important ideas Burns simply ignores, consider Rand's 1973 discussion of the relationship between conservatives and liberals, and how profoundly different she is from both:

Both hold the same premise—*the mind-body dichotomy*—but choose opposite sides of this lethal fallacy.

The conservatives want freedom to act in the material realm; they tend to oppose government control of production, of industry, of trade, of business, of physical goods, of material wealth. But they advocate government control of man's spirit, i.e., man's consciousness; they advocate the State's right to impose censorship, to determine moral values, to create and enforce a governmental establishment of morality, to rule the intellect.

The liberals want freedom to act in the spiritual realm; they oppose censorship, they oppose government control of ideas, of the arts, of the press, of education (note their concern with "academic freedom"). But they advocate government control of material production, of business, of employment, of wages, of profits, of all physical property—they advocate it all the way down to total expropriation.

The conservatives see man as a body freely roaming the earth, building sand piles or factories—with an electronic computer inside his skull, controlled from Washington. The liberals see man

as a soul freewheeling to the farthest reaches of the universe—but wearing chains from nose to toes when he crosses the street to buy a loaf of bread.

Yet it is the conservatives who are predominantly religionists, who proclaim the superiority of the soul over the body, who represent what I call the "mystics of spirit." And it is the liberals who are predominantly materialists, who regard man as an aggregate of meat, and who represent what I call the "mystics of muscle."

This is merely a paradox, not a contradiction: *each camp wants to control the realm it regards as metaphysically important; each grants freedom only to the activities it despises.* Observe that the conservatives insult and demean the rich or those who succeed in material production, regarding them as morally inferior—and that the liberals treat ideas as a cynical con game. "Control," to both camps, means the power to rule by physical force. Neither camp holds freedom as a value. The conservatives want to rule man's consciousness; the liberals, his body.¹¹

Surely this passage is relevant to the subject matter of *Goddess of the Market*. It should have been presented, critically analyzed, and evaluated. It certainly deserves more attention than Rand's moderate use of amphetamines, which Burns distorts, mentions often, and milks for mileage.

Burns is, to return to Oscar Wilde, a modern, and such are the ways in which she vulgarizes Rand.

On the first page of this biography, Burns writes of Rand: "Ideas were the only thing that truly mattered, she believed, both in a person's life and in the course of history."

That is true. And Ayn Rand deserves a biographer who believes, at the very least, that ideas matter.

Endnotes

1. Published by Doubleday and Houghton Mifflin respectively.
2. Nathaniel Branden and Barbara Branden, *Who is Ayn Rand* (New York: Random House, 1962).
3. I exclude Jeff Britting's *Ayn Rand* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2004), a brief pictorial biography. *Goddess of the Market* preceded by a couple of weeks Anne Heller's *Ayn Rand and the World She Made* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 2009). In her blog, Burns reports, "The primary stipulation [of the Ayn Rand Archives] was that I not use the archival material to write a full length biography, since the Ayn Rand Institute had commissioned an Objectivist literary scholar, Shoshana Milgram, to write an authorized biography. Because my focus was on Rand in relationship to a particular aspect of American history—the American right—my work was classified as a 'special study'" (<http://www.jenniferburns.org/blog/64-in-the-rand-archives-part-1-gaining-access> [accessed November 22, 2009]). In fact, her book is as much a biography as it is such a special study (especially with respect to selectivity).
4. I take this in the way I believe Wilde intended it: to celebrate the greatness of a hero, and not the flaws discovered or invented by the biographer.
5. These are by no means the only problems. The book is filled with errors—major and minor—concerning Rand's life and the nature of her thought. For example, Burns claims that according to Rand "the state is always a destroyer, acting to frustrate and inhibit the natural ingenuity and drive of individuals" (p. 3). This is patently false; and that Burns thinks it is true explains (in part) her failure to appreciate the significant differences between Rand and libertarians. See also note 8 below.
6. David McCellan, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 389.
7. See Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Penguin-Dutton, 1991), pp. 310–23; and Tara Smith, *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 94–99, 171–72.
8. Burns employs such unsupported evaluations in her lamentable attempts at literary analysis as well. Her descriptions of Rand's novels are interlarded with snarky remarks presented as obvious. For example: "Confusing and conflicted, Dominique is among Rand's least convincing creations" (p. 46); Isabel Paterson "advised Rand to prune all unnecessary adjectives [from *The Fountainhead*], a change that would have gutted the novel" (p. 85).
9. Robert Mayhew, *Ayn Rand and Song of Russia: Communism and Anti-Communism in 1940s Hollywood* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004). See especially ch. 6.
10. See Mayhew, *Ayn Rand and Song of Russia*, ch. 8.
11. Ayn Rand, "Censorship: Local and Express," in *Philosophy: Who Needs It* (New York: Penguin-Signet, 1984), 186.