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The Sociology of the Ayn Rand Cult

By [Murray N. Rothbard](#)

Written in 1972, this was the first piece of Rand revisionism from the libertarian standpoint.

In the America of the 1970s we are all too familiar with the religious cult, which has been proliferating in the last decade. Characteristic of the cult (from Hare Krishna to the "Moonies" to EST to Scientology to the Manson Family) is the dominance of the guru, or Maximum Leader, who is also the creator and ultimate interpreter of a given creed to which the acolyte must be unswervingly loyal. The major if not the only qualification for membership and advancement in the cult is absolute loyalty to and adoration of the guru, and absolute and unquestioning obedience to his commands. The lives of the members are dominated by the guru's influence and presence. If the cult grows beyond a few members, it naturally becomes hierarchically structured, if only because the guru cannot spend his time indoctrinating and watching over every disciple. Top positions in the hierarchy are generally filled by the original handful of disciples, who come to assume these positions by virtue of their longer stint of loyal and devoted service. Sometimes the top leadership may be related to each other, a useful occurrence which can strengthen intra-cult loyalty through the familial bond.

The goals of the cult leadership are money and power. Power is achieved over the minds of the disciples through inducing them to accept without question the guru and his creed. This devotion is enforced through psychological sanctions. For once the acolyte is imbued with the view that approval of, and communication with, the guru are essential to his life, then the implicit and explicit threat of excommunication – of removal from the direct or indirect presence of the guru – creates a powerful psychological sanction for the "enforcement" of loyalty and obedience. Money flows upward from the members through the hierarchy, either in the form of volunteer labor service contributed by the members, or through cash payments.

It should be clear at this point in history that an ideological cult can adopt the same features as the more overtly religious cult, even when the ideology is explicitly atheistic and anti-religious. That the cults of Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Trotsky, and Mao are religious in nature, despite the explicit atheism of the latter, is by now common knowledge. The adoration of the cult founder and leader, the hierarchical structure, the unswerving loyalty, the psychological (and when in command of State power, the physical) sanctions are all too evident.

The Exoteric and the Esoteric

Every religious cult has two sets of differing and distinctive creeds: the exoteric and the esoteric. The exoteric creed is the official, public doctrine, the creed which attracts the acolyte in the first place and brings him into the movement as a rank-and-file member. The quite different creed is the unknown, hidden agenda, a creed which is only known to its full extent by the top leadership, the "high priests" of the cult. The latter are the keepers of the Mysteries of the cult.

But cults become particularly fascinating when the esoteric and exoteric creeds are not only different, but totally and glaringly in mutual contradiction. The havoc that this fundamental contradiction plays in the minds and lives of the disciples may readily be imagined. Thus, the various Marxist-Leninists cults officially and publicly extol Reason and Science, and denounce all religion, and yet the members are mystically attracted to the cult and its alleged infallibility.

Thus, Alfred G. Meyer writes of Leninist views on party infallibility:

Lenin seems to have believed that the party, as organized consciousness, consciousness as a decision-making machinery, had superior reasoning power. Indeed, in time this collective body took on an aura of infallibility, which was later elevated to a dogma, and a member's loyalty was tested, in part, by his acceptance of it. It became part of the communist confession of faith to proclaim that the party was never wrong.... The party itself never makes mistakes.^{[1](#)}

If the glaring inner contradictions of the Leninist cults make them intriguing objects of study, still more so is the Ayn Rand cult, which, while in some sense is still faintly alive, flourished for just ten years in the 1960s; more specifically, from the founding of the Nathaniel Branden lecture series in early 1958 to the Rand-Branden split ten years later. For not only was the Rand cult explicitly atheist, anti-religious, and an extoller of Reason; it also promoted slavish dependence on the guru in the name of independence; adoration and obedience to the leader in the name of every person's individuality; and blind emotion and faith in the guru in the name of Reason.

Virtually every one of its members entered the cult through reading Rand's lengthy

novel [Atlas Shrugged](#), which appeared in late 1957, a few months before the organized cult came into being. Entering the movement through a novel meant that despite repeated obeisances to Reason, febrile emotion was the driving force behind the acolyte's conversion. Soon, he found that the Randian ideology sketched out in Atlas was supplemented by a few non-fiction essays, and, in particular, by a regular monthly magazine, The Objectivist Newsletter (later, The Objectivist).

The Index of Permitted Books

Since every cult is grounded on a faith in the infallibility of the guru, it becomes necessary to keep its disciples in ignorance of contradictory infidel writings which may wean cult members away from the fold. The Catholic Church maintained an Index of Prohibited Books; more sweeping was the ancient Muslim cry: "Burn all books, for all truth is in the Koran!" But cults, which attempt to mold every member into a rigidly integrated world view, must go further. Just as Communists are often instructed not to read anti-Communist literature, the Rand cult went further to disseminate what was virtually an Index of Permitted Books. Since most neophyte Randians were both young and relatively ignorant, a careful channeling of their reading insured that they would remain ignorant of non- or anti-Randian ideas or arguments permanently (except as they were taken up briefly, brusquely, and in a highly distorted and hectoring fashion in Randian publications).

The philosophical rationale for keeping Rand cultists in blissful ignorance was the Randian theory of "not giving your sanction to the Enemy." Reading the Enemy (which, with a few carefully selected exceptions, meant all non- or anti-Randians) meant "giving him your moral sanction," which was strictly forbidden as irrational. In a few selected cases, limited exceptions were made for leading cult members who could prove that they had to read certain Enemy works in order to refute them. This book-banning reached its apogee after the titanic Rand-Branden split in late 1968, a split which was the moral equivalent in miniature of, say, a split between Marx and Lenin, or between Jesus and St. Paul. In a development eerily reminiscent of the organized hatred directed against the arch-heretic Emanuel Goldstein in Orwell's [1984](#), Rand cultists were required to sign a loyalty oath to Rand; essential to the loyalty oath was a declaration that the signer would henceforth never read any future works of the apostate and arch-heretic Branden. After the split, any Rand cultist seen carrying a book or writing by Branden was promptly excommunicated. Close relatives of Branden were expected to – and did – break with him completely.

Interestingly enough for a movement which proclaimed its devotion to the individual exertion of reason, to curiosity, and to the question "Why?" cultists were required to swear their unquestioning belief that Rand was right and Branden wrong, even though they were not permitted to learn the facts behind the split. In fact, the mere failure to

take a stand, the mere attempt to find the facts, or the statement that one could not take a stand on such a grave matter without knowledge of the facts was sufficient for instant expulsion. For such an attitude was conclusive proof of the defective "loyalty" of the disciple to his guru, Ayn Rand.

Steel-Hardened Cadre Man

Frank Meyer writes, in his *The Moulding of Communists*,² of the series of crises that Communists repeatedly go through in their career in the Party. From his account, it is clear that the rank-and-file member joins the party from being attracted to the official or exoteric creed; but, as he continues in the Party and rises through its hierarchical structures, he is confronted with a series of crises that test his mettle, that either drive him out of the party or convert him increasingly into a steel-hardened cadre man. The crises might be ideological, say, justifying slave labor camps or the Stalin-Hitler pact, or it might be personal, to demonstrate that one's loyalty to the party is higher than to friends, family, or loved ones. The continuing pressure of such crises leads, unsurprisingly, to a very high turnover in Communist ranks, creating a sea of ex-Communists far larger than the party itself at any given time.

A similar but far more intensive process remained at work throughout the years of the Randian movement. The Randian neophyte typically joined the movement emotionally caught by Atlas and impressed by the concepts of reason, liberty, individuality, and independence. A series of crises and growing inner contradictions was then necessary to gain power over the minds and lives of the membership, and to inculcate absolute loyalty to Rand, both in ideological matters and in personal lives. But what mechanisms did the cult leaders use to develop such blind loyalty?

One method, as we have seen, was to keep the members in ignorance. Another was to insure that every spoken and written word of the Randian member was not only correct in content but also in form, for any slight nuance or difference in wording could and would be attacked for deviating from the Randian position. Thus, just as the Marxist movements developed jargon and slogans which were clung to for fear of uttering incorrect deviations, the same was true in the Randian movement. In the name of "precision of language," in short, nuance and even synonyms were in effect prohibited.

Another method was to keep the members, as far as possible, in a state of fevered emotion through continual re-readings of Atlas. Shortly after Atlas was published, one high-ranking cult leader chided me for only having read Atlas once. "It's about time for you to start reading it again," he admonished. "I have already read Atlas thirty-five times."

The rereading of Atlas was also important to the cult because the wooden, posturing, and one-dimensional heroes and heroines were explicitly supposed to serve as role models for every Randian. Just as every Christian is supposed to aim at the imitation of Christ in his own daily life, so every Randian was supposed to aim at the imitation of John Galt (Rand's hero of heroes in Atlas). He was always supposed to ask himself in every situation "What would John Galt have done?" When we remind ourselves that Jesus, after all, was an actual historical figure whereas Galt was not, the bizarrerie of this injunction can be readily grasped. (Although from the awed way Randians spoke of John Galt, one often got the impression that, for them, the line between fiction and reality was very thin indeed.)

Her Bible

The Biblical nature of Atlas for many Randians is illustrated by the wedding of a Randian couple that took place in New York. At the ceremony, the couple pledged their joint devotion and fealty to Ayn Rand, and then supplemented it by opening Atlas – perhaps at random – to read aloud a passage from the sacred text.

Wit and humor, as might be gathered from this incident, were verboten in the Randian movement. The philosophical rationale was that humor demonstrates that one "is not serious about one's values." The actual reason, of course, is that no cult can withstand the piercing and sobering effect, the sane perspective, provided by humor. One was permitted to sneer at one's enemies, but that was the only humor allowed, if humor that be.

Personal enjoyment, indeed, was also frowned upon in the movement and denounced as hedonistic "whim-worship." In particular, nothing could be enjoyed for its own sake – every activity had to serve some indirect, "rational" function. Thus, food was not to be savored, but only eaten joylessly as a necessary means of one's survival; sex was not to be enjoyed for its own sake, but only to be engaged in grimly as a reflection and reaffirmation of one's "highest values"; painting or movies only to be enjoyed if one could find "rational values" in doing so. All of these values were not simply to be discovered quietly by each person – the heresy of "subjectivism" – but had to be proven to the rest of the cult. In practice, as will be seen further below, the only safe aesthetic or romantic "values" or objects for the member were those explicitly sanctioned by Ayn Rand or other top disciples.

As in the case of all cults and sects, a particularly vital method for moulding the members and keeping them in line was maintaining their constant and unrelenting activity within the movement. Frank Meyer relates that Communists preserve their members from the dangerous practice of thinking on their own by keeping them in constant activity together with other Communists. He notes that, of the major Communist defectors in the United States, almost all defected only after a period of

Communist detectors in the United States, almost all detected only after a period of enforced isolation. In short, they had room to think for themselves (e.g., being in the army, going underground, etc.). In the case of Randians – particularly in New York City, where the movement was largest and Rand and the top hierarchy all lived – activity was continuous. Every night one of the top Randians lectured to different members expounding various aspects of the “party line”: on basics, on psychology, fiction, sex, thinking, art, economics, or philosophy. (This structure reflected the vision of Utopia outlined in *Atlas Shrugged* itself, where every evening was spent with the heroes and heroines lecturing to each other.)

Failure to attend these lectures was a matter of serious concern in the movement. The philosophical rationale for the pressure to attend these meetings went as follows:

1. Randians are the most rational people one could possibly meet (a conclusion derived from the thesis that Randianism was rationality in theory and in practice);
2. You, of course, want to be rational (and if you didn't, you were in grave trouble in the movement);
3. Ergo, you should be eager to spend all your time with fellow Randians and a fortiori with Rand and her top disciples if possible.

The logic seemed impeccable, but what if, as so often happens, one didn't like, even couldn't stand, these people? Under Randian theory, emotions are always the consequence of ideas, and incorrect emotions the consequence of wrong ideas, so that therefore, personal dislike of other (and especially of leading) Randians must be due to a grave canker of irrationality which either had to be kept concealed or else confessed to the leaders. Any such confession meant a harrowing process of ideological and psychological purification, supposedly ending in one's success at achieving rationality, independence, and self-esteem and therefore an unquestioning and blind devotion to Ayn Rand.

One incident of suppressed doubt of Randian tenets is revealing of the psychology of even the leading cult members. One top young Randian, a veteran of the movement in New York City, admitted privately one day that he had grave doubts on a key Randian philosophic tenet: I believe it was the fact of his own existence. He was deathly afraid to ask the question, it being so basic that he knew he would be excommunicated on the spot for simply raising the point; but he had complete faith that if Rand should be asked the question, she would answer it satisfactorily and resolve his doubts. And so he waited, year after year, hoping against hope that someone would ask the question, be expelled, but that his own doubts would then be resolved in the process.

In the manner of many cults, loyalty to the guru had to supersede loyalty to family and friends – typically the first personal crises for the fledgling Randian. If non-Randian family and friends persisted in their heresies even after being hectored at some length by the young neophyte, they were then considered to be irrational and part of the Enemy and had to be abandoned. The same was true of spouses; many marriages were broken up by the cult leadership who sternly informed either the wife or the husband that their spouses were not sufficiently Randeworthy. Indeed, since emotions resulted only from premises, and since the leaders' premises were by definition supremely rational, that top leadership presumed to try to match and unmatch couples. As one of them asserted one day: "I know all the rational young men and women in New York and I can match them up." But suppose that Mr. A was matched with Miss B and one of them didn't like the other? Well, once again, "reason" prevailed: the dislike was irrational, requiring intensive psychotherapeutic investigation to purge oneself of the erroneous ideas.

Psychological Hold

The psychological hold that the cult held on the members may be illustrated by the case of one girl, a certified top Randian, who experienced the misfortune of falling in love with an unworthy non-Randian. The leadership told the girl that if she persisted in her desire to marry the man, she would be instantly excommunicated. She did so nevertheless, and was promptly expelled. And yet, a year or so later, she told a friend that the Randians had been right, that she had indeed sinned and that they should have expelled her as unworthy of being a rational Randian.

But the most important sanction for the enforcement of loyalty and obedience, the most important instrument for psychological control of the members, was the development and practice of Objectivist Psychotherapy. In effect, this psychological theory held that since emotion always stems from incorrect ideas, that therefore all neurosis did so as well; and hence, the cure for that neurosis is to discover and purge oneself of those incorrect ideas and values. And since Randian ideas were all correct and all deviation therefore incorrect, Objectivist Psychotherapy consisted of (a) inculcating everyone with Randian theory – except now in a supposedly psychotherapeutic setting; and (b) searching for the hidden deviation from Randian theory responsible for the neurosis and purging it by correcting the deviation.

It is clear that, considering the emotional and psychological power of the psychotherapeutic experience, the Rand cult had in its hands a powerful weapon for reinforcing and sanctioning the moulding of the New Randian Man. Philosophy and psychology, explicit doctrine, social pressure, and therapeutic pressure, all reinforced each other to generate obedient and loyal acolytes of Ayn Rand.

It is no wonder that the enormous psychological pressure of cult membership led to an extremely high turnover in the Randian movement, relatively far more so than among the Communists. But so long as he was in the movement, a new Randian Man emerged, a grim and joyless figure indeed. For a while the Randians would discourse at length on "happiness," and on the alleged fact of their perpetual state of being happy, it became clear on closer examination that they were happy only by definition. That in short, in Randian theory, happiness refers not at all to the ordinary language meaning of subjective states of contentment or joy, but to the alleged fact of using one's mind to the fullest (i.e., in agreement with Randian precepts).

In practice, however, the dominant subjective emotions of the Randian cultist were fear and even terror: fear of displeasing Rand or her leading disciples; fear of using an incorrect word or nuance that would get the member into trouble; fear of being found out in the "irrationality" of some ideological or personal deviation; fear, even, of smiling at an unworthy (i.e., non-Randian) person. Such fear was greater than that of a Communist member, because the Randian had far less leeway for ideological or personal deviation. Furthermore, since Rand had an absolute and total line on every conceivable question of ideology and daily life, all aspects of such life had to be searched – by oneself and by others – for suspicious heresies and deviations. Everything was the object of fear and suspicion. There was the fear of making an independent judgment, for suppose that the member was to make a statement on some subject on which he did not know Rand's position, and then were to find out that Rand disagreed. The Randian would then be in grave trouble, even if the only problem were that his language was a bit differently nuanced. So it was far more prudent to keep silent and then check with headquarters for the precisely correct line.

Check With Headquarters

Thus, one time a leading Randian attorney was giving a speech on Randian political theory. During the question period, he was caught short by being asked how he could reconcile Rand's support for the compulsory subpoena power with the Randian political axiom of non-initiation of force. He hemmed and hawed, and then said that he had to think about this – a code phrase for hurriedly checking with Rand and the other leaders on the proper answer.

Part of the continuing need to check with headquarters came from the fact that Rand, though considered infallible by her disciples, changed her mind a great deal, particularly on concrete personalities or institutions. The fundamental line change on Branden is a glaring example, as well as the line change on other formerly high-ranking Randians who were expelled from the movement. But far more frequent if less important were changes of position on show business folk whom Rand might have met. Thus, the "line" on such people as Johnny Carson or Mike Wallace (prominent TV

personalities) changed rapidly – largely because of Rand's discovering various heresies and alleged betrayals on their part. If the Randian member was not attuned to these changes, and happened to aver that Carson was “rational” or had a benevolent “sense of life” when he had already been designated as irrational or malevolent, he was in for serious trouble and inquiry into the rationality of his own premises.

Driven by their conception of rational duty, every Randian lived in – and indeed was himself – a community of spies and informers, ready to ferret out and denounce any deviations from Randian doctrine. Thus, one time a Randian, walking with a girl friend, told her that he had attended a party at which several Randians had made an impromptu tape imitating the voices of the top Randian leaders. Stricken by this dire information and after spending a sleepless night, the girl rushed to inform the top leadership of this terrible transgression. Promptly, the leading participants were called on the carpet by their Objectivist Psychotherapist and bitterly denounced in their “therapy” sessions: “After all,” said the therapist, “you wouldn't mock God.” When the owner of the tape refused the therapist's demand to relinquish it so that it could be inspected in detail, his doom as a member of the movement was effectively sealed.

No Randian, even the top leadership, was exempt from the all-pervasive fear and repression. Every one of the original cadre, for example, was placed on probation at least once, and was forced to demonstrate his loyalty to Rand at length and in numerous ways. How such an atmosphere of fear and censorship crippled the productivity of Randian members may be seen by the fact that not one of the top Randians published any books while in the movement (all of Branden's books, for example, were published after his expulsion). The only exception that proves the rule was the authorized exercise in uncritical adulation, *Who Is Ayn Rand?* by Barbara Branden.

But if the Randian lived in a state of fear and awe of Rand and her leading disciples, there were psychological compensations; for he could also live in the exciting and comforting knowledge that he was one of a small number of the elect, that only the members of this small band were in tune with reason and reality. The rest of the world, even those who were seemingly intelligent, happy, and successful, were really living in limbo, cut off from reason and from understanding the nature of reality. They could not be happy because cult theory decreed that happiness can only be achieved by being a committed Randian; they couldn't even be intelligent, since how could seemingly intelligent people not be Randians, especially if they commit the gravest sin – failing to become Randians once they were exposed to this new gospel.

Excommunications and Purges

We have already mentioned the excommunications and “purges” in the Randian movement. Often, the excommunications – especially of important Randians – proceeded in a ritual manner. The errant member was peremptorily ordered to appear at a “trial” to hear charges against him. If he refused to appear – as he would if he had any shred of self-respect left – then the trial would continue in absentia, with all the members present taking turns in denouncing the expelled member, reading charges against him (again in a manner eerily reminiscent of 1984). When his inevitable conviction was sealed, someone – generally his closest friend – wrote the excommunicate, a bitter, febrile, and portentous letter, damning the apostate forevermore and excluding him forever from the Elysian fields of reason and reality. Having his closest friend take the leading part in the heresy proceeding was of course important as a way of forcing the friend to demonstrate his own loyalty to Rand, thereby clearing himself of any lingering taint by association. It is reported that when Branden was expelled, one of his closest former friends in New York sent him a letter proclaiming that the only moral thing he could do at that point was to commit suicide – a strange position for an allegedly pro-life, pro-individual-purpose philosophy to take.

The break with the apostate – even if once closest friends – had to be uncompromising, permanent, and total. Thus, a woman, very high in the Randian hierarchy, once hired a Randian girl to be her assistant in editing a magazine. When the woman was summarily expelled from the movement, her assistant refused to talk to her at all, except strictly in the line of business – a position steadfastly maintained despite the obvious tensions at the office that had to result.

As is true of all witch-hunting groups, the greatest sin was not so much the specific transgressions of the member, but any refusal to sanction the heresy-hunting procedure itself. Thus, Barbara Branden reported that her greatest sin was held to be her refusal to attend, and therefore to sanction the legitimacy of, her own trial, and other purgees have had similar tales to tell.

It should come as no surprise to learn that, in contrast to most other psychotherapies, the Objectivist Psychotherapists served as stern moral guardians for the troops. “Immoral” patients were expelled from therapy, a practice that reached its apogee when patients of Objectivist Psychotherapists were expelled for simply asking their therapists the reasons for the Rand-Branden split.

Thus, kept in ignorance of the world, of facts, ideas, or people who might deviate from the full Randian line, held in check by adoration and terror of Rand and her anointed hierarchy, the grim, robotic, joyless Randian Man emerged.

For the moulding processes of the cult did succeed in creating a New Randian Man –

for so long as the man or woman remained in the movement. People were invariably transformed by the moulding process from diverse, often likeable men and women to grim, tense, hostile poseurs – whose personalities could best be summed up by the word “robotic.” Robotically, the Randians intoned their slogans, generally imitating the poses and manner of Nathaniel and Barbara Branden, and further, imitating their common cult vision of heroes and heroines of the Randian fictional canon. If any criticism of Rand or her disciples were made, or any arguments were pressed that they could not answer, the Randians would adopt a tone of high offense: “How dare you say such a thing about her?,” turn on their heels and stomp off. No smile, nor many other human qualities, managed to shine through their ritualized faade. Many of the young men managed to look like carbon copies of Branden, while the young women tried to look like Barbara Branden, replete with the cigarette-holder held aloft, derived from Ayn Rand herself, that was supposed to symbolize the high moral standards and the mocking contempt wielded by Randian heroines.

Son of Rand

Some Randians emulated their leader by changing their names from Russian or Jewish to a presumably harder, tougher, more heroic Anglo-Saxon. Branden himself changed his name from Blumenthal; it is perhaps not a coincidence, as Nora Ephron has pointed out, that if the letters of the new name are rearranged, they spell, B-E-N-R-A-N-D, Hebrew for “son of Rand.” A Randian girl, with a Polish name beginning with “G-r,” announced one day that she was changing her name the following week. When asked deadpan, by a humorous observer whether she was changing her name to “Grand,” she replied, in all seriousness, that no she was changing it to “Grant” – presumably, as the observer later remarked, the “t” was her one gesture of independence.

If looking and talking and even being named like the top Randians was the most “rational” way to act, and seeing them as much as possible was the most rational form of activity, then surely residing as close as possible to the leaders was the rational place to live. Thus, the typical New York Randian, upon his or her conversion, would leave his parents and find an apartment as close to Rand's as possible. As a result, virtually the entire New York movement lived with a few square blocks of each other in Manhattan's East 30's, many of the leaders in the same apartment house as Rand's.

If continuing an intense psychological pressure was in part responsible for the extremely high turnover among Randian disciples, another reason for this turnover was the very fact that the movement had a rigid line on literally every subject, from aesthetics to history to epistemology. In the first place it meant that deviation from the correct line was all too easy: Preferring Bach, for example, to Rachmaninoff, subjected one to charges of believing in a “malevolent universe.” If not corrected by

self-criticism and psychotherapeutic brainwashing, such deviation could well lead to ejection from the movement. Secondly, it is difficult to impose a rigid line on every area of life and thought when, as was the case with Rand and her top disciples, they were largely ignorant of these various disciplines. Rand admitted that reading was not her strong suit, and the disciples, of course, were not allowed to read the real world of heresies even if they had been inclined to do so. And so the young convert – and they were almost all young – began to buckle when he learned more about his own chosen subject. Thus, the historian, upon learning more his subject, could scarcely rest content with long outdated Burkhardtian clichés about the Renaissance, or the pap about the Founding Fathers. And if the disciple began to realize that Rand was wrong and oversimplified in his own field, it was easy for him to entertain fundamental doubts about her infallibility elsewhere.

Rational Tobacco

The all-encompassing nature of the Randian line may be illustrated by an incident that occurred to a friend of mine who once asked a leading Randian if he disagreed with the movement's position on any conceivable subject. After several minutes of hard thought, the Randian replied: "Well, I can't quite understand their position on smoking." Astonished that the Rand cult had any position on smoking, my friend pressed on: "They have a position on smoking? What is it?" The Randian replied that smoking, according to the cult, was a moral obligation. In my own experience, a top Randian once asked me rather sharply, "How is it that you don't smoke?" When I replied that I had discovered early that I was allergic to smoke, the Randian was mollified: "Oh, that's OK, then." The official justification for making smoking a moral obligation was a sentence in *Atlas* where the heroine refers to a lit cigarette as symbolizing a fire in the mind, the fire of creative ideas. (One would think that simply holding up a lit match could do just as readily for this symbolic function.) One suspects that the actual reason, as in so many other parts of Randian theory, from Rachmaninoff to Victor Hugo to tap dancing, was that Rand simply liked smoking and had the need to cast about for a philosophical system that would make her personal whims not only moral but also a moral obligation incumbent upon everyone who desires to be rational.

If the Rand line was totalitarian, encompassing all of one's life, then, even when all the general premises were agreed upon and Randians checked with headquarters to see who was In or Out, there was still need to have some "judicial" mechanism to resolve concrete issues and to make sure that every member toed the line on that question. No one was ever allowed to be neutral on any issue. The judicial mechanism to resolve such concrete disputes was, as usual in cults, the rank one enjoyed in the Randian hierarchy. By definition, so to speak, the higher-ranking Randian was right, the lower one wrong, and everyone accepted this Argument from Authority that might

have seemed not exactly consonant with the explicit Randian devotion to Reason.

One amusing incident illustrates this decision-by-hierarchy. One day a dispute over concretes occurred between two certified and high-ranking Randians, both of whom had been dubbed as rational by their Objectivist Psychotherapist. Specifically, one was a secretary to the other. The secretary went to her boss and demanded a raise, which she rationally intuited was her just dessert. The boss, however, checking his own reason, decided that she was incompetent and fired her. Now here was a dispute, a conflict of interest, between two certified Randians. How were all the other members to decide who was right, and therefore rational, and who was wrong, irrational, and therefore subject to expulsion? In any truly rational group of people, of course, it would not be incumbent upon anyone but these – the only ones familiar with the facts of the case – to take any position at all. But that sort of benign neutrality is not permitted in any cult, including the Randian one. Given the need to impose a uniform line on everyone, the dispute was resolved in the only way possible: through rank in the hierarchy. The boss happened to be in the top rank of disciples; and since the secretary was on a lower rank, she not only suffered discharge from her job, but expulsion from the Randian movement as well.

The Pyramid

And the Randian movement was strictly hierarchical. At the top of the pyramid, of course, was Rand herself, the Ultimate Decider of all questions. Branden, her designated “intellectual heir,” and the St. Paul of the movement, was Number 2. Third in rank was the top circle, the original disciples, those who had been converted before the publication of *Atlas*. Since they were converted by reading her previous novel, [The Fountainhead](#), which had been published 1943, the top circle was designated in the movement as “the class of ‘43.” But there was an unofficial designation that was far more revealing: “the senior collective.” On the surface, this phrase was supposed to “underscore” the high individuality of each of the Randian members; in reality, however, there was an irony within the irony, since the Randian movement was indeed a “collective” in any genuine meaning of the term. Strengthening the ties within the senior collective was the fact that each and every one of them was related to each other, all being part of one Canadian Jewish family, relatives of either Nathan or Barbara Branden. There was, for example, Nathan's sister Elaine Kalberman; his brother-in-law, Harry Kalberman; his first cousin, Dr. Allan Blumenthal, who assumed the mantle of leading Objectivist Psychotherapist after Branden's expulsion; Barbara's first cousin, Leonard Piekoff; and Joan Mitchell, wife of Allan Blumenthal. Alan Greenspan's familial relation was more tenuous, being the former husband of Joan Mitchell. The only non-relative in the class of ‘43 was Mary Ann Rukovina, who made the top rank after being the college roommate of Joan Mitchell.

These were the disciples before the publication of *Atlas*. After that, Branden began his basic lecture series, which soon evolved into the Nathaniel Branden Institute, the organizational arm of the movement. Eventually, NBI was established in Rand's symbolically heroic Empire State Building, although it resided unheroically in the basement. In New York City, the various lectures and lecture series were put on in person; outside New York, each city or region had a designated NBI representative, who was in charge of putting on performances of the lectures on tape. The NBI rep was generally the most robotic and faithful Randian in his particular area, and so attempts were made, largely though not always totally successfully, to duplicate the atmosphere of awe and obedience pervading the mother section in New York. Determined efforts were made to translate Rand's mass readership of her best-selling works into faithful disciples who would first subscribe to *The Objectivist*, and then keep attending NBI taped lectures in their area, thus being inducted into the movement. If a flow of magazines, tapes, and recommended books went out from NBI to the rank-and-file members of the movement, a flow of money and volunteer labor inevitably traveled the reverse path, not excluding payments for psychotherapeutic services.

It has been evident throughout this paper that the structure and implicit creed, the actual functioning, of the Randian movement, was in striking and diametric opposition to the official, exoteric creed of individuality, independence, and everyone's acknowledging no authority but his own mind and reason. But we have not yet precisely focused upon the central axiom of the esoteric creed of the Randian movement, the implicit premise, the hidden agenda that insured and enforced the unquestioning loyalty of the disciples. That central axiom was the assertion the "Ayn Rand is the greatest person that has ever lived or ever shall live." If Ayn Rand is the greatest person of all time, it follows that she is right on every question, or at the very least, will far more likely be correct at any time than the mere disciple, who grants himself no such all-encompassing greatness.

Typical of this attitude was a meeting of leading young Randians attended by a friend of mine. The meeting turned into a series of testimonials, in which each person in turn testified to the overriding influence that Ayn Rand had been in his own life. As one of them explained: "Ayn Rand has brought to the world the knowledge that A is A, and that 2 and 2 equal 4." When a top Randian, on hearing that a notoriously refractory member who was in the process of leaving the movement had written a parody in the Randian philosophical manner, a "proof" that Ayn Rand was God, the Randian, in genuine puzzlement, asked: "He's kidding, isn't he?"

There was a generally consuming concern with greatness and rank among the Randians. It was universally agreed that Rand was the greatest person of all time.

There was then a friendly dispute about the precise ranking of Branden among the all

There was then a friendly dispute about the precise ranking of Branden among the all-time all-stars. Some maintained that Branden was the second greatest of all time; others that Branden tied for second in a dead heat with Aristotle. Such was the range of permitted disagreement within the Randian movement.

The adoption of the central axiom of Rand's greatness was made possible by Rand's undoubted personal charisma, a charisma buttressed by her air of unshakeable arrogance and self-assurance. It was a charisma and an arrogance that was partially emulated by her leading disciples. Since the rank-and-file disciple knew in his heart that he was not all-wise or totally self-assured, it became all too easy to subordinate his own will and intellect to that of Rand. Rand became the living embodiment of Reason and Reality and by some quality of personality Rand was able to bring about the mind-set in her disciples that their highest value was to earn her approval while the gravest sin was to incur her displeasure. The ardent belief in Rand's supreme originality was of course reinforced by the disciples' not having read (or been able to read) anyone whom they might have discovered had said the same things long before.

Ejection From Paradise

The Rand cult grew and flourished until the irrevocable split between the Greatest and the Second Greatest, until Satan was ejected from Paradise in the fall of 1968. The Rand-Branden split destroyed NBI, and with it the organized Randian movement. Rand has not displayed the ability or the desire to pick up the pieces and reconstitute an equivalent organization. The Objectivist fell back to The Ayn Rand Letter, and now that too has gone.

With the death of NBI, the Randian cultists were cast adrift, for the first time in a decade, to think for themselves. Generally, their personalities rebounded to their non-robotic, pre-Randian selves. But there were some unfortunate legacies of the cult. In the first place, there is the problem of what the Thomists call invincible ignorance. For many ex-cultists remain imbued with the Randian belief that every individual is armed with the means of spinning out all truths a priori from his own head – hence there is felt to be no need to learn the concrete facts about the real world, either about contemporary history or the laws of the social sciences. Armed with axiomatic first principles, many ex-Randians see no need of learning very much else. Furthermore, lingering Randian hubris imbues many ex-members with the idea that each one is able and qualified to spin out an entire philosophy of life and of the world a priori. Such aberrations as the “Students of Objectivism for Rational Bestiality” are not far from the bizarreries of many neo-Randian philosophies, preaching to a handful of zealous partisans. On the other hand, there is another understandable but unfortunate reaction. After many years of subjection to Randian dictates in the name of “reason,” there is a tendency among some ex-cultists to bend the stick the other way, to reject reason or thinking altogether in the name of hedonistic sensation and service.

reason or thinking altogether in the name of hedonistic sensation and caprice.

We conclude our analysis of the Rand cult with the observation that here was an extreme example of contradiction between the exoteric and the esoteric creed. That in the name of individuality, reason, and liberty, the Rand cult in effect preached something totally different. The Rand cult was concerned not with every man's individuality, but only with Rand's individuality, not with everyone's right reason but only with Rand's reason. The only individuality that flowered to the extent of blotting out all others, was Ayn Rand's herself; everyone else was to become a cipher subject to Rand's mind and will.

Nikolai Bukharin's famous denunciation of the Stalin cult, masked during the Russia of the 1930's as a critique of the Jesuit order, does not seem very overdrawn as a portrayal of the Randian reality:

It has been correctly said that there isn't a meanness in the world which would not find for itself an ideological justification. The king of the Jesuits, Loyola, developed a theory of subordination, of "cadaver discipline," every member of the order was supposed to obey his superior "like a corpse which could be turned in all directions, like a stick which follows every movement, like a ball of wax which could be changed and extended in all directions"... This corpse is characterized by three degrees of perfection: subordination by action, subordination of the will, subordination of the intellect. When the last degree is reached, when the man substitutes naked subordination for intellect, renouncing all his convictions, then you have a hundred percent Jesuit.³

It has been remarked that a curious contradiction existed with the strategic perspective of the Randian movement. For, on the one hand, disciples were not allowed to read or talk to other persons who might be quite close to them as libertarians or Objectivists. Within the broad rationalist or libertarian movement, the Randians took a 100% pure, ultra-sectarian stance. And yet, in the larger political world, the Randian strategy shifted drastically, and Rand and her disciples were willing to endorse and work with politicians who might only be one millimeter more conservative than their opponents. In the larger world, concern with purity or principles seemed to be totally abandoned. Hence, Rand's whole-hearted endorsement of Goldwater, Nixon, and Ford, and even of Senators Henry Jackson and Daniel P. Moynihan.

Neither Liberty Nor Reason

There seems to be only one way to resolve the contradiction in the Randian strategic outlook of extreme sectarianism within the libertarian movement, coupled with extreme opportunism, and willingness to coalesce with slightly more conservative

heads of State, in the outside world. That resolution, confirmed by the remainder of our analysis of the cult, holds that the guiding spirit of the Randian movement was not individual liberty – as it seemed to many young members – but rather personal power for Ayn Rand and her leading disciples. For power within the movement could be secured by totalitarian isolation and control of the minds and lives of every member; but such tactics could scarcely work outside the movement, where power could only hopefully be achieved by cozying up the President and his inner circles of dominion.

Thus, power not liberty or reason, was the central thrust of the Randian movement. The major lesson of the history of the movement to libertarians is that *It Can Happen Here*, that libertarians, despite explicit devotion to reason and individuality, are not exempt from the mystical and totalitarian cultism that pervades other ideological as well as religious movements. Hopefully, libertarians, once bitten by the virus, may now prove immune.

Bibliographical Note

Of the several works on Randianism, only one has concentrated on the cult itself: Leslie Hanscom, "Born Eccentric," *Newsweek* (March 27, 1961), pp. 104–05. Hanscom brilliantly and wittily captured the spirit of the Rand cult from attending and reporting on one of the Branden lectures. Thus, Hanscom wrote:

After three hours of heroically rapt attention to Branden's droning delivery, the fans were rewarded by the personal apparition of Miss Rand herself – a lady with drilling black eyes and Russian accent who often wears a brooch in the shape of a dollar sign as her private icon....

"Her books," said one member of the congregation, "are so good that most people should not be allowed to read them. I used to want to lock up nine-tenths of the world in a cage, and after reading her books, I want to lock them all up." Later on, this same chap – a self-employed "investment counselor" of 22 – got a lash of his idol's logic full in the face. Submitting a question from the floor – a privilege open to paying students only – the budding Baruch revealed himself as a mere visitor. Miss Rand – a lady whose glare would wilt a cactus – bawled him out from the platform as a "cheap fraud." Other seekers of wisdom came off better. One worried disciple was told that it was permissible to celebrate Christmas and Easter so long as one rejected the religious significance (the topic of the night's lecture was the folly of faith). A housewife was assured that she needn't feel guilty about being a housewife so long as she chose the job for non-emotional reasons....

Although mysticism is one of the nastiest words in her political arsenal, there hasn't been a she-messiah since Aimee McPherson who can so hypnotize a live audience."⁴

At least as revelatory as Hanscom's article were the predictable howls of overkill outrage by the cult members. Thus, two weeks later, under the caption "Thugs and Hoodlums?", Newsweek printed excerpts from Randian letters sent in reaction to the article. One letter stated: "Your vicious, vile, and obscene tirade against Ayn Rand is a new low, even for you. To have sanctioned such a stream of abusive invective...is an act of unprecedented moral depravity. A magazine staffed with irresponsible hoodlums has no place in my home." Another man wrote that "one who has read the works of Miss Rand and proceeds to write an article of this caliber can only be motivated by villainy. It is the work of a literary thug." Another warned, "Since you propose to behave like cockroaches, be prepared to be treated as such." And finally, one Bonnie Benov revealed the inner axiom: "Ayn Rand is...the greatest individual that has ever lived." Having fun with the cult, Newsweek printed a particularly unprepossessing picture of Rand underneath the Benov letter, and captioned it: "Greatest Ever?"⁵

Notes

1. Alfred G. Meyer, [Leninism](#) (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), pp. 97–98. A particularly vivid expression of this communist faith was put forward by Trotsky, in a speech at the 1924 Congress of the Soviet Communist Party:

Comrades, none of us wishes to be or can be right against the party. In the last instance the party is always right, because it is the only historic instrument which the working class possesses, for the solution of its fundamental tasks.... One can be right only with the party and through the party because history has not created any other way for realization of one's rightness.

In Isaac Duetscher, [The Prophet Unarmed](#). (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 139.

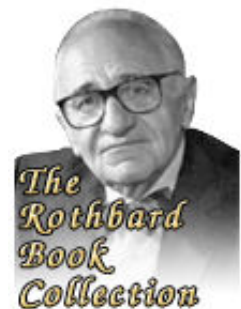
On all this, see in particular Williamson M. Evers, "Lenin and His Critics on the Organizational Question," (unpublished MS.) pp. 15ff.

2. Frank S. Meyer, [The Moulding of Communists: The Training of the Communist Cadre](#) (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1961).

3. Nikolai Bukharin, [Finance Capital in Papal Robes: A Challenge](#) (New York: Friends of the Soviet Union, n.d.), pp. 10–11. Also see Evers, "Lenin and his Critics," p. 15.

4. Newsweek (March 27, 1961), p. 105.

5. Newsweek (April 10, 1961), pp. 9, 14.



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