

# Menoetius revolted: Critique of Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* political economy, and its place in neoliberalism

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## Abstract

This article analyses Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, from the point of view of the critique of political economy. Using immanent analysis, we critically analyze the objectivist philosophy of the novel and its superficial resemblances with Marxism, especially its idea of a utopic society in the John Galt's Gulch. While Rand presents the individual producer as a realized and rational human being, we contrast him with the idea that the capitalist is merely the personification of capital to show how Galt's Gulch fails as a utopia. Such analysis allows us to situate *Atlas Shrugged* in the liberal project, arguing that liberalism still has an aristocratic bias which facilitated the 2008's economic crisis.

**Keywords:** Ayn Rand; neoliberalism; critique of political economy; aristocracy; economics and literature.

**JEL Code:** B24, B29, Z11

*Now Iapetus took to wife the neat-ankled maid Clymene, daughter of Ocean, and went up with her into one bed. And she bore him a stout-hearted son, Atlas: also she bore very glorious Menoetius and clever Prometheus, full of various wiles, and scatter-brained Epimetheus who from the first was a mischief to men who eat bread; for it was he who first took of Zeus the woman, the maiden whom he had formed. But Menoetius was outrageous, and farseeing Zeus struck him with a lurid thunderbolt and sent him down to Erebus because of his mad presumption and exceeding pride. And Atlas through hard constraint upholds the wide heaven with unwearying head and arms, standing at the borders of the earth before the clear-voiced Hesperides; for this lot wise Zeus assigned to him.*

Hesiod, *Theogony*

*Thus the fundamental form-determining intention of the novel is objectivized as the psychology of the novel's heroes: they are seekers.*

György Lukács

## 1. Introduction

Atlas holding the heavens on his back has entered the social consciousness as a powerful image. The American writer Ayn Rand made use of this image in her novel *Atlas Shrugged* ([1957] 2006, henceforth *Atlas*) as a metaphor for the productive class and the desire to just shrug off the ones who “exploit” them – something the Portuguese Brazilian translation (Rand, [1957] 2017) does not capture when adopting the term “revolt” (literally, *Atlas’s revolt*). Rand would be known as one of the fiercest defenders of capitalism, through her philosophy of Objectivism. Such philosophy is one of the most extreme defenses of liberal capitalism, by taking the apology of rational egoism as a virtue and altruism as a fakery, an insult to human spirit (Senra, 2011).

From the point of view of the American culture, *Atlas* is a phenomenon. In the introduction of Rand’s academic biography, Jennifer Burns (2009, p. 1) wrote that “in 2008 alone combined sales of her novels [...] topped eight hundred thousand, an astonishing figure for books published more than fifty years ago”. The data used by Burns come from the Ayn Rand Institute and, even if it has an interest in inflating its patron’s importance, Rand’s influence in the American culture is undeniable. According to Alonso and Rodríguez (2019, p. 77), it would be impossible to list all American businessmen that read and felt inspired by any of her books. According to Duggan (2019, p. 89-90), former American president Donald Trump considered himself aligned with Rand’s thinking, just as a good part of his government. To someone outside her context, it is a mystery how she became so popular.

Therefore, in spite of her fame/infamy, we aim to critically evaluate this book because it is a *text*. Marc Bloch (2002) wrote that, in order to make good use of the historical method, we must analyze what the witnesses of history produced: “we know that witnesses can lie or deceive. But, before all, we must let them speak.” Such procedure must also be observed in literary criticism and its intersection with economics. We argue that letting *Atlas Shrugged* “speak”, and making use of the tools of the critique of political economy, will tell us something about the reality of capitalism and of the neoliberalism.

In order to illustrate the argument, it must be reminded that one of Rand’s most popular disciples was Alan Greenspan, who considered her and Friedman<sup>1</sup> the “iconoclasts” of his time (Greenspan, 2008). Although he downplayed her influence in later years, in his memories he exalted the role of Randian ideas in his worldview and, above all their performance: “I began to study how societies form and how cultures behave, and to realize that economics and forecasting depend on such knowledge... [Rand] introduced me to a vast realm from which I’d shut myself off”. Greenspan did not see a lot of issues in supporting violent dictatorship in foreign countries and, as we will show below, this does not enter in contradiction with Randian ideas. Taking in consideration practical aspects of society implies, both for him and his mentor, promoting gains for their own agents, not to all of society. Therefore, we mention Raymond Williams’s (1977, p. 145) reminder that “literary theory cannot be separated from cultural theory”, because *Atlas* has an underlying influence, from which an analysis of political economy would be relevant. The English novelist and essayist G. K. Chesterton (1904) once wrote that “a good novel tells us the truth about its hero; but a bad novel tells us the truth about its author”. Judging by this standard alone, *Atlas* is doubtlessly a terrible

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<sup>1</sup> Friedman never met with Rand, but considered her “an utterly intolerant and dogmatic person who did a great deal of good.” (Burns, 2009, note 6:22).

novel. But Chesterton continues: “But from bad literature he might learn to govern empires and look over the map of mankind”.<sup>2</sup>

Following the argument proposed by Žižek (2002), that the book’s ideological presentation should not be underestimated, we see that Rand’s use of controversial language and appeal to her readers’ ego guarantees her success with some demographic targets. These, however, are distractions. More than that, it provides a window into the liberal worldview, as well as being a piece of an “aristocratic rebellious” literature (Losurdo, [2002] 2019). In spite of its rebellious proposal, we argue that if we let *Atlas Shrugged* “speak”, we will see that it is not a book about “shrugging” or “revolting”, as in the Brazilian translation, but it is a book about *submission*. Instead, we argue that a more accurate metaphor would be Atlas’s brother, Menoetius. In the *Theogony*, Menoetius was cast off to the Erebus by Zeus for his pride and punished in a lake of fire (Hesiod, 1914). With climate change, created by the pride and greed of a capitalist society, in which Capital needs to consume, produce and expand as an existential need, Menoetius raging against Olympus for things he caused seems to be a more appropriate metaphor.

The article makes use from the contributions of many authors that used the so-called “immanent analysis” in order, from the reading of a text, to make explicit the decisive meanings of a body of ideas (cf. Chasin, 1999; Losurdo, [2002] 2019; Lukács, 2020; Mesquita, 2021). We intend to show that, on the contrary, in its own words, *Atlas* represents a regressive ideology, a reactionary defense of an exclusionary elitism, which advanced in the 1970s, having as its peak the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Besides this introduction, the article is divided in four sections. In the first, we present a brief biography of the author; in the second, we realize an immanent reading of *Atlas*, focusing on the Galt’s Gulch chapters. In the following, we study the ideological aspects of the Randian text, contrasting with Marx writings. In the final section, we discuss the reactionary character of Rand’s liberalism. We, then, conclude reaffirming the points of the article.

## **2. The utopia of greed as an ideal society**

Heller (2009) considers *Atlas* as the synthesis of her philosophical ideas in form of a novel. They can be summarized in John Galt’s discourse, the book’s climax, which took two years to be written: “I swear—by my life and my love of it—that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine.”

If Lukács (2000) defined the novel as the bourgeoisie epic, *Atlas* is the culmination of this definition, in the way that it openly portrays the capitalist class as the ultimate hero. In the novel, communist governments took over the entire world and the United States, last bastion of democracy, is more

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<sup>2</sup> The entire citation is worth reproducing: “In one sense, at any rate, it is more valuable to read bad literature than good literature. Good literature may tell us the mind of one man; but bad literature may tell us the mind of many men. A good novel tells us the truth about its hero; but a bad novel tells us the truth about its author. It does much more than that, it tells us the truth about its readers; and, oddly enough, it tells us this all the more the more cynical and immoral be the motive of its manufacture. The more dishonest a book is as a book the more honest it is as a public document. A sincere novel exhibits the simplicity of one particular man; an insincere novel exhibits the simplicity of mankind. The pedantic decisions and definable readjustments of man may be found in scrolls and statute books and scriptures; but men’s basic assumptions and everlasting energies are to be found in penny dreadfuls and halfpenny novelettes. Thus a man, like many men of real culture in our day, might learn from good literature nothing except the power to appreciate good literature. But from bad literature he might learn to govern empires and look over the map of mankind.”

and more under their control. The heroine, Dagny Taggart, has the dream of building a transcontinental railway while the country is on its way to be literally turned off. She faces off against the statist villains, who want to take advantage of her gifts, while she unveils the mystery on who John Galt is. Meanwhile, she discovers that the “producers” exited society and left to a mysterious valley where they can fulfill their most selfish desires, far from the collectivist world. Galt created a perpetual energy engine, that sustains a “utopia of greed” in the Vale. Most of the story is centered on Dagny and her lover, Hank Rearden, discovering the truth behind all of this as they learn the virtues of egoism. In the end, the heroes win, waiting the outside world self-destruct itself as they plan the new society, which belongs now to heroes and individual creators. “The road is cleared...We are going back to the world.’ He raised his hand and over the desolate earth he traced in space the sign of the dollar.” (Rand, [1957] 2006).

The book is written in simple language. Her career as scriptwriter helped her to organize her stories so that they can be easy to read (Alonso, Rodríguez, 2019, p. 78). In spite of being published in 1957, she took almost 15 years to finish it. It was published in the apex of the Golden Age of capitalism, where the only general fear in the United States was the Soviet Union. Thus, Rand shocked her audience by portraying the United States as decadent. The book was badly received by critics, but, due to the structure concocted by her financiers, it became a success. After the publication, Rand ceased to write novels and dedicated herself to political activism.

Both Burns (2009) and Heller (2009) biographies dedicated many chapters to the writing of *Atlas*. Because it is Rand’s most iconic work, it receives most attention and, for the purposes of this article, it is enough to analyze the chapters on the Vale, commonly called Galt’s Gulch. *Atlas* has many unique excerpts, such as Francesco d’Anconia’s discourse on the empowering property of money, the narration of the failure of the Twentieth Century Motors (a company managed by a workers’ cooperative, therefore “damned” according to Rand’s views), and even John Galt’s radio speech, but we chose the Vale because it is the epitome of objectivism’s *praxis*, the “utopia of greed”.

Utopias have a great political value because they are capable of confronting an ideal situation with reality, with the intention of “provoke the political imagination of the readers, a *sine qua non* condition to transform the real” (Loty, Schang, 2021, p. 19). Clardy (2012, p. 245) writes that the Vale “is a sketch of what the world could and should be like if things were done according to this Objectivist philosophy” – confronting the American reality with the ideal of the Vale.

It is allowed to Dagny enter the Vale, where she finds many “producers” there: bankers, entrepreneurs, celebrities and even urban workers and farmers (Rand includes herself as a fishwife<sup>3</sup>), all of them enlightened by rational egoism and rejected by a society that does not understand them. Upon portraying a large diversity of actors, Rand tries to show Dagny and Hank, and the reader by default, that they are not alone in the fight against “collectivism” – there is a “conspiracy of good people” guiding them to a final victory. She inverted the logic of representation movements by framing the capitalist businessman as a member of an oppressed minority, in which their talents and energy are exploited by the majority. The productive class is forced to hand over the work of their hands to a country that exploits them<sup>4</sup>. For this reason, the producers go on a

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<sup>3</sup> Galt: “She’s a writer. The kind of writer who wouldn’t be published outside. She believes that when one deals with words, one deals with the mind.” Dagny is jealous of her closeness with Galt.

<sup>4</sup> Galt: “You proclaim yourself unable to harness the forces of inanimate matter, yet propose to harness the minds of men who are able to achieve the feats you cannot equal. You proclaim that you cannot survive

social strike and retreat to the Vale. She used anticonformist language to create a “superconformist” theory (Žižek, 2002).

The Vale itself is located in Colorado. Francesco d’Anconia, Dagny’s childhood friend, had talked to her about an “Atlantis” that only heroes can enter. The place has no official name, people call it what they want. Galt explains to her that there are no laws or rules, not because Rand was anarchocapitalist<sup>5</sup>, but because she believed that an enlightened person would transcend the need of laws. There is only one law, that was more of a custom: to never use the taboo work “give”. Thus, nobody receives anything for free, not even a cup of water. Everyone works, including Dagny. Non-monetary favors are seen as “compromises” that must be paid back.

As said before, the Vale’s inhabitants can enjoy Galt’s genius and live according to the customs of rational egoism. They can create pieces of art and inventions without others’ pressure. In a talk with Ellis Wyatt, an oil baron, Dagny asks why he abandoned his privileged position to stay in the Vale, to which he replies: “I now work for use, not for profit—my use, not the looters’ profit. Only those who add to my life, not those who devour it, are my market. Only those who produce, not those who consume, can ever be anybody’s market. I deal with the life-givers, not with the cannibals.”

One of the main messages of *Atlas* is that the producer owes nothing to nobody. Different from what the Friedman doctrine<sup>6</sup> says, the Randian producers owe nothing to no one, not even their shareholders. And yet, there is an ardent desire to create and to be recognized by their creations in the producer’s heart. In the novel, it is given emphasis to the moral strength of the producers. Hank meets with another businessman and they refuse to accept a deal with the government in order to keep their principles. He considers Dagny to be the only worthy client of his miraculous metal. Clardy (2012, p. 243) argued that the question of how the public goods work (among them, the force field separating the Vale from the outside world) is left without answer. We argue that Clardy’s question can be answered in the narrative itself: only the enlightened people are worthy of receiving the public goods supplied by Galt. The looters and moochers are automatically excluded. Therefore, the tragedy of commons is solved in the Randian system through a worthiness mechanism, as in the reactionary catchphrase: “human rights for the right humans”.

This logic of worthiness is also reflected in the organization of the market in the Vale. Rand seems to have a dubious relationship, almost schizophrenic with the concept of “competition” itself. On one hand, she supported capitalism, framing the government as a villain for creating laws limiting competition. And, yet, competition is just something in the background at the Vale. Although Rand denounced monopolies as anticapitalistic collectivism (Burns, 2009, p. 39), all goods and services in the Vale are produced through monopolies (Clardy, 2012, p. 242). In reality, each monopoly is gained through competition in which the winner takes the entire market and the loser may be free

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without us, yet propose to dictate the terms of our survival. You proclaim that you need us, yet indulge the impertinence of asserting your right to rule us by force—and expect that we, who are not afraid of that physical nature which fills you with terror, will cower at the sight of any lout who has talked you into voting him a chance to command us.”

<sup>5</sup> The relationship between Rand and Murray Rothbard, father of anarchocapitalism, was of mutual hatred. He went to meetings at her apartment for a while and defended her works, but one day in July 1958, Rothbard realized “I hated the guts of [Nathan] and Ayn and the rest of the gang” (Burns, 2009, p. 183).

<sup>6</sup> The only social responsibility of the corporation is to maximize long-term profits for its shareholders (Friedman, 1970).

to do other things or work for the winner. They resemble more medieval duels. In a scene, Dagny talks to Andrew Stockton, owner of the Vale's foundry, showing her his former rival who is now a sculptor, a rambunctious man that became docile after losing and accepts peacefully his "destiny", earning more money than before. And Andrew also says he cannot wait Hank joining the Vale so that he can be defeated by him and become his servant<sup>7</sup>. No word is said about the logistics of this market, only the consolidated power relations.

When Rand puts the individual in the center of her work, it is necessary to ask who is this individual. Much of Rand's philosophy comes from Nietzsche (besides Albert Jay Nock, José Ortega y Gasset, and other earlier authors that fused reactionary and free market ideas). Although Sciabarra ([1995] 2013, p. 92) emphasized that Rand scoffed at him for his emotionalism, Burns (2009, p. 16) showed that she was his reader, devouring his books. She even did many direct references to him in her works, before realizing that such references would harm her project of presenting herself as a completely original thinker. Nietzsche's influence stands out because Losurdo ([2002] 2019) presented, using an anachronic comparison, a "Rand-like" Nietzsche, who believed that the *übermensch* were a group of people separated from their peers and, through their efforts, they had an inner superiority over the others. For this reason, Nietzsche criticized abolitionists, because he considered slavery a fundamental institution of a healthy society. Rand would also be a "radical aristocrat", like Nietzsche.

These influences from Nietzsche are also reflected in John Galt. Generally, Rand divides the human nature between unique, highly motivated individuals that are indifferent to social norms, and the rest (Clardy, 2012, p. 19). Galt, however, is not just a hero with these traits, but akin to a Messiah of a new age. In the words of Rand, the objective of her writing was "the projection of the ideal man" (Sciabarra, [1995] 2013, p. 107). Galt proposes that the individual who has the control of themselves, has the control of anything, a process that Rand called "mind focus" (Senra, 2011, p. 69). Galt is not ashamed of working in the lowest digging trenches and, yet, he still has time and fortitude to create fantastic machines, capable of producing infinite energy, whose usage he accedes only to those whom he deems worthy of his vale of egoism. Galt does not hesitate, nor he is scared. He does not need his human flaws. And, because of that, he can always take the correct moral decision.

Not even when he is being tortured by the government, does he stop being serene. He even gives instructions to his incompetent torturers of how to do their job better. He cannot hate them, neither feel pity for them, because these are not rational reactions; they are just common people. Because he has control of himself, he has control over the world around him. He can recognize potential in others, such as Dagny and Hank, while rejecting others. While disguised as a trench worker, he always entertained Eddie Willers, Dagny's friend that failed to live up the Randian ideal; he was always polite to him, but he never talked about the Vale to him. Eddie was just a common person; he could not understand the lesson that a person should only live to themselves. For this reason, he is left to die in the end. Common people like Eddie must not be allowed in the new world.

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew: "When I came here, he and his partner had a sort of combination hand-forge and repair shop. I opened a real foundry, and took all their customers away from them. The boy couldn't do the kind of job I did, it was only a part-time business for him, anyway—sculpture is his real business—so he came to work for me. He's making more money now, in shorter hours, than he used to make in his own foundry [...] I know one man who could [defeat me] and probably will, when he gets here. But, boy!—I'd work for him as a cinder sweeper. He'd blast through this valley like a rocket. He'd triple everybody's production."



*Atlas* can be classified as a *bildungsroman* (coming of age novel), because it involves a journey of self-discovering. Suarez (2005) classifies *bildungsroman* in stages, that can be filled by *Atlas*:

**Table 1: *Atlas* as a *bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age story**

Bildungsroman	Atlas Shrugged
Work in the <i>bildung</i> emphasizes practical actions of the protagonist, they take the initiative.	<i>Atlas</i> emphasizes that wealth is accumulated through hard work and that the egoist and rational person should be proud of the fruits of their work and protect them from looters and moochers.
Long journeys are very important, because they allow the protagonist to leave the known world in order to experience new discoveries about the world and themselves.	Dagny and Hank travel through the entire United States looking for the “truth” about John Galt and discover the virtues of self-love, while observing the evils of collectivism – one is not born a Man, one must become one.
Translation was a valued discipline in the romantic era, represented as not just mere translation of texts, but also learning from the mystical Other, that allows the protagonist to achieve inner revelations.	The Vale is a place outside society, where the enlightened can realize their most personal ambitions and to be helped by a community that understands them.
The past is inhabited by heroes, that references the glories of ancient conquests.	A great emphasis is given to the characters’ lineages, such as the Taggart patriarch and the first d’Anconia that migrated to Argentina, who already showed the egoist virtues.

**Source:** Elaborated by the authors using Suarez (2005) and Rand ([1957] 2006).

Thus, the novel follows Dagny’s journey to learn the virtues of egoism. In the beginning, she has an intuitive understanding of egoism, but she lacks the realization that she must love herself more than her railway. Throughout the one thousand pages of the book, Dagny is subject to a journey that ends with the holistic realization of the person. While the Vale’s guerrilla invades the government complex to rescue Galt, Dagny orders a worker to stay out of her way. The confused worker stays immobile. Then, Dagny goes for the simpler solution: she shoots him. He falls dead and Dagny goes forward without any weight in the consciousness. The narrative shows that no one can condemn her for this. Dagny has control of herself; for that reason, she has control of everything around her, including other people’s lives. Her relationship with Hank is possible because they both share the same worldview. If one day they become obstacles to their ambitions, they will discard each other. If Eddie was even a bit near enlightenment, he would have accepted his death in peace.

From the point of view of political economy, the logical extension of objectivist philosophy is to decide the fate of nations. For that reason, Rand defended enthusiastically the genocide of Native Americans for the crime of not recognizing property rights in the way she understood (Norton, 2015). Although she had denounced racism as “collectivism”, and had herself experienced antisemitism, her writings remain hostile and blissfully unaware of the structural effects of racism in American society. For Tucker-Abramson (2017), there is a racialized language in the escape from the producers into the Vale as metaphor of the White Americans running away from urban

centers to suburban refuges, after the Second World War. Capitalist escapist fantasies are still popular among the elites – see Rushkoff (2022), in which many companies aiming wealthy clients promise escapes, resembling the Vale, from a supposed societal and environmental collapse, or Simpson and Sheller (2022) on the use of islands to foster fantasies of cryptosecessionism, in which liberal utopias can be realized through cryptocurrency. Such escapes are very attractive to the elite, because they are simple solutions that turn extraneous structural engagement.

### **3. The dialectics of capital: the Randian project against Marxism**

Another reason why the chapters on the Vale were chosen was because they illustrate another of *Atlas*'s main point: its antagonism with Marxism. Rand never referenced real people in *Atlas* to avoid outdating her setting, but it is clear which ideas she had in mind. Due to her strong personality, she accumulated enemies from all sides of the political spectrum. But, in all of her work, she shows a deep hatred of Marxism.

Such attitude can be explained by her time in the Soviet Union, where her family experienced terrible life conditions while adapting to the new Soviet reality (Nikiforova, Kizilov, 2018) and fueled the major part of her political activism, be it against New Deal, or testifying to senator Joseph MacCarthy's House of Unamerican Actions on Communism in Hollywood. And yet Sciabarra ([1995] 2013) argued that there are many parallels to be made between Rand and Marx. Both saw themselves influenced by Aristotle and his dialectics. Similarly, Shah (2021) observed parallels between Gramsci and Rand, in which the Vale's inhabitants adopted a world domination strategy based in a hegemonic domination, control of key areas. Although she read some Marxist literature in the then called University of Petrograd, its departments were not fully influenced by the official Soviet ideology (Sciabarra [1995] 2013; Burns, 2009). Her use of utopia is both a rupture with the liberal anti-utopia tradition (Loty, Schang, 2021) and an attempt of dialectically overcoming the problems of capitalism. Just like Marx and Engels ([1847] 2010) ended *Communist Manifesto* with "Workers of all countries, unite!", Rand also shared a similar message to the producers, writing in a previous work titled *Capitalist Manifesto*: "Individualists of the world, unite!" (Burns, 2009, p. 38).

From a Marxist point of view, *Atlas* is another manifestation of capitalist discourse – the difference is that it fully embraces ideas that would be "impolite" to be openly admitted by capitalists. Galt is just another attempt to deny that the alienation of the worker exists or is relevant. In contrast, for Rand, alienation is imposed by looters and moochers. A simple method to identify heroic companies in *Atlas* is to see if they have the name of their founders. A company such as Twentieth Century Motors is fraudulent because there is no indication of its founder in its name. Unlike these poor imitations of a true firm, all the companies with personal names have their founders in the Vale. To Rand, producers create unalienated extensions of themselves. They need to be constantly sacrificed to attend the looters' demands – consumers that do not recognize the true value of the things they consume.

Although the tone might be as tempestuous as Marx's style in *Capital*, the fight against alienation using pure entrepreneurial psychic energy is wishful thinking, if we follow Marx. The capitalist is just a personification of capital (Marx, [1867] 2011, v. 1, p. 307), an avatar. It is as if capital acquired a life of its own, whose objective is growth and nothing else. As an avatar of capital, the capitalist must take decisions that foster the increasing accumulation of capital. In the moment that a capitalist decides to take a "non-rational" decision – such as a large studio execution giving preference to an artistic movie of low return, instead of a sappy blockbuster – they will jeopardize



their career, because they can simply be replaced by another one who will take more decisions in line with what is to be expected. Obviously, sometimes it does not work, the most apparently rational decision might not be the best (especially when involving long term returns, such as any activity with environmental impact), but this is the imperative logic. Galt gleefully achieves, therefore, a point that Marx warned about: the complete subsumption of the individual in the capital. Galt will do all he can to maximize returns to himself, because his creations are an extension of himself. Any person that stays in the way of a producer, such as the nameless worker that Dagny kills, must get out of the way or be crushed by the Juggernaut. Just like the religious ceremony, as described by Marx ([1867] 2011, p. 167, 330), the ultimate capitalist fantasy includes the supposition that the workers celebrate being tossed to the Juggernaut. *Atlas* realizes it under the peaceful environment of the Vale.

The lack of consideration with others is a noted theme in *Atlas*'s negative reviews. Arrogance, to Rand, is a virtue as long as it is backed up by talent. The Randian capitalist takes the role of a patriarchal dictator, taking the company and everything in its inner workings – workers included – as extensions of their productive actions. The objective is to realize a product without alienation, an artistic expression of their desire to create<sup>8</sup>. And they have right to this dictatorial role because they are enlightened by their rational egoism. As said before, Galt does not make mistakes. The destruction of the old world is according to the “plan”. The managers of Twentieth Century Motors are condemned because they did not take hard decisions, such as laying off workers. Thus, *Atlas* allows the businessman to justify “tough decisions”, such as elimination of worker benefits. They should not feel guilty because, if the workers are enlightened, they would gladly accept and celebrate the decisions of the leaders, and do the same.

Marx would recognize this as the bourgeoisie discourse of his time, that success depends of abstinence and some entrepreneurial spirits, hiding the exploitation process (Marx, [1867] 2011, section VIII). Rand inverted the logic of oppression – entrepreneurs are the oppressed minority – and upon removing the *noblesse oblige* as a duty of the elite ever since the pre-capitalist age, she set up a model of action. Rand's heroes are people who live in austere, but comfortable houses in the Vale, without practicing conspicuous consumption (and when they do, they do it to make a point, like Francesco). All of them emphasize hard work, aiming to legitimize the American myth of the self-made man, “connected to utopian visions of a classless society, or at least to a society that allows considerable social mobility”, what Adorno called “the barbaric success religion” (Paul, 2014, p. 367-368). Hank, for example, came from a poor family and built everything he had using his blood, sweat and tears<sup>9</sup>. Greed, covetousness, selfishness are virtues that advance mankind, while altruism is a mortal sin.

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<sup>8</sup> This reflects Schumpeter's entrepreneurship discourse: “[to fulfill their] will to conquer: the impulse to fight, to prove oneself superior to others, to succeed for the sake, not of the fruits of success, but of success itself” (Schumpeter, [1934] 1949, p. 93).

<sup>9</sup> A common critique to Rand was that “she hated the poor”. We consider this to be a vulgar critique because there is diversity of characters in *Atlas*: many characters that are producers in the outside are, in reality, moochers and use their undeserved riches to harm the heroes; the most sympathetic villain is a union leader, to the point some readers think he was an infiltrated agent of Galt. Burns (2009, p. 173) argued that Rand abandoned her sympathy for the poor present in previous works in Galt's speech, but we believe she still keeps it. Galt is generalizing the language that there are looters and moochers in all classes. Similar rhetoric is found in Plínio Salgado's integralism, that saw something heroic in the poor farmers (Chasin, 1999).

The matter of sacrifice is also explored. It is an insult to sacrifice oneself to the others in the Randian system. Although Rand had a distorted view of what exactly is being sacrificed, these ideas find echo in Marx, because that is what has been demanded from workers. The descriptions of workers' conditions in *Capital* are just a sample of how the progress hailed by the Randian system demands the sacrifices of many bodies. Such sacrifices do not exist in the Vale, because they are all working for the good of themselves. As Clardy (2012) argued, no word is said about the Vale's worker class, assuming that all of them docily work for the winner monopolists. Although Galt swore to never ask another man to give his life for him, what is a *Man*? Again, one is not born a Man, one must become one – in the words of Francesco: “The reason my family has lasted for such a long time is that none of us has ever been permitted to think he is born a d’Anconia. We are expected to become one.” (Rand, [1957] 2006). *Atlas* is a work that has a cast of both people who managed to become Men and those who failed. And the readers already understand what happens to the ones who fail.

In real life, it is questionable how much businessmen would accept being “cinder sweepers” to more successful people. Empirical evidence has shown that the more a worker behaves like the Vale model worker – loving their job, docily submitting to the enlightened capitalist, trusting their decisions – the higher the chances they will be exploited, denied benefits or increases in wages, being rewarded with just more work (Tokumitsu, 2015; Stanley et al, 2023). Plus, the idea of a city only made of rich people was already ridiculed centuries before by the Christian preacher John Chrysostom, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. In his sermons, he exhorted the rich people from Constantinople, including empress Eudoxia, to abandon their greed and exploitation of the poor. He made many enemies because of this. In one of his sermons, he described a city of poor and a city of rich. If they start from the same point, the city of poor will prevail, even if it stays “poor”, without luxury, because the rich will be too proud to do “poor” tasks. He concluded: “When will the city of the poor have need of the rich? Clearly, when the time comes to destroy it” (González, 2002, p. 208). In summary, Clardy (2012) argued that the Vale fails to represent a utopia because, in order to work, it is necessary to not make questions on the logistics of many services.

#### **4. *Atlas* and the liberal worldview: Eleutheria shrugs?**

Rand has an ambiguous place in the pantheon of liberalism. Although her books are read by liberal figures, mentions to her most extreme ideas are swept under the rug or even shunned. In spite of her fame, few people would claim to be “objectivists” in meetings of liberal scholars and sympathizers. But, due to her fanatical devotion to her own ideas and ideals, many conservatives and libertarians saw her as an asset to promote their ideas against the Left. Ginzburg’s (1999) discussion on the berserker is relevant. The berserkers were, originally, Viking warriors (whose historicity is not clear) that took drugs in order to fight under the effect of a frenzy in the battlefield, without caring for pain or wounds. Ginzburg observed how this “tradition” continues today, anachronically appropriated by reactionary authors. It evokes the idea of a debater that is capable of resisting to any rhetorical attack, while fight tenaciously to defend their own ideas. Rand can be seen a capitalist berserker.<sup>10</sup> Burns (2009) mentioned many examples of interlocutors that claimed

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<sup>10</sup> Political berserkers can be one of the most effective assets of a capitalist. For those who ignored her as just an eccentric, Teitelbaum (2020) shows that esoteric eccentrics, like Steve Bannon, Olavo de Carvalho and Aleksandr Dugin, influenced new right governments exactly because of their combative attitude and talent in attracting reactionaries under their wings. They don’t even need to wield *actual* power, symbolic power is enough. An eccentric berserker is, essentially, a very low-cost asset for a capitalist: if they are unsuccessful, the capitalist can simply abandon them; *au contraire*, the capitalist class has a loyal, low-maintenance elite

it was nearly impossible to win a debate against her due to the tenacity of her arguments and devotion to her ideals. Many see her as a religious leader (Walker, 1999; Gunalaban, 2017).<sup>11</sup>

In her view, there was no contradiction between condemning racism as collectivist delirium and defending genocide of peoples who have alternatives to property rights as she understood. Would such ideas be incompatible with the liberal worldview? As Mariutti (2019, p. 21) wrote, what determines the liberal worldview is “competition as basic ordering principle of society”. Although there are differences between how liberals understand this, Mariutti identified the “neoliberals” as the ones that emphasize “competition supported by regulatory mechanisms that minimize the costs”. It is the also the current that is closer to Rand’s thought, due to her emphasis on competition as an arbiter of success and social justice as an obstacle. The human being must become a personal enterprise and compete based on their abilities, seeking higher stages of competition. Therefore, far from the expectation of self-destruction of capitalism by its contradictions, the capitalism of *Atlas* is a “strong, stable, and natural force” and the shocks heal the system, being the holy duty of those who live in it to not just survive, but thrive as well (Tucker-Abramson, 2017, p. 89). Shock therapy becomes a lifestyle.

For this reason, racism, sexism, elitism, all other “-isms” can be seen as collectivism deliria because they harm the competitive system, by stopping the oppressed from contributing to the competition system and improve themselves. Slips such as former Brazilian, Chicago-trained minister of economy Paulo Guedes indignant with domestic helpers going to Disneyland (Arcanjo, 2021) are just slips. What if they aren’t?

History shows that, in its insertion, liberalism had a distorted view on this issue. Losurdo ([2006] 2011) showed that this a conveniently ignored trait in the history of liberalism, to the point of being necessary a “counter-history” of liberalism. If we take liberalism as “the tradition of thought whose central concern is the liberty of the individual, which is ignored or ridden roughshod over by organicist philosophies of various kinds” (*ibid*, p. 1), Losurdo asks who this individual is. This individual is more limited than it is supposed. The classic liberal authors were inserted in a deeply racist society, that they internalized in their writings. John Calhoun, for example, is remembered as an important representative of liberal thought, who defended free markets and the free initiative (Tabarrok, Cowen, 1992). He also saw Black slavery in the Southern United States as a “positive good”, something fundamental to society and considered abolitionists deluded. The reason why Losurdo started with Calhoun is a rhetorical *reductio ad absurdum*, but it soon becomes clear that this was not an isolated opinion, neither an artifact of a less enlightened era – Grotius, Locke, Tocqueville, Acton, all of them had similar opinions that puts in question if all of humanity should be included under the liberty liberalism defends. While the English liberals prided themselves for their free-market policies and freedom of expression in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they also condoned the

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soldier. Such model is quite successful in the age of social networks, while conservative parties depend more and more on eccentric candidates that shock and advance the audience, such as Marjorie Taylor Greene in the United States and Nikolas Ferreira in Brazil (Nagle, 2017). Jordan Peterson, for example, can write the wildest garbage about “woke moralists” in the space a tweet allows and yet not lose his power among his followers. On the contrary, he might even incite a berserk frenzy. Burns (2009, p. 69, 171) emphasized how Rand’s career was supported the American entrepreneurial elite: “business had found a champion.”

<sup>11</sup> Luigi Corvaglia, board member of the European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Sectarianism, has noted the relationship between cults and libertarian thought, when conservative and libertarian ideas converge and, in the process, liberal ideals are swept under the rug to create cultic propagation of ideas (Corvaglia, 2023).

systematic destruction of the Gaelic culture just across the Irish Sea, considering it incompatible with the new capitalist culture. Alfredo Bosi (2007, p. 363) concludes in his review that it is “strange that people still claim, in good or bad faith, that liberalism was or still is synonym of social and economic democracy.”

Losurdo had a controversial critical view of Nietzsche. According to him, the German philosopher understood that there were some people naturally superior to the others – the division between *übermensch* and *üntersmensch*. Such division is also present in the writings of classical liberals, which are inherited by modern liberals.<sup>12</sup> Among Rand’s allies, there was Ludwig von Mises. He was one of Rand’s economic teachers (Burns, 2009).<sup>13</sup> He went to some meetings at Rand’s apartment and wrote positively about *Atlas*. Mises, who was an aristocrat by birth, and whose coat-of-arms is adopted by many institutes that inherit his name, subscribed to the ideal of free initiative. His liberalism, however, is embedded in a religious and aristocratic nature (Augusto, 2016). There is, in his work, a “defense of the natural differences and the superiority of few in relation to others” that “extends...to the relationship between those who rule and those who do not, both in politics and between individuals in the economy” (*ibid.* p. 104). Such elitism is present in Mises’s effusive comments on *Atlas*: “You have the courage to tell the masses what no politician told them: you are inferior and all the improvements in your conditions which you simply take for granted you owe to the effort of men who are better than you.” (Burns, 2009, p. 177).

Just like Rand’s heroes have the power to decide the fate of entire nations, so do economists in real life covet this power. Slobodian (2018) argued that one of the founding principles of the neoliberal international order are the “xenos rights”, the idea that, in economic missions, the natives must have their rights suspended or, at least, put as secondary concern in order to give free reign for the liberal consultants to reform their economies according to the neoliberal agenda. It is crystalized in proposals, such as the charter cities championed by Paul Romer and used in cryptosecessionist projects (Simpson, Sheller, 2022). One can see the antiracist rhetoric from liberal thought, but practical indifference when confronted with reality. This is obvious in the South African apartheid, with liberal economist W. H. Hutt telling South African Blacks they must endure their suffering in name of economic freedom (Slobodian, 2018; Darity et al, 2023).

This has consequences to how Rand saw the “endgame” of her worldview. Both in *Atlas* as in *The Fountainhead*, Rand adopted the common Hollywood ending: the world is saved (or left to die so it can be reborn) and the couple ends together. Using utopia as a political fiction, Rand could create a *just* world, where the producers are rewarded and, above all, looters and moochers, socialists and communists, and recalcitrant liberals and conservatives are punished. Eddie Willers’s ending is necessary for the purification of the world. While Dagny joins the apotheosis of the producers, Eddie is relegated to history’s garbage bin. He committed the capital Randian sin: he did not live for himself. When he took over Dagny’s company in the last act, he did it to impress her. But, even before, most of the main characters noted he did not have something fundamental that the elite

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<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche influenced many earlier economists, not just liberals, among them members of the German Historical school (Reinert, Reinert, 2006), Schumpeter (Santarelli, Pesciarelli, 1990), Hayek and Mises (Robin, 2015) and Pigou (Maciò, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> She might have referenced his ideas on the socialist economic calculation debate in Galt’s speech: “Now you have placed modern industry, with its immense complexity of scientific precision, back into the power of unknowable demons—the unpredictable power of the arbitrary whims of hidden, ugly little bureaucrats. A farmer will not invest the effort of one summer if he’s unable to calculate his chances of a harvest.” It is reasonable to think that Mises might have talked about his ideas to her and she is referencing by memory.

had. Although Galt had entertained him in their talks, in any moment he exhorted Eddie to live for himself or even implied he had a chance, even if it was near-zero, to join the Vale. On the contrary, in spite of his kindness and devotion, for the justice of the world be fulfilled, he must die with the old world<sup>14</sup>. The novel never shows a final meeting between Dagny and Eddie, but she does not need it. Dagny, being enlightened by rational egoism, can abandon Eddie without any weight in the consciousness. She could even kill him in case he becomes too bothersome, just like the worker that did not open the way for her. Mercy is too valuable to be wasted on common people like Eddie.

Ayn Rand presumed herself part of the “winners”, thus she placed herself in the Vale as the fishwife. In the words of Burns (2009, p. 34), “Nietzsche’s elitism fortified her own. Like many of his readers, Rand seems never to have doubted that she was one of the creators, the artists, the potential Overmen of whom Nietzsche spoke”. But she saw no future for the ones who needed to go. In the same way, libertarians do not seem to be particularly conflicted with right-authoritarian regimes. James Buchanan’s opposition to the Chilean dictatorship was tepid, when compared to his opposition to student movements in the 1970s California (Mongioli, 2019). Friedrich Hayek (in)famously said he preferred a liberal dictatorship to a non-liberal democracy, but he could only say that because he never saw himself as part of those who are persecuted by a military dictatorship (Filip, 2018). Hayek’s ideas on spontaneous orders, that promote a self-regulating market, also foster submission in a population, in which they must accept the market result (Whyte, 2019). Both in Hayek, apparently, and in Rand, explicitly, there is this presumption that the market will benefit the ones who trust on it. Therefore, structural problems like racism, patriarchalism, military authoritarianism etc., are given secondary attention at best because, ultimately, they are not their problem. The market will eventually “solve” these problems and they will not have to make any noise – just as Rand emphatically claimed the market was solving the problem of racism until leftists reintroduced it in America (Norton, 2015). Eleutheria, the Greek goddess of liberty, shrugs.

As mentioned before, there is a contradiction between liberal rhetorical activism and practical indifference towards structural problems of society. Isn’t it contradictory how an ideology that prides itself in freedom of choice accepted so promptly Thatcher’s slogan “there is no alternative”? If there is no alternative, then there is no choice. And, if there is no choice, then what is the point of fighting back? The message of *Atlas*, therefore, is not about “shrugging”, nor “revolting” as in the Brazilian translation, but rather “submission”.

## 5. Conclusion

*Atlas*’s appeal to its demographic target, however, should not be ignored. Rand’s work is also capable of earnestness and sincerity. In a scene, Dagny is at a diner and immediately sees ways to improve the road ahead. She is only thinking of how to improve it, without any egoist intention, seeing her work as a way to artistically express herself. Academics tend to underestimate the power of stories like these, of how they can resonate with audiences. Although Rand was not near as a good writer as Dostoevsky or Tolstoy, Rosa Luxemburg noted how these reactionary authors could have “a rousing, edifying, and liberating effect on us” (*in* Frölich, 1972, p. 187) that socialists

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<sup>14</sup> Ayn Rand had, for many years, an affair with Nathaniel Branden. Meanwhile, Branden and a younger follower, Patrecia, started an affair without Rand knowing, which spelled doom to the objectivist project. Nathan tried to calm Rand, calling Patrecia “an Eddie Willers” to assure her that there was nothing between them and she was as irrelevant as Eddie; history showed she was definitely not irrelevant (Heller, 2009).



should pay attention to.<sup>15</sup> Rand wanted to tear down the wall that separated elite cinema and people's cinema, vulgar art and cultured art (Sciabarra, [1995] 2013, p. 126). Similar ideas can be found in the critique of political economy tradition: "in a communist society there are no painters, but only people who engage in painting among other things" (Marx; Engels, [1845] 1976, p. 418). The desire to practice nonalienated, *meaningful* work transcends differences in worldviews. Independent of how academia treats her, her works will have appeal to some people because, just like any work of fiction, they appeal to basic desires of mankind.

The resemblances stop there. Rand believed it to be acceptable to shrug the world's plight to reach this goal. Both Eddie the anonymous worker killed by Dagny are examples of this. For that reason, we consider that *Atlas* is a novel about submission. Even if it denounces a certain type of tyranny, it remains indifferent to others, that pose no direct threat to libertarianism.

The Aristotelian objectivism helped, after the collapse of Bretton Woods, creating exclusionary policies. The defense of liberalism implied an increase of the irrational powers of the monetary authority, with winners and losers determined beforehand. Its executor, not by chance, was Greenspan. Only after the 2008 crisis, he would cynically admit that the irrational policy he adopted, under the influence of the liberal objectivism, starting from the 1970s, was wrong. The ideal Randian man is an exclusionary entity and, ultimately, fated to fail when he leaves the world of fiction and is confronted by the real world *in ways the author could not expect*. The critique of political economy sees the capitalist as more Menoetius than Atlas, making John Galt nothing more than an idol.

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<sup>15</sup> As an anecdote, when I (Rafael) discussed the book in a reddit thread, another user claimed it was one of their favorite books. They considered themselves an anticapitalist and rejected Rand's ideals and yet they said they felt inspired by the book's characters attitude of not giving up and even helped them recognize an abusive relationship in real life. In my view, this capacity of unpredictability when reading is one the many reasons why *Atlas* (italicized) should be considered a work of art, in spite of Rand's average writing ability and malice, and my personal opinion that the world would be a slightly better place without it."



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