

The Ayn Rand Contradiction

She revered reason but spent her career appealing to emotion.

By Rainer Zitelmann

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Ayn Rand, Russian-born American novelist, in New York, 1962. PHOTO: AP

Few have championed capitalism as unreservedly as Ayn Rand, born Alisa Rosenbaum on Feb. 2, 1905. Her 1957 novel “Atlas Shrugged” has sold more than 10 million copies. Milton Friedman’s 1962 book “Capitalism and Freedom” has sold about one million.

What is the secret of her success? Unlike the economists Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek and Friedman, Rand is best known for her novels. Her cultural significance comes not from her powers of rationality but rather her appeals to morals and emotions. At the same time, she steadfastly believed in the supremacy of reason and thought emotions were valid only when they were rooted in logic.

Anne C. Heller, author of the 2010 biography “Ayn Rand and the World She Made,” points out this contradiction: “Whether she knew it or not, she was

retailing her philosophy of strict rationality through a primal emotional appeal by characters in a fable.”

Rand was likely aware of this incongruity. According to Ms. Heller, while promoting her 1943 novel “The Fountainhead,” Rand explained to a businessman that novels “moved people emotionally first and intellectually second.” This, she said, “made them the most compelling kind of propaganda.”

Rand’s followers revered her. Some worshiped her and regarded her as a superhuman figure who embodied strict rationality. But Rand was full of contradictions. She was a heavy smoker who for years refused to acknowledge any link between smoking and lung cancer. She sometimes wore a dollar-sign pin in recognition of the heroes of “Atlas Shrugged,” who adopted a large dollar sign as a symbol of their capitalist movement. Yet she chose not to invest her money in stocks; most of her money was in a savings bank. She was fascinated by airplanes, but she didn’t fly until late in her life due to an irrational fear of crashing.

Despite championing individualism, Rand generated a cultlike following. Though she was an atheist, some of her admirers have transformed her teachings into a rigid dogma that demands conformism—something of a religion. She was a human with contradictions, strengths and weaknesses—far from the flawless superhuman characters in her novels.

But we can still learn a lot from Rand. The historical evidence supporting capitalism is so convincing that it’s difficult to understand why some people view it so negatively. In 1820, during the early stages of modern industrial capitalism, about 90% of the global population was living in extreme poverty. Today that figure stands at less than 9%.

Modern criticism of capitalism persists because emotions rather than facts and figures tend to sway public opinion. That’s why Rand was so concerned about the negative portrayal of entrepreneurs in Hollywood films. She even wrote a 12-page guide for Hollywood producers in 1947 demanding that they avoid communist ideology and refrain from attacking “individual rights, individual freedom, private action, private initiative, and private property.” No one understood humans’ emotional urges better than Rand, the high priestess of reason.

Mr. Zitelmann is author of “The Origins of Poverty and Wealth.”