

Present Tense

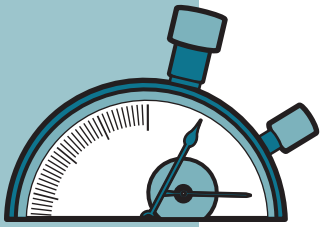
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Ayn Rand, Conservative Populists, and the Creed of Self-Immolation

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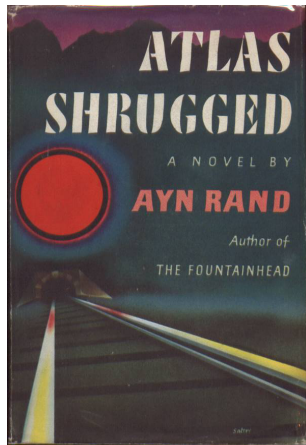




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Atlas Shrugged, Ayn Rand's didactic novel on the moral superiority of free markets, is flying off the shelves again. The Ayn Rand Institute [reports](#) that

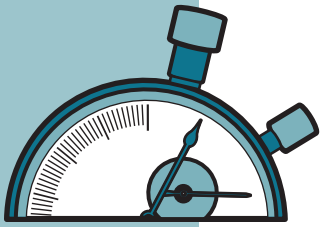


sales of the novel soared to 200,000 copies in 2008 and then a jaw-dropping 500,000 copies in 2009—not bad for a book that has been strafed by critical fire since its publication in 1957. Since we cannot

attribute the stellar sales to literary laurels, we must turn to political reasons, which the Ayn Rand Institute, [The Economist](#), [The Cato Institute](#), and [The Wall Street Journal](#) are happy to present. The article in *The Economist* about the phenomenon provides a graph showing how spikes in sales of *Atlas Shrugged* coincide with lowered interest rates in late 2007, the election of President Obama, and the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act. For many conservatives, like Stephen Moore, senior writer for *The Wall Street Journal*, Rand's libertarian-inflected novel reads like a prophecy for a political era in which, as Moore writes, "our current politicians are committing the very acts of economic lunacy" that *Atlas Shrugged* satirized.

Ayn Rand's novels, which use narrative as the delivery system of an explicitly political ideology, together with her nonfiction philosophizing form one of the intellectual pillars of Tea Party conservative populism, alongside the writings of Friedrich A. Hayek, Milton Friedman, and the Founders (or at least the Founders as read by Glenn Beck and associates). Contemporary conservatives often look to Rand et al.—rather than, say, Leo Strauss, Irving Kristol, or Normon Podhoretz, the once-admired neoconservatives upon whose principles the Bush Doctrine was built—for the tools to dismantle the rhetoric of "statist capitalism," the Right's enemy. *Atlas Shrugged* is a remarkably popular political tract that in the last fifty years has sold over seven million copies, 10% of which have been sold, indirectly we could say, by President Barack Obama. I suggest we will better understand contemporary political rhetoric if we analyze the persuasive allure of the tale of John Galt—master capitalist and avatar of contemporary American populism.

I make this case in three moves. First, I will define populism as a rhetorical strategy best understood thematically rather than politically; in other words, populism, often associated with progressive-left politics, is a strategy without a partisan home, an equal opportunity storehouse for arguments across the spectrum. Second, I offer a reading of *Atlas Shrugged*, the



novel that functions as the “gateway drug to life on the right,” especially for precocious teenagers (Burns 4). Though I don’t have room to analyze the entire novel, I will analyze one of the many synecdochic speeches Rand’s characters give in defense of free markets. In a world ravaged by government oversight, John Galt, renegade capitalist and leader of a secret band of elite *laissez faire* enthusiasts, preaches to a potential disciple on the evils of “the creed of self-immolation” (Rand 686). Since Galt’s theme is *sacrifice*, self-sacrifice specifically, I turn to Kenneth Burke’s notion of self-immolation to analyze how Rand turns the classical virtue of self-sacrifice into “the most contemptible evil” (Rand 445), thus perpetuating what Jeremy Engels calls “rhetorics of victimhood” (Engels 304).

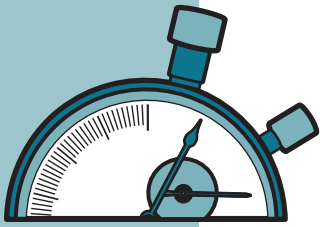
Finally, I argue that the popularity of *Atlas Shrugged* provides a timely moment for re-seeing novels as appropriate, even necessary, artifacts for rhetorical criticism. As proverbs writ large, novels constitute what Kenneth Burke called “equipment for living,” and as such they participate in the constitutive back and forthness of public rhetoric, sometimes even eclipsing public address or other symbolic political action in terms of reach and influence (Burke *Philosophy* 293). American fiction has a rich tradition of pamphleteering on behalf of the victims of an evil culture (e.g., *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *The Jungle*, *Fahrenheit* 451, etc.). Ultimately, as in Burke’s reading of Milton’s poem *Samson Agonistes*, we must see *Atlas Shrugged* as “literature for use”—in this case, literature that provides a liberating sacrifice typology for free-market conservative populists to see

themselves as victimized saviors of a corrupt society (Burke *Rhetoric of Motives* 4).

Populism as Rhetorical Strategy

Much of the scholarship on populism focuses on the agrarian reform movements that helped constitute American progressivism before World War I.¹ Participants in the early populist movement saw themselves as inheritors of agrarian virtue alienated from the post-Civil War “corporate order” (Kazin 28). They also believed that “state action” was the most effective “means to settle accounts with perceived enemies” like bankers and owners of railroads (Postel 17). In the late 1940s, however, populism migrated to the Right as anti-communist and anti-statist forces used populist tropes to oppose, rather than support, social change (Kazin 167). In part because of this dramatic shift, in recent years we have come to see populism and populist rhetoric as articulating more a *mood* than a specific political ideology—a “language,” as Michael Kazin puts it, intended to mobilize the “noble assemblage” of “ordinary people” against the “self-serving and undemocratic” elites (Kazin 1). We know populist rhetoric not by its political content but by “the pattern of arguments” it presents as a generic response to situations defined by crisis (Rohler 316). To be banal, populist rhetorics use populist reasoning.

In his description of the “populist argumentative frame,” Michael Lee provides us with four attributes of populist reasoning: Populist rhetoric (1) invokes a virtuous people “portrayed as heroic defenders” of time-honored values (358); (2) identifies this



Ayn Rand, Conservative Populists

rhetorically constituted people against a rhetorically constituted enemy “hoarding power” (359); (3) further compounds the enemy rhetoric by claiming to work against a “system” (like government or the economy) once virtuous but now “sullied” (360); and (4) expresses an “apocalyptic confrontation” or a “mythic battle” set in a political order on the verge of collapse (362). Running through these four strategies is a “narrative of victimization and redemption” that inverts the biblical soteriology by turning the congregation itself into the undeserving scapegoat (363).

Rhetorics of Victimhood

This rhetoric of victimhood is central to understanding the rhetorical situation of *Atlas Shrugged* as it provides aid and comfort to contemporary conservatives who see themselves as sacrificial victims of evil men and evil systems whose immoral incompetency is driving society to the edge of the abyss. After the Federal Government

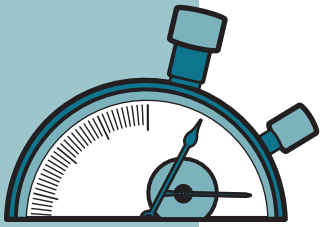


passed the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act in 2008 (the troubled assets bill) and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in 2009 (the stimulus bill) to stop what could have been a catastrophic market crisis, the Tea Party movement coalesced around a sometimes vague, but

always visceral, discontent with government spending, government debt, entitlement programs, and health care reform. On the Tea Party Patriots webpage, the **core values** of the grassroots movement are bulleted as “fiscal responsibility,” “constitutionally limited federal government,” and “free markets.” These time-honored values, often framed in Tea Party rhetoric as the legacy of the Founders (with obvious references to the Boston Tea Party), constitute the doctrine of the Righteous in their moral struggle against the Wicked.

This victimhood language is best understood *logologically* in the sense that it gives an example of what Burke called “usable secular analogues” to theological language (*Rhetoric of Religion* 2). Theological language provides certain topoi for secular discourse, the most dramatic one being the “sacrificial principle” by which a people seek a victim—a scapegoat—to carry off their sins through its own destruction. For Burke, this “curative” role of victimhood” (*Rhetoric of Religion* 4) explains all kinds of cultural animosities, both real and symbolic, as various groups demonize, antagonize, and ultimately seek to destroy their enemies in a move to purge the world of evil. On a more abstract level, the “imagery of killing,” as described by Burke in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, is a principle of “transformation (‘rebirth’)” (xiii), a kind of poetic *topos* that provides motives and terms by which a “thing can be defined narratively in terms of its fulfillment or fruition” (13). Victims complete the order.

Burke helps us understand how people use language to make enemies worth killing (through “matricide, patricide,



infanticide, tyrannicide, or regicide," and then finally "genocide" (*Rhetoric of Motives* 13); but we also learn something about the victim's rhetoric. Resentful times call for a "politics of resentment," as Jeremy Engels argues in a recent article on the Tea Party (305). When "resentment is constitutive of civic identity," citizens see themselves primarily as victims whose only recourse is unhinged hostility at "a purported cause of suffering" (Engels 306, 322). Unlike the sacrificial lamb who goes to the slaughter in obedient silence,² the victim in this case resents its victimhood and lashes out at the victimizer.

I believe the most compelling and conspicuous source of the Tea Party's rhetorics of victimhood is Ayn Rand, author of several novels and proponent of her own brand of capitalist philosophy. Rand appears regularly in the online conversation about the Tea Partiers, to which she is linked directly by conservative blogs like David Frum's *frumforum* and, obviously, Pamela Gellar's *Atlas Shrugs*. The central mythological allusion in *Atlas Shrugged* is, of course, Atlas, the primordial Titan cursed by Zeus to support the celestial spheres on his shoulders forever. In the typology of the novel, enduring Atlas represents the brilliant innovators and capitalists of the world who carry not only an overly ponderous tax burden but the responsibility to keep the gears of industry turning. In some vague future, the enemies of free enterprise—unions, university professors, philanthropists, progressives, government planners, and other various looters, moochers, beggars, and "whining rotters" (Rand 420)—collude to take control of industry and pass quasi-socialist legislation with maudlin titles such

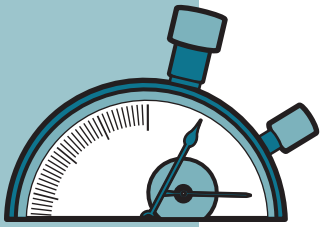
as "Preservation of Livelihood Law," "Fair Share Law," "Public Stability Law," (279) and (I'm not making this up) the "Anti-dog-eat-dog rule" (75).³ After the novel was published, Rand appeared in a Mike Wallace interview to make a characteristically forceful argument against the conventional morality of self-sacrifice: (see Ayn Rand on "self interest").

Again, this argument gives Tea Party populists the rhetorical strength to "shrug" off their role as sacrificial animal in the name of a self-evidently rational ethical code of self interest. Hank Rearden, the novel's promethean iron magnate, speaks for Rand and her contemporary populists when he identifies as "the most contemptible evil" on earth society's demand that the wealthy "immolate" themselves like "sacrificial animals" through the redistribution of wealth (Rand 445).

The Sacrificial Victim on Strike

In *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand sets up a (melo) dramatic victim narrative inside which contemporary conservative populists can affix themselves, with righteous indignation as the adhesive. She cleverly subverts the typology of the theological victim—e.g., the sacrificial lamb or Jesus Christ—by making the act of atonement a vile injustice rather than the instrumentality by which justice is restored. Atlas's majestic shrugging is the ultimate revenge fantasy for those who believe the government and all those who support market intervention have demonized the most useful, creative, and productive members of society.

Atlas Shrugged is riddled with long-winded speeches by characters who



Ayn Rand, Conservative Populists

seem to have read *Atlas Shrugged*. The longest of these speeches is the 54-page sermon by John Galt near the end of the novel, but he gives a much shorter warm-up earlier on, when his secret, idyllic hideout of free market geniuses is discovered by Dagny Taggart, a railroad executive and Galt's future lover. This speech, like the others, works as synecdoche for Rand's larger argument about free markets. Galt explains to Taggart that the men who have joined him at Galt's Gulch are on strike. The useless men of the world have used the strike in the past; now "the men who have carried the world on their shoulders, have kept it alive, have endured torture as sole payment," the greatest minds who endure the greatest social limitations, will walk out on the world. "This is the strike of the men of the mind, miss Taggart," Galt explains. "This is the mind on strike" (Rand 677). Without the strike, the very best of society—the most pure and worthy and necessary, the lambs without blemish, the sinless ones—gets massacred by those who need them most.

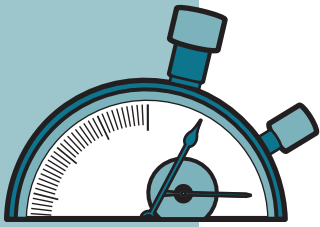
By contrast, the oblivious victimizers, like the Roman guards at the foot of the cross, know not what they do. Controlled by "dark emotions" rather than reason, the mass of humanity rises in power, having fattened themselves on goods and services they did not produce. Once the victims and victimizers are set in dramatic relief, Galt turns preacher to explain how "the creed of self-immolation" works (686). Again, in spite of Rand's trenchant atheism, or perhaps because of it, this rhetoric of victimhood must be read within "the dialects of theology" as a commentary on atonement (Burke *Rhetoric of Religion* 10). Galt invokes the atonement topos

by arguing that Atlas is made "to accept the part of a sacrificial animal and, in punishment for the sin of intelligence, to perish on the altars of the brutes" (678).

Atlas Shrugged is a forceful political narrative because it enrages and empowers the victim. Galt's capitalist heroes, who have historically atoned "for the guilt of ability," are now preparing themselves to step off the grid and let the grid collapse in an earthquake of ineptitude (679). Take away the victims, says this logic, and civilization is impossible. In Rand's fantasy, the political economy collapses as the unwashed and unworthy step in to replace the army of Atlases who have removed their services. This rhetoric of victimhood takes its audience beyond rage and into pseudotheological self-congratulation. Contemporary conservative populists can see themselves not only as society's victims but as their saviors who, like Jonathan Edwards's God, hold society over the abyss by sheer will. By the end of the novel, the victims have become the victors, and Galt and his gang go back to the world, having conquered their enemies—not, as Constantine did, by the sign of the cross but by "the sign of the dollar" (1069).

Novels as Political Pamphlets

"Fiction is a much more powerful weapon to sell ideas than nonfiction," Rand argued in 1944. That same year she called herself "the chief living writer of propaganda fiction" (qtd. in Pierpont 70). Literary theorists often speak of the "intentional fallacy"—that you cannot understand a novel by its author's intentions. As literary critic Thomas Mallon puts it, Rand seems to believe in the "intentional imperative,"



meaning that good fiction somehow *requires* its author to pamphleteer for moral principles (Mallon 66). Though no literary scholar I know would go as far as Rand does, we can at least agree, with Burke, that one function of fiction is indeed to make arguments about values. Though leading scholars in rhetorical studies have made this case in the past,⁴ we have not yet made studying literature a regular part of our criticism. Recently Jeffrey Walker argued that rhetorical poetics, though often not directly deliberative, provide through imaginative expression the value system that makes deliberation possible (Walker 4).



If this is the case, then we must attend more regularly to those cultural artifacts that tell stories, like film and fiction, especially when those artifacts contribute implied arguments about the values undergirding democratic culture. Considering the popularity of right-wing political thrillers like Glenn Beck's *The Overton Window*, published in 2010, and the novels of Brad Thor, we must more carefully analyze the way conservative populism uses fictional narrative to demonize competing ideologies. Rhetorical theory gives us useful tools to situate literary texts in public debates and to help readers of such texts "become rhetors," as Rosa Eberly argues

so effectively in *Citizen Critics* (9).

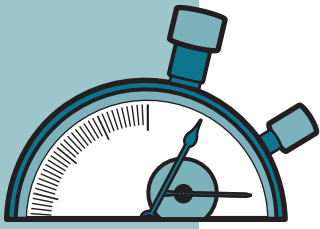
In the case of *Atlas Shrugged*, a bestselling novel has become scripture for contemporary conservative populists in their quest to identify themselves as victims and fight a polluted, bloated system of meddling government. The novel lets them see themselves as John Galt, imbued with political righteousness, ready to shrug off the government's burdens through collective action. Whatever your opinion of Rand's work, that kind of rhetorical power forges strong political identities—and, of course, animosities. Hence, we cannot engage with the emerging political order without understanding Ayn Rand's unhappy populists and the rhetoric of victimhood.

Endnotes

1. See Erlich (1977), Goodwyn (1978), Hofstadter (1955), and Postel (2007).
2. See Isaiah 53:7.
3. Rand may be a better satirist than she's been given credit for.
4. See Wayne C. Booth's *The Company We Keep*, for example.

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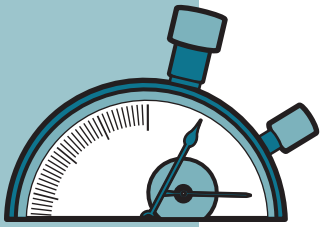
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