

Ayn Rand in the Scholarly Literature

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From time to time, *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* will highlight attention paid to Ayn Rand in the works of contemporary scholars and intellectuals. In this issue, we focus on two such thinkers: Paul Feyerabend and Slavoj Žižek.

In 1970, Rand wrote a scathing critique of Feyerabend's *Journal of Philosophy* article, "Science without Experience." In Rand's view, the article was guilty of context-dropping and "concept-stealing"; it signified a return to a primitive rationalism in its advocacy of a scientific epistemology divorced from sense perception and empirical observation (Rand 1982, 106).

James D. McCawley thought it regrettable that Rand consigned Feyerabend "to her philosophical inferno," without having engaged such works as *Against Method*; surely, says McCawley, Rand would "have been stimulated to write a new novel in which her alter egos engaged in dialogues with an intellectual villain modeled after Feyerabend" (McCawley 1990, 383). By contrast, says McCawley, Feyerabend rather liked Rand, whom he rated as

much better than most academics. Instead of defending her point of view in dreary essays she writes juicy tales full of sex, industrial espionage, murder, mystery, and at the climax introduces her beloved Aristotle (*Atlas Shrugged*—a story I read with considerable pleasure). And Aristotle, as far as I can see, by far exceeds all existing "thinkers" in versatility

and depth. . . . I prefer her to Derrida and Foucault any time.
(personal communication to McCawley, 30 November 1988
in McCawley 1990, 385 n. 21)

Up until 1999, this was the only reported comment on Rand made by Feyerabend. In *For and Against Method*, however, the reader is given additional evidence of Feyerabend's fascination with Rand. That book features lectures by Imre Lakatos and lengthy correspondence between Feyerabend and Lakatos on the nature of scientific method and philosophy. It was from challenges posed by Lakatos that Feyerabend developed his unique methodological ideas. As their correspondence develops, Feyerabend brings Rand to the attention of Lakatos. Feyerabend (in Lakatos and Feyerabend 1999, 198–99) writes:

5 April 1970
Berkeley

Dear Imre,

You have powerful allies in this country: Ayn Rand (know her?) is after me. She wrote a long article against a short (three and a half pages) article of mine, and sent copies to 4,000 philosophers in order to prevent American philosophy from deteriorating further. Sample: the author (i.e. me) "heralds the retrogression of philosophy to the primordial, pre-philosophical rationalism of the jungle [. . .] But what is innocent and explicable in an infant or a savage becomes senile corruption when the snake oil, totem poles and magic potions are replaced by a computer . . ."

You must admit, she writes much better invective than you. I'll send you a copy as soon as I have made one. And, mind you, the whole commotion is about my article, "Science without Experience" which is only 3 and ½ pages long. But, like every good ideologist she smells the devil even from a

small footprint. At any rate, how about marrying her?

Much love,
Paul

Another thinker who takes note of Rand is the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, the hottest "Continental" theorist of the day. Žižek applies the ideas of Kant, Hegel, Schelling, Marx, and Lacan to post-Communist politics and global popular culture in such books as: *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989); *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); *For They Know Not What They Do* (New York: Verso, 1991); *The Ticklish Subject* (New York: Verso, 1999); *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan In Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 1992); *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000); *The Indivisible Remainder* (New York: Verso, 1996); *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan . . . But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock* (an anthology; New York: Verso, 1992); *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991); and *The Fragile Absolute—or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (New York: Verso, 2000).

Although Žižek is widely seen as a postmodernist, this is a mistake. As Žižek's most programmatic work, *The Ticklish Subject*, makes clear, he is a critic of postmodernist "anti-humanism," which is the attempt to reduce the human subject, as a locus of freedom and responsibility, into an assemblage of external determining factors, e.g., culture, race, class, language, the unconscious, etc. Žižek does, however, recognize that these factors play a real role in shaping our thoughts and actions. But he denies that they are always disabling, limiting conditions.

Žižek's attempt to reconcile freedom and finitude places him among the German Idealist defenders of modernity. Modernity is the project of man's progressive self-emancipation from the tyranny of nature, by means of science and technology, and the tyranny of man, by means of free thought and free institutions. Following Rousseau,

the German Idealists defended a heroic, as opposed to a "bourgeois," conception of modernity. Modernity is justified not because it better satisfies our "creature comforts," but because it offers us greater opportunities for realizing our higher capacities for creativity and intellectual and moral self-cultivation.

In his 1997 volume, *The Abyss of Freedom / Ages of the World*, Žižek's 102-page essay "The Abyss of Freedom" serves as an introduction to and commentary on a translation of the second draft of Schelling's unfinished 1813 manuscript *Ages of the World*. Žižek concludes his essay with a surprising quote. To illustrate the German Idealist's attempt to see human finitude as enabling rather than merely as limiting, Žižek quotes from *The Fountainhead*, which he characterizes as, "a novel that is usually decried as the exemplary case of proto-fascist capitalist individualism." Žižek allows that, "[t]here is nonetheless a trace of authenticity in Rand's description of the momentary impact the architect Howard Roark, the hero of the novel, makes on the members of the audience in the courtroom where he stands trial" (Žižek 1997, 85).

Žižek then quotes at length Rand's description of the transformation of the audience's attitude toward Roark as he took the witness stand and paused before speaking. At first, Roark evokes the usual resentment and insecurity. But because the audience felt that they were safe from him, that he had no chance, they finally saw him as he was: "a man totally innocent of fear"—fear of the disapproval of other men—and therefore innocent of hatred and resentment toward them. In grasping this, "[e]ach asked himself: do I need anyone's approval?—does it matter?—am I tied? And for that instant, each man was free—free enough to feel benevolence for every other man in the room" (86).¹

The encounter with Roark, like the encounter with any other human being, is experienced first and foremost as a limitation. The other is precisely what is not the self. The other makes clear the limits of the self. This is particularly the case with Roark, who is experienced as more alien than most and therefore makes others particularly self-conscious. But by heightening the self-consciousness of the audience, Roark enables them to reflect upon their potentiality

for freedom, which actually makes them freer. Thus a limiting condition is transformed into an enabling one.

Notes

1. Sciabarra (1995, 378–79) closes his book on Rand with this very same passage.

References

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