

## Isabel Paterson and the Idea of America

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*The Woman and the Dynamo: Isabel Paterson and the Idea of America*

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The year 1943 was a turning point in the history of liberty in the United States. To most Americans at the time, the opposite appeared to be the case. The ideological consensus for the welfare-warfare-regulatory state had never seemed so triumphant. Defenders of the free market were under siege and in decline. With some notable exceptions, they had been reduced to writing either simplistic screeds or milquetoast middle-of-the-road apologies.

Three momentous works, all by women, challenged this dominant consensus: *The Fountainhead* by Ayn Rand, *The Discovery of Freedom* by Rose Wilder Lane, and *The God of the Machine* by Isabel Paterson. Each helped to build the foundation for the modern libertarian movement. While *The Fountainhead* easily outsold the other two combined, few regarded it at the time as a work on politics or economics or even on the merits of a free society. That would come later with *Atlas Shrugged*. *The Discovery of Freedom* was a deeply personal and passionate, though not particularly profound, philosophical treatise. As an appeal to emotion, it has great beauty but, as a work of history and logic, it falls short. Of the three, *The God of the Machine* was the most explicit and sophisticated discussion of free markets, constitutional structures, and the fallacies of interventionism.

In *The Woman and the Dynamo: Isabel Paterson and the Idea of America*, a well-written, carefully researched, and thoughtful biography,

Stephen Cox reconstructs the story behind this fascinating, but unusually secretive, woman. The final product reveals Cox's great diligence in uncovering Paterson's origins and early adult years. Although Paterson proudly embraced American traditions, she originally hailed from Manitoulin Island, a highly isolated area in Lake Huron. Her father, whom she never respected, was an affable but irresponsible and perpetual failure. Every few years, he pulled up stakes and moved the family of eight children back and forth between Canada and the United States in a fruitless search for stability and economic success. She was closest to her hard-working and sensible mother. Paterson had minimal formal education but was precocious and read voraciously.

She made her way to Alberta, Canada, taking such jobs as waitress and secretary. In 1910, she married Kenneth B. Paterson, a traveling salesman. It was not a happy match and they soon separated. They never formally divorced and she always kept her personal life shrouded in mystery. At about the same time, she began a career as a working journalist on the *Spokane Inland Herald*. She once worked for R. B. Bennett, a future prime minister of Canada. During World War I, she took up residence in New York City and, later, in 1928, she became an American citizen. Her first novel was in existence by 1914, and during the next four and a half decades, she penned several novels and short stories.

She achieved the greatest success, however, in her regular column, "Turns with a Book Worm" for the *New York Herald Tribune* "Books" from 1924 to 1949. Her biting wit and unembarrassed honesty made it of one of the most widely read in the United States. Most of the best-known writers of her time knew her, and gave her opinion great weight. Paterson was scrupulously even-handed in her reviews. As Cox observes, she assessed each author as an individual, making "no distinction between ancient and modern, man and woman, poet and novelist, left and right, alive and dead: authors were simply people" (Cox 2004, 71).

In the tradition of Oscar Wilde, Paterson had few equals as the master of the sharp and well-aimed barb. These were short, incisive, and eminently quotable. Her readers must have done multiple double takes each morning as they sipped their coffee. Here are a few: "Nothing that well meaning people might do would surprise us"(68);

“The main object of a university press seems to be to publish books which one wouldn’t want to be found dead reading” (68); “Psychology [is] a science which tells you what psychologists are like” (66); and “People mostly do as they like, and that would be fine if they’d let other people do the same” (68). On hearing that Gertrude Stein, the author of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, was heading off on a lecture tour, she quipped that one of her “topics will be ‘The History of English Literature as I Understand It.’ That should be a very brief lecture” (73).

While the main concerns of these columns were literary and personal, she increasingly took on the misdeeds of politicians and other statists, revealing a deep-seated libertarian outlook. Soon after the presidential election of 1932, for example, Paterson declared herself as an advocate of “the classical American school of political thought, and therefore would be shot at dawn with equal enthusiasm by reactionaries, communists, fascists, internationalists, imperialists, technocrats, economists, and miscellaneous young radicals. . . . We still believe in liberty or death, no foreign entanglements, and the least governed country is the best governed” (Paterson 1933).

Although she voted for Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932, primarily because of his pledge to end Prohibition, she soon came to regret it. In 1935, she wrote that the “whole trend of the New Deal is toward Fascism; it parallels with striking fidelity the procedure in Germany; inflation of the currency . . . and a stupefying tangle of contradictory regulations of every activity of the private citizen” (Paterson 1935).

Unlike many of Roosevelt’s critics, Paterson’s critique of statism extended beyond economics in a narrow sense. She pledged to fight “against all moral legislation affecting adults only” (Cox 2004, 108). Her libertarianism included a thoroughgoing critique of censorship and anti-prostitution laws. During the 1920s, she argued, with only slight exaggeration, that she was responsible for “the only article ever published in this country against any kind of law to prohibit prostitution” (108).

Paterson not only opposed Roosevelt’s New Deal but also his foreign policy. Breaking with many on the isolationist Old Right at the time, she had no sympathy for nationalist protectionism or xenophobia. Like Rand, she backed the Republican Wendell Willkie in 1940, fearing that a third term for Roosevelt would give even

greater power to the welfare-warfare state in the name of “National Emergency” (247). But she rejected pacifism as naive and after Pearl Harbor supported a “commensurate counter-attack” (248).

Despite this shift, Paterson’s support for the war effort was always conditional. Dissenting from the growing American love affair with all things Soviet, she repeatedly warned that Josef Stalin, Hitler’s former partner in arms, was not to be trusted. She also opposed Roosevelt’s domestic policies, including censorship. At some risk to her career, she came out against wartime conscription, a stand that was a rarity among all but a few pacifists. U.S. belligerence was a fait accompli to her after December 7, 1941 but this did not mean an end to questioning the reasons for going to war. When Truman dropped the atomic bombs, she deplored his decision “to fry Japanese babies in atomic radiation” (Cox 2004, 250).

Beginning in the 1930s, one of the most enthusiastic readers of Paterson’s column in *New York Herald Tribune* “Books” was a young, and relatively unknown, Ayn Rand. Paterson was probably the closest approximation Rand ever had to a mentor. One eyewitness of their interaction cast Rand in the role of student to Paterson’s guru while another remembers that “Ayn used to sit at Pat’s feet” well into the night (220). For her part, Paterson admired what she regarded as Rand’s “unique mental powers, her genius, her heroic effort against deadly odds, and her extraordinary accomplishment” (221). Their correspondence during the 1940s was deeply affectionate, at least at first. Paterson often addressed Rand as her “little sister” and “my child” (304) and constantly recommended her work to important people.

The Rand/Paterson friendship was especially close in 1943 when *The God of the Machine* first appeared. The book was her first opportunity to flesh out a systematic political, constitutional, and economic philosophy, and she made the most of it. In that opus, Paterson masterfully described the contrast between market dynamism and human creativity and the harm inflicted by do-gooders armed with state power. She grounded her underlying theory, quite literally, in the metaphors of engineering. Paterson compared the market and the social institutions of a free society to an elaborate machine, or networks of energy and creativity. Governments tinkered with this machine at their peril.

Under Paterson's conception, "Personal liberty is the pre-condition of the release of energy. Private property is the inductor which initiates the flow. Real money is the transmission line; and the payment of debts comprises half the circuit. An empire is merely a long circuit energy-system. The possibility of a short circuit, ensuing leakage and breakdown or explosion, occurs in the hook-up of political organization to the productive processes" (Paterson 1993, 62). Thriving societies represented a "long circuit energy system" because of their respect for private property and federalism (Cox 2004, 271).

*The God of the Machine* is an unfortunate title in some ways as both critics and friends of Paterson pointed out. It fosters the impression of a Newtonian theory that the course of society was determined by neat and tidy predictable laws, much like the orbit of the planets around the sun. In actuality, her conception was closer to the ever-changing "spontaneous order" theory of an F. A. Hayek or a Ludwig von Mises than the well-oiled physical universe of a Newton. Paterson emphasized that "*A machine economy cannot run on a mechanistic philosophy*" (263). The subjective individual actor, who was "the dynamo" at the center of the machine, made it all run (255). For Paterson, as Cox notes, "the crucial element in the economy is not some piece of machinery. It is you and I. It is anyone who generates energy by making individual, creative choices" (255).

One of the most provocative and, for followers of Rand, controversial parts of *The Woman and the Dynamo*, is the attempt to find the identity of "The God" in the title of her book. Paterson was never clear on this point. A logical implication of her theory was that she meant it as shorthand for the free individual ("the dynamo") but Cox isn't so sure. He theorizes that she might have meant it to be God in a literal sense as the original "Source of Energy" (263). This interpretation has much to recommend it. While Paterson rarely discussed her religious beliefs, the best evidence is that she favored theism, albeit of the deist variety. She considered the concept of God to be one of the pillars holding up the foundation of American liberty: "Let anyone who does not recognize the connection of these principles [of liberty and rights] try to rewrite the Declaration of Independence without reference to a divine source of human rights. It cannot be done; the axiom is missing" (263).

In the end, Cox argues that “[i]n Paterson’s world, there is both a God who created human beings and a godlike creative spirit within human beings. The Machine is the world, the invention of God, but it is also all those human inventions, those human structures, that provide for the generation and transmission of energies originally divine” (264).

Paterson rejected anarchism or even the quasi-anarchism of her ideological ally, Albert Jay Nock. She regarded a society without government as impossible in an extended market order. Government was necessary to be “an agency to witness long-term contracts and see that they are fulfilled in the absence of either of the parties, or to enforce an agreed penalty in case of default” (*The God of the Machine*, cited in Cox 2004, 85). In contrast to later thinkers, such as Murray Rothbard, she never examined whether competitive markets could perform this agency role.

While Paterson believed in government, it was to be kept on the shortest of leashes. It was utterly incapable, she concluded, of planning or directing economic life. Human beings were too unpredictable, diverse, and unique to be stage-managed by a central authority. Despite her disdain for anarchism, Paterson considered the whole history of governments to be one of destructive predation and/or bungling. The status society, which subordinated the individual to the needs of the group, whether via the landed aristocracy of ancient Rome or the abusive guilds of medieval Europe, had repeatedly hobbled market institutions and innovators.

Like many libertarians, then and now, Paterson, had great esteem for the Constitution. Quite plausibly, she traced the genius of the document to the founders’ familiarity with sound architectural principles. The right of private property gave the Constitution a secure “base” (269). Popular sovereignty, tempered by local control and the balance of factions and powers, provided the necessary “mass” (269). The Senate, originally chosen by state legislatures, represented the “regional bases” of the machine (260). The House of Representatives, organized around proportional representation, provided a “mass veto function” against abuses by government and the other branches (269). She praised the “structural sense” of mathematician Robert Sherman and other drafters, telling the story of when Sherman “was invited to speak on the occasion of opening a new

bridge. 'He walked critically over the structure,' and delivered his oration in one sentence: 'I don't see but it stands steady'" (270).

Even so, Paterson avoided what Jeffrey Rogers Hummel has called "constitutional fetishism." The Constitution was a product of great genius but she knew that it was a flawed document. The main defect was its treatment of slavery, in particular the fugitive slave clause. This defect almost destroyed the entire structure. Quoting Paterson, Cox writes that this provision "allowed the South to make 'an uncompensated cross-thrust' against the North, while the North, unburdened by slavery, dynamically extended its energy circuit into the territories, further unbalancing the structure" (271). Paterson expressed little sympathy for the seceding Southern states which, on the one hand, had tried to use the fugitive slave clause to protect their peculiar institution but, on the other, had abrogated their part in the compact when it became inconvenient. Yet, while the war had ended slavery, it had also set the stage for a federal leviathan.

Paterson's defense of the Constitution does not entirely satisfy even under the conditions of her own time. During the 1940s, the actions and interpretations of judges and politicians were already turning the Constitution into a dead letter. While Paterson's use of engineering metaphors to characterize the intentions of the founders was apt, the structure they designed had proven too weak to resist the growth of federal government. Paterson never explained why it was a worthwhile gamble for defenders of liberty to place any hopes in a structure that had buckled, and in some portions collapsed, under the pressures of the Progressive Era, the Depression, and two world wars.

Although Cox has limited space to tell his story, like all authors, it is surprising that he did not devote more attention to the most memorable chapter of *The God of the Machine*, "The Humanitarian with the Guillotine." This portion of Paterson's book could easily stand alone. Tellingly, the engineering theory that dominates most of the other chapters is nowhere to be found in it. The passages in that chapter show perhaps the closest parallels to the writings of Rand. Paterson begins: "Most of the harm in the world is done by good people, and not by accident, lapse, or omission. It is the result of their deliberate actions, long persevered in, which they hold to be motivated by high ideals toward virtuous ends" (Paterson 1993, 235). According to Paterson, what "the humanitarian actually proposes is

that *he* shall do what he thinks is good for everybody. It is at this point that the humanitarian sets up the guillotine” (241). She estimated that the combined efforts of all sincere philanthropists “have never conferred upon humanity one-tenth of the benefit derived from the normally self-interested efforts of Thomas Alva Edison” (250). For understandable reasons, Rand was exuberant about *The God of the Machine*. She went so far as to argue that “*The God of the Machine* does for capitalism what the Bible did for Christianity” (Cox 2004, 289).

Yet, their differences should not be forgotten. Religion was chief among them. Rand was dismissive of the major religions but Paterson praised them as “great intellectual systems” that “have always recognized the conditions of the natural order. They enjoin charity, benevolence, as a moral obligation, to be met out of the producer’s surplus” (Paterson 1993, 239). Paterson denied that the traditional religious had fostered an open-ended altruism but instead argued that they had sensibly recognized that any charitable contributions were “*secondary to production*” and thus dependent on it (239).

While sales of *The God of the Machine* were small, fans of the book included key figures in the subsequent history of conservatism and libertarianism. Among them were Leonard Read, the founder of the Foundation for Economic Education, Russell Kirk, and William F. Buckley. *The God of the Machine* represented the high tide of Paterson’s influence.

In 1949, Paterson lost her job of more than twenty years with *New York Herald Tribune “Books”*, probably because of her political views. Strains developed in her friendship with Rand during the mid-1940s. While Rand always appreciated Paterson’s influence, she could not understand how Paterson so easily reconciled her twin beliefs in theism and reason. The final straw was personal, however. It came during Paterson’s visit to Rand’s home in the late 1940s, when Paterson insulted one of Rand’s guests. There was just a little flurry of correspondence after the breakup.

As Cox points out, Paterson was often her own best enemy. Unlike either Rand or Lane, she was far too irascible to fit the role of mentor, leader, or follower. Rand and Lane, by contrast, played key hands-on roles in building pro-liberty movements and organizations. For the last decade of her life, Paterson lived in semi-retirement in

New Jersey and became increasingly isolated. She occasionally contributed to conservative publications, such as *National Review*, and more libertarian periodicals, such as *The Freeman*. She died in 1961. *The God of the Machine* guarantees her a secure place in the story of human liberty.

*The Woman and the Dynamo* is the definitive biography of Isabel Paterson. It combines solid historical detective work with a high-level analysis of Paterson's fiction and non-fiction. Cox's libertarian sympathies give him a certain advantage as a biographer. They make it easier for him to make an informed critique without falling into caricature. The prose is lucid and compelling. Cox not only provides a guide to Paterson's worldview but knows how to tell a good story.

## References

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