



HAL
open science

Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged: "Laissez-Faire Fiction?"

Vincent Dussol

► **To cite this version:**

Vincent Dussol. Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged: "Laissez-Faire Fiction?". The Fictions of American Capitalism. Working Fictions and the Economic Novel, Palgrave Macmillan, pp.247-261, 2020, 978-3-030-36563-9. hal-04296379

HAL Id: hal-04296379

<https://hal.science/hal-04296379>

Submitted on 24 Apr 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

Vincent DUSSOL

Introducing Ayn Rand's views on fiction, Romanticism, the novel and why *Atlas Shrugged* makes a problematic plea for capitalism as the vector of freedom

Since its publication in 1957, *Atlas Shrugged* has been a huge best-seller in the United States despite its general panning by literary critics. Written in the post-WW2 years, the novel clearly appears today as a defense of capitalism at a time when the West's dominant economic system was fragilized by its Communist nemesis.¹ As recently as the early 2010s, the novel enjoyed a significant revival of popularity, the surge in sales probably resulting from Tea-Party Libertarians' influence at the time. In the country that has most identified with capitalism, it can, therefore, legitimately be said that this book has had a successful career both as an energizer and a reflection of faith in free enterprise.

Rand theorized her views on art in essays written after she had published her major novels: they are gathered in *The Romantic Manifesto* (1971). Her highly idiosyncratic definition of Romanticism is bound up with her view of representation: it should always go with the creation and the championing of values. She dismisses as "Naturalism" all art showing and advocating dedication to reality. Art, and fiction in particular, must be free to stray from reality in order to remain inspirational: i.e. to help model and correct reality. What makes fiction superior to history, she writes, quoting Aristotle, is that "history represents things as they are, while fiction represents them as they might be and ought to be" (Rand 1971, p.71).

Value-creation is a conscious choice. What characterizes Romanticism, according to Rand's definition, is the acknowledgement of the primacy of volition as the faculty most necessary to artistic creation. Only in the nineteenth century, Rand argues, were the conditions

¹ The story is simple. Major industrialists/inventors vital to the United States' economy go on strike. One by one, they appear to vanish from the surface of the earth. Their efforts to keep things going have long been thwarted by the government. It takes a few hundred pages for the reader to find out that they have in fact been convinced to let go of their businesses by an active propagandist named John Galt. He directs them to the refuge of a valley in the mountains of Colorado which his scientist friends have made undetectable to radar. Meanwhile, America goes to the dogs. But Galt has not turned his back on the United States. He is just waiting for the crisis to ripen. Not until the country is on the brink of collapse, and the events have made the federal government totally powerless, does he decide it is time the rebels all went back to "the world." They will now be able to start from scratch, holding all the cards. The novel's title refers to Atlas, the Titan forced to carry the Heavens on his shoulders. Rand imagines him having grown tired of enduring punishment and deciding to shake the load off his back. The Titan stands for all the valorous human engines of the US economy who choose to withdraw from the competition, having been convinced of this by the excessively adversarial circumstances resulting from constant interference by the government.

created for volition to express itself fully: with the advent of “capitalism, which gave man’s mind the freedom to translate ideas into practice” (Rand 1971, p.95). Rand posits this, to her, perfect equation between freedom and capitalism even more clearly in “What is Capitalism?”: “The basic issue is only: Is man free? In mankind’s history, capitalism is the only system that answers: ‘Yes’” (Rand 1967, p.10).

According to Rand, the novel is the “proper literary form” for man “as a being able to choose his values, to achieve his goals, to control his own existence” (Rand 1971, p.116). This, to Rand, accounts for the flowering of the novel in the nineteenth century and explains why such literary forms as tragedy, which emphasizes determinism, prevailed until capitalism became the dominant economic system.

Despite Rand’s constant praise of, and professed dedication to, freedom (both in fiction and in human life), I contend that *Atlas Shrugged* offers unconvincing evidence of her commitment. What exactly may account for this impression? As I hope to make clear, the answer is largely found in the form of the novel: there is no “laissez-faire,” no open-ended fiction to be found here. That impression is strengthened by the high degree of intransigence found in the way Rand presents, in the novel and outside it, the “variety of capitalism” that she favors as the purest form of this economic system, in contrast to what she considers to be debased versions of it. The pursuit of this mirage of purity makes Rand’s laissez-faire capitalism a reductionist authoritarian fiction.² Paradoxically, she claims that one of the defining features of capitalism is that it makes no use of force to achieve what it regards as the good (Rand 1967, p.15). Here again, such an assertion does a lot to invalidate anything else Rand may say about capitalism. The long history of labor conflicts in the USA is rich in episodes when capitalists’ only answer to workers’ dissent consisted in crushing it.³

The following pages aim to explore the various points mentioned above.

² Doubtless, Rand would have dismissed a question considered central by Robert Boyer and regulation theory adepts concerning the kind of institutions called for by a capitalist economy. Boyer argues that “it is [...] indisputable that financial, monetary and economic history concur in showing how important the part played by politics in developing institutional compromises and social forms of capitalism has been [...]. To take but one example, firms will ‘kill’ competition and form oligopolies out of a natural inclination to corner the market. It is then up to external watchdogs to enforce the safeguarding of this cardinal principle of capitalism: competition. [...] And if politics does play a part, then there are bound to be different forms of capitalism, according to each country’s own social history [...]. That is why the contemporary capitalist system purports to be innovative on different fronts: technologically, organizationally and institutionally.” Author’s translation from Boyer.

³ “But when the country on cracked shoes, in frayed trousers, belts tightened over hollow bellies,/ idle hands cracked and chapped in the cold of that coldest March day of 1932,/ started marching from Detroit to Dearborn, asking for work and the American Plan, all they could think of at Ford’s was machineguns./ The country was sound, but they mowed the marchers down./ They shot four of them dead” (Dos Passos, p.775).

The consistency imperative creates a bubble, “trimming” life of its complexity

Successful fiction, Rand argues, demands absolute consistency. Even Romanticism, she maintains, “in spite of the abundance of Romantic writers at the time of its dominance, [...] has produced very few pure, consistent Romantics of the top rank” (Rand 1971, p. 99). She singles out Hugo and Dostoevsky as the greatest among them and names *The Scarlet Letter* as a novel matching her criteria of consistency, unlike Hawthorne’s other works of fiction.

More so than previous “holdalls” for language-based artistic human expression – like epics for instance – the novel as a genre has made openness one of its defining features: loose threads left hanging are tolerated in the plot and character development alike; the exploration of new forms has often tended towards accepting more uncertainty, calling for increased reader-participation. The exploratory qualities of creative fiction have been especially developed in the case of the American novel – often hailed as the vehicle of America’s best homespun philosophy, a situation resulting from “the long-standing American distrust of philosophical speculation” (Chodat, p.653). In *The Romantic Manifesto*, Rand seems to be fully aware of this power of the novel: “A novel is *the* major literary form – in respect to its scope, its inexhaustible potentiality, its almost unlimited freedom” (Rand 1971, p.72, Rand’s emphasis). However, while *Atlas Shrugged* is made out by its author to be the epitome of a novel, in many respects it matches the more rigid, i.e. didactic, versions of other genres, and these generic intents working at cross purposes may account for the book’s partial literary failure, most notably as regards the characters’ lack of complexity. “The ambivalence of the novel as a form” (Chodat, p.665) is badly tested by this didactic drift. The engagement with what Rand calls “philosophy” entails “sacrificing the heteroglossia and irony that have long been associated with the novel as a genre” (Chodat, p.656). In *Atlas Shrugged*, the variety of speech genres and accents that usually succeed in “pulling [a novel] away from assertion and argument” are conspicuously absent (Chodat, p.665). So are the “forgiving fullness of view, obligations of understanding and compassion” required by the polyphony of the genre (DeMott, quoted in Chodat p.664). Novelistic openness is marred by harangues and tirades meant to relentlessly enforce the “uncontaminated capitalism” gospel.

The shrillness of the anti-state discourse in the novel is almost scary, as if the imperative of complete laissez-faire might easily amount to laissez-fairing the imperative of an oxymoronic free-police-state. It seems that in *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand intended to dramatize the title of Mises’s 1944 opus, *Omnipotent Government. The Rise of the Total State and Total War*, uncritically applying the Austrian economist’s analyses of dictatorships to post-WW2 America.

Such stridence cannot but lead one to ask where the original meaning of “laissez-faire” has gone: could it be that everyone should be granted the freedom to seek their own interests?

In his review of Karl Taro Greenfeld’s anti-capitalist dystopia, *The Subprimes*, Jonathan Dee asks: “How do you make invented characters operate as symbols or stand-ins without turning your work into a moralistic puppet show?” Commenting on the characters’ insufficient roundness,⁴ he concludes: “No cause is served by turning the oppressed into saints; in the end all that does is trivialize their humanity” (Dee, 2015). In *Atlas Shrugged*, the “Goodies” and the “Baddies” are too consistently good or bad. The virtuous unfailingly put their shoulders to the wheel of economic recovery. Bosses are dedicated leaders and they elicit immense respect among the rank and file. When the female head of a huge railroad company sends out a call for applications for the first, and possibly hazardous, run of a train that is to cross a bridge made of controversial new metal, not a single engineer fails to apply. Such a unanimous response is suspect. Most workers are portrayed in a manner that calls to mind as much Alexey Grigoryevich Stakhanov, [Hero of Soviet Labor](#), as Rosie the Riveter. Verisimilitude is stretched to breaking point, as in socialist realist novels: “the irony of socialist realism was that its ‘real’ was so highly idealized that it forfeited its mimetic and indexical coordination altogether” (Shonkwiler, Laberge 2014, p.17). Like present-day populist politicians, “nevertheless, [socialist realism] represented itself as splitting off from the elitism and decadence of modernism, and as reshaping literary values for the benefit of the ‘ordinary’ worker” (Shonkwiler, Laberge 2014, p.17).

The double-edged resort to dystopia

Rand’s intention to convey a message for freedom through her portrayal of virtuous capitalists hamstrung by an invasive government is further defeated by the circumstances and channels she picks, to convey the novel’s ideas – a trial and a marathon speech on the national radio – both of which recall the methods of an authoritarian regime.

So does the way Rand uses internal focalization which, in *Atlas Shrugged*, is reserved for the invisible narrator’s spokespersons, making said narrator’s presence feel overbearing. Rand may have been a militant atheist who distrusted invisible powers, but in this case, she let

⁴ The distinction between round and flat characters was introduced by E.M. Forster. “Flat characters are two-dimensional in that they are relatively uncomplicated and do not change throughout the course of a work. By contrast, round characters are complex and undergo development, sometimes sufficiently to surprise the reader.” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*)

her guard down and failed to apply her distrust of the Invisible to her narrative economy: her Invisible Hand weighs a ton. There is no laissez-faire to this narrative system.⁵

The same feeling of being forced into an ideological Procrustean bed holds true for Rand's choice of a dystopia to convince her audience that laissez-faire is the better option. Like most dystopias, *Atlas Shrugged* contains generous glimpses of its author's vision of an exact opposite, and the pages devoted to the dreamt-of utopia verify the experimental truth that utopias and dystopias are often two sides of the same coin.

The place that is still nowhere to be found is envisioned as a valley in the mountains of Colorado where not just the major industrialists but all "the men of justice, of independence, of reason, of wealth, of self-esteem" (p.924) retire to (one woman, the novel's heroine, finally joining them). Paradisiacal and peaceful as the descriptions of that haven may seem, suspicions about the actual freedom of expression existing in this oasis cannot fail to be aroused on reading that it is a place from which contradiction has vanished absolutely. The three parts of the novel are entitled respectively "Non-Contradiction," "Either-Or," and "A is A." By the final two pages, tautology has won the day. Such is the kind of freedom that Rand assumes is required for American entrepreneurship to flourish.⁶

Atlas Shrugged is set in the near future. "The purpose of this book is to prevent itself from becoming prophetic," whistleblower Rand said (Rand 1967, p.64).⁷ Like 19th Century economic novels, it "dramatizes threats to the nation's future" (Zimmerman, p.417). But the suspension of disbelief required from the reader in any uchronia is overly tested by the historically inconsistent technological and industrial landscape presented in the story. Experiments much resembling the testing of nuclear weaponry during the Cold War coexist with a Gilded Age ubiquity of the most basic industries: steelmaking, oil, mining, the railroad and all related sectors. The American economy that is celebrated recalls that which, in the glory

⁵ The French word synonymous with economic non-interventionism is either spelt "laissez-faire" or "laissez-faire," the latter form an imperative, the former a milder infinitive. Unsurprisingly, Rand chooses the imperative form.

⁶ As Francisco d'Anconia, the Argentinian member of the male triumvirate of virtuous entrepreneurs puts it: "Contradictions do not exist. Whenever you think that you're facing a contradiction, check your premises. You will find that one of them is wrong" (p.188).

⁷ Rand's trust in the effectiveness of the counterfactual to indicate the right direction to follow (and her reciprocal lambasting of naturalism) recalls Milton Friedman's view of economic theory as not interested in "truistic predictions" (See Boyer's chapter in this book).

days of snail mail, authoritarian regimes tended to exhibit on their postage stamps.⁸ The raw celebration of motive power and technology is reminiscent of post-WWI's Italian Futurists' fascination with energy that led many of them to embrace Fascism. In this case, Rand is hoist by her own petard in that the fictional departure from reality is at the same time not bold enough and excessive, with, as a result, uchronia reinforcing the impression that the representation of the economy is either strictly ideological or indicates a misinformed author.

A didactic epic means a failed Great American Novel

Not all epics are narrowly didactic, but the genre *is* deeply political. That is why both authoritarian regimes *and* their opponents have often marshaled the epic, its larger-than-life figures and bellicose hosts, as vehicles for their ideas and ideologies. Conversely, the novel's small congregations have fitted democracies better.

To develop the view of *Atlas Shrugged* as an unconvincing eulogy to freedom, the generic collision between the novel and the epic that takes place in it needs to be explored in greater depth, firstly by providing unambiguous evidence of Rand's epic purpose.

Her wish to both match and deride Frank Norris's *The Octopus* is one element among many others in *Atlas Shrugged* that testifies to the epic intent of her novel. Norris made no secret of his ambitions with his three-volume project of an epic which he was prevented from completing by his death.⁹ Rand was responding to Frank Norris when she chose to make the fate of a railroad company the heart of *Atlas Shrugged*. The railroad is central to both novels. In Norris's, it stands for the evils of capitalism. In Rand's, it stands for the last rampart against the enemies of capitalism. And to drive the point home, she devised the very minor character of a despicable second-rate writer, protected by Washington, who edits a magazine called *The Future*, and writes a piece for it entitled "The Octopus" about one of the novel's protagonists, Hank Rearden, the heroic steel tycoon. Rearden's response might well be Rand's indirect assessment of Norris's novel:

He saw the article, "The Octopus," by Bertram Scudder, which was not an expression of ideas, but a bucket of slime emptied in public – an article that did not contain a single fact, not even an

⁸ Confined to an episode involving the wheat harvest in the northern states (Dakota and Minnesota), Rand's representation of farming in *Atlas Shrugged* is also very limited and borrows from clichéd versions of it coming from the Eastern bloc during the Cold War.

⁹ See Payen-Variéras's chapter in this volume.

invented one, but poured a stream of sneers and adjectives in which nothing was clear except the filthy malice of denouncing without considering proof necessary (p.134).

In Rand's opinion, one of Norris's unforgivable sins in *The Octopus* must have been that Presley, the poet character, regards the epic as attuned to "the song of the People" (Norris, p.609) pitted against the hydra of capitalism, while Rand herself insisted that heroism was on the side of capitalism.

If only by its massive scale – 1067 pages, almost matching the 1184 of Dos Passos's *USA* trilogy – *Atlas Shrugged* betrays the scope of Rand's purpose. She wanted her novel to achieve national significance, as epics will. In his long radio address, John Galt, one of her main representatives in the "novepic,"¹⁰ expresses deep-felt concern about the nation's destiny, taking the government to task for failing to acknowledge its "soul and hero: the industrialist" (p.972).¹¹

Still, *Atlas Shrugged* also features long drawn-out, and rather corny, emotional passages devoted to the love relationships between the main and otherwise heroic characters – one woman and three men – and those scenes sit oddly beside the tales of glorious feats or the didactic moments typical of epics. Rand tries to have it both ways and, to this reader, fails. The scales tip too much the way of an epic for the sentimental scenes not to sound like *scènes à faire*.

A softer version of the totalizing thrust of the epic is indigenous to America, with writers' often self-confessed pursuit of the elusive Great American Novel. "[O]nly after 1865 did the dream of 'the great American novel' displace the dream of a national epic," Buell writes (Buell 2011, p.322). The definition and the writing of it were always-already in progress. They still are. Lawrence Buell's recent attempt at mapping the outlines of the concept helps one see why, say, *Moby-Dick* qualifies as a Great American Novel when *Atlas Shrugged* does not: "a Great American Novel must not limit itself to rehearsing particular lives and events but provide, at least implicitly, some consequential reflection on U.S. history and culture and its defining institutions – democracy, individualism, capitalism, sectionalism, immigration, expansionism, signature landscapes, demographic mix" (Buell, p.29). Out of the eight themes listed here as defining the U.S.A., only the first three are dramatized by the plot of *Atlas Shrugged*. Conspicuously absent are those reflecting the ethnic, cultural and social diversity of the nation.

¹⁰ Our coinage, in reference to "Novlangue," the French translation of Orwell's "Newspeak" in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

¹¹ The subject is dealt with in more detail in Vincent Dussol, "Views of worlds ending: Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." In *Carrying the Fire: Cormac McCarthy's The Road and Apocalyptic Literature*, eds. Rick Wallach, and Scott Yarbrough, Miami: The Cormac McCarthy Society. Forthcoming.

Rand's world is one of healthy and educated white Anglo-Saxon grown-ups. It can certainly be argued that the entrepreneurs and inventors portrayed by Rand are representative figures of American society. Like Henry K. Webster and Samuel Merwin, co-authors of her favorite novel, the 1901 bestseller *Calumet K*, she portrays "the capitalist titan as a trustee of American civilization and progress" (Zimmerman, p.419). But her model capitalists' unawareness of major issues in the national community, their existence in a kind of vacuum, makes their representativeness insufficient for the story in which they appear to be considered eligible as a Great American Novel.¹² One of these captains of industry, Francisco d'Anconia, is a living incarnation of the Monroe Doctrine, which envisioned Latin America as an extension of America (with its raw materials at US capitalists' disposal.) So, in these four respects, Rand's novel suffers from a democratic deficit.

Rand's populist fiction of laissez-faire: capitalism beyond economics?

"We are useless, according to your economics [...]. We are dangerous and to be shackled, according to your politics. We have chosen [...] not to wear the shackles any longer" (925). John Galt's words, taken from his State of the Union-like address close to the end of *Atlas Shrugged*, can lead one to believe that economics is a top-priority for Rand. Transparent allusions to the theories of prominent economists are occasionally found in the novel.¹³ But her writings consistently show that she does not think very highly of economists.

At first sight, her criticism of them is not very different from Robert Boyer's assessment that the profession has kept deluding itself in entertaining the dream that their field is a hard science¹⁴: "[t]heir attitude, in effect, amounts to the unstated, implicit postulate: 'Man is that which fits economic equations.' Since he obviously does not, this leads to the curious fact that,

¹² Buell refers to a more general connection between the novel and nationhood: "The novel has been 'bound up with the idea of nationhood,' as Ralph Ellison claimed [...]. In recent critical theory, nation making itself has been metaphorically described as a kind of narrative creation" (Buell, p.10). He reads the idea of the Great American Novel as a symptom of "cultural legitimation anxiety" (Buell, p.12) and links it with capitalism: "The United States as an unprecedented experiment in republican democracy forever trying to make good on the promises of the Declaration. The United States as a culture of enterprise forever innovating and casting old technologies behind. Maybe it's too jaded, but it's not altogether off base to consider the G[reat] A[merican] N[ovel] a characteristic expression of the ethos of perpetual obsolescence inherent in capitalist democracy U.S. style" (Buell, p.14).

¹³ To take but two examples, one of the novel's arch-villains deplores the Schumpeterian drift of the economy: "We can't help it if we're up against destructive competition of that kind" (p.18). Another "baddie" meant to embody the worst kind of statism, sounds vaguely Keynesian in his refusal to believe in the total predictability of events: "Nobody can tell what the course of a country's future may be. It is not a matter of calculable trends, but a chaos subject to the rule of the moment, in which anything is possible" (p.177). Keynes's and other economists' insistence on the impossible disregard of uncertainty in economic theorizing is discussed by Jens Beckert in his contribution to this volume.

¹⁴ For more on this point, see chapter 2, in this volume.

in spite of the practical nature of their science, political economists are oddly unable to relate their abstractions to the concretes of actual existence” (Rand 1967, p.6). In a similar gesture of distrust of hard data, she dismisses Naturalism as a merely statistical form of art: “Naturalism [...] substitut[ed] *statistics* for a standard of value” (Rand 1971, p.117).

But she is poles apart from Boyer when, like a demagogue populist, she would have her readers believe that one’s view of capitalism need not rest upon economic considerations. Since there simply is no acceptable alternative to laissez-faire capitalism, adhesion to it should be a philosophical decision guided by sheer rationality. A precocious advocate of the fundamentalist version of capitalism that denies any validity to mixed forms of it,¹⁵ Rand demands faith from her readers. This accounts for a quasi-dismissal of economics which places “pure” capitalism beyond figures and theoretical frameworks. What kind of rationality is this that lets itself be governed by *a priori* choices?

Yet Rand rallied support from top-rank economists. Three essays by the former President of the Federal Reserve, Alan Greenspan, are included in her non-fiction volume *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*. Proof of her recognition by the laissez-faire apostles of the Austrian school of economics was Ludwig Mises’s invitation for her to come and address his privately-financed seminar at the University of Vienna. Browsing through the online archives of the Mises Institute makes the reader of *Atlas Shrugged* feel on very familiar ground: free-market economics is the gospel truth; the state is the arch-villain, and so forth. The Austrian economist’s interest in literary fiction was genuine; he “wrote back” to anticapitalist novelists: “They fail to realize that the shocking circumstances they describe are the outcome of the absence of capitalism, the remnants of the precapitalistic past or the effects of policies sabotaging the operation of capitalism” (Mises, p.67-68). That realization is the starting point of *Atlas Shrugged*. However, to repeat, Rand maintained that her defense of capitalism was not primarily based on economic grounds, but on philosophical ones. How philosophical is her philosophy?

In truth, Rand’s use of the word “philosophy” involves a semantic appropriation close to a hijacking, if only because, in her understanding of it, it looks like doubt is ruled out. Her work provides several significant instances of this. Rand’s own form of Newspeak, conspicuous in *Atlas Shrugged*,¹⁶ ties into her wish to make the writing of fiction quasi-synonymous with a

¹⁵ And has enjoyed regained popularity with Tea-Partyites.

¹⁶ Unlike the original Newspeak, the language devised by the authoritarian rulers of Oceania in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Rand’s variety does not involve the coining of new signifiers. It consists of a limited and strategically chosen handful of them, including proper names, whose signifieds have become the opposite of what they originally were. For a brief inventory of Randian Newspeak in *Atlas Shrugged*, see Vincent Dussol, “Views of

creation of values that amounts to a narrowing-down of meaning and scope for interpretation. That is another reason why her eulogizing of freedom rings false.

What she does with the name “John Galt” is part of her wish to set things right as, “[w]hat existed in practice, in the nineteenth century, was not pure capitalism, but various mixed economies.¹⁷ Since controls necessitate and breed further controls, it was the statist element of the mixtures that wrecked them; it was the free capitalist element that took the blame” (Rand 1967, p.24). Galt, the inspirer of the great minds’ strike in *Atlas Shrugged*, was named by Ayn Rand after a Scottish [novelist](#) (1779-1839), who was also an entrepreneur and political and social commentator, who referred to the body of his work (mostly fiction) as “theoretical history.”¹⁸ “He was Coleridge’s favorite novelist,” Andrew O’Hagan recalls, “the first of his kind to draw on the industrial revolution” (O’Hagan, 2017). Lawrence Buell describes Galt’s most famous novel, *Annals of the Parish* (1821), as a “narrative of community” taking place in an “archaic counter-space to society at large” (Buell 2014, p.352). While the description fits that of life in the happy mountain valley in *Atlas Shrugged*, the real John Galt’s social concerns were very far from Rand’s loathing of anything resembling a welfare economy. Still, an entrepreneur novelist would have been to her liking. In the same way as she was tempted to entitle *Atlas Shrugged*, “*The Strike*,” she turned the social-minded figure of the real John Galt on its head and made him a fictional eulogist of do-it-alone and laissez-faire, in keeping with her fictitious rationality.

The American novel: from the pulpit to the hustings

The relation between “art [and] advocacy” (Buell 2011, p.325) belongs to an American tradition. Possibly due to the importance of preaching in American history – from the early days of colonization down to the present day – several American novels feature ministers and include sermons. These make perfect channels for an author to throw their voice or, conversely, a stump from which views adverse to their own are offered to readers’ judgment. In Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, a shortcut to some of the author’s essential views is taken by exposing Mr. West, the protagonist, to Mr. Barton’s sermon. And, West is informed, Mr. Barton “preaches only by telephone, and to audiences often reaching 150,000,” surely an image for the audience

worlds ending: Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*.” In *Carrying the Fire: Cormac McCarthy’s The Road and Apocalyptic Literature*, eds. Rick Wallach, and Scott Yarbrough, Miami: The Cormac McCarthy Society. Forthcoming.

¹⁷ More recently, this positing of a “pure” capitalism, “a capitalism which is only inhibited and blocked by extrinsic, rather than internal elements” resurfaced in Accelerationist scenarios (Fisher, p.46).

¹⁸ Did this anticipate Rand’s awkward cobbling of genres in *Atlas Shrugged*?

Bellamy intended to reach.¹⁹ In *Atlas Shrugged*, a 56-page long radio broadcast in a chapter entitled “This is John Galt Speaking,” strategically placed towards the end of the novel, fulfills the same purpose of directly channeling the author’s mind.²⁰ In other words, there seems to be a history of American fiction writers including ideological expository discourse in their novels. This may give some perspective on Rand’s didacticism. She would not really let her fiction simply speak for itself, instead presenting her book on *Capitalism* as “a nonfiction footnote to *Atlas Shrugged*” intended to clarify for young readers the political aspects of the novel in an age of “epistemological chaos” (Rand 1967, p.IX). One of the essays in it, “Is Atlas Shrugging?,” indeed offers very specific guidance to read her work of fiction. Conversely, she makes frequent use of the novel in her essays on capitalism.

Conclusion

As a novel meant to cast capitalism in the favorable light of freedom, Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* can be deemed a failure. As I hope to have shown, this has to do as much with strictly literary reasons as with the novel’s content proper. The obvious nation-(re)building ambitions of Rand’s novel account for its borrowings from more didactic genres – the epic and the utopia – and those do not sit well with the more romantic aspects of the plot. Consequently, the mimetic power of the novel is diminished, and its characters often feel awkwardly rigid. Their space is cramped and the reader’s relation to them hampered.

Technically, what permits the association of capitalism with freedom is based on economics. What capitalism guarantees, its advocates say, is freedom of enterprise, laissez-faire. But Rand’s partisanship leads her to dismiss even economics, and just hammer home the message.

Undoubtedly, Rand would have disapproved of the subject of the present book, which intends to bring out contact zones between capitalism and fiction via political economy and economics and therefore contributes to blurring the lines, a blurring that she fiercely denounced. As part of an exploration of the representations of capitalism in the United States, it seemed necessary not to dismiss Ayn Rand’s mega-novel as a second-rate object, but rather to attempt to puzzle out the discrepancy between negative critical reception and readers’ continued favor. While the former point has been explored at length through Progressive-tinted glasses, the reader may rightly point out that very little has been said on the latter. But, surely to simplify, does not the main appeal of *Atlas Shrugged* continue to lie in its celebration of the capitalist as

¹⁹ See also the working-class woman’s sermon about future hope in Phelps’s *The Silent Partner*.

²⁰ Note how in both cases, the story’s near-future setting leads to technology-enhanced preaching.

a hero in a country (and a world) where faith in free enterprise still abides? Rand was certainly right in assuming that a function of art is to be a refuge. A believer may then receive her novel “like a beacon raised over the dark crossroads of the world, saying: ‘*This is possible*’” (Rand 1971, p.164).

In ways opposite to what Rand meant, but of interest to Progressive readers, *Atlas Shrugged* is indeed prophetic of current irresponsible options taken by American capitalism:

He pointed west. ‘The Buena Esperanza Pass. Five miles from here. Everybody’s wondering what I’m doing with it. Oil shale. How many years ago was it that they gave up trying to get oil from shale, because it was too expensive? Wait, wait till you see the process I’ve developed. It will be the cheapest oil ever to splash in their faces, and an unlimited supply of it, an untapped supply that will make the biggest oil pool look like a mud puddle?’ (p. 233).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bellamy, Edward. 1887. *Looking Backwards from 2000 to 1887*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company. Project Gutenberg ebook. Accessed 1 September 2018.
- Boyer, Robert. 2004. *Une théorie du capitalisme est-elle possible ?* Paris: Odile Jacob.
- Buell, Lawrence. 2011. Theories of the American novel in the age of realism. In *The Cambridge history of the American novel*, eds. Leonard Cassuto, Clare Virginia Eby and Benjamin Reiss, 322-336. Cambridge University Press.
- Buell, Lawrence. 2014. *The dream of the great American novel*. Cambridge, Mass., London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Chodat, Robert. 2011. Philosophy and the American novel. In *The Cambridge history of the American novel*, eds. Leonard Cassuto, Clare Virginia Eby and Benjamin Reiss, 653-670. Cambridge University Press.
- Dee, Jonathan. 2015. shhh! socialism: Karl Taro Greenfeld and the novel of inequality. *Harper’s Magazine*, June. <https://harpers.org/archive/2015/06/shhh-socialism/>. Accessed 7 August 2019.
- Dos Passos, John. *U.S.A.* 1936. 1938. 1966. Penguin Books.
- Encyclopedia Britannica*. Flat and round characters. Accessed 9 September 2018.
- Fisher, Mark. 2009. *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?* Winchester, UK, Washington, USA: O Books.
- Greenfeld, Karl Taro. 2015. *The Subprimes*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Mises, Ludwig von. 1954. 2008. *The anti-capitalistic mentality*. Auburn, Alabama: Ludwig von Mises Institute.

Norris, Frank. *The Octopus*. 1901. 1986. In *Novels and essays*, ed. Donald Pizer. The Library of America.

O'Hagan, Andrew. 2017. Ayrshire's other bard. *The Scottish Review of Books*. June 9. Accessed 1 September 2018.

Rand, Ayn. *Atlas Shrugged*. 1957. 1996. New York: A Signet Book.

Rand, Ayn. 1967. *Capitalism: The unknown ideal*. New York: A Signet Book.

Rand, Ayn. 1971. *The romantic manifesto*. New York: A Signet Book.

Zimmerman, David A. 2011. Novels of American business, industry, and consumerism. In *The Cambridge history of the American novel*, eds. Leonard Cassuto, Clare Virginia Eby and Benjamin Reiss, 409-425. Cambridge University Press.