

Reflections on Ayn Rand

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Four years ago, I began writing my master's thesis on Ayn Rand. Whenever I told someone about it, there were three possible reactions. The first and least likely one was: 'I read *The Fountainhead* as a teenager. I loved it.' These people were mostly Americans and if not, they were Dutch babyboomers who wanted to distinguish themselves from their leftist friends. The second possible reaction: 'Wow, that libertarian nutcase? Why?? And have you really read those Bible-sized books?' This one I got from Dutch intellectuals who were certain that Rand had single-handedly caused the greed-is-good mentality and, ultimately, the financial crisis.

But, and now I come to my point, over 90 percent of the people I told about my thesis had never heard of Ayn Rand at all. I had to tell the story again and again: that she was a woman who fled the Soviet Union in the 1920's, to become one of America's most read and most worshiped writers. In her novels, she promoted radical capitalism by creating a sharp divide between creative, individualistic heroes (always handsome, strong, and multi-talented) and moronic conformists who suffered from a constant fear of being rejected by others.

I enthusiastically told people about this strange black-and-white universe, in which sharp and wise comments about authenticity, individualism and the dangers of conformism alternated with misanthropic depictions of inferior people and a survival-of-the-fittest philosophy that make even right-wingers feel uncomfortable.

Four years later, meaning now, the situation is different. All of a sudden, everyone around me is talking about Rand – and not only talking about it, they are even reading those books that were earlier discarded as either too extreme or too thick. More importantly, they don't simply laugh about it (as people tended to do earlier); they find Ayn Rand's life lessons, especially those in *The Fountainhead*, inspiring.

Now I have two questions and fortunately I think I have the answers too. First: why is Rand suddenly so popular in the Netherlands? Surely it has to do with Toneelgroep Amsterdam's performance of *The Fountainhead*. The play received great reviews and all of the

performances in the months to come are already sold out. We are talking about a play that lasts four hours and contains several long philosophical monologues, but nevertheless thousands of people have bought tickets, like it's a Beyonce concert or a national soccer game. And I understand why: the story of *The Fountainhead* contains an attractive message for us. It's the anthem of individuality, creativity and nonconformism that appeals to people. 'Authenticity' has become the foremost virtue of our time. We all want to be 'ourselves', and that means: original, independent individuals. But at the same time, we want to be liked, loved and respected: we post photos and comments on Facebook hoping that our friends will like them; 'like' as in the Facebook way. If we were truly independent, if we were true Howard Roarks, we wouldn't care about the opinions of others. That's why *The Fountainhead* is confronting and inspiring for many people. It may seem disrespectful to reduce Ayn Rand's work to self-help literature, but I think many people read it that way.

Curiously, many of the new Rand fans think *The Fountainhead* can be appreciated as something that stands apart from her political philosophy. When I ask what they think of her ideology of radical capitalism, they say they disagree with it. So, as much as Dutch people are inspired by her message of individual integrity, they still reject Ayn Rand's worldview. That's why I think her other big novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, will not gain the same popularity: it's too extreme and too political.

Compare that to Rand's reception in the US. There, *Atlas Shrugged* is the most read book after the Bible. Not only Tea Partiers and right-wing Republicans are Rand fans, many moderate people love her work as well. And not just the apolitical parts, as in the Netherlands, but the whole rhetoric about the dangers of big government as well. That leads me to my second question, the one I concentrated on in my research: how can we explain the enormous popularity of Ayn Rand in the US and the lack thereof anywhere else? Of course this can partly be explained by the fact that Americans are generally distrustful of their government, more so than Europeans.

But another part of the answer, I think, lies in Rand's celebration of American exceptionalism: the theory that America is fundamentally different from (and, according to many Americans, superior to) other nation states. Rand believed that America was the only country in the world in which people could really be free: the only country that respected

the rights of the individual. In her view, the Founding Fathers had created a political system that was entirely different from that of the Old World: it was based on the creed of individualism, as opposed to the European systems, which were collectivistic by nature.

You can find examples of this view everywhere in her work. In *The Fountainhead*, Howard Roark says: 'Now observe the results of a society built on the principle of individualism. This, our country. The noblest country in the history of men. The country of greatest achievement, greatest prosperity, greatest freedom.'

In *Atlas Shrugged*, it is Francisco d'Anconia, one of Rand's heroes, who says: 'To the glory of mankind, there was, for the first and only time in history, a country of money – and I have no higher, more reverent tribute to pay to America, for this means: a country of reason, justice, freedom, production, achievement.'

And in one of the many essays she wrote in the sixties, Rand lectures: 'In mankind's history, the understanding of the government's proper function is a very recent achievement: it is only two hundred years old and it dates from the Founding Fathers of the American Revolution.'

This notion of America as a unique country has a long tradition. Both right- and leftwing politicians have referred to it. To understand how important this idea is, we only have to go back two years ago, when Obama downplayed this idea by saying he believed in American exceptionalism, just as he suspected that the British believed in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believed in Greek exceptionalism. This remark was met by hostile reactions: Obama was immediately depicted as 'un-American'.

What made Rand's description of American exceptionalism even more powerful and attractive was her warning that America stood at the brink of losing this special position. If the government kept on expanding, America would betray its roots and its creed, Rand said.

Today, this is still, and perhaps even more so, an urgent message. After the financial crisis, the sale of Rand's novels climbed to even higher levels. The fear of collectivism and betrayal of the American Creed was very much alive, especially after Obama's Affordable Care Act. Tea Partiers all over the United States adopted Rand's narrative of American exceptionalism and her fear for the downfall of America as the freest country in the world.

This message of American exceptionalism doesn't resonate with Dutch readers. The most obvious reason is simply that Dutch people are not Americans. But besides that, we don't have a tradition of patriotism comparable with that of the US. When former Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende praised the VOC mentality, people laughed about it or angrily informed if he hadn't heard about slavery. Every attempt to create a unifying Dutch history has been cast aside. Since the Dutch canon was launched by historians in 2006, we have never again heard of it. And the creation of a National Museum of History stranded because of budget cuts.

The current admiration for Rand's message of authenticity in *The Fountainhead* will maybe result in a Dutch fan base for Rand after all. But her message of capitalism and freedom will never resonate here as it does in the US. For Rand, capitalism was essentially American, and thus the European reader will always be an outsider.