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Trump, Bibi, and Ayn Rand's Ghost.

[That stunning video](#) of President Trump and Bibi Netanyahu across a dining table at the White House the evening of Monday, 7 July: Who can make sense of it? A murderer wanted under international law as a war criminal breaks bread with “the leader of the free world” who bankrolls and supplies Israel’s campaigns of terror in Gaza and the West Bank—the two of them having just joined to bomb Iran. And then the Israeli prime minister hands the American president a copy of his letter nominating the American for the Nobel Peace Prize. “It’s well deserved, and you should get it,” Bibi tells Trump, who is “forging peace as we speak, in country after country.”

“I don’t know whether to laugh or cry,” Medea Benjamin, a prominent antiwar activist, remarked as the video circulated widely. Indeed: How many Palestinian children wandering hungry and parentless in Gaza were killed on the other side of the globe while Trump and Bibi gloated over all their wisdom, their peacemaking, their victories, and all else they boasted of as their accomplishments?

“Surreal,” was Medea Benjamin’s word for this scene. Yes, it was of course this to anyone with any fundamental sense of humanity, ordinary decency, common morality, any kind of ethical perspective on life and others and the lives of others.

But we must proceed further as we consider this event: We must reason through the matter such that we are able to recognize that these two appalling men were serious in their self-congratulation. The idea of themselves they presented before

the media cameras is genuine: They sincerely understand themselves in this way—virtuous, courageous, bearing the world’s banner forward.

Of what are such people made? This is our question.

To attempt our answer we must rummage through America’s intellectual and political history until we come to the curious case of Ayn Rand, a writer of didactic novels and a propagator of radically nonsensical ideas she and her acolytes dressed up as a philosophy they named Objectivism. It would be difficult to overstate Rand’s irrationality and the inhumanity at the core of her ideas, chief among them what she called “the virtue of selfishness.” And it would be foolish to understate the influence she has had on the thinking, if this is my word, of generations of extremist American conservatives. We can include Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu, who is well-practiced as a mimic of the political and cultural fashions abroad in America at any given moment, among these extremists.

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Ayn Rand was born Alissa Zinovyevna Rosenbaum in 1905 into a prosperous Jewish family in what was then (and is once more) St. Petersburg. With the Bolshevik Revolution a dozen years later her father lost his prosperous chemicals company and the family plunged into extreme poverty. These proved the defining years of Rand’s life until she died in 1982. She was ever not merely a committed anti-Communist: This formative experience made her obsessively opposed to any system of thought or public policy that reflected any trace of concern for the community or the commonweal. Her philosophy—a critical point here—was thus the outcome in considerable measure of psychological and emotional complexes.

From [an essay by Jennefer Burns](#), one of Rand's biographers (*Goddess of the Market*, Oxford, 2009) that appeared in *Die Zeit* in February 2017, a month after—to be noted—Donald Trump began his first presidential term:

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Communism was not just a political system, but an ethical system that claimed the community was more important than the individual. To fight communism, she concluded, it was necessary to defend the individual above all else. And to effectively do this, one had to challenge the whole basis of Western morality. Rand, an atheist, believed Christian morality was at the root of the problem. To win the global struggle against collectivism, society would need a new moral system that made the individual paramount. This would be the ideal to which she dedicated her life.

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It was out of this intellectual mulch that Objectivism arose. As she explained its essential tenet herself, “man exists for his own sake, that the pursuit of his own happiness is his highest moral purpose, that he must not sacrifice himself to others, nor sacrifice others to himself.” It follows more or less automatically that selfishness is virtuous—an early version of “greed is good,” the ethos we identify with the 1980s. To put this in practical terms, government should be limited to the provision of a military, a police force, and a judiciary.

Rand developed this theme—the radical individual who must stand above the mediocre majority and manifest his or her visions without fetters—in two novels. *The Fountainhead* came out in 1943 to mixed reviews, but it was the basis of what would become an Ayn Rand cult. It was *Atlas Shrugged*, published in 1957 that

made Rand's name and reputation (also very mixed, suspended between ridicule and idolatry).

The Fountainhead's protagonist was an architect named Howard Roark, who is obsessed with the perfection of his own designs: At the end of the book he destroys his masterpiece rather than allow it to be altered. *Atlas Shrugged* concerns the struggles of a railroad executive named Dagny Taggart and her lover, a steelman named Hank Reardon, against a government increasingly given to regulation and market restrictions. In the end they join a strange and strangely drawn character, John Galt, who forms a collective in the desert, Galt's Gulch, where they plot to erect a new kind of capitalist society, the kind Rand envisioned as her ideal—everyone for himself or herself, there is no place for pedestrian sentiments such as compassion or generosity.

Atlas Shrugged came out to indifferent-or-worse reviews, too, but Rand was on her way to a status as a visionary heroine to some and simply a kook to many others. Jonathan Freedland, a *Guardian* columnist, had a wonderful line in [a piece some years ago](#) about Rand's actual place in the discourse:

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Most readers make their first and last trip to Galt's Gulch—the hidden-valley paradise of born-again capitalists featured in *Atlas Shrugged*, its solid-gold dollar sign standing like a maypole—sometime between leaving Middle Earth and packing for college.

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All the widely shared ambivalence notwithstanding, an inner circle formed around Rand after *Atlas Shrugged* came out, and among its members was a young economist called Alan Greenspan. This important to note. Greenspan, of course,

later became the long-serving chairman of the Federal Reserve, the American central bank, and was noted for his vigorous market fundamentalism (which he disavowed after the 2008 financial crisis). Greenspan effectively announced, then, the drift into political and governing circles of Ayn Rand's wildly overdone worship of individualism (as an "ism," an ideology), a corresponding animosity toward government, and the conviction that "the market" always knew better than all sentient human beings.

The names since claiming Rand as an influence, if not a lifelong guide, are many. President Reagan cited Rand as one of his intellectual—can we use this word with Reagan?—ancestors. A lot of prominent senators and congresspeople have, too. Mike Pompeo, a legislator and later C.I.A. director and secretary of state during Trump's first term, was an Ayn Rand man. ("*Atlas Shrugged* really had an impact on me.") And so we come to Trump himself, who remarked of *The Fountainhead* during his 2016 political campaign, "It relates to business, beauty, life and inner emotions. That book relates to everything."

There is one thing one ought to keep in mind as these kinds of people cite Rand and her books. In almost all cases they have not read Rand. It is a little like the market fundamentalists who have the habit of citing Adam Smith: Very few have actually read *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Smith's famous 1776 work. This is obvious from the prevalent ignorance among these people of what Smith actually wrote. Read in an historical context, he was not an advocate of free markets in the way the fundamentalists among us assume. His name simply acquired, over years of citing-him-without-reading-him, a sort of totemic significance.

As these people bastardize Adam Smith, Ayn Rand bastardized Nietzsche (among others) and those claiming to have read Rand but plainly have not—the borderline

illiterate Trump most certainly among them—use her as a kind of hood ornament, as we say in America, to give an impression of intellectual heft while invoking a few uncooked ideas: Government is bad, the market must not be regulated, corporations must not be impeded, social-welfare spending is wasteful and wrong. Rand’s Objectivism, crude in its own right, is reduced to a handful of slogans.

And here is the preposterous contradiction among all these Rand-readers-who-have-not-read-Rand. They profess belief in the Rand catechism, an almost nonexistent state among its commandments, while holding high office in the state apparatus and asserting themselves by way of the power the state confers on them. There is no making sense of this, just as, upon even modest consideration, there is no making sense of Ayn Rand.

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It would not do to include among these slogans the thought that people at the top are visionaries standing and acting high above the dull-witted majority and who also must not be impeded. This would not be politic in a polity purporting to function as a democracy. But the tint of Randian thought has seeped into the political fabric in the United States (and elsewhere in the West), and at this point it would be hard to scrub out. They do not much quote Ayn Rand in Silicon Valley, for example, but the cult of the visionary has a very strong following out there.

This is how I read that moment last Monday evening, when two leaders with blood-drenching their hands sat opposite and shared profuse self-praise. “I’m stopping wars. I’m stopping wars,” Trump said in reply to “my friend Bibi.” And then a reference to the Iran bombing operation: “We had a great time, would say it was a lot of work, but we had a great result recently. And we’re going to have a lot of great results.”

Neither of these two have ever denied the mass casualties of their various campaigns. “I hate to see people killed,” Trump remarked at the dinner with Bibi he hosted. No, and let us understand this moment for what it was: As the statistics and the record of the past 21 months attests, the casualties simply do not matter to these two. They are by their own self-portrayals visionaries in the Randian mode—lonely at the top, nonetheless pursuing their consummate ideals without so much as a flinch, just as Gary Cooper does when playing Howard Roark in the 1949 film version of *The Fountainhead*.

Netanyahu is an active participant in the Rand cult as it has evolved over the decades from explicit to implicit. He has in the past cited Rand in precisely the same terms as Americans political figures customarily do. *Ha 'Aretz*, the Israeli daily, traced this relationship in [a piece published some years ago](#) under the headline, “The Link Between Benjamin Netanyahu and Extreme Libertarian Ayn Rand.” Bibi’s vision of Israeli hegemony across West Asia, taking shape as we speak, is usefully read as his variant of Howard Roark’s inviolable masterpiece.

Netanyahu’s interest in Rand, however active or otherwise now, sheds light in another way. As earlier noted, Ayn Rand’s “philosophy”—let us stay with quotation marks—was borne of the psychological sustained in her childhood in the early years of the Soviet Union. This is not a sound basis for a true philosophy arising from the rationalist tradition. It is philosophy as the expression of unaddressed trauma. In the case of Netanyahu, his obsessive animus toward the Arab population all around him—his “hard line,” as he call it—arises in some measure from the death of his brother Yonatan during the Entebbe hostage-rescue operation in 1976.

My point here is simple: Policies so deeply informed by emotional injury are bound to be as unbalanced as Rand's Objectivism.

Slavoj Žižek, the over-productive Slovenian scholar, calls the film version of *The Fountainhead* "ultracapitalist propaganda, so ridiculous that I cannot but love it."

Ayn Rand's lingering presence in America's political life is not to be so humorously tossed-off. Rand was an extremist by any good definition of the term.

There seems to me a straight line from what she left behind to the drift toward rightist extremism in the United States over many years.

And I do not think this... this what?... this deformity in the American polity can any longer be said to stop at the shores of either ocean. It now informs America's foreign policies and so the policies of others, Israel a case in point. Fictions, extravagantly indulged narcissism, self-dramatizations: Are these Ayn Rand's pernicious legacies? Do we live with her ghost among us?

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