

28 September 2007

Atlas Shrugs Again

Marc E. Babej and Tim Pollak



Remember the big question in Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*: "Who's John Galt?" In the novel, more and more people ask the question, but no one knows the answer, or even where the question came from. Ironically, the same thing now seems to be happening to Ayn Rand and her philosophy of objectivism. Even leading objectivists don't know the whole answer, but one thing is sure: A quarter century after her death, and half a century after the publication of *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn Rand is back.

The autobiography of former Rand acolyte Alan Greenspan, in which he credits her for his development, just got published with big fanfare. In recent weeks, both *The New York Times* and *The L.A. Times* have run articles about her work. *Atlas Shrugged* has been featured prominently in a recent episode of AMC's hit series *Mad Men*. A movie version of the book, starring Angelina Jolie in the main role, is slated for release next year.

Meanwhile, sales of Ayn Rand titles have tripled since the early 1990s--in fact, more are being sold now than at any time in history. *Atlas Shrugged* sales on Amazon in the first nine months of this year are already almost double the total for 2006. As of this writing, *Atlas* ranks 124th on Amazon's sales charts. Compare that to *The Da Vinci Code* at 2,587.

Objectivism is also making inroads in education and academia. Under the leadership of Executive Director Yaron Brook, the Ayn Rand Institute budget has more than tripled since 2000, to over \$7 million. Thanks in large part to book donations by ARI, next school year more than a million kids will be reading Ayn Rand in high school.

Rand, an ardent advocate of rational egoism and capitalism, might have been the bane of academics in her lifetime, but now objectivism is taught at more than 30 universities, with fellowships at several leading philosophy departments. Next

year, ARI plans to enter the Washington, D.C., think tank world with a center devoted to the advocacy of individual freedom and capitalism.

Why this sudden interest in Ayn Rand? Brook gives two reasons: "First, she never really went away. Many who read the books when they were young, in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, are now confident enough to say that Ayn Rand is their favorite author, and they have the means to donate to the institute. That's enabled us to promote objectivism more aggressively."

Second, Brook cites what he calls a cultural vacuum: "Today's left doesn't have anything positive to offer to young people. When they were socialists, there was at least something they were fighting *for*, and they believed in a right and a wrong. Today's leftist agenda is negative and nihilistic--focused on stopping industrialization, capitalism and even Western civilization. But young people want positive values. That's why religion is so strong today, because many view it as the only thing that promises a brighter future."

According to Brook, this gap between liberalism and religious conservatism goes far to explain the surge in interest. "Ayn Rand is the only voice that offers a secular absolutist morality with a positive vision and agenda, for individuals and for society as a whole," he says.

The cultural and political climate might be opportune for the objectivist movement. After all, a philosophy that celebrates reason as the only means of knowledge seems particularly appealing at a time when liberalism is preoccupied with preventing nightmares rather than promoting dreams, when neoconservatism has been widely discredited, and when standard-bearers for traditional values--such as Ted Haggard and Republican senators, David Vitter of Louisiana and Larry Craig of Idaho, have been found looking for love in all the wrong places.

Whether this revival is a flash in the pan or a lasting trend depends on marketing. But how does one market something as amorphous as a movement? Here are some key steps:

- **Choose a fertile target.** For objectivists, this means conservatives who aren't comfortable with the religious right and feel alienated and orphaned. Objectivists can attract this audience with a moral argument for capitalism and individual rights by showing that free markets and individual choice aren't just smart and practical, but also moral.
- **Activate your natural supporters.** Objectivism is a natural fit for businessmen because it not only tolerates, but extols them. Fortune 500 CEOs can become to objectivism what movie stars are to Scientology and Kabalah.
- **Go Hollywood anyway.** Like it or not, we live in a celebrity culture, and there's no publicity like celebrity publicity. Would Kabalah, PETA, Scientology

or RED have become household words without the likes of Madonna, Tom Cruise and Bono?

- **Accentuate the positive.** It's easy to be a naysayer. It's harder, but much more rewarding, to offer hope. To win hearts and minds, objectivists need to show not only why they're right, but how to get from here to there.
- **Pick your controversies selectively, and don't be afraid to court the controversies you pick.** Conservative Republicans have dominated presidential politics for over half a century by deftly capitalizing on wedge issues --the latest example being same-sex marriage. Objectivists would do well to steal a page from that playbook by picking a battle on a specific issue in the area of individual rights.
- **Get linked.** From blogs to Facebook to Wikipedia, the Internet is the ideal medium for movements to build communities of supporters. Links, in particular, are the key to success--between sites of supporters of a movement, and from these sites to others.

In fact, getting linked in the broader, real-world sense, to people and organizations is the key to an idea making the leap from margins to mainstream.

Marc E. Babej and Tim Pollak are partners at [Reason Inc.](#), a marketing-strategy consulting firm that works with clients in a range of categories, including media and entertainment, financial and professional services, packaged goods and the public sector.