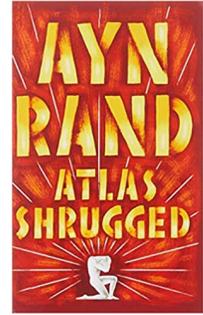


Atlas Shrugged

Ayn Rand (1957)

Notes by Bob Evely
Wilmore, Kentucky; 2022.



Who is John Galt? This mysterious question is asked throughout the book, and I'll say more about it if you read to the end of this review.

Atlas Shrugged is a classic written in 1957 that took me many years to find. It's a commitment to read, nearly 1,100 pages in the mass paperback edition with very small print font. But it's a captivating story and very thought-provoking – and I highly recommend it.

I'll go a step further and say that this book should be required reading at every university. Yes, it is a fictional account. But as you will find, so much of what the author shares is coming to pass in our present day. And while all may not agree with the author's perspectives that drive the story, it should be seen as the other side of the "coin" to what the "social reformers" are propagating in the universities or our day. It is a warning as to the outcome of extreme socialism and the hatred being espoused toward the wealthy class, and even against business owners in general.

This story is about free enterprise, the rights of ownership, the right to think and to create and to build a business and then to run it freely. These concepts have created the environment for America to become a great nation – and if removed ... well ... read the story!

[Page numbers that I share with references provided correspond with the mass paperback edition as pictured above.]

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At the center of the plot is "The State Science Institute." Having been commandeered by social reformers, dictates are imposed by government and orders are given *in the name of science*.

Hank Reardon invents a new formula for steel that is much lighter and much stronger. But because this would give him the edge over other steel companies, and because the social reformers are bent on creating equality among all businesses, they produce "research" papers *in the name of science* declaring this new steel to be unsafe. As the pressure exerted by the Science Institute mounts, unions forbid workers to work on any railroad line using Reardon Steel. Companies begin to cancel shipments of Reardon Steel that had been ordered.

Dagny Taggart, trying her best to run the Taggart Railroad operations against the mounting regulatory opposition declares, "This is not the world I expected." (p. 206) *[I have found myself saying the same over the past 10-20 years.]*

When Taggart persists and, in cooperation with Reardon, builds the "John Galt Line" using Reardon Steel, no space is given by the newspapers about the progress of the construction. (p. 215) And when Taggart and Reardon appear to be making headway against the powers of the social reformers that oppose them, "The Bureau of Economic Planning and National Resources" invokes "emergency powers" to address what they refer to as an "unbalanced economy." (p. 279)

Influenced by the growing social reform, a bank provides a risky loan that goes bad, leading to the bank's failure. When asked why the loan was made the ex-banker replies, "I had no time for details. My objective was social progress, universal prosperity, human brotherhood, and love. Love ... that is the key to everything." (p. 290)

While these objectives seem admirable, when imposed by governmental regulation we see throughout the story the decline and destruction of society.

Hiring decisions are no longer made based on a person's qualifications or abilities, but only if the person needs a job. *[Are we not quickly approaching this principle as many corporations promote their "diversity" and not the quality of their product or the reliability of their service?]*

One business decides to implement purely socialistic principles to run the business. "We put into practice that noble historical precept: From each according to his ability, to each according to his need. Everybody in the factory, from chairwomen to president, received the same salary." When asked how the plan worked out the former owner of this failed business replied, "I do not care to discuss it. Things became very ugly indeed and went fouler every year. It has cost me my faith in human nature." (p. 301)

Government follows with dictate after dictate. Railroad bonds are frozen or unfrozen based upon "essential need." "There were three questions that no one answered or asked. What constituted proof? What constituted need? Essential, to whom?" When this bond manipulation led one to commit suicide the people said, "If he'd really needed his money, the government would have given it to him, but some men are just greedy." (p. 327) *[We note from this perception how the social reformers had turned the masses against the notion of free enterprise, and toward a total trust in government.]*

As social conditions grow worse, one laments why no first-rate talent had risen in the field of science for years. (p. 329) Things begin to break and there is no one qualified to make repairs. Deteriorated railroad lines break and trains derail. Quality of every product and service is gone.

All the while the newspapers are silent to the worsening conditions. After the exaggerated attention they had given to a high-profile court case involving Hank Reardon, when the result did not go the way of their narrative they acted as if the trial was not worthy of notice. (p. 448)

As she considers how to overcome the cards that are stacked against her, Dagny thinks about her father when he faced difficult odds in the early day of his business. In those days he thought out a plan of what he would do to find the right men, the men of independent judgment; to find them, to convince them, to raise the money, to continue the bridge he had set out to build. (p. 475) Empowered by these thoughts, Dagny vows to do the same.

But society has been turned against anyone that owns a business or that has a novel idea. The people on the street mourn, "That's how it's always been in the world. There will be no chance for the poor until the rich are destroyed." (p. 481)

One man who had been a leader in business but who had dropped out to work an unskilled job shares with Dagny: "[The U.S.] was the only country in history where wealth was not acquired by looting, but by production; not by force but by trade; the only country whose money was the symbol of man's right to his own mind, to his work, to his life, to his happiness, to himself." (p. 628)

"Looters" is the apt term used throughout the book for those social reformers who *take* from those with successful businesses, thru force, governmental power or manipulation. Gradually these business leaders quit and quietly disappear. And those of the masses that choose not to cooperate with the "system" are not permitted to work, and they live simply off the land as best they can, or work odd jobs illegally to eke-out an existence, or they simply die. Yet no press coverage is given to these calamities as the narrative continues to espouse the wonderful social reforms that are supposedly taking place.

Washington continues to proclaim salvation thru science, emergency orders, and social equilibrium (p. 749), and they threaten sanctions against any in the press that proclaim anything negative about the social reforms being implemented.

Those who had been forced to abandon their businesses and who had dropped out declare, “If anyone wished to oppose a government policy, how would he make himself heard? Through these gentlemen of the press? Is there an independent newspaper left in the country? An uncontrolled radio station?” (p. 760)

Those who had once owned successful business who were forced to give them up, signing over all patents to the government, know the one thing that could not be controlled by others is their opinion, and their response. So while the government-imposed restrictions prohibit them from quitting, *requiring* them to use their skills and their brain power managing government-controlled enterprises, they quit and go into hiding – awaiting the day when things have so totally failed that the world will welcome them back. But for now, the social reformers that control government, the “Science Institute,” and the press had turned the masses against the “greedy” business owners.

The social reformers declare, “Just as laymen leave medicine to doctors and electronics to engineers, so people who are not qualified to think should leave all thinking to the experts and have faith in the experts’ higher authority. Only experts are able to understand the discoveries of modern science.” (p. 859)

The social reformers had infiltrated college classrooms. As society continues its rapid, downward spiral, one observes, “Teachers had delivered [students], disarmed, to the thug’s gun. The soft, safe assassins of college classrooms who, incompetent to answer the queries of a quest for reason, took pleasure in crippling the young minds entrusted to their care.” (p. 910) *[So it seems is the case with university classrooms of our day, where social reformers use every opportunity to shape the opinions of students into their social image.]*

Late in the book it is observed, “When his kind [social reformers] get into power, they are expert at contriving means of *terror*, at giving you ample cause to feel the *fear* by which they desire to rule you.” (p. 946)

“They [social reformers] proclaim that every man born is entitled to exist without labor and, the laws of reality to the contrary notwithstanding, is entitled to receive his ‘minimum sustenance’ – his food, his clothes, his shelter – with no effort on his part, as his due and his birthright. To receive it – from whom?” (p. 955)

As I set the book down, I marveled that it had been written in 1957. Yet as I think about the world in recent years, I recognize many of the same catch phrases found throughout this story as society was “reformed” – catch phrases now prevalent among the social reformers of our present day.

- Trust the experts.
- Trust science.
- The Science Institute (W.H.O. and CDC).
- Trust the governmental authorities.
- Fear [Covid] and listen to every directive from the authorities.
- Emergency orders.
- Essential business vs. non-essential business.
- We’re all in this together.
- We all need to make sacrifices.
- Entitlement (without gratitude, and with no effort required in return).

Saddest of all is the complacency that had set-in amongst the masses. No one spoke up as little by little their freedom was removed and as they became totally reliant upon a government gone bad. The narrative was totally controlled by government and a cooperative press that the people continued to trust.

A work of fiction; yes. But I contend the book illustrates the logical conclusion to socialism unabated. What will motivate the creator of ideas or the person taking risks to start businesses that could employ thousands ... if there is no reward of possible affluence?

Would you contend that the rich class is not needed, and that government can lead the business world and promote equality for the hard worker and the not-so-hard worker alike? Has government ever run an enterprise successfully and effectively? Even the best of governments? Corruption, waste, and inefficiencies quickly enter – just as described in the fictitious account known as *Atlas Shrugged*.

Are we to despise the one becoming rich if they employ their imagination, skill, and capital to create an enterprise that provides employment to many? Would we really prefer a government-run world where the lazy are compensated equally with the hard working?

Even the most outspoken of rock musicians from the 60's and 70's who sang out against capitalism changed course when they, themselves came into riches. Were they happy to pay the price to support the socialistic world they promoted so passionately in song? No; they moved abroad to avoid heavy taxation – still singing out against capitalism as they personally avoided the high taxation associated with the socialism they supposedly supported.

To this day I love classic rock music. But I place no stock in the political views expressed in song or in interviews. Most artists have built their reputations as rebellious and anti-authority. Vocalizing these views has helped them to assemble their audience and their following. But I find it interesting that when it comes to funding the socialistic views they promote, more than one relocated to another country to avoid the excessive taxation that resulted.

Late in the book the author outlines what I believe to be a good description of the role and purpose of government.

"The only proper purpose of a government is to protect man's rights, which means: to protect him from physical violence. A proper government is only a policeman, acting as an agent of man's self-defense, and, as such, may resort to force *only* against those who *start* the use of force. The only proper functions of a government are: the police, to protect you from criminals; the army, to protect you from foreign invaders; and the courts, to protect your property and contracts from breach or fraud by others, to settle disputes by rational rules, according to *objective law*." (p. 973)

And this is followed by a good description of business and free enterprise.

"When you work in a modern factory, you are paid, not only for your labor, but for all the productive genius which has made that factory possible: for the work of the industrialist who built it, for the work of the investor who saved the money to risk on the untried and the new, for the work of the engineer who designed the machines of which you are pushing the levers, for the work of the inventor who created the product which you spend your time on making, for the work of the scientist who discovered the laws that went into the making of that product, for the work of the philosopher who taught men how to think and whom you spend your time denouncing." (p. 974)

“You decided to call it unfair that we, who had dragged you out of your hovels and provided you with modern apartments, with radios, movies and cars, should own our palaces and yachts – you decided that *you* had a right to your wages, but *we* had no right to our profits.” (p. 976)

I will not spoil the end of the book, but I will tell you that hopeless as the decline of society seems from this brief description of the story – there is redemption at the end, though not before the world had gotten to the lowest of points. Still, the human, entrepreneurial spirit cannot be forever suppressed.

And who is John Galt? He was the first to resist; the first to drop-out; the first to help others to follow him – awaiting the day when society is ready to turn to them once again after the government has showed it has no solution.

My prayer is that the society of our present day reverses its downward spiral into socialism before the destruction described in this book comes.

The Media

Perhaps the most influential voice in all eras is the media. If the media remains objective, it can be a preventative against corruption. But if the media is controlled, and if the narrative can therefore be controlled, it can be the most destructive component within society.

Throughout *Atlas Shrugged* we see how the press is controlled by the government as its power grows. In a previous book by Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (1943), we read the following observations concerning the press.

One day newspaper owner Gail Wynand was startled and “slightly sick” to recognize the change that had taken place in his paper over time, carried out by its writers and editors without his notice. (p. 588) “He had known for several years the trend which his paper had embraced gradually, imperceptibly, without any directive from him. He had noticed the cautious “slanting” of news stories, the half-hints, the vague allusions, the peculiar adjectives peculiarly placed, the stressing of certain themes, the insertion of political conclusions where none was needed. If a story concerned a dispute between employer and employee, the employer was made to appear guilty, simply through wording, no matter what the facts presented. If a sentence referred to the past, it was always “our dark past” or “our dead past.” If a statement involved someone’s personal motive, it was always “goaded by selfishness” or “egged by greed.” A crossword puzzle gave the definition of “obsolescent individuals” and the word came out as “capitalists.””

As I read *Atlas Shrugged*, I encountered an article by the editor of *Lifewatch* newsletter that made some interesting observations about our present-day media. “The mainstream media has shifted from biased journalism to *activist journalism*, accompanied by certain cherished narratives.”

Of course the media has always showed bias, as was observed by the author in *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*. Which stories to cover and which not. Which side of a story gets sympathy and which not.

The *Lifewatch* article goes on to say, “In the world of the cultural elite and political left, stories had been written and rewritten to fit their ideological cause.”

About the same time I encountered several insightful articles in *America 1st Freedom* magazine (March 2022). One noted the desire of the CDC (Center for Disease Control) to inject itself into firearms restrictions. Like the culture we read of in *Atlas Shrugged*, in our present day we see the call for “science” to rule – in this case the “science” of health, disease, and gun control. It struck me as quite amazing that Ayn Rand wrote in 1957 of a Science Department that had

“Atlas Shrugged” (Ayn Rand)

been taken over by social engineers, imposing restriction upon restriction in the name of “science” as freedom was gradually taken away from a free society.

This same *America 1st Freedom* issue noted *complacency* as “the silent killer.” The complacency within my lifetime has permitted extremely anti-capitalism pro-socialism policies to be the current standard -- policies I would have said would be impossible to implement 40 years ago.

During the recent COVID predicament it amazed me that even the most rebellious lot hung upon every word from health “authorities” and allowed government to use the opportunity to take away personal freedom and liberty. The media held to the narrative, providing statistics that caused those with common sense to scratch their heads at times – and refusing to report on those with alternative solutions beyond vaccines, masks, and the closure of businesses deemed to be non-essential.

All of this to say – find a copy of Atlas Shrugged. Read, and think!

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