

Can the free market be saved without Rand?

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OPINION



It's been a year since Stephen Moore's article, "*Atlas Shrugged: from Fiction to Fact in 52 Years*," seemed to ignite an explosion of interest in Ayn Rand. Sales of this prescient novel tripled; two Rand biographies have been selling like hotcakes; and references to her in the media have skyrocketed.

Yet, some free-market defenders continue to repudiate her and her ideas, as they have for decades. It used to be conservatives such as William F. Buckley of National Review trashing "*Atlas Shrugged*;" now the critics include libertarians, such as Heather Wilhelm of the Illinois Public Policy Institute, who penned "Is Ayn Rand Bad for the Market?"

But in their rush to distance themselves from Rand, they succumb to a deadly philosophic trap. It results from their anxious desire to apologize for the individualistic, self-interested motives that actually drive free markets. This anxiety prompts them to defend capitalism on the opposite premise: that capitalism is good only because it is "other-directed"—i.e., that it grants certain groups, such as the poor, opportunities to acquire wealth and power.

Over the decades, this has led such apologists to launch unpersuasive and futile crusades, such as "compassionate conservatism" and "bleeding-heart libertarianism," which are not defenses of capitalism, but embodiments of its opposite. For example, conservatives and some libertarians plunged headlong into the moral and logical pitfalls of collectivism when, led by "compassionate conservative" Republican president George W. Bush, they created Medicare Part D, then the biggest-ever addition to welfare entitlements.

Likewise, Wilhelm summed up what too many on the right think, when she writes that free markets are best "sold" on the premise that, above all else, they help society's neediest. She adds

that “Rand’s insistence on the folly of altruism, however, tends to overshadow and even invalidate this message.”

You bet it does—and with good reason. That’s because no one can defend capitalism and free markets logically and consistently without a moral validation of enlightened self-interest as the highest good.

After all, the left didn’t rise to power because they had facts and rational arguments on their side. The empirical case for the superiority of capitalism in bringing a better life to the poor is overwhelming, whether we compare Chile to Cuba, Hong Kong to communist China, or the fully communist China of the past to itself today. So, one has to ask: Why haven’t these arguments won over all those who claim to want to help the poor?

The answer is that the left’s ascendance to power wasn’t driven by economic fact but by a moral vision thinly covered with economic claims. This vision was accepted by millions only because of the moral philosophy of self-sacrifice that dominates our culture.

That morality claims that the highest good for each individual is to live for the sake of others—for society or the collective. Ultimately, it implies that each of us is a moral slave to someone else. Whether it’s Marx’s “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need,” or Hitler’s admonition to live for the German Volk, or Pol Pot’s belief that “since he [the individual] is of no use anymore, there is no gain if he lives and no loss if he dies,” the morality of self-sacrifice kills liberty because it subordinates the individual’s life to the group.

This is the morality that brought us the carnage of the 20th century.

The arguments of “compassionate” libertarians and “bleeding-heart” conservatives do nothing to challenge this ethic. They merely try to slip capitalism in under the tent of collectivist moral philosophy, telling everybody, in effect: “Don’t worry; even though sinful, individualistic self-interest drives capitalism, it is good because it can be harnessed to serve groups, such as the poor.”

In other words, these would-be defenders of capitalism merely “me-too” the collectivist moral claim that our primary ethical responsibility should be the welfare of other people. In this view, they march lockstep with those on the left who revile individualism and capitalism as being anti-poor, anti-caring.

Their view couldn’t be further from the truth. Free-market capitalism arises from a social vision that cares about the smallest minority of all: the individual. That vision recognizes the moral superiority of the right of the individual to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—the very vision identified by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence and fought for by the Founding Fathers.

What is this right, if not the right of each person to pursue his or her own highest self-interest? Remember, the slogan of the American Revolution was “Don’t tread on me.”

Yet, that “selfish” American Revolution established a social system that created the most productive nation the world has ever seen, with the highest level and broadest distribution of wealth. It was a system based on individual rights, limited government, and equal justice under the law, in which everyone could keep and enjoy the fruits of his or her own efforts.

This system was fair because it gave each person the equal opportunity—and the pride-enhancing challenge—to make the most of his or her life, poor and rich alike. In fact, only a capitalist society can truly serve the interests of the poor and the disadvantaged, as well as the rich and the capable, because it is at root based on justice for the individual. And justice for the individual *is* justice for all.

This is what makes capitalism morally superior to collectivism.

Ironically, given the prevailing presumptions about self-interest, capitalist societies such as the U.S. are also the most charitable. Our individualistic system created a nation of magnanimity due to our unimpeded productivity, overflowing abundance, and benevolent sympathy for other individuals struggling for their own lives, liberty, and happiness.

It’s amazing that in all their talk of Rand’s “harsh message” and “confrontational language,” many free-market defenders haven’t asked themselves why her writings have inspired millions to become advocates of capitalism. They don’t understand that she completes the 18th century vision of the American Revolution by presenting a morality that fully justifies capitalism and individual freedom.

Rand’s morality of rational, enlightened self-interest defends the individual’s right to his own life, the power of his own liberty, and the glory of his pursuit of his own happiness. She said: “My philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive work as his noblest achievement, and reason as his only absolute.” Her message—that “man’s proper estate is an upright posture, an intransigent mind and a step that travels unlimited roads”—is a message of the glory of the individual, unshackled and free.

We urgently need Rand’s vision of the moral nobility and greatness of a social system based on enlightened self-interest if we, the 21st century advocates of freedom, are to finally free the world from the death grip of collectivism. And that is a vision we must defend with “our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

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