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AYN RAND AND THE ASCENT OF MAN

Peter Saint-André

Painting of a horse c. 16,000 BC at the Lascaux caves in France

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Introduction

Although Ayn Rand liked to call herself a novelist-philosopher, her academic training was in history. Yet what is the relation between Rand's ideas and the course of human history? How much justice has Randian historical analysis done to what Jacob Bronowski called "the ascent of man" (Bronowski, 1973)? These are open questions—especially so because very few of Rand's followers have shown more than a passing interest in history. One reason may be that doing history rather than philosophy forces one to get one's hands dirty sifting through messy facts rather than tidy theories. Be that as it may, the analysis of Randian historiography is a green field that may yield valuable insights into the validity of her world-view.

Pre-History

Reading Rand, one might think that history began with the birth of philosophy in ancient Greece. Her essays are full of scorn for "primitive" man—consider her statement that the "savages" of "primitive tribes" were "on the preconceptual level of development" (Rand, 1973: 42), which cannot have been true of any human being in the last 100,000 years or so if Rand is right that "language is the exclusive domain and tool of concepts" (Rand, 1990: 10). Yet that scorn betrays a lack of understanding for the human context and the general rule that one must start small or not at all. Everything takes time, and one of the keynotes of human cultural evolution is that progress has over time accelerated (despite occasional setbacks). Further, as Bronowski notes, human progress tends to reach plateaus from which it does not again descend: it is well-nigh impossible to imagine humans becoming pre-linguistic, pre-agricultural, pre-urban, or pre-scientific (Bronowski, 1977: 6). These achievements, once gained, are not easily relinquished.

Many of the most fundamental advances of humankind were made in that undocumented time we call pre-history, among them language, art, tool-making, religion (which Rand considered a primitive form of philosophy), mathematics, agriculture, trade, money, law, and the building of cities. All of these pre-date the classical Greeks and give the lie to Rand's view that "at the root of every civilized achievement, such as science, technology, progress, freedom ... you will find the achievement of one man, who lived over two thousand years ago: Aristotle" (Rand, 1984: 7).

The mental leaps behind these progressive advancements in ways of human living are both deeply significant and deeply conceptual. The most fundamental of these is language, although mathematics and art are close behind in the conceptual sophistication they enable. Yet all of the early human innovations involved changes in human thought-patterns. Consider the agricultural revolution. No longer were humans to hunt and gather as nature made potential foods available. Instead, humans began to "make their own nature"—to think not a few hours or days ahead, but to plan months in advance for the harvesting of crops and the keeping of seeds for the following year. Here is a radical change in human thinking and behavior, a change which is anything but primitive.

The same could be said for the building of the first cities. The change from nomadic to settled life occurred in concert with the agricultural revolution. Although at the beginning it seems that villages were built close to good cropland, several thousand years later people began to build modest-sized cities distant from prime agricultural land. Here again we see a change in thinking: an increased ability to abstract from the particulars of place to conceive the possibility of human living outside the context of immediate access to foodstuffs. Similar advances in the human ability to abstract can be found in the invention of irrigation, metalworking, trade, money, law, and all manner of tools.

While I would not deny that Rand celebrated the conceptual achievements inherent in certain of these innovations, she seems strangely unaware of their evolutionary nature. For example, nowhere does she trace or even hint at the humble origins

of her favorite symbols of human productivity—such as the sign of the dollar or the skyline of New York City—in the trading of shells and stones or the founding of early proto-cities on the alluvial plains of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers over six thousand years ago. Yet there is a direct line of inheritance here; as Rand noted in a different context, human concepts do not change, since they still refer to the same entities: it is the knowledge of those concepts that becomes ever wider and deeper (Rand, 1990: 66). Once human beings formed the concept of cities or trade or money or tool-making, the rest was development (albeit often hard-won development) of those concepts.

Part of the reason Rand seems uncomfortable with these insights is that a great deal of their explanatory power lies in the concept of evolution. Yet despite the overwhelming evidence for the facts of both biological and cultural evolution (no matter what one thinks of the theories that have been advanced to account for them), Rand never affirmed that she recognized those facts. Why not? Well, for one thing the first few million years of human existence were excruciatingly boring, since the scale of progress was first biological and then cultural only in ways that were most likely pre-linguistic and certainly pre-theoretical (the passing on of knowledge about how to make stone tools, build fires, hunt animals, gather non-poisonous plants, etc.). But over countless generations, humankind pulled itself up by the evolutionary bootstraps, as it were, and proceeded to make ever more complex tools, build structures, develop language, create art, domesticate animals, trade with one another, adjudicate disputes, and lay many other conceptual and behavioral foundations for our modern existence. The details of how all that happened remain murky. But one thing is clear: those halting beginnings set the stage for everything else that was to come.

One reason Rand slighted such slow processes is that they are seemingly communal or non-individual in nature. She celebrates the nameless first person to harness fire, but not those who developed extensions to and uses of that insight. While a great deal of human ingenuity goes into those extensions, that ingenuity is evolutionary, not revolutionary—and Rand was interested not in the relative equilibrium of everyday human progress, but in the punctuated outbursts of innovation one finds in the foundational inventions and discoveries made by outstanding individuals. In this way she mostly ignores the importance of co-operative effort and of the gradual and communal attainment of truth as exemplified by the cumulative advancement of theoretical knowledge and practical techniques.

Thus pre-history presents something of a problem for Rand: we don't know who the innovative individuals were, so we are at sea regarding whom to celebrate. Yet I think her reticence is tied to another phenomenon: pre-historic innovations are, more particularly, pre-philosophic. As illustrated by Rand's view that Aristotle is the fountainhead of civilization, Rand believed that philosophy moves the world. How was innovation possible before human beings had gained proper philosophic principles and insights in the time of classical Greece? What caused the development of pre-Aristotelian classical Greece and other early human civilizations and innovations? If philosophy is the prime mover of human history, what caused philosophy? These questions are hard to answer within the framework of Rand's theory of history, so her chosen approach seems to be to ignore them.

I think one key to resolving the dilemma is to recognize that while ideas may indeed move the world, not all ideas are philosophic ideas. Specifically, concepts such as working towards a harvest, gathering together in a city, trading one item for another, or making tools are key drivers of human progress—both material *and mental*. On this view, technology, trade, art, and other human products or practices are just as conceptual, and just as historically determinitive, as philosophical theories.

Civilizations

Prior to the agricultural revolution, the stable unit of humankind was the nomadic band. Why did human beings change their mode of living from hunting and gathering to settled agriculture? We can be sure that the change was not the result of some radical philosophy of "agriculturalism"! No, people gave up the nomadic lifestyle that had served thousands of generations of their ancestors because they had to. Specifically, the human population had grown so large that it exceeded the carrying capacity of the land. It was no longer possible to head into the next valley when the current one got too crowded, because the next valley was

already full (at least from the hunter-gatherer perspective). The solution was to settle down and cultivate the land more intensively (something humans doubtless already knew how to do but didn't previously pursue full-time because they simply didn't have to). The result: settled villages rather than widely scattered temporary camps (thus leading to more tempting targets for invaders), more regular interactions with a larger number of people (thus increasing the likelihood of disputes), the emergence of power structures and social stratification, increasing trade and economic specialization, money, law, taxes, writing, early cities—in short, a new mode of human living centered on civilizations rather than bands, tribes, or small-scale societies.

What is a civilization? The finest analysis I have found is that provided by Carroll Quigley in The Evolution of Civilizations (Quigley, 1961). Quigley's preliminary definition is "a producing society that has writing and city life" (76), but he later offers a more sophisticated analysis that takes into account three key factors: a civilization is a large-scale society that is organized in such a way that (1) "it has an incentive to invent new ways of doing things", (2) "somewhere in the society there is accumulation of surplus", and (3) "the surplus which is being accumulated is being used to pay for or to utilize the new inventions" (132). Together, Quigley calls these three factors an "instrument of expansion"; by his later definition, Quigley counts less than twenty societies in human history that have had an instrument of expansion and that thus can be considered as civilizations.

According to Quigley (145-6), in general civilizations experience seven phases: (1) the mixture of diverse, smaller societies to form a unique, larger whole; (2) the gestation of that large society, specifically in the development of a method for accumulating an economic surplus and investing it in methods of expansion; (3) a period of vigorous expansion in population, territory, technological competence, wealth, knowledge, etc.; (4) a period of major conflict between societal elements or geographical areas within the civilization; (5) the development of a universal empire ruling over the entire civilization, which far from being a golden age represents a precursor to decay and collapse; (6) the decay of the civilization as exemplified in the ossification of institutions and structures within the empire; and (7) the collapse of the civilization, usually through invasion by a younger civilization that is in the expansion phase. These phases can be discerned in all human civilizations to date (although modern Western civilization forms something of an exception, at least so far).

With these analytical tools in hand, we can look more closely at the civilization that provides many of the precursors to the modern West: namely, the classical civilization of the Greeks and Romans. Ayn Rand consistently lauded the Greeks as the inventors of philosophy and claimed that "Western civilization was the child and product of reason—via ancient Greece" (Rand, 1960: 62). Indeed, according to her historical analysis, Western civilization has undergone three main phases: classical times were the first and founding phase, medieval times interrupted the pro-reason tradition of the West with a thousand years or so of "mysticism", and Western civilization was reborn in the Renaissance and has continued into modern times. Yet Rand's analysis misses what Quigley's does not: classical civilization went through the seven typical civilizational phases and died away, which means that it was distinct from (although a major precursor to) the modern West.

We can see this most clearly in the mechanism of surplus-accumulation characteristic of classical civilization: slavery. Whereas modern Western civilization slowly eradicated the ages-old institution of human slavery, that institution formed the very bedrock of classical civilization. That foundation led to or was consistent with many other characteristic features of classical civilization: aggressive policies of expansion through military conquest and enslavement, authoritarian statism and imperial absolutism, and a combination of philosophical idealism and an antipathy to physical labor that is quite the opposite of the modern spirit of factual inquiry and material production.

The latter stages of classical civilization were dominated by the Roman Empire, which ruled over a vast number of societies; however, over time its institutions became ossified, its societal structures decayed, and its mores became corrupt. Although it was in some sense possible for classical civilization to reform itself, it never did so, leading to invasion by outsiders in a familiar replay of civilizational history. The results were not pretty, but death never is.

The Rise of the West

The collapse of classical civilization had effects that are predictable to any perceptive student of history. In particular, new civilizations began to form through the mixture of elements of the old civilization with other societies on the periphery. Thus out of the collapse of classical civilization emerged Islamic civilization to the south and east (whose heartland is Arabia), Orthodox Christian civilization to the north and east (whose modern heartland is Russia), and Western European civilization to the north and west (whose original heartland lay in northern France, western Germany, and the Low Countries).

In the case of Western civilization, the phases of mixture and gestation that Quigley elucidates happened to coincide with what Rand decries as the Dark Ages. Rand's philosophical determinism leads her to conclude that the darkness of medieval times was caused by a mystical philosophy that devalued reason, freedom, and individualism. Certainly the early middle ages contained some fairly brutal and chaotic centuries in Western Europe; but the collapse of a civilization always leads to chaos, and one of the keynotes of the later Roman Empire itself was a thoroughgoing, almost studied, brutality. From the perspective of Western civilization, what matters more is that during medieval times some of the higher values, ideas, and practices of classical civilization mixed with the relatively more earthy and freedom-oriented cultures of the Franks, Saxons, and other peoples whom the Romans considered uncivilized.

That mixing led to a number of important early Western innovations in practical matters such as agriculture (the horse-drawn plow and three-field crop rotation foremost among them), power generation (especially the windmill and watermill), and everyday living (eyeglasses). While such inventions and applications may seem humdrum today, they were never developed in classical civilization, in part because the Greeks and Romans were biased against practical pursuits. All of these developments occurred before the year 1200 C.E. and thus before Thomas Aquinas allegedly "brought an Aristotelian view of reason ... back into European culture, and lighted the way to the Renaissance" (Rand 1967a, 315; cf. Rand 1975, vii). Also pre-dating Aquinas were the abortive but influential Carolingian reforms, the so-called "Twelfth Century Renaissance", the founding of the first European universities, renewed trading links across the continent and early commercial trading ventures (accompanied by development of both the Law Merchant and double-entry bookkeeping), the growth of European cities, and a general quickening of life in the high middle ages. Indeed, Quigley dates the first expansion phase of Western civilization from 970 to 1270, much too early for Saint Thomas (1225? - 1274) to have been a causative agent. Could it be that the mixture and gestation inherent in "bad" medieval times involved to some extent a freeing up of creative energies that were stifled during "good" classical times (when, for example, a working steam engine was created but abandoned as a mere toy)? Rand's neat story about the philosophy of Aristotle as the source of all good things seems difficult to square with the evidence of history.

The Permanent Renaissance

One of the puzzles of Western civilization is that it has found the ability to reform itself and replace one instrument of expansion with another after a period of conflict. After its first phase of expansion, the West entered a period of severe conflict and decline exemplified by the Hundred Years' War (1339 - 1453) and the Black Death. Yet out of that period of conflict, which in large measure reflected contradictions inherent in the feudal basis for the first phase of expansion, came a second and much greater phase of expansion, approximately from 1450 to 1650. The highlights of that second expansion (which largely coincides with that vague term "the Renaissance") included an unprecendented increase in scientific and practical knowledge, world exploration and colonization by Western Europeans (thus spreading their civilization across the globe), the levelling of the old aristocracy, and the creation of vast new wealth (mostly through peaceful commerce rather than war, conquest, and slavery).

Was all this progress caused by the re-introduction of Aristotelian philosophy into European culture? The Randian case is not particularly strong. During the Renaissance, Aristotle's philosophy was mainly used to fight a rear-guard action against the new forces of progress. It was Aristotelians who refused to look through Galileo's telescope. It was Aristotelians who argued that the hierarchical nature of the universe required centralized control

over society, providing intellectual ammunition for the Inquisition. It was Aristotelians who tried to discourage the spread of new sources of instability such as the printing press. And the grasping nature of the new commercial capitalists was not exactly in harmony with the classical ideal of contemplative theorizing that one finds in Aristotle's ethics. Even allowing for the fact that Aristotle was not an Aristotelian (let alone a Thomist), it is hard to see how the West's second period of expansion was driven by an Aristotelian philosophy of life.

The very term "Renaissance" assumes that what happened in the second phase of Western expansion was a rebirth. Yet, although some elements in society looked back, one of the cardinal aspects of modern times is not looking back but looking forward. Whereas in classical civilization the fading image of a supposed golden age was always held up as the ideal, the modern West has discarded that fundamentally pessimistic outlook and has developed a forward-looking viewpoint that expects progress and works to build something new under the sun.

Here is a fundamental revolution in human thinking, a turning to the future that is fundamentally foreign to classical civilization and that sets Western civilization apart from its ancestors. Was this caused by philosophy? Not obviously. While the causes of this revolution are obscure, they seem to have more to do with the cumulative advancement of technology, human knowledge, and the human condition than with an Aristotelian revival. In particular, Rand's historical analysis in terms of philosophy gives short shrift to a deeply enabling technology without which sustained cumulative advancement would have been impossible: the printing press. Without the ability to reliably capture and reproduce ideas and information (from science and philosophy to maps and accounting), rapid, sustained, cumulative advancement had never occurred in human history—and it is difficult to see how it could have. The printing press built on the earlier information revolutions instigated by the development of language (100,000 BCE?) and of writing (6,000 BCE?), but enabled much more rapid and sustained progress than either of those two previous innovations, leading to the "permanent Renaissance" we have experienced ever since (see Eisenstein 1993).

The Enlightenment

The second phase of Western expansion (roughly from 1450 to 1650) was followed by another period of conflict (roughly from 1650 to 1750) as the system of commercial capitalism based on trade became corrupted into mercantilism and an early kind of state capitalism. During that period arose a loose intellectual movement called the Enlightenment or the "Age of Reason". Because of the latter name, followers of Ayn Rand are rather attached to the idea that Objectivism is a philosophy of the Enlightenment. For example, a communication from The Objectivist Center made the following claim:

> We identified ... a single idea that conveys, simply and clearly, Objectivism's distinctive outlook to people not already familiar with the philosophy. That theme is *the concept of an "Enlightenment culture" opposed to both the cultural Right and the cultural Left*. [emphasis in original]

However, even superficially, Rand's philosophy is not exactly the Enlightenment revisited. For one thing, Enlightenment thinkers were generally anti-Aristotelian but also quite rationalistic. For another, Rand's Romantic literary heroes, especially Victor Hugo, were virulent enemies of the culture of the Enlightenment. They held strongly that Enlightenment culture was characterized by a desiccated vision of reason, an elevation of etiquette over emotion, and a focus on rules and duties in life and in art. It appears that Rand accepted much of this critique, for in her essay "What is Romanticism?" (Rand, 1969) she derided the "classicists" of Enlightenment times, who set concrete-bound rules for literary production and thereby descended from artistic creation to artistic imitation.

Probably the most famous characterization of the Enlightenment can be found in Immanuel Kant's essay "What Is Enlightenment?". There, he claims that "The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! Have courage to use your own understanding!" Kant's catchphrase "Dare to know!" captures one significant theme of the Enlightenment: the pursuit of knowledge. However, the Enlightenment focus on knowledge tended toward a certain kind of intellectualism unconcerned with practical matters such as material production (a re-

birth, perhaps, of the old classical ideal). Partly this was no fault of Enlightenment thinkers, since before 1790 the industrial revolution did not have enough strength even in the most advanced countries to appear as a new age that would prove the value of applying knowledge to the creation of wealth. Yet even outside the economic realm, the Enlightenment was not focused strongly on action. For example, while Enlightenment intellectuals showed a certain irreverence towards established authorities and a humanitarian opposition to arbitrary power, by no means were they revolutionaries; in fact for the most part they believed in social stability, "being reasonable", and the legitimate power of benevolent despots and aristocrats as opposed to revolutionary transformation or the messy processes of popular democracy.

The Enlightement belief in order extended beyond society to its vision of nature. That vision can be summed up in one word: Newton. Newton's discovery of a fixed order of laws behind the apparent chaos of natural phenomena held endless fascination during the Enlightenment, and was championed by Voltaire and the other major figures of the time. These thinkers had great faith in the power of Providence, and they believed that a higher power—no longer quite the God of Christian tradition, but an organizing force in the universe—was necessary for the existence of natural order. Without a god of the deistic variety, it was believed that the forces of blind mechanism would lead to chaos. The choice was stark: fixed order or total flux. And the Enlightenment came down on the side of order—not just in the sciences, but also in morals, manners, art, and life in general. As Isaiah Berlin noted in The Roots of Romanticism (Berlin, 1999: 105):

> The Enlightenment supposed that there was a closed, perfect pattern of life....[t]here was some particular form of life and of art, and of feeling and of thought, which was correct, which was right, which was true and objective and could be taught to people if only we knew enough.

The problem is, the order of the universe is not fixed or static. Throughout the 1700s, evidence began to accumulate pointing ever more strongly to the existence of geological, biological, cultural, and social evolution. Unfortunately, that evidence conflicted with the deistic vision of a higher power who ensured the order of the universe. If there was no higher power, then either there was no order (a la the skepticism of David Hume) or the only source of order was material (a la the determinism of modern Epicureans such as Gassendi), and neither of these alternatives was acceptable to Enlightenment thinkers.

Romanticism and Revolution

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the utilitarians tried to overcome this problem by substituting a "natural religion" of social utility based on a common human nature for the old-time deism, but the attempt failed. It was then that the budding "pre-romantic" movement (which started as early as the 1760s) gained force, stressing human feeling both as a supplement to the seemingly limited powers of pure reason and as a way out of the dilemma of skepticism vs. determinism, which it seemed that reason could not solve on its own. If the cosmopolitan universalism of Enlightenment reason did not have all the answers, then perhaps one needed to turn for insight to feeling, sentiment, intuition, imagination, genius, art, raw nature, subjective individuality, psychology, the inner life -- in a word, to romanticism.

Such was the attitude of the artist towards the end of the Enlightenment. Meanwhile the engineers and entrepreneurs were busy initiating their own form of evolution: the creative destruction of technological and economic progress, which in its inexorable fashion began to break down the vestiges of aristocracy still existing in the eighteenth century in favor of the meritocracy of talent and achievement. Yet this was not the commercial capitalism of Western civilization's second phase of expansion, whose symbols were the merchant and trader. Instead, it was an industrial capitalism whose symbols were the engineer, the entrepreneur, the producer. This is the form of capitalism that Rand celebrates in her novels, which are populated by those who build and run steel factories, power engines, railroads, skyscrapers, and other large-scale products of the industrial economy.

One corollary of Rand's view that Aristotle is the prime mover of human progress is that the romanticism and industrial capitalism characteristic of the nineteenth century were the products of an Aristo-

telian philosophy and "sense of life" (Rand, 1960: 66; Rand, 1965: 30-1; Rand, 1969: 103). Yet the romantic self-assertion and passion for practical work that are core to Rand's outlook on life seem deeply at odds with the more moderate and contemplative tenor of Aristotle's stated views. In contrast to the political animal or contemplative sage of Aristotelian ethics, Rand's heroically individualistic characters are all highly imaginative and creative technologist-entrepreneurs who defy societal conventions and remain true to their personal visions no matter what the cost to themselves or society. Would a good Aristotelian blow up buildings or deliberately try to stop the motor of the world? I very much doubt it.

Although many of her followers like to see Rand as a unique, world-historical genius, we can begin to see now that in many ways she was a product of her times. This goes beyond her celebration of industrialism and her looking back to the nineteenth century as a golden age of capitalism and romanticism. Rand lived almost her entire life during the third great period of conflict within Western civilization, characterized by two pan-European wars, communist and fascist revolutions, economic depression, the corruption of industrialism into state capitalism, and continuing upheavals late into Rand's lifetime. All of these experiences and events colored her perceptions and probably led to her more pessmistic visions of Western decline and even forthcoming apocalypse.

Yet I think Rand underestimated the resilience of Western civilization. Each time the West has experienced a period of conflict caused by the corruption of its previous instrument of expansion, it has emerged, through reform and rejuvenation, into another period of expansion founded on a new basis. It is too soon to tell what course the West is on today. Some would argue that it has descended into an imperial phase, with the ascendance of an American empire that exercises effective hegemony over Western civilization. Others would argue that it has developed a new instrument of expansion in the form of the information economy, which has in large measure replaced the production of material goods (characteristic of industrial capitalism) with the generation and application of new knowledge. I tend to the latter view, adducing as evidence the crucial information innovation we call the computer, which has already made possible information storage, retrieval, reproduction, and recombination techniques that are orders of magnitude vaster (and faster) than those engendered by the printing press.

This does not imply that we have reached the end of history. Expansion is a form of creative destruction, institutions become ossified, traditions become corrupt, unresolved tensions lead to open conflict, civilizations clash, and developments we cannot foresee could change the very basis of the world we live in. But I think it is precisely the gradual and communal nature of change that gives cause for optimism about the direction of Western civilization and humanity as a whole, for it provides space for the cumulative unfolding of both cognitive and practical efficacy.

Borrowing the title of a painting by Rand's husband, we could even say: "Man also rises."

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