

Atlas Shrugging: The Impossible Queer Desire of Ayn Rand

The writing of Ayn Rand has had an enormous influence on global neoliberal politics and policies. Most histories of those policies--by David Harvey, Naomi Klein and others--analyze the impact of intellectuals, ideologues and politicians from Ludwig von Mises and Milton Friedman, to Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan and Augusto Pinochet. But a significant percentage of English speaking recruits to hard neoliberal power politics start by reading Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, often in high school. Though, as founder of Objectivism, she claimed to provide a purely rational philosophy expounding the moral basis of capitalism, her novels have been much more widely circulated than any of her non fiction screeds. And what those novels provide is fantasy--a libidinal fantasy life for the would be heroic entrepreneur who eschews empathy and collectivity on the path to pure creative achievement.

Rand's fiction appeals to many adolescents, as it channels a fierce rebellion against parental control. Her writing has a particular appeal to young people with queer desires, who through her lens can see themselves as heroic rebels. What Rand's fiction provides is a structure of feeling, a moralized and libidinal politics, that channels such desires into identification with a heroic entrepreneurial subject (of either gender) who responds to disappointment and set backs with an anti-empathic belief in the moral efficacy of strategies of accumulation that press on over the literal as well as figurative dead bodies of competitors and workers.

In this lecture, I will explore Rand's fictional strategies and their role in shaping neoliberal, neoconservative and imperial queer and feminist political subjects who have had a decided influence in Europe and the United States over the past two decades.