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Review: Ayn Rand, Homosexuality, and Human Liberation

Eric Fleischmann

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Let's begin this review honestly: despite having referenced her in multiple articles, I—like almost all leftists regardless of ideology—do not like Ayn Rand and am most certainly not an Objectivist. I approach her much like Karl Hess did: seeing her value in comparison to Emma Goldman but rejecting her ostensive, unflattering solipsism. Yet, I consider Chris Matthew Sciabarra both a close friend and mentor. His dialectical interpretation of Rand is one of the only thoroughly elaborated versions of her thought that I can stomach and, in fact, continues to actually have a major influence on my thinking. Therefore, I hope that my distaste for any orthodox understanding of Rand and Objectivism as a whole will be balanced by my deep affection for and intellectual indebtedness to Chris.

Sciabarra's monograph (or "Homonograph" as he likes to call it) *Ayn Rand, Homosexuality, and Human Liberation* is best understood in a dialectical fashion; that is, to quote some words from

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Sciabarra himself, to look at it “from a variety of perspectives and levels of generality, so as to gain a more comprehensive picture of it[.]” which “requires that we grasp the object in terms of the larger system within which it is situated, as well as its development across time.” To accomplish this, I will draw from some conversations I have had with Chris on the topic: He is the first to admit the contextual limitations of the monograph. For one, it was written in the early 2000s—which, wow, was 20 years ago—when the 21st century form of the LGBTQIA+ community was still taking shape (Chris has even mentioned to me how, when writing this, the term was still GLBT). And he is genuinely insistent that if he were to write it today, he would have written it very differently (particularly with a greater emphasis on the inclusion of the experiences and perspectives of trans folk). But in regard to what he *did* write, he explains that...

[i]n the Homonograph, . . . I operate on the assumption that the world is indeed made up of a cluster of mutually interdependent processes and that the only way to understand it is by grasping it as a larger context across time. We achieve that understanding through a process of abstraction, because we can't take in the 'totality' in one fell swoop. It requires successive shifts of our vantage point and levels of generality in the study of any problem. So, in this instance, my goal was to understand Rand's view of homosexuality and to study its reciprocal causes and effects, both upon her acolytes and those LGBTQ+ individuals who were drawn to her thought like moths to a flame, only to be burned in the process. But I also wanted to understand why some of these individuals were not burned; in fact, some of these individuals were uplifted to embrace their authentic, evolving selves.

the most thorough, convincing, and nuanced arguments for why Rand's thought is a genuinely liberatory project. And, of course, if you are an Objectivist, his monograph is required reading.

Ultimately this piece was written with an Objectivist audience in mind—hence its more or less obvious right-wing flavor—but as described above, it is, at its core, a study of the subjective experiences of both LGBTQIA+ individuals and cisheterosexual individuals involved in the Objectivist movement in an effort to ascertain as close to the objective reality of the situation as possible. The 'situation' is that many young queer folk identified with Rand's fictional work in the 20th and early 21st century, seeing in it a sense of individualism, nonconformity, and self-expression not particularly tied to a capitalist ideology. As Roderick Long writes of the subject:

Consider the architectural firm of Francon & Heyer, later Francon & Keating, in *The Fountainhead*. The head of the company, Guy Francon, is a gladhanding fraud who takes credit for work actually done by his draftsmen, and who cares more about the colour of his employees' neckties than about the quality of their work. And most of the businesses portrayed in the novel are similar. There are exceptions, most notably the case of the self-made millionaire Roger Enright; but most of the admirable characters are working-class.

Atlas Shrugged of course has heroic capitalists at its center; and . . . I think something does begin to change with *Atlas*. But even here, for every heroic entrepreneur like Dagny Taggart or Hank Rearden, there's a slimy rent-seeking plutocrat like James Taggart or Orren Boyle. Indeed James Taggart is, let it be remembered, Dagny's boss, who takes credit for all her achievements while blaming her for all his mistakes. (And interestingly, the labour organiser Fred Kinnan, though technically a villain, is presented far more sympathetically than are the businessmen and bureaucrats with whom he colludes.) . . .

Rand's identification with the capitalist class seems to emerge fairly late in her career – not really before *Atlas*.

And furthermore in *Atlas*, as Sciabarra points out in a Facebook thread, “Galt’s Gulch’ is practically a self-governing agrarian cooperative utopia, with folks attending to crops, fruit trees, chickens, cows, and so forth—becoming farmers, gardeners, and ‘blue collar’ workers, in the complete absence of any oppressive corporate or state entity whatsoever!” But, after finding these almost postcapitalist, liberatory themes in her work, when those same LGBTQIA+ individuals came to the *actual* Objectivist movement, they were, more often than not, confronted with a conservative, homophobic culture tied to the fetishization of an empty capitalist ‘individualism.’ Thus, Sciabarra seeks to understand *why*? And then offer straightforward and reasonable arguments for *why not*.

Now that some of the context of the monograph has been established, an outline is due. After beginning with a foreword by Lindsay Perigo—founder of SOLO (Sense of Life Objectivists) and editor of *The Free Radical*—and then a preface and introduction by Sciabarra (all of which are worth reading), things jump into Ayn Rand’s and the early Objectivists’ personal views on homosexuality. Spoiler alert; they are horrifying. According to Rand and young Nathaniel Branden, homosexuality is “a symptom of psychological dysfunction, altruistic immorality, . . . literary depravity[,]” and “the modern celebration of abnormality.” Furthermore, a primary reason Rand rejected the Women’s Liberation Movement was its promotion of the rights of queer women and sex workers. Overall this section revolves around the infamous response to the question posed to Rand about why she viewed homosexuality as immoral:

Because it involves psychological flaws, corruptions, errors, or unfortunate premises, but there is a psycho-

is one of the fundamental bases of thick libertarianism, which my colleague Nathan Goodman defines as “any broadening of libertarian concerns beyond overt aggression and state power to concern about what cultural and social conditions are most conducive to liberty.” Despite its critics on the libertarian right, I agree with many of my comrades at the Center that the debate is over. We are all thick libertarians now. The question now is what bundles of values we are to subscribe to: the reactionary values of Randroids, Koch-heads, and folks like Hans-Hermann Hoppe and Keith Preston (who *somehow* think allying with fascists will lead to a liberatory outcome) or the liberatory values of leftist libertarians—ranging from left-wing market anarchists to left-minarchists & bleeding-heart libertarians—like Long, Charles Johnson, Kevin Carson (although these days he considers himself an anarchist without adjectives), Philippe Van Parijs, Peter Vallentyne, and Matt Zwolinski. Thus, Sciabarra’s monograph serves as one of the centerpieces in the establishment of thick libertarian ideas. It especially forwards the point that it is not enough that people refrain from trying to use the state against the LGBTQIA+ community. We must go further and combat a culture that breeds both physical and nonphysical violence. As Marshall Rosenberg accounts,

Most people refer to violence as physically trying to hurt another. We also consider violence any use of power over people, trying to coerce people into doing things. That would include any use of punishment and reward, any use of guilt, shame, duty and obligation. Violence in this larger sense is any use of force to coerce people to do things. Violence is also any system that discriminates against people and prevents equal access to resources and justice to all people.

This is something that Sciabarra understands and accounts for throughout his work. And he has made and continues to make

of them; she just is precisely the person who tried to combine these two strands.

A better question is: which strand most accurately expresses her fundamental principles? And here it seems to me that the answer is: the left-libertarian strand.

And yet I am not convinced that this changes the fact that Rand's philosophy—despite being materialist and, through Sciabarra's interpretation, a genuinely dialectical one with a nuanced theory of power—seems to also fundamentally lack, in almost all practice and popular theory I have seen, the material imperatives for queer liberation. For example, despite being anti-statist, it fails to even begin to account for, or even acknowledge, the material basis of forcibly maintaining sexual conformity (and the gender binary) for the sake of creating legible and productive subjects within state capitalism. Objectivism continues to fall short of understandings such as these because it focuses narrowly, if at all, on the 'liberation' of essentially isolated subjects from the most obvious and least nuanced understanding of power. But then again, is beginning to rectify these issues not the point of Sciabarra's monograph? If contemporary (and good faith) students of Rand are consistently against the state and its manipulation of society, perhaps they will come to realize, as Sciabarra has, that—in this case, for queer folk in particular—capitalism is not an "unknown ideal" but a "known reality."

And beyond this idealistic (materialist) speculation, the reality is that Rand has had and will likely always have a decisive influence on the liberty movement far beyond just her orthodox admirers. There's no two ways about it. And if our movement is to be genuinely liberatory, it must be stripped of reactionary bigotry at all costs. As Sciabarra writes in *Total Freedom*, "Just as relations of power operate through ethical, psychological, cultural, political, and economic dimensions, so too the struggle for freedom and individualism depends upon a certain constellation of moral, psychological, and cultural factors." In many ways, this

logical immorality at the root of homosexuality. Therefore I regard it as immoral. But I do not believe that the government has the right to prohibit it. It is the privilege of any individual to use his sex life in whichever way he wants it. That's his legal right, provided he is not forcing it on anyone. And therefore the idea that it's proper among consenting adults is the proper formulation legally. Morally it is immoral, and more than that, if you want my really sincere opinion, it is disgusting.

These comments are vile, to say the least, and they anticipate the types of views held by many modern day paleolibertarians, who (sometimes) oppose legislating against LGBTQIA+ rights but (always) seek to strengthen the homophobic, transphobic, cisheteronormative, and heterosexist elements of U.S. and global culture.

Sciabarra then approaches the views on homosexuality by 'post-Randians,' which include bizarre faux psychological theories by the likes of Leonard Peikoff and Branden. The former has argued "that sensitive and thinking young men may not be able to fit into the cultural stereotype of the macho male" and thus become drawn to the approval of more 'manly' men in the form of homosexual desire. Wow. This actually bears some kind of resemblance to one of the various Freudian analyses of gay men (not that this helps Peikoff out *at all*). Freud writes in "Certain Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia and Homosexuality" that "[i]f a 'negative' or 'inverted' Oedipus complex occurs, a boy seeks his father's love and masculine identification by taking on a feminine identification and reverting to anal eroticism." Pseudoscience obviously, complete pseudoscience. Branden on the other hand, as Sciabarra draws out in *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical*, "has exhibited much growth in his view of homosexuality." He formerly held that a rigid gender binary was necessary to "fully foster each individual's

awareness of his or her male and female aspects” and therefore saw non-heterosexuality as deviating from this development. However, later in life he moved toward a position of acknowledging numerous factors as contributing to an individual’s sexual orientation and therefore arguing against moralizing on the matter. Chris has also shared a story with me of how, when it came up that he is gay, Branden was apologetic for the harm he had done with his work on homosexuality and stated both that there are a multitude of sexualities and that science and philosophy could not even fully explain heterosexuality. And Branden’s progress on this matter seems to represent a movement toward an at least ostensibly ‘neutral’ and sometimes even positive stance on homosexuality. This is represented to Sciabarra in specific works by Damian Moskovitz (“Is It Moral to be Homosexual?”), David C. Adams (“Rand Among the ‘Queers’”), and Nick Wiltgen (“Employment ‘Rights’ vs. Equal Rights). He also points to The Rattigan Society—a group of Objectivists named for the openly gay Romantic British playwright Sir Terence Rattigan—who insist that homophobic discrimination is “irrational” and that the ideals of Rand have an important place for LGBTQIA+ individuals, notably for the purpose of utilizing market pressure (educating the public, engaging in private boycotts, etc.) against discriminatory businesses.

But this frankly minimal progress cannot make up for the cultishly homophobic attitudes in the past and present Objectivist movement. And this is where Sciabarra’s accurately named “Horror File” comes in. This section covers first-hand, (mostly) pseudonymized incidents of homophobia (alongside, of course, heterosexism and heteronormativity) in the Objectivist movement drawn together through numerous interviews and surveys. I would recommend anyone who would feel triggered by these subjects, if it were not already obvious of this whole work, to approach this particular section with extra care. One particularly disturbing story is that of “Ricky.” Ricky was an Objectivist *and* an active bisexual in the 60s. This was a time when homosexual

and the ever infamous article “The Christopher Columbus Controversy: Western Civilization vs. Primitivism” by the Ayn Rand Institute’s Michael Berliner.) Perhaps a favorable argument could be made revolving around Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author,” in which he argues that “[t]o give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final significance, to close the writing.” This gives credence to the perceptions of homoeroticism in *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*, but can one refrain from giving ‘an Author an Author?’ Admittedly an author is ‘made up’ of texts from a literary theory perspective, but then we begin to enter broad conversations largely divorced from the actual arguments being made in the monograph. However, Sciabarra has made the following, related case to me that I find compelling:

I take seriously the Paul Ricoeur principle that a text is detached from its author and develops consequences of its own—transcending its relevance to its initial situation and addressing an indefinite range of possible readers. So any philosophy that embraces personal flourishing, autonomy, and a dialectical project seeking to overturn oppression across personal, cultural, and structural dimensions can be used as a means of transcending the narrow views of its originator. I’d say the same about Marx and Engels (who were not friendly to homosexuality).

And in an relatively similar fashion, Long argues that...

that there are in effect two Rands, or two strands in Rand: a left-libertarian, feminist, anti-militarist, anti-corporatist, benevolent, experimental strand, and a conservative, patriarchal, homophobic, flag-worshipping, boss-worshipping, dogmatic strand. Which strand represents the “true” Rand? Well, both

This final flaw continues in his consideration of the “gay right,” as he argues that “among ‘gay right’ intellectuals are those who seek to transcend left and right, overturning a tired politically correct framework, which has no tolerance for genuine diversity.” I hate to say it, but this comes off as something too close to the kind of dog whistling rhetoric of cryptoconservatives and fascist/alt-right apologists like Dave Rubin for my taste. However, Chris has emphasized to me that the purpose of this statement was largely to give a selling point to those Objectivists who viewed LGBTQIA+ identity as a political threat to individual liberty through the state. And while personally I do not see much overt value in this kind of appeal to the insecurities and paranoia of the right, I feel strongly that Sciabarra is honest in his ultimate argument that “Ayn Rand’s literary legacy nourishes . . . diversity. It offers . . . an uplifting portrait of the human potential for greatness, unencumbered by personal, cultural, or political forms of oppression. It is a legacy that projects an exalted view of love as a response to values. It is a legacy that belongs to all rational men and women—of whatever sexual orientation.”

At the end of the day, although Rand’s thinking can be useful at times, I still find it difficult to believe that a homophobe like Rand, whose movement is, often very explicitly, committed to the uncritical perpetuation of Anglo-American capitalistic traditions (except the most superficial elements of the puritanical form of Christianity) rooted in white supremacy, cisheteronormativity, imperialism, and settler-colonialism can ever be the primary ideological basis for queer liberation. (For proof consider Long’s point that “Rand denied that the U.S. was an imperial power; dismissed the military-industrial complex as ‘a myth or worse’; advocated censoring antiwar activists; favoured entangling alliances with Israel, Taiwan, and other tripwire regions; and saw no moral problem with bombing innocent civilians,” and see her own anti-Indigenous and imperialist/anti-Arab comments in *Ayn Rand Answers: The Best of Her Q & A*, her anti-African comments in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*,

behavior was a criminal offense, and Ricky, like “many gay respondents to [Sciabarra’s] survey . . . embraced Objectivism because [he] rejected the moralizing of organized religion.” However, he did not find acceptance amongst Rand’s disciples. His Objectivist girlfriend found out about his sexual orientation and revealed it to others in his close social group, and he was eventually pressured into going to an “Objectivist therapist” (I genuinely had to reread that phrase when I encountered it. Its similarity to so-called-Christian mental health ‘professionals’ who promote conversion ‘therapy’ is uncanny). This ‘therapist’ insisted that homosexuality was wrong and that Rand absolutely believed it to be the case. I will not reveal the entirety of Ricky’s story, but in the end he felt the need to break away from Objectivism entirely because of it and Rand’s homophobia and disrespect for his existence. The Horror File is full of stories similar to this to varying degrees.

But in contrast to these stories, Sciabarra argues that “[t]here are growing signs of change in the attitudes toward homosexuality expressed by people who have been involved to varying degrees with Objectivism.” For some, this difference stems from individual, personal development over the years. For example, “Johnathan”—an academic involved in the early Objectivist movement—initially viewed homosexuality as deeply unnatural, but, although not gaining a very ‘enlightened’ view on the matter, eventually grew more comfortable and even served as the faculty advisor for his college’s Gay and Lesbian Society. For others this change is more a product of an intergenerational difference, with younger Objectivists being more open to queerness and sexual nonconformity—this includes LGBTQIA+ identities as well as BDSM and polyamory. But even this progress is always accounted for alongside numerous incidents of homophobia—direct and indirect—amongst old and young guards alike. Notably, some Objectivists noted a belief or suspicion that some relationships between men in Rand’s books are homoerotic. This leads to the chapter titled “Male Bonding in the Randian Novel,” in which

Sciabarra notes how many respondents to his survey identified with the possibly homoerotic relationships between Howard Roark and Gail Wynand in *The Fountainhead* and Hank Rearden and Francisco d'Anconia in *Atlas Shrugged*. He then proceeds to identify scholarly work by Roderick Long (another scholar whose interpretation of Rand I particularly respect), Slavoj Žižek, Judith Wilt, Melissa Jane Harie, and even Rand herself that point toward homoerotic components in Rand's work.

To finish things off, Sciabarra considers a) a new perspective on Rand's relationship with sexual and gender nonconformity and b) new possible models of queer liberation based around her thought. This first effort is predicated upon the assertion that "[u]ltimately, Rand's antipathy toward homosexuality was not particularly logical or philosophical; it was a reflection of her own personal tastes," that "it is possible and necessary to distinguish between the attitudes, tastes, or preferences of Ayn Rand the person and the essential, core philosophical ideas of the philosophy she named Objectivism," and that "[t]oday, Objectivists are much more inclined to make this [latter] distinction." Sciabarra points out that Rand had a complicated personal relationship with gender and sexuality. She was very close to her brother-in-law Nick O'Connor (aka Nick Carter), who was very possibly a below-the-radar gay man, and further, having "asked several people who knew Rand personally whether they had ever heard her comment on homosexuality in private[, n]obody suggested that Rand was ever outwardly prejudicial or disrespectful or that she ever used epithets behind people's backs." Furthermore, many individuals have pointed out that Rand was a very masculine woman, with some even speculating on her possible 'butch bisexuality,' but this has never been substantiated. And, as Sciabarra writes, one might come "to the provocative conclusion that Rand was a gay man trapped in a straight woman's body. It is the kind of metaphor that Queer Studies professors would relish in their attempts to make sense both of Rand's expressed view of gender and sexuality

as well as her rather more complex psychodynamics as a human being." This seems far-fetched (and more than a little problematic), but the point is made: Rand (like everyone if you look close enough) had a complicated and multidimensional gender and sexual dynamic.

The second part (b) is probably the weakest section, but perhaps that is because this is a difficult and deeply unfinished philosophical project. Continuing the argument that Rand's personal views are separable from Objectivism, Sciabarra posits the latter as a possible basis for a philosophy of queer liberation that opposes the "anti-gay bias [that] is a manifestation of collectivism" in both its right- and left-wing forms. As he writes, "Whatever the impact of the Lavender Left on the movement for sexual liberation, the Marxists . . . once argued that homosexuality was some sort of aberration, a sign of 'bourgeois' decadence" and "[t]he Communists used gulags and psychological 'reconditioning' as part of their 'cultural revolution' to stamp out homosexuality." But this oppression "was also practiced in Hitler's National Socialist Germany, where those notorious 'anti-Marxists,' the Nazis, discovered the virtue of the Pink Triangle as a way of identifying, incarcerating, enslaving, castrating, experimenting on, or murdering homosexuals." I do not think Sciabarra meant it this way, but this seems to follow the false presumption that all forms of collectivism are essentially the same (consider the difference between U.S. settler-colonial and imperialist nationalism versus the anti-colonial struggles of rightly sovereign Indigenous nations) and downplays the *vastly* different roles the libertarian left and right have had in the history of queer liberation—even if, as Sciabarra does, one "distinguish[es] between the modern conservatives, classical liberals, and radical libertarians" on the right. From individualists and mutualists to anarcho-communists and communalists, left-wing anarchism has long been part of the struggle for the individual *and* collective rights of the LGBTQIA+ community. Right-wing libertarian thought? Not so much.