

One Cheer for Ayn

by James Como (April 2016)

Some fifty-five years ago – I would have been fourteen: the Yankees beat the Reds in a great World Series, great, that is, if you were a Yankee fan – I began my lamentable Ayn Rand mini-jag. I found her at a local shop on Broadway in Astoria, Queens, called the Patrick Henry Bookstore. My father was along, and when we left he warned me against the shop. A man of the moderate Right, he called it “fanatical,” largely owing to the ample display of John Birch Society material and of *None Dare Call it Treason*, a conspiracy screed if ever there was one. I bought that book, it proved my father right (according to it my Polish grandmother was suspect), and I never returned to the store (which closed soon after).

But I also bought Rand’s *Anthem*, nano-fiction compared to almost everything else she would write. In a nutshell: all are merely particles within a mass collective, so that, for example, the use of the first person singular is prohibited. I already had *Animal Farm* under my belt and was in the middle of 1984, so this book would not be thematically new to me. But the parable-like narrative of *Anthem*, with its rinsed-down simplicity, was unavoidably forceful, at least for me, and it was more frightening than Orwell. Its impact lay in its three lessons: 1/ do not, ever, run with a herd, least of all merely for the sake of belonging, especially if it is the herd *du jour* – and that, no matter how emotionally seductive the herd; 2/ resist those who would have you do so; and 3/ thought-control comes in many forms. The effect on me would be both personal and social (*i.e.* public and political). I would recoil against any effort – whether deriving from party, cause, ideology, movement, the gang on 29th Street, or the Beatles – to sign me up and have me check my brain at the door.

I would get over my Ayn-crush, dispositively after reading her preposterous interview in *Playboy*. But I never got over *Anthem*[here](#).

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