

Author Functions and Freedom

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Author Functions and Freedom: ‘Michel Foucault’ and ‘Ayn Rand’ in the Anglophone ‘Culture Wars’

LISA DOWNING

All words grouping themselves round the concepts of liberty and equality, for instance, were contained in the single word *crimethink*, while all words grouping themselves round the concepts of objectivity and rationalism were contained in the single word *oldthink*.

George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Introduction

Freedom was a core theme of Michel Foucault’s later writings, as well a central tenet of the work of pro-capitalist Russian-American writer Ayn Rand (1905-1982). Although writing in different decades and intellectual movements, and with ostensibly opposing political views, this article demonstrates some previously unsung and surprisingly similar arguments made in the *œuvres* of these unlikely bedfellows regarding freedom. It explores how *care for the self* or *holding the self as one’s highest value* (in Foucault’s and Rand’s respective lexicons) are held by the thinkers to lead to an ethic of freedom, and how ‘practices of freedom,’ in Foucault’s terms, are an ongoing project rather than a single act of liberation – a view Rand also effectively propounded by envisaging freedom as the proper project of a human being’s entire life. This article has a bipartite aim. Firstly, it places Rand into dialogue with Foucault to reveal their sometimes surprising closeness on the crucial question of individual freedom. Secondly, it examines a much more striking point of similarity between them, that can perhaps be attributed precisely to their commitment to freedom: the fact that both author

names have recently been deployed in critical, political, and media discourses to stand in for caricatured versions of the ‘freedoms’ of right-wing greed and left-wing moral relativism, respectively, in the so-called ‘culture wars’ of the 2020s. My (perhaps clichéd and overdone, but irresistible nevertheless) borrowing from Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* for the epigraph above is intended to suggest that in a world in which freedom becomes the enemy, the values of both Rand and Foucault are at risk of being deformed and potentially overwritten.

In my 2019 book, *Selfish Women*, I briefly examined how some of Ayn Rand’s central concepts for understanding the individual, including ethical selfishness and Christian self-sacrifice as an evil, found some parallels in the later work of Foucault.¹ I suggested that their logics broadly work in analogous ways, by means of what Foucault calls ‘reverse discourse’ – thinking against the grain of what seems natural or normative, and creating inversions through familiar logics (as when Rand describes Christian sacrifice as an evil and selfishness as a good). However, I did not give space to a characterization of the nature of the conceptualization of ‘freedom’ in their works, since ‘selfishness’ was my object there. This will instead be the aim of the first part of the current article. To my knowledge, no other scholar picks up on any similarities at all between these two, otherwise seemingly very different, thinkers. Indeed, there is an absence of engagement with Rand’s work in the scholarship of continental thought and critical theory – which is understandable, as these are not traditions to which she contributed directly, though a debt to Friedrich Nietzsche (a debt shared by Foucault) is very much in evidence in her earlier works and notebooks.² It must also be noted that her commitment to capitalism is obviously in stark tension with the political origins of modern critical theory. There is also much questioning of her claims to any legitimacy as a philosopher in the field of analytical philosophy – probably owing to political taste and a residual misogyny, as much as disciplinary boundedness.³ In the first section of this article, I will focus on how it may be said that Rand and Foucault

conceptualize freedom in somewhat compatible ways, even as their model of ‘the self’ differs between Foucault’s poststructuralist, decentred subject, and Rand’s broadly classical liberal, rational, ‘Objectivist’ one.⁴

I should make clear that I am making no suggestion of straightforward influence in the resonances to which I am drawing attention. I have no concrete evidence that Foucault, writing in the 1960s-80s, read Rand whose work was published between the 1930s and the 1980s – although we know from his lectures given at the Collège de France in 1978-9, and later published in English as *The Birth of Biopolitics*, that he was very familiar with right-wing economic thinkers such as Friedrich Hayek and Ludovic von Mises, the latter an acquaintance and admirer of Rand’s, so it is not impossible that he also knew her works. In those lectures, to the dismay of many of his followers, Foucault expressed a fascination with the form of freedom that might be potentiated by neoliberalism as a model, giving rise to a polemical and bitter debate in Foucault criticism circles between those who ‘believe in’ Foucault the neoliberal and those who interpret the very suggestion as a kind of slur.

One outcome of tracing the contiguity between ideas in Rand and Foucault will be to show the relevance of Rand’s thought for debates on key philosophical questions – debates from which she has largely been excluded. Conversely, showing the closeness of Foucault’s work to Rand’s casts retrospective light on Foucault, a thinker whose relationship with neoliberalism and individualism was ambivalent and ambiguous, as I will discuss in the second section of this article, despite the best attempts of many to fit him straightforwardly into a left-wing continental canon. My overall aim, then, is to provide a corrective to what I see as a broad tendency in modern public and cultural discourse – in the academy, in the political sphere, and especially on social media – to assume that the names of individuals occupy and stand in for pure, polarized, political positions and to overlook or downplay ideological and ethical messiness, complexity, and inconsistency. My third and concluding

section will consider ‘Michel Foucault’ and ‘Ayn Rand’ as author functions, in Foucault’s sense, and explore the ways they are deployed in current discourse.

Rand, Foucault, Freedom

In this section, I will sketch the meanings of freedom, firstly for Rand and then for Foucault, before pointing up some of the specific positional, philosophical, and textual similarities between their bodies of work and highlighting what I believe their significance to be.

As a self-proclaimed ‘radical for capitalism,’⁵ the type of freedom with which Rand may be most immediately associated is that of the free market. Rand was working on her long, polemic novel about the value of both capitalism and individual excellence – *Atlas Shrugged* (published in 1957 after more than ten years of writing) – at a time when the surrounding political consensus was epitomized by a welfare state project, the ‘New Deal,’ implemented in the USA to remedy the effects of the Great Depression. This means that assumptions that Rand’s affiliation with a free-market ideal was a sign of her conservatism or conformity are somewhat flawed: Rand was an outlier, rather than a conformist in that time, her suspicion of the value of collectivism no doubt affected by the Soviet take-over of her homeland and the resulting impoverishing dispossession of her family.⁶ This is why I disagree with Slavoj Žižek’s assertion that Rand’s subversiveness is that of the ‘overconformist,’ and an effect of her ‘very excessive identification’ with ‘the ruling ideological edifice [capitalism].’⁷ Indeed, in theorizing capitalism as the ultimate potential – but untested – bringer of freedom, Rand argues that a true free market is an untried ideal, since a mixed economy and state intervention had always been features of American economic life.

Indeed, in the collection of essays entitled *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, Rand mapped the notion of the freedom of markets as the ideal shape of an economic system directly onto the notion of the freedom of individuals as their proper state. She writes:

In order to sustain its life, every living species has to follow a certain course of action required by its nature. [...] Since men are neither omniscient nor infallible, they must be free to agree or disagree, to cooperate or to pursue their own independent course, each according to his own rational judgement. *Freedom is the fundamental requirement of each man's mind.*⁸

Rand argues here that freedom is a condition inherent to the nature of being human, and one needed for flourishing, but one that is not adopted by all, leading to what amounts to a form of alienation.

Turning to Foucault, on the one hand, it is a commonplace to say that – especially in his later work – Foucault is a consummate thinker of freedom. Joanna Oksala, author of the book *Foucault on Freedom* (1999), cites two prominent Foucault critics who make definitional claims about his relationship with the concept: ‘Gary Gutting [...] writes that Foucault’s thought is a search for “truths that will make us free”; while John Rajchman [...] claims that Foucault is “the philosopher of freedom in a post-revolutionary time”.’⁹ On the other hand, a different version of Foucault is that ‘austere anti-humanist thinker of the 1960s, who had proclaimed the “death of man” in open hostility to Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophy of freedom.’¹⁰ The early, ‘archeological’ Foucault, suspicious of any claim of humanism, can indeed be seen to stand starkly apart from his later incarnation. However, it is fair to say that, even in his later years, Foucault warns repeatedly against investing in a project of liberation, as when he states in probably his key interview on the concept of freedom, ‘The Ethic of the Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom’ in 1984: ‘I’ve always been a little distrustful of the general theme of liberation.’¹¹ This is because it might suggest – contrary to his project of

debunking the repressive hypothesis in *The History of Sexuality vol. 1* – that ‘it would suffice to loosen [...] repressive locks so that man can be reconciled with himself, once again find his nature.’¹² It is statements such as this that lead some critics to characterize Foucault as enduringly suspicious of freedom, as Oksala also notes.

It is accurate to state, then, that Foucault is considerably more nuanced and cautious than Rand in his evaluation of both the virtue of freedom and the ‘nature’ of man. Where Foucault argues that to adduce a sense of ‘human nature’ from an overvaluation of freedom would be a misstep (since Foucault does not have truck with any such totalizing notion as human nature), Rand states categorically that it is in accepting the indivisibility between man’s nature as rational and his desire for freedom that the project of human purpose – happiness – is found. She writes, ‘These two—reason and freedom—are corollaries, and their relationship is reciprocal: when men are rational, freedom wins; when men are free, reason wins.’¹³ Yet, Foucault, later in the same, above-referenced, interview states, ‘Liberty is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the deliberate form assumed by liberty.’¹⁴ In parallel with Rand, then, here Foucault argues that we cannot imagine a genuinely ethical life without freedom. He puts ‘ethics’ as the value term in relation to freedom exactly where Rand puts ‘reason’. The origin of this assertion is Foucault’s research into the ethical codes of the Graeco-Roman world, in which ‘in order to behave properly, in order to practise freedom properly, it was necessary to care for the self [...] Individual liberty was very important to the Greeks.’¹⁵

Both Rand’s and Foucault’s – albeit ontologically and epistemologically differently oriented – models of freedom are concerned with negotiating between an individual’s duty to their ‘practices of freedom’ and the responsibility demanded by social and civic life. This is clear in Foucault when he explains that the Greek ethic of care for the self as a model of freedom involves relationality: ‘Care for self is ethical in itself, but it implies complex

relations with others.’¹⁶ This is an axiom that is broadly accepted in reception of Foucault’s ideas, but often (deliberately?) overlooked by critics of Rand. But in this vein, consider Rand’s words in the ‘Textbook of Americanism’:

Do not be misled [...] by an old collectivist trick which goes like this: [...] society limits your freedom when it does not permit you to kill; therefore, society holds the right to limit your freedom in any manner it sees fit; therefore, drop the delusion of freedom—freedom is whatever society decides it is.

It is *not* society, nor any social right, that forbids you to kill—but the inalienable *individual* right of another man to live. This is not a ‘compromise’ between two rights—but a line of division that preserves both rights untouched. The division is not derived from an edict of society—but from your own inalienable individual right. The definition of this limit is not set arbitrarily by society—but is implicit in the definition of your own right.¹⁷

This is no more than a particularly strongly-worded version of the old liberal adage regarding the freedom of one person’s fist-swinging ending where the other person’s nose begins. Rand, despite being known as a proponent of selfish individualism first and foremost, clearly intended *selfish individualism for all* – a premise that appears perverse, so difficult is it to imagine its pragmatic workings.

Moreover, for all that Rand’s liberal understanding of freedom and Foucault’s Ancient ethics-informed one are necessarily founded on different premises, they both acknowledge and share an opposition to the notion of tyranny or power turned into domination. In ‘Conservatism: An Obituary,’ Rand writes: ‘The issue is not slavery for a “good” cause versus slavery for a “bad” cause; the issue is not dictatorship by a “good” gang

versus dictatorship by a “bad” gang. The issue is freedom versus dictatorship.’¹⁸ And Foucault acknowledges:

[I]t is true that slavery is the big risk to which Greek liberty is opposed, there is also another danger, which appears at first glance as the opposite of slavery: the abuse of power. In the abuse of power, one goes beyond what is legitimately the exercise of power and one imposes on others one’s whims, one’s appetites, one’s desires. There we see the image of the tyrant [...] ¹⁹

In this acknowledgement, Foucault dispels a criticism often levelled at his understanding of power and freedom: that by reconceptualizing power in *Discipline and Punish* and *The Will to Knowledge* as a forcefield in place of a system of hierarchical oppression, he ignores very real systems of oppression in the world (patriarchal and white supremacist, for example). Foucault does indeed offer a re-vision of (modern) power as malleable, multi-directional and capable of being resisted – but he does this without denying the threat of power reifying itself as tyranny. (Although it is perhaps only in his later works that he articulates this so clearly.)

Perhaps the *defining* similarity between Rand’s and Foucault’s versions of freedom, then, is that, for both, it remains a shadowy ideal that is in the realm of the utopian, the heuristic, and the unknown. Critics of Rand’s concept of freedom as necessary to the *condition* of being human, and therefore, deductively, a *right*, point out the difficulty of imposing obligations on individuals and societies to ensure the equally inalienable freedom of each self,²⁰ and it is the contention of *Rand herself* that we do not know quite how liberating a genuinely free market system would be, since it is (or was in her day, at least, she claimed) untested. It is similarly difficult to see quite how Foucault’s imagined masculinist paradise of cultivation of the self, leading to practices of freedom as modelled by Ancient Greek elites, could offer anything approximating a universal ethical good in his twentieth-

century – or our twenty-first-century – culture. Let us not ignore that Foucault acknowledges in his paeon to Greek ethics: ‘it is important for a free man, who behaves correctly, to know how to govern his wife, his children and his home.’²¹ Unsurprisingly, feminist critics and others have outlined grave objections to pursuing such a heuristic as a viable model that recognizes the human sovereignty of any subject other than the white free man.²²

Foucault and Neoliberalism

In the section above, I have focused on Foucault’s claims about individual freedom that issued from his late work on ‘problematizing’ the Classical past for volumes 2 and 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, and that he spoke about at length in interviews towards the end of his life. I have shown that, even here, there are some parallels with Rand’s pro-capitalist and individualistic model of freedom. In this section, I want to consider Foucault’s alleged flirtation with neoliberalism – a contested site of debate – that *could* potentially place him even closer to Rand.

In early 1979 (shortly before the era of Thatcherism and Reaganism), Foucault delivered a number of lectures on the history and cultural-national contexts of neoliberalism as part of a lecture series ‘The Birth of Biopolitics,’ that would be published posthumously – in 2004 in French and 2008 in English. Foucault appears to understand neoliberalism in these lectures as a departure from the classic economic liberalism which, he argues, sought to connect state and market, promoting disciplinary techniques of surveillance to enable economic freedom.²³ Foucault also professed suspicion of small statism and of social security which he saw as leading potentially to a form of biopolitical authoritarianism. Since the publication of these essays, many words have been written regarding what Foucault’s clear interest in neoliberalism as a form of governance might mean for his continuing status as a ‘left-wing intellectual.’ In their controversial book *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and*

the End of Revolution, Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora point out that it was under the editorship of Foucault's former student François Ewald that the publication of these lectures took place. They state that:

[T]he question of Foucault's own relationship to neoliberalism has been put on the agenda by [...] Ewald. In 2012 at the University of Chicago, in conversation with the economist, Gary Becker, Ewald suggested that Foucault had offered an 'apology of neoliberalism.'²⁴

The Last Man Takes LSD can be seen as an extended meditation on this claim, pursuing a through-line from Foucault's lectures of neoliberalism to contemporary cultural trends. Dean and Zamora's is not the only or first book to tackle the question – several works published in both French and English had already addressed Foucault's take on neoliberalism and advanced a variety of positions regarding Ewald's claim,²⁵ but the publication of *The Last Man Takes LSD* prompted a particularly intense furore of online comment among left-wing Foucault scholars.

The book is discussed in a Substack post by self-styled 'eclectic leftist' American professor, Lisa Duggan, who, not-so coincidentally, in 2019 had published a searing critique of Ayn Rand's influence on contemporary neoliberal political, cultural, and economic life, *Mean Girl: Ayn Rand and the Culture of Greed*, which I have engaged with in detail elsewhere.²⁶ Duggan's discussion of *The Last Man Takes LSD* features in a post that addresses the 'series of interrelated, repetitive, reductive arguments' in which, she claims, 'the Euro-American left, broadly conceived' has been embroiled since 1968.'²⁷ Duggan argues that, while Dean and Zamora's book has many strengths, chief among them the detailed history it provides of Foucault's intellectual and political development after May 1968, it nevertheless 'makes a leap from analyzing a thinker's writing, to diagnosing political organizations and social movements as if they were derived from the texts that influenced

them.’²⁸ I share Duggan’s resistance to arguments that rely on attributing directly to thinkers of the past the actions and characters of movements in the present as if, as she writes, they are ‘guidebooks’ rather than ‘resources.’ Perhaps ironically, my main criticism of her book *Mean Girl* largely issues from the same perspective: therein, Duggan ascribes far too much direct responsibility to the historical Rand for the actions of her adherents in the present, as when she describes Rand as ‘the writer whose dour visage presides over the spirit of our time.’²⁹ Here, however, Duggan convincingly argues that Dean and Zamora’s attempt to tie Foucault’s fascination with the art and care for the self directly to late-twenty-first-century hyper-identity politics – a sort of defanged neoliberal lifestyle consumerism – is poorly anchored and ill-evidenced.

Duggan takes particular issue with a claim the authors make about the closeness of Foucault to neoliberal thinker Gary Becker, quoting at length from *The Last Man Takes LSD*:

This complete redefinition of politics in terms of subjectivity must, however, be seen as a starting point for the production of a neoliberal Left more committed to equal opportunity and the respect of difference than to abolishing the exploitation of humans by other humans. ‘Don’t forget to invent your life,’ Foucault concluded in the early 1980s. Doesn’t that sound familiar to Gary Becker’s injunction that we should not forget to be ‘entrepreneurs of ourselves?’³⁰ (169-170)

Duggan points out in relation to this quotation that the pursuit of analogous logics or rhetorics does not equate to the pursuit of identical aims, and I hope I have been careful in the section above to show that where Foucault and Rand share *logics*, they do not share *intentions*. Duggan also espies a covert homophobia and social conservatism in Dean and Zamora’s apparent fixation on Foucault’s drug-taking experimentation –

eponymously noted – and on his claims that gay, sadomasochistic bodily acts could constitute creative forms of practices of freedom. I think Duggan is right to point to a sort of *moral smearing* of Foucault and, by extension, of those of us who find his work useful, when she writes:

But the more important context for the current shifting reception of Foucault [...] is the way he has been recruited, absurdly, as an avatar for ‘identity’ or ‘lifestyle’ politics, in the general effort to marginalize and diminish the writers and thinkers influenced by his work.³¹

I have noted that Duggan’s defence of Foucault against ill-argued and poor-faith arguments about real-world influences and consequences is not matched by her own treatment of Ayn Rand. This itself, one could argue, is an effect of the very political fracturing and polarization of recent years – leading to blinkered tribalism – that Duggan herself is grappling with in her Substack post.

An article in *The Point* magazine by Samuel Clewes Huneke, “‘Do Not Ask Me Who I Am’: Foucault and Neoliberalism,” published shortly after Dean and Zamora’s book, discusses the striking fact that Foucault’s work continues to attract so much praise and derision, in equal measures, long after his death.³² Huneke points out with perspicuity that ‘there is a certain formal similarity between Foucauldian thought and neoliberalism. Both are prominent terms of academic discourse, and both have come to mean at once too much and too little.’³³ Indeed, definitions of both sets of positions are notoriously elliptical, meaning of course that they can be pressed into the service of arguments, often without foundation or simply to connote crude ideas of ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ depending on the commentator’s ideological leanings.

Foucault’s much-documented *interest* in neoliberalism (which, it should be noted, is not the same as unconditional *support* for it) has, then, to be understood in the

context of his broader concern with freedom, horror of totalitarianism (shared with Rand), and interest in a model of governmentality that actively seeks not to restrict individual freedoms. As I hope to have demonstrated above, I find the *reception* of this aspect of Foucault's thinking much more notable, telling and illustrative of the spirit of our age than the fact of his curiosity about an – at the time still embryonic – theory of economic and cultural organization that offered ways of thinking differently than in terms of statism.

Conclusion: Taking Author Names in Vain

Today in the UK and Europe, Ayn Rand is relatively little known. In the USA that she made her home on fleeing from Soviet-controlled Russia as a young woman, on the other hand, she is a household name. This is partly owing to the financial and cultural power of the Ayn Rand Institute, which, every year, sends hundreds of thousands of copies of her novels and books of essays to high schools throughout North America.³⁴ The availability of Rand's name to stand in for the value of the free market and a robust, individualistic liberalism is amply seen in the way politicians deploy it. During his original campaign for the US presidency in 2016, Donald Trump linked his name to Ayn Rand's. Trump claimed that he especially admired Rand's novel *The Fountainhead* (1943), and that he identified with its protagonist Howard Roark. This is rather ironic, since Roark is an exceptionally talented, self-made architect from a poor background, while Trump is the heir to a massive fortune, much of which he allegedly squandered.³⁵ The only conclusion to be drawn from Trump's claim is that, if he read *The Fountainhead*, he misunderstood its message.

In the public political-discursive sphere in the USA, the name 'Rand' has attributed to it a weight of significance as an exemplar of greed, capitalistic excess, and selfishness-without-ethics that a close reading of her work does not fully bear out. While

unapologetically a ‘radical for capitalism,’ as we have seen, Rand’s insistence that the virtue of taking the self as one’s highest value should extend to *all* selves – that my rights end where yours begin – is, as we have also noted, straightforwardly classical liberal in tenor. She writes in 1946:

Do not make the mistake of the ignorant who think that an individualist is a man who says: ‘I’ll do as I please at everybody else’s expense.’ An individualist is a man who recognizes the inalienable individual rights of man—his own and those of others.³⁶

Similarly, the Christian conservative right in America aligns itself with Rand’s name unwisely given that she was an outspoken atheist and defender of a woman’s right to choose abortion, which she termed ‘a moral right which should be left to the sole discretion of the woman concerned.’³⁷ What is especially striking here is that many of both the advocates who laud her, and the critics who despise her, refuse to take seriously her ideas on their own terms. They attribute to her – we might say project onto her – associations that are not in her texts, and yet also and simultaneously consider her incredibly powerful; capable of decisive influence.

Left-wing critic George Monbiot – one of the few non-Americans to use Rand’s name in this way – writes the following words about Rand’s system in an article for *The Guardian* (whose readership may well be more American than British, these days) on 5 March 2012:

It has a fair claim to be the ugliest philosophy the post-war world has produced. Selfishness, it contends, is good, altruism evil, empathy and compassion are irrational and destructive. The poor deserve to die; the rich deserve unmediated power. It has already been tested, and has failed spectacularly and catastrophically. Yet the belief system constructed by Ayn Rand, who died 30 years ago today, has never been more popular or influential.³⁸

The article is sensationally titled ‘A Manifesto for Psychopaths,’ reflecting the fashionable 21st-century tendency to use psychiatric labels in lay contexts – sometimes for the purposes of slurring, as here; at other times to confer authority. As newspaper titles are chosen more usually by editors than writers, my point in raising the fancifulness of the title is not one about Monbiot’s own intentions. The entire article, though, is instructive for the broader trend it represents. Nowhere in Rand’s corpus does she suggest that ‘the poor deserve to die.’ As alluded to above, her ‘ideal heroes’ of novels *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, Howard Roark and John Galt, are themselves from humble backgrounds. Characters with social comforts and family money in Rand’s fiction, such as James Taggart and Peter Keating in those same novels, are more often portrayed as mediocre and cruising on unearned reputations. (Monbiot may well disapprove of meritocracy too. But that is not what he says here.) The casting of Rand as ‘evil’ is a hyperbolic exercise of populist rabble-rousing to create a folk demon. In fact, Rand’s name and words are seen to have a legacy of almost witchlike powers (which I have elsewhere analysed as an example of rhetorical misogyny regarding how ‘inappropriate’ and too-influential women are often read³⁹). This quasi-supernatural reach can perhaps best be demonstrated by considering the fact that Darryl Cunningham’s graphic book, *Supercrash: How To Hijack the Global Economy* actually argues that the 2007 financial crash can be laid at the feet of Rand, since many of the proponents of the reckless, unregulated market practices leading to the subprime mortgage collapse were the generation that grew up admiring her work.⁴⁰

Foucault’s name in public and political discourse is pressed into a similar service as Rand’s – but for politically opposite ends. In a political speech from December 2020, ‘The Fight for Fairness,’ the then British Conservative Equalities Minister, later short-lived Prime Minister, Liz Truss, spoke about her experience of education in Leeds in the 1980s.⁴¹ She claimed that schoolchildren were taught about racism and sexism, but not how to read and

write. ‘These ideas,’ according to Truss’s speech, ‘have their roots in postmodernist philosophy – pioneered by Foucault – that put societal power structures and labels ahead of individuals and their endeavours.’ That Truss had either not read or not understood Foucault any more successfully than Trump had understood Rand is clear. I have explored in the first part of this article the degree to which Foucault’s late work is devoted to the notion of the cultivation of the self – a nuanced meditation *precisely* on ‘individuals and their endeavours’ that Truss thinks would be a more proper pedagogical focus, and I have shown in my second section how his proximity to neoliberalism – even if the nature of the closeness is disputed and multivalent – makes his status as an exemplary caricatural leftist for our times much more complex and ambivalent than Truss would wish.

Foucault simply serves in such rhetorical examples as a convenient left-wing bogeyman. He is a ‘cultural Marxist,’ to use a term that is as ubiquitous as it is inaccurate among the so-called ‘alt-right,’ and a moral relativist. In fact, Foucault is neither of these things. (Indeed, his distance from Marxism is often a source of regret for his left-wing fans, as suggested above.) The only antidote to such ill-founded and unhelpful approximations can be careful, respectful close-reading and judicious critical thinking – from all sides and towards all sides.

In his seminal article ‘What is an Author?’ (1969), Foucault introduces the concept of the ‘author function’, a term designed to describe how certain author names come to stand in for more than that individual human being, located at a time and place in history, and become instead signifiers for ‘founders of discursivity.’⁴² His examples are Freud and Marx who made possible modes of thinking that would lead to whole disciplines and movements, and become interchangeable with them – in ways that exceed their individual personhood, intentions, or words. Rand and Foucault are author names in this sense too. A largely left-leaning academic establishment has valorized the name ‘Foucault’ while demonizing the

name ‘Rand,’ while a largely right-leaning political establishment has applied the reverse judgments. In neither case is the nuance of the respective thinker’s contribution acknowledged, understood, or taken seriously. Foucault, in fact, is doubly misconstrued and rendered ‘problematic’ since – as well as becoming a metonym for the perceived dangers of identity politics in universities, according to Liz Truss, his ambivalent and ambiguous relationship with neoliberalism and individualism proves a problem to many scholars who wish to fit him squarely into a left-wing continental canon, so that they can safely continue to align themselves with his work.

I hope to have demonstrated in this article that, by tracing the contiguity between Rand’s and Foucault’s versions of freedom – and between the deployment of their names as markers for crude caricatures of ideological ‘leftist’ and ‘right-wing’ positions in our current moment – we are offered a warning against simplistic, retroactive readings that sacrifice critical engagement and genuine curiosity for a knee-jerk, tribal politics of purity.

NOTES

¹ Lisa Downing, *Selfish Women* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 66-71.

² Ayn Rand would deny her debt to Nietzsche, claiming that Aristotle alone of earlier philosophers had influenced her thought. She would also state in a lecture that philosophy consisted only of ‘the three As – Aristotle, Aquinas, and Ayn Rand.’ See: Michael Prescott, ‘Shrugging Off Ayn Rand,’ <http://michaelprescott.freesevers.com/shrugging-off-ayn-rand.html> [accessed 19/05/2023]. However, many scholars before me have pointed out the obvious influence of Nietzsche on Rand’s work, especially in her early conception of the perfect heroic man as a sort of Nietzschean *Übermensch* figure. For an account of the ambivalent and changing relationship Rand had with Nietzsche, see:

<https://theobjectivestandard.com/2017/02/ayn-rand-contra-nietzsche/> [accessed 19/05/2023].

³ See, for example, John W. Robbins, *Without a Prayer: Ayn Rand and the Close of Her System* (Dallas: Trinity Foundation, 1997), which offers a Christian philosophical rebuttal of Rand, and Scott Ryan, *Objectivism and the Corruption of Rationality: A Critique of Ayn Rand's Epistemology* (New York: Writers Club Press, 2003). A rare exception is *The Philosophic Thought of Ayn Rand*, edited by Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), which includes essays that take seriously Rand's 'attempt to provide a systematic, philosophical position.' (224).

⁴ 'Objectivism' is the term Rand gives to her philosophical system which proceeds from the first principle that the human being is a rational being, capable of objective action.

⁵ Rand asserted that: 'Objectivists are not "conservatives." We are radicals for capitalism.' Rand, 'Check Your Premises,' *The Objectivist Newsletter*, 1 (1962), 1.

⁶ See Chris Matthew Sciabarra, *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

⁷ Slavoj Zizek, 'The Actuality of Ayn Rand,' *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*, 3:2 (2002) 215–227, (215).

⁸ Rand, 'What is Capitalism?' [1965] in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (New York: Signet, 1986) 1-29 (8). [My italics in the quotation.]

⁹ Joanna Oksala, *Foucault on Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 2.

¹⁰ Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora, *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution* (London and New York: Verso, 2021), 2.

¹¹ 'The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom: An Interview with Michel Foucault on January 20, 1984,' in *The Final Foucault*, edited by James Bernhauer and David Rasmussen (Cambridge, Mass. And London: MIT Press, 1994), 1-20 (2).

¹² Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,' 2.

¹³ Rand, 'Faith and Force: The Destroyers of the Modern World' [1960] in *Philosophy: Who Needs It* (New York: Signet, 1984) 58-76 (66). See also Eric Mack, 'The Fundamental Moral Elements of Rand's Theory of Rights,' in Den Uyl and Rasmussen, *The Philosophic Thought of Ayn Rand*, 121-161 (154).

¹⁴ Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,' 4.

¹⁵ Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,' 5.

¹⁶ Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,' 7.

¹⁷ Rand, 'Ayn Rand's Textbook of Americanism: First Instalment, May 1946,' in *A New Textbook of Americanism: The Politics of Ayn Rand*, edited by Jonathan Hoenig (Chicago: Capitalistpig Publications, 2018), 2-11 (6).

¹⁸ Rand, 'Conservatism: An Obituary,' in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, 214-225 (215).

¹⁹ Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,' p. 8.

²⁰ Mack, 'The Fundamental Moral Elements of Rand's Theory of Rights,' p. 155.

²¹ Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,' p. 7.

²² For a good overview of feminist uses of, and objections to, Foucault's concept of subjectivity, see: Margaret A. McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity* (New York: SUNY Press, 2002). Moreover, as Foucault's exemplary praxis for 'cultivating the self' in the service of freedom would be gay sadomasochistic bodily acts, it is not obvious where and how women might take up the heuristic.

²³ Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), p. 67.

²⁴ Dean and Zamora, *The Last Man Takes LSD*, p. 14.

²⁵ See, for example: Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste* (London: Verso, 2013); Serge Audier, *Penser le 'Néolibéralisme: Le Moment Néolibéral, Foucault et la Crise du Socialisme* (Lormont: Le Bord de L'eau, 2015); *Foucault and Neoliberalism*, edited by Daniel Zamora and Michael Behrent (Cambridge: Polity, 2016). In *After Foucault*

edited by Lisa Downing (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2018), I commissioned Nicolas Gane to write a chapter on ‘Foucault and Neoliberalism,’ which offers a very balanced account of the lectures, the brouhaha surrounding them, and an assessment of the extant publications on the topic (46-60).

²⁶ Downing, *Selfish Women*, especially 51; 71.

²⁷ Lisa Duggan, ‘Who’s Afraid of Michel Foucault,’ *Commie Pinko Queer*, 8 August 2021.

https://lisaduggan.substack.com/p/whos-afraid-of-michel-foucault?fbclid=IwAR2L33a130e8uniyfAKbh2r33jI0JG2lxCPsJc8QHZsJQ0bc5VHb_JJ7U_g [accessed 19/05/2023].

²⁸ Duggan, ‘Who’s Afraid of Michel Foucault.’

²⁹ Duggan, *Mean Girl: Ayn Rand and the Culture of Greed* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), xi.

³⁰ Dean and Zamora, *The Last Man Takes LSD*, 169-170.

³¹ Duggan, ‘Who’s Afraid of Michel Foucault.’

³² Samuel Clewes Huneke, “‘Do Not Ask Me Who I Am’: Foucault and Neoliberalism,” *The Point*, 2 June 2021 https://thepointmag.com/politics/do-not-ask-me-who-i-am/?fbclid=IwAR3Umr6bMRhxe1EuP7wkPefI14KHzykganoU4uynWJqD_BdoiK6ImM0j2_E [accessed 19/05/2023].

³³ Huneke, “‘Do Not Ask Me Who I Am’.”

³⁴ See: <https://ari.aynrand.org/a-grateful-teacher-receives-free-ayn-rand-novels/> [accessed 19/05/2023].

³⁵ See: Robert Reich, ‘Trump’s Brand is Ayn Rand,’ *Salon*, 19 March 2018. https://www.salon.com/2018/03/19/trumps-brand-is-ayn-rand_partner/

³⁶ Rand, ‘Ayn Rand’s Textbook of Americanism: First Instalment, May 1946,’ 5.

³⁷ Rand, ‘Of Living Death,’ *The Voice of Reason: Essays in Objectivist Thought*

(New York: Meridian, 1990), 58–59.

³⁸ George Monbiot, ‘A Manifesto for Psychopaths,’ *The Guardian*, 5 March 2012
<http://www.monbiot.com/2012/03/05/a-manifesto-for-psychopaths/85> [accessed 27/05/2023].

³⁹ See: Downing, *Selfish Women*. A good example of this use of language, which I discuss in detail, is taken from Gore Vidal’s review of *Atlas Shrugged* where he states: “Moral values are in flux. The muddy depths are being stirred by new monsters and witches from the deep. Trolls walk the American night.” (cited|: 61.)

⁴⁰ Darryl Cunningham, *Supercrash: How To Hijack the Global Economy* (Brighton: Myriad, 2014).

⁴¹ Liz Truss, ‘The Fight for Fairness’, 17 December 2020
<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/fight-for-fairness>. These particularly inflammatory words were later removed from the record on the government website, as discussed in this article in *The New European* by Adrian Zorzut, that appeared 18 December 2020:
<https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/brexit-news-westminster-news-tory-minister-equalities-speech-redacted-6858470/> [accessed 11/07/2023].

⁴² Foucault, ‘What is an Author,’ *Essential Works of Michel Foucault*, vol. 2, edited by James D. Faubion (London: Penguin, 1998), 205-222 (217).