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ARTICLES

Murray Rothbard's Lost Letters on Ayn Rand

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Relying on live-ink letters discovered in an Altoona, Pennsylvania, warehouse in 2022, this article provides a fresh look at an old controversy: Murray Rothbard's bitter parting from the inner orbit of Ayn Rand. The correspondence from Rothbard to *National Review* senior editor Frank S. Meyer pertaining to the Randians details Rothbard's rollercoaster of responses toward the Collective. The letters on Rand begin shortly before the release of *Atlas Shrugged* in October 1957 and end after the publication of an unsigned 1961 *Newsweek* article belittling the novelist. The newly discovered correspondence undermines the persistent claim that Rothbard fabricated unflattering descriptions of the Objectivists in response to their accusing him of plagiarism. The letters, sent long before Nathaniel Branden leveled those charges, reflect the general description of the group in Rothbard's "Sociology of the Ayn Rand Cult," issued in 1972. The article further details the influence of Meyer's *Moulding of Communists* on Rothbard in his structuring of "The Sociology of the Ayn Rand Cult."

On the day of *Atlas Shrugged*'s release, Murray Rothbard wrote Frank S. Meyer to further justify another about-face on Ayn Rand, a subject the two had previously discussed. "Thanks for trying to save my soul," he wrote Meyer in the recently unearthed October 10, 1957, letter. "You know, however, that I have always been an extreme libertarian purist, anti-prudence, atheist, natural rightser, Aristotelian, etc. so that whatever shifts I may make in a Randian direction will be a logical development and not any sudden conversion. No matter how much you disagree with her system I think you should hail her as a great genius and system-builder" (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.). Meyer failed to disabuse Rothbard of his enthusiasm. Rand eventually did. Perhaps more accurately, her lieutenant, Nathaniel Branden, especially did.

a Daniel J. Flynn (danflynn@stanford.edu), a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution and an American Spectator senior editor, wrote The Man Who Invented Conservatism: The Unlikely Life of Frank S. Meyer (Encounter Books, 2025).

The story of Murray Rothbard's close encounters of the Rand kind, first told by Rothbard to a mass audience in 1972, the year of Frank Meyer's death, has been retold in the Rothbard biography *An Enemy of the State* (Raimondo 2000, 109–35), in the Rand biographies *Goddess of the Market* (Burns 2009, 182–84), *Ayn Rand and the World She Made* (Heller 2009, 295–301), *My Years with Ayn Rand* (N. Branden 1999, 229–31), and *The Ayn Rand Cult* (Walker 1999, 28, 33–34), and in countless articles, speeches, and podcasts.

This article offers fresh information on an old story: Rothbard's contemporaneous observations of his 1950s interactions with Ayn Rand and "the Collective," the group of admirers who surrounded the novelist. Original, live-ink letters discovered in a Pennsylvania warehouse in 2022, as part of research for *The Man Who Invented Conservatism: The Unlikely Life of Frank S. Meyer*, provide Rothbard's perspective not from more than a decade later or distilled through the intermediary of other authors, but firsthand and conveyed in real time to an older, more experienced friend whom he knew as a skeptic of the burgeoning philosophy of Objectivism. The Rothbard file folder contains, among other items, thirty-five letters between him and Frank and Elsie Meyer, of which six letters from Rothbard pertain directly to novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand. This warehouse find came within a larger trove that included scores of folders that hold documents pertinent to other figures of relevance on the postwar American Right. Meyer, an ex-Communist, *National Review* editor, and exponent of fusionism, met Rothbard in 1954 (as a November 28 letter from Rothbard that year shows) and remained friends with him until Meyer's death in 1972 (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.). Atop using his friend as a sounding board in these letters, the younger man relied on him again, in a way that has gone largely unnoticed, when he opted to finally publicize what he had observed and experienced among Rand, Branden, and company.

Many of the charges Rothbard ([1972] 2025) issued against Ayn Rand and her followers in a public way in 1972 he had shared privately with Meyer fifteen years earlier. This included using the word "cult" to describe the group that surrounded Rand, noting their humorlessness, and observing the way emotion frequently overwhelmed reason in their leader in contradiction to her philosophy. In at least one instance, the letters provide an account somewhat different from the one Rothbard gave years later. Two letters present evidence that weighs in Rothbard's favor in disputes that outlived the various parties involved.

In the passage quoted above, for instance, Rothbard speaks of always subscribing to natural rights and Aristotelian views. For the last sixty-seven years, some Objectivists have claimed that Rothbard swiped his Aristotelianism and beliefs about natural rights from Rand. He did personally acknowledge a "debt" to her in developing his appreciation of Aristotle and natural rights (Mises and Rothbard 2007, 14–15). The idea

that this required a hat-tip citation whenever he wrote about such concepts, or that a man with three degrees from an Ivy League institution had been ignorant of Aristotle and natural rights before he entered Rand's inner orbit, seems like a difficult position to defend. Nevertheless, this conjecture continues to animate discussions many decades after the initial dispute.

"Murray Rothbard never cites Ayn Rand once in any of his works in which he defends Aristotle, in which he defends natural rights, or free will—ideas he clearly got from Ayn Rand without giving her a single citation," Objectivist writer James Valliant claimed on a 2021 podcast. His interlocutor, Jonathan Hoenig, a Fox News Channel talking head, speculated that Rothbard "largely fictionalized" his accusations against Rand. "It's a load of bullshit, basically, just designed to denigrate Ayn Rand because he was called out plagiarizing her," he said to Valliant. "Am I summing it up?" Valliant maintained during the podcast that Rothbard "got Aristotle and natural rights straight from Ayn Rand" (Hoenig and Sotirakopoulos 2021).

But in a postcard to Frank Meyer postmarked October 10, 1957, nine months before Nathaniel Branden originated that charge and shortly before Rothbard became a member of sorts of the Collective, the economist described Aristotelianism and natural rights as long-held, core beliefs (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.). The plagiarism charge, heretofore regarded as outlandish by non-Objectivists, would seem even weaker given Rothbard's words typed months before he faced an accusation he could hardly have prophesied. Furthermore, the imputation that a petty Rothbard libeled Rand and her followers in revenge for their exposure of his "plagiarism" cannot stand based on these letters that sat unnoticed since their receipt in Woodstock, New York, nearly seven decades ago.

Rothbard had detailed privately to Meyer in a December 4, 1957, letter the same notion of a rigid, conformist atmosphere within the Collective which imbued "The Sociology of the Ayn Rand Cult" (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.; Rothbard [1972] 2025). Any genesis story on Rothbard's claims cannot, therefore, attribute their origins to Rothbard devising them as a tit-for-tat response to Branden's charges of plagiarism. This does not mean, as letters presented later in this article demonstrate, that a degree of vengeance did not motivate Rothbard to publicize what he saw and experienced. An August 24, 1958, letter clearly shows Rothbard seeking to engineer a small amount of payback against people he regarded as his slanderers, and an undated letter from 1961 exudes schadenfreude in response to bad press received by the Objectivists (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.).

Rothbard's ([1972] 2025) published reflections on Rand and the Collective arrived with the perspective of years removed from her orbit and jaundiced by the events that led to the bitter parting of two figures of massive import among libertarians. His recently discovered correspondence with Meyer snapshots his views, complex and changing from one letter to the next, while

he was inside the group. A reader gleans both what attracted him to the novelist and what ultimately drove him away. Once upon a time, long before Rothbard's public criticism of Rand, as friend Ralph Raico would later put it, "Murray was very enthusiastic about Ayn" (Raico [2013] 2016).

Rothbard Shrugged

Murray Rothbard first ventured into Ayn Rand's orbit as a twentysomething Columbia University PhD candidate short of his doctorate. Rand biographies claim that the brothers Richard and Herb Cornuelle, both affiliated at various times with the William Volker Fund (which generously supported, among others, both Rothbard and Meyer), took the Ludwig von Mises disciple to her salon-apartment in 1952 (Burns 2009, 144; Heller 2009, 251). Rothbard credited Herb Cornuelle with the introduction (Rothbard 1989, 27).

From a distance, the Circle Bastiat meetings at Rothbard's apartment and those attended by the Collective at Rand's apartment looked the same. Both featured advocates of liberty discussing philosophical topics at a high level in Manhattan, a place not as hostile to those ideas as Moscow but nonetheless quite unfriendly to them. The similarities evaporated upon closer inspection. Rothbard, for instance, noted that Circle Bastiat meetups included "song composing, joint moviegoing, and fiercely competitive board games." He described them as a "helluva lot of fun" (Rothbard 1989, 27). Few ever described the agora of Objectivism at 36 East 36th Street as fun.

Whereas his encounters with Ludwig von Mises in the early 1950s fueled his intellectual output until the end of his days, the young Rothbard found Rand's dogmatism off-putting and draining. Her tremendous intellect and individualism, however, seduced him into coming back. He first returned for two nights in the summer of 1954. This time, he ventured into her domain accompanied by the Circle Bastiat. Internally, he found himself intellectually taking Rand's side in her browbeating of George Reisman but rooting for his teenage friend (Raimondo 2000, 110). As he explained three years later to Rand, the visits left him exhausted, depressed, and threatened by a perceived potential loss of independence should he continue to see her (Mises and Rothbard 2007, 12–16). So, again, he stayed away.

Three years later, after one of the Circle Bastiat obtained an early copy of *Atlas Shrugged*, Rothbard, now boasting a PhD in economics from Columbia University, found himself not merely intrigued by but enamored of Rand and her ideas (Heller 2009, 295–96). His vacillation, if nothing else, remained consistent.

He wrote her an especially obsequious fan letter on October 3, 1957, the aim of which seemed, at least in part, to return him to Rand's good graces. To that end, he emphasized his internal defects to explain what had earlier pushed him away from her. His absence, in other words, stemmed from

a problem of his and not of hers. Hyperbole constituted most of this letter that its writer insisted lacked hyperbole. He noted his regret that his mother had been able to read merely Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy but never such a work as *Atlas Shrugged*, which he called "the greatest novel ever written," from "a mind that I unhesitatingly say is the most brilliant of the twentieth century" (Mises and Rothbard 2007, 12–16). The overstatement here wasn't necessarily puffery. Rothbard, writing on the day he had finished reading the novel (Mises and Rothbard 2007, 12), probably believed much of what he wrote. Countless others, after all, would experience similar exhilaration upon completion of *Atlas Shrugged* and also regard it as a profound accomplishment.

Rothbard again returned to Rand's orbit, but for a much longer period than his previous forays. This time, he became not so much a visitor but a member of sorts of the Collective, the small but growing coterie surrounding the Russian immigrant. His letters to Meyer reflect enthusiasm, hesitation, and seeds of the issues that would eventually sunder him from the group.

"We've seen Ayn a few times, a couple of times ourselves and once with the whole group," he wrote Meyer on December 4, 1957. "When Joey [Rothbard's wife] and I were up there alone, everything went fine, since I asked her questions and she answered them, which is about the only relationship the Randians enjoy having with others: as lecturers. You know I am a 98% Randian: I like their atheist-rationalist-libertarian-Aristotelianism. However, when the group got to Ayn's a bit of strain set in: in fact, despite her nice words at the end, I could see that fanatical hatred in her eye" (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.). Rothbard had unwisely submitted to a course of what he described to Meyer as "Brandian psychoanalysis" for his "phobia," identified elsewhere as a fear of travel (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.; Heller 2009, 297). Rand lieutenant Nathaniel Branden lacked proper credentials at this point to conduct such treatment (Heller 2009, 297–98), and the information he collected, in providing him potential leverage against jaded or jilted members of the group, made such sessions a conflict of interest. Much of this did not occur to Rothbard at the time, as he described the psychoanalysis to Meyer as "pleasant." He noted that Circle Bastiat members Ralph Raico and George Reisman also visited Branden to cure their illnesses, and that Reisman's problem remained unknown to him (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.).

If Rothbard did not yet grasp the imprudence of turning over personal secrets to a man more interested in collecting and keeping followers for Ayn Rand than in helping his patients overcome various mental health ailments, he at least understood his own place in the Objectivist orbit as tenuous. Part of this involved his wife JoAnn, whose Christianity clashed with Objectivism's zeal for atheism. "Joey says that she would like to see the day when George, Ralph and I are all cured," her husband continued in that December 4 letter

to Meyer, "and then spit in Nathan's face and walk out; this would be swell but I'm afraid things will come to a head long before that" (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.).

Rothbard went on to enumerate various points of disagreement between himself and the emerging guru. While Rand had once socialized among peers, to include Isabel Paterson, Ludwig von Mises, and Henry Hazlitt, she increasingly operated in a curated world inhabited by vetted admirers (Burns 2009, 114, 125–32, 141; Heller 2009, 245–51). Despite the subservient tone of his October letter to Rand, Rothbard, though two decades her junior, constitutionally did not fit for long in any such sycophantic environment. The fact that he dared to disagree with and even ridicule her demonstrated this. He wrote to Meyer that while Rand's belief in natural rights appealed to him, he regarded her extension of them to animals as crazy—and confessed to joking about the natural rights of cockroaches with his clique. Rothbard pointed out his belief, contra Rand, in natural instincts and disbelief, contra Rand, that "everyone on the same intelligence level could do anything in any field on the comparable intelligence plane." He noted a split on the seemingly uncontroversial idea of making support of children compulsory for parents, which, despite *Atlas Shrugged*'s reputation as a kid-free zone, Rand endorsed. The group's harsh rejection of his idea of private courts similarly alienated him, he wrote (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.). He claimed in the letter that the Randians joined him in support of private police forces, though Nathaniel Branden later cited that as an idea held by Rothbard that Rand rejected as a recipe for civil war, so it is possible that Rothbard misunderstood (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.; N. Branden 1999, 230). He opined to Meyer that "to the Randians no differences are minor, and all are crucial," and that emotion rather than reason governed many of the leader's pronouncements (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.).

To illustrate this controversial point, he juxtaposed Rand's embrace of her Random House editor, who had rejected her ideas but not her book, with her rejection of a classical liberal whose love of God seemed more powerful than his love for *Atlas Shrugged*. "Bennett Cerf is 'really' and metaphysically a great libertarian because he liked *Atlas*, even though 'he doesn't agree to specific issues,'" Rothbard reported to Meyer as the chief Objectivist's subjective outlook, "while Leonard Liggio is a son of a bitch because he didn't like *Atlas*, and also not really a libertarian" (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.). This intolerance extended, perhaps especially, to the small but growing group of admirers who imitated Rand: Rothbard further told Meyer in that December 4, 1957, letter that his younger associates, Raico and Bruce Goldberg, drove the Collective "wild with fury" by embracing a "logical positivism" that they integrated with Randian ethics (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.). This disagreement set off an explosive conflict.

As Rothbard described it to Meyer, Nathaniel Branden and others at the meeting declared Ayn Rand not only the greatest mind since at least Aristotle, but the greatest person as well. Those who did not share this view, Rothbard noted, they labeled as evil. They further acknowledged that Randians were obligated to collectively spurn any person holding such an evil opinion. Both Raico and Goldberg dissented. They conceded that Rand ranked as *one of the greatest minds of the century*. They just regarded Ludwig von Mises as her intellectual superior. This set Branden and others off. While this blowup involved Randians and not Rand herself, and Rothbard received the story distilled telephonically from Raico and Goldberg, the tale likely evoked in their older friend a déjà vu of sorts concerning the unease he had felt at Rand's dressing down of Reisman more than three years earlier (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.; Rothbard 1989, 28–29).

By the late 1980s, Rothbard recalled the Goldberg excommunication slightly differently from what he had communicated to Meyer in the December 4, 1957, letter. In Rothbard's 1989 *Liberty* article, the question did not pertain to the greatest mind in history. Instead, Branden asks, "Who has been the most intellectually important person in my life?" And to this perfunctory question presupposing rote answers of "Ayn Rand," Goldberg answers not "Ludwig von Mises," as Rothbard had told Meyer contemporaneously with the excommunication, but "Ralph Raico," who followed Goldberg out of the Collective just as a grateful Goldberg had earlier followed Raico into libertarianism (Rothbard 1989, 28–29). Possibly time played mischief with memories of the event. Possibly time allowed for the accumulation of more detail that provided greater accuracy. Possibly what Rothbard wrote to Meyer in 1957 and what he wrote in *Liberty* in 1989 both happened. What is definite is that in certain details, the depiction of this event in 1957 differed from the depiction of it thirty-two years later.

The December 1957 experience so jarred Raico and Goldberg—the latter of whom four years later would pen a brutal review of Rand's *For the New Intellectual* (Goldberg 1961)—that they called Rothbard at two in the morning with their concerns. Rothbard confessed to Meyer in that December 4, 1957, letter an impulse to immediately share this information with him through a morning-part-of-the-night call, of the type regularly dialed and received on Meyer's farmhouse's line, but that his financially "embarrassed" situation restrained him (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.). "Do you know the Randians are a grim lot?" he continued. "Even at their most friendliest, which we had seen till recently, they are at best genial, never wildly dramatic and humorous in the Grand Tradition. Ayn's doctrine is that a sense of humor is permissible: provided one [laughs] at one's enemies" (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.).

Circling the Wagons

A few weeks later, Rothbard, writing in longhand atop a carbon copy of a typed December 28 letter sent to William F. Buckley Jr., asked Meyer to disregard his negative depiction of Rand and her followers from his previous letter. It was, he had since discovered, a misrepresentation. He now knew what they had really meant. And what was that? He did not say. He did fixate on attacks on *Atlas Shrugged* in the letter to Buckley, so possibly a circle-the-wagons effect hastened the reorientation of Rothbard's epistolary depictions of the Collective and its leader (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.).

In the October 3, 1957, letter, Rothbard had offered to Rand to write letters to the editor on behalf of *Atlas Shrugged*, which he noted he had already done in response to a negative article on the book by former Communist Granville Hicks in the *New Leader* (Mises and Rothbard 2007, 15–16). He had continued this crusade in the late fall by writing a letter objecting to a review in *Commonweal* (Raimondo 2000, 120–21).

He had lamented in an October 8 letter to Meyer the critique of *Atlas Shrugged* by Helen Beal Woodward in the *Saturday Review* (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.). Therein, Woodward (1957, 25) had praised Rand's talent while describing the book as "the equivalent of a fifteenth-century morality play" with "stylized vice-and-virtue characters" that "serve as dummies on which to drape the author's ideas." *Atlas Shrugged*, Woodward wrote, "sets up one of the finest assortments of straw men ever demolished in print." Rothbard had noted to Meyer, *National Review*'s "Books, Arts, and Manners" editor, that the "idiot" who wrote that piece also wrote "stupid" reviews for his magazine. The fact that Woodward conceded Rand's abilities, and fixated less on her ideology than on the notion that her ideology overpowered aesthetics and story and all else, made for a more damaging review than a politicized review in which the prejudices of the critic, rather than the faults of the author, became apparent. He wrote Meyer, "I think I would have preferred an outright leftist attack than this moronic nonsense that makes the book out to be some sort of Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm" (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.).

Now, in late December, Rothbard's ire turned toward the section of *National Review* that libertarianish Frank Meyer oversaw. Months earlier, Meyer had taken over the "Books, Arts, and Manners" section from Willi Schlamm, after the tempestuous Austrian clashed with his *National Review* cofounder, William F. Buckley Jr., and fellow senior editor James Burnham. The departure elevated Meyer to editor of the reviews section and facilitated the arrival of Whittaker Chambers, a fellow senior editor who had likely viewed Schlamm's involvement in the magazine as one reason to rebuff its editor's repeated invitations to him to join the staff (Tanenhaus 1998, 491–500; Flynn 2025, 218–19). Early in his short *National Review* tenure, Chambers wrote an infamous, or famous (depending upon one's perspective), review

of *Atlas Shrugged* that was published in the December 28, 1957, issue. Technically, Meyer oversaw the section that printed the review. However, his newness in the position and the magazine's desire to hold on to a figure of Chambers's stature made any potential question of tempering the review moot. An intervention seemed unlikely for another reason: laissez-faire governed Meyer's editing as well as his economics.

Chambers had already submitted a review of imprisoned Yugoslavian dissident Communist Milovan Djilas's *The New Class*, which he demanded the magazine suppress, which it did, until he delivered part two of the review, which he never did. Based on the false supposition of a forthcoming completed Chambers review, Meyer rebuffed, as correspondence from September 1957 shows, attempts by the better-suited Slobodan Draskovich, a Yugoslavian who had witnessed his father's murder by the Communists and who had spent several years in a Nazi concentration camp, to review his countryman's book (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.). Rothbard had noted to Rand in his October 3 letter to her that John Chamberlain, a figure within *National Review*'s orbit who was far more amenable to *Atlas Shrugged*'s outlook, might instead review her book for the magazine if Chambers did not produce a review—information likely gleaned from conversations with Meyer (Mises and Rothbard 2007, 12–16).

The idea of a Chamberlain rather than a Chambers review necessarily unleashes what-might-have-been, counterfactual histories of the American Right. But, in contrast to his handling of the Djilas volume, Chambers did submit a full review of *Atlas Shrugged*, one that forever alienated Rand from Buckley, Chambers, *National Review*, and much of the burgeoning conservative movement. The backup Chamberlain review, which ultimately appeared in *The Freeman*, prophetically described the book as "so deftly plotted, so excitingly paced, and so universal in its hero-villain intensity, that it will carry its message to thousands who would never be caught dead reading a textbook—or even a difficult article—on economics" (Chamberlain 1957, 56). While Chamberlain mentioned the author's "dogmatic ethical hardness" (55), his article mainly consisted of elongated quotations from the novel—hardly the stuff to inspire visceral hatred of the type engendered by the Chambers piece.

From labeling *Atlas Shrugged* "a remarkably silly book" in the second paragraph to judging in the penultimate paragraph that it commands, "To a gas chamber—go," the Chambers (1957, 594, 596) review struck as less criticism than condescension. For Chambers, Rand owed a debt not to Aristotle but to a less fashionable thinker: Friedrich Nietzsche. Chambers objected in a philosophical sense to what he dubbed materialism informing the work and in a literary sense to caricatures instead of characters populating its pages. He judged, "Randian Man, like Marxian Man, is made the center of a godless world" (595).

The review had the opposite effect on Rothbard of what Chambers had intended—at least initially. Rothbard's early December letter to Meyer sounded in places like Chambers's late December review for Meyer's section in *National Review*. In that December 4, 1957, letter, Rothbard had described Objectivism to Meyer as "a little cult, whose 'mass base' consists of a corporals' guard of stupid young Jewish girls," that appeared "perilously close to outright insanity, if not over the brink" (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.). Yet after reading Chambers's harsh review, Rothbard rallied around the Randians. "I am surprised and chagrined to find that the only right-wing best-seller of the decade—Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*—has received its most unsympathetic and unfair review in the pages of *National Review* (Dec. 28)," Rothbard wrote Buckley on the same date in a missive that he shared with Meyer. "It is no wonder that our intellectual and cultural life is dominated by the Liberals" (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.). The three-page letter to Buckley resembled a three-page April 8, 1956, letter published by *Commentary* in June of that year in which Rothbard objected to Dwight Macdonald's snobbish piece in the publication's pages about the birth of a new magazine, *National Review* (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.). Eventually, however, Rothbard adopted a position that, though substantively different, was tonally the same as the one expressed by Chambers so controversially in the pages of *National Review*.

The Moulding of "The Sociology of the Ayn Rand Cult"

In his December 28, 1957, letter to Buckley, Rothbard cited Chambers's comparisons of Rand with Adolf Hitler as the "most outlandish error" of his review (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.). He came around, judging that "the Rand line was totalitarian," comparing the movement that coalesced around her to the ones that ultimately surrounded "Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Trotsky, and Mao," describing Nathaniel Branden as "the Führer," and labeling Objectivism "a totalitarian Cult" (Rothbard [1972] 2025, 1989, 27–28). This conclusion did not seem a far cry from "To a gas chamber—go."

Whittaker Chambers did not influence Rothbard here. Another *National Review* senior editor did. Frank Meyer and Murray Rothbard worked in the 1950s and early 1960s as the Volker Fund's two analysts who reviewed scholarly journals and books. The magnum opus of each man, *In Defense of Freedom* by the former and *Man, Economy, and State* by the latter, came about through grants from Volker. Meyer, in his capacity as "Books, Arts, and Manners" editor at *National Review*, regularly ran reviews written by his friend during the late 1950s and early 1960s.[1] Even during a time when

1 From 1956 to 1961, Rothbard wrote twenty-two full-length reviews (short reviews do not show up in search engines) in *National Review*. Several of these reviews predated Meyer's stewardship of "Books, Arts, and Manners," which began in the summer of 1957. None, significantly, came under the watch of Austrian economics critic Willmoore Kendall from the magazine's November 1955 origin to July of the following year, when Willi Schlamm began editing that section. For a listing of Rothbard's *National Review* writings, see the Murray N. Rothbard Archives at the *Unz Review*.

Rothbard's attempts at political organizing brought him into an alliance with the New Left, he described Meyer in a 1967 article about him as the most libertarian-oriented *National Review* editor and in a March 4, 1969, letter to him as the only reliably profreedom voice, with the possible exception of John Chamberlain, within the conservative movement (Rothbard 1967; *Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.). Their friendship stemmed not merely from political similarities. Both men hailed from Jewish backgrounds in the New York area, gained reputations as nocturnal creatures, and transformed their homes into salons by welcoming a long line of pilgrims who visited to discuss and debate over weekends and into the night. Rothbard liked and respected Meyer, and vice versa.

Rothbard first took public the private concerns which he had shared with his older friend and others in 1957 and 1958 in a 1972 publication. His "Sociology of the Ayn Rand Cult" cites Meyer by name, uses "cadre"—one of the former Communist's favorite words—to make the point that Rand's inner circle encountered esoteric teachings at odds with her exoteric ones, and references Meyer's (1961) *Moulding of Communists* to demonstrate the similar indoctrination processes of Communists and Objectivists (Rothbard [1972] 2025). A curious style that omits dates and names for all but major events and leading figures imbues both Rothbard's 1972 publication and Meyer's 1961 book with a hazy quality. A careful reading of the two works reveals the former's reliance in a broad, structural sense on the latter.

In *The Moulding of Communists*, a sort of anthropology of the folkways of the party's vanguard, Meyer recalled a "great sureness" accompanying his embrace of Marxism. He noted that "no conceivable area of life, of action, even of speculation" existed in which the Marxist believes "his judicious use of theory cannot quickly yield certainties and clarities which fit with precision into the well-ordered pattern of his total outlook." He cited the notion of instructing a physicist to abandon scientific principles in favor of Marxist guidance or the novelist to disregard the judgments of veterans in his field in favor of those from party leaders as examples of how fealty to the group eclipsed individual reason and wisdom (Meyer 1961, 52–53).

One detects echoes of this and other parts of Meyer's analysis while reading "The Sociology of the Ayn Rand Cult." Yet Rothbard delivered what he guessed amounted to the first negative review of *The Moulding of Communists* upon the issuance of a paperback edition in 1967. What Meyer described as special to communism, Rothbard characterized as prosaic. IBM, GM, and other large organizations all imposed conformity, he reasoned (Rothbard 1967, 25–26). Meyer, who had worked closely with Prince Mirsky, who later died in the gulag; Walter Ulbricht, who later erected the Berlin Wall; and Michael Straight, who later engaged in espionage for the Soviet Union, certainly witnessed the Communist Party's "organization men" engage in activities foreign to IBM, GM, and the Randians (Flynn 2025, 43, 54, 70,

75–77). However, the book dealt mainly in generalities and, when citing specifics, did so vaguely. Rothbard (1967) consequently offered a ho-hum reaction to the rather staid expression of Meyer's wild experience as a Communist from 1931 through 1945.

In *The Moulding of Communists*, Meyer detailed how the party broke up marriages when one partner lacked sufficient devotion not to the other but to the cause (Meyer 1961, 128–30). In his review, Rothbard characterized marital interference as normal throughout any large organization, where "even the choice of a wife is thoroughly checked and corrected by the criterion of whether or not she fits into the company executive mould. Yet Mr. Meyer seems to believe that only the Communist Party has presumed to dictate the private lives of its members!" In response to the outlining of a similar party expectation of insular, ideologically based friendships in *The Moulding of Communists*, Rothbard scoffed: "Now Good Heavens! Has Meyer never heard of friendships being formed on the basis of deeply-shared interests?" (Rothbard 1967, 25–26, 30).

The excuses Rothbard afforded Bolsheviks he did not extend to the Objectivists five years later: "In the manner of many cults, loyalty to the guru had to supersede loyalty to family and friends—typically the first personal crises for the fledgling Randian," points out his vaguely memoirish 1972 broadside. "If non-Randian family and friends persisted in their heresies even after being hectored at some length by the young neophyte, they were then considered to be irrational and part of the Enemy and had to be abandoned. The same was true of spouses; many marriages were broken up by the cult leadership who sternly informed either the wife or the husband that their spouses were not sufficiently Randworthy" (Rothbard [1972] 2025). Rothbard later insisted that he and JoAnn had experienced this heavy-handed tactic (Rothbard 1989, 27–30). Meyer had experienced it, too, albeit in the attempt of the Communists to keep Elsie Meyer within the party by convincing her to ditch her unsalvageable Browderite husband (J. Meyer, pers. comm., July 11, 2023). Each exposé omitted this autobiographical detail even as they both discussed the general phenomenon.

"As in the case of all cults and sects, a particularly vital method for moulding the members and keeping them in line was maintaining their constant and unrelenting activity within the movement," Rothbard noted in his 1972 tract. "Frank Meyer relates that Communists preserve their members from the dangerous practice of thinking on their own by keeping them in constant activity together with other Communists. He notes that, of the major Communist defectors in the United States, almost all defected only after a period of enforced isolation" (Rothbard [1972] 2025). This was certainly true of Meyer, who spent about two years away from the party in the army and then recuperating from surgeries necessitated by training injuries (Flynn 2025, 105–18). To illustrate the broad point of isolation breeding

independence, Rothbard inserted himself in the story in his 1989 *Liberty* article, where he recalled that Nathaniel Branden had asked him in 1958 why he attended Objectivist meetings only two days a week (Rothbard 1989, 29).

Why did a man known for allegiance to principle zigzag so dramatically on both Ayn Rand and the obscure book by Frank S. Meyer that provided him a template for writing "The Sociology of the Ayn Rand Cult"? In the case of the former, the twists and tacks primarily involved not principle, which he never sacrificed or renounced to ingratiate himself to the Collective, but personality. He countenanced differences in philosophy and what he called "bizarreries" in behavior because he believed Rand offered something special through *Atlas Shrugged*. Ultimately, his distaste for overbearing people who preached a hands-off policy drowned his earlier enthusiasm for the novel that brought them all together.

In the case of the latter, his shifting standard was possibly influenced by desired outcomes. In 1967, when he reviewed *The Moulding of Communists*, the Vietnam War was escalating—and Rothbard's noticeable outrage over the state again taking human life was, too. Rothbard and Meyer agreed on so much. They disagreed on anti-communism. Meyer contemplated a nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union, shouted "Tear down the Berlin Wall" more than a quarter century before Ronald Reagan did, and offered "Invade Cuba!" as a Madison Square Garden response to the Cuban Missile Crisis (Ebert 1962; Newberry 1962; Judis 1988, 174). Rothbard, who came up through the Old Right, perhaps found it difficult to understand the passion of his friend, who had seen communism up close. A book that depicted Communists—the very people fighting the US government in Vietnam—as robotic ideologues programmed to abjectly follow orders inconvenienced the foreign policy point Rothbard then sought to stress. Meyer, whom Rothbard regarded as a libertarian in just about every respect save for his strident, bellicose anti-communism, probably irked him at that point more than ever (Rothbard 1981, 352–63). Whatever the reason, what Rothbard dismissed as humdrum in his review of *The Moulding of Communists*, he highlighted as tremendous injustice in "The Sociology of the Ayn Rand Cult."

"A Calm Contempt"

Rothbard once exhorted Meyer to acknowledge Rand as a genius expositor of freedom. Then he used the template of Meyer's *Moulding of Communists* to illustrate the various means that the Randians had employed to exert control over followers. What happened between his initial, glowing 1957 letter to Meyer on Rand and the publication of the Meyer-reliant "Sociology of the Ayn Rand Cult" in 1972? The available Rothbard writings do much to explain. The heretofore unavailable Rothbard letters to Meyer do as well. They also underscore that emotions, which Rothbard often explained

motivated Rand (despite her philosophy's eschewal of a reliance on them even in terms of musical preferences or romantic partners), also fueled him to some degree (Walker 1999, 105–39; B. Branden 1986, 363–64, 386–87, 395).

By mid-1958, the tolerance from Rothbard toward the Randians and the tolerance for Rothbard from the Randians had expired. Dispositive factors for the split included Rothbard's refusal to turn over a recording of a skit performed by the Circle Bastiat that mocked the Collective; pressure on Rothbard to coax his wife to drop Christianity; Nathaniel Branden's attempt to damage Rothbard professionally with plagiarism accusations; and Rothbard's refusal, despite his stated enthusiasm for private courts, to show up for his Randian trial (Rothbard 1989, 27–32; Raimondo 2000, 123–30).

After Branden contacted academics in Rothbard's field in 1958 with his bill of particulars, the young economist sought to damage the people who sought to damage him. "I just remembered that the Randians get a great number of their raw material channeled to them through Lyle Munson, who, whenever he hears of an admirer of *Atlas*, sends the person on to Nathan and his lectures," Rothbard wrote to Meyer on August 24, 1958. "Behind his back, Ayn and Nathan of course dislike Munson greatly (a Catholic you know) but, despite their Higher Morality, are well willing to use him. It occurs to me that one blow you could strike for the anti-Randian, anti-Brandian cause, is to alert Lyle Munson about the nature of these bastards, and thus cut off much of their supply of potential converts" (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.). By summer's dog days of 1958, the 98 percent Randian of less than a year earlier described the group with offensive language and sought ways to undermine their project. He now recruited others to "the anti-Randian, anti-Brandian cause."

The extant correspondence between Frank and Elsie Meyer and Munson, who with his company, the Bookmailer, effectively operated a clearinghouse for right-wing titles and acted as a middleman between buyers and publishers, does not include a note of the type suggested by Rothbard. Meyer compiled a reading list, for light remuneration, for the Bookmailer in 1958, so the correspondence between the two appears heavier that year than in any other. Possibly, given Meyer's preference for the telephone over the mail, the pair spoke about it; however, Meyer's papers do not provide any evidence that such a conversation took place (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.).

In fact, Meyer's papers provide little evidence that he gave much thought to Objectivism at all. The gauge of Meyer's interest comes through the almost complete absence of Ayn Rand mentions within the tens of thousands of his letters extracted from the warehouse. Meyer's elder son, John, subscribed to the *Objectivist Newsletter* as a teenager. He said in an interview for this article that he regarded Rand's ideas more favorably than did his father. "I think he considered Rand significant," John Meyer recollected, "but that there were errors. I am pretty sure that my father's view was that, on balance, Rand was

actually a positive influence." That said, Frank Meyer regarded Objectivism as not under the broad umbrella of American conservatism, a sentiment Rand would undoubtedly have seconded (J. Meyer, pers. comm., June 16, 2025). Though she did not operate beyond his notice, she did operate outside his passion.

Almost three years after the petition to Meyer to alert Lyle Munson about his false friends, Rothbard remained scarred by his experience within the Collective. In 1961, he sent Meyer a venomous March 27, 1961, *Newsweek* article, which he described in an undated note as "precious to me" and emphasized that he meant it by petitioning for the article's return (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.). The article examined Ayn Rand and the courses on her theory that Nathaniel Branden oversaw in Manhattan. If the Whittaker Chambers review dripped with condescension, the *Newsweek* piece flowed with it. Therein, an unsubtle Leslie Hanscom, whom Rothbard identified as the author of the nonbylined piece, places *The Fountainhead* among the worst novels ever written and defends Rand from charges of Nazism by pointing out that she hates the majority of mankind impartially (Newsweek 1961, 104–5).[2] "God bless Mr. Hanscom—he did a beautiful job on The Rand—he *really caught the spirit* of the atmosphere, the cult, etc., extremely well," he wrote Meyer. Just a few years earlier, Rothbard had spun off critical letters to *National Review*, the *Saturday Review*, the *New Leader*, and *Commonweal* for their negative articles on Rand not nearly as snarky as the *Newsweek* piece. By 1961, such negative publicity inspired celebratory notes to his friend in Woodstock including an insulting nickname of "The Rand," which conjured up hive-brain imagery for a group espousing rationalism and individualism. "*Newsweek* did such a fine job of doing something that I wanted badly to see done," he wrote, "that it has freed me from passionate hatred of The Rand, and transmuted it into a calm contempt" (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.).

Passions indeed cooled. Contempt calmed. They did not, as Rothbard's periodic revisitations of this unhappy period demonstrate, entirely dissipate. As he had concluded to Meyer in the August 24, 1958, letter, "To the ordinarily good slogan 'no enemies to the Right,' the Randians offer a striking exception" (*Frank S. Meyer Papers*, n.d.).

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2 This article, unlike other articles sent by Rothbard to Meyer, does not appear in the file folder, which suggests that Meyer did return it as his correspondent had requested.

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