

# THE Ayn Rand LETTER®

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## FROM MY "FUTURE FILE"

This Letter was written over a period of about fifteen years.

I keep a file of notes for my future work, many of which are passages I have cut out of my various articles in the past. I have cut them chiefly for lack of space, and I save them for more detailed discussion in the future.

But I realized that although I intend to write further on some of these subjects, it is very unlikely that I will write again on others. Yet I do want to express these particular thoughts - so I decided to publish them in their original form, as self-contained excerpts. Square brackets indicate additions I have written for the present issue.

## News Events

There is no proper solution for the war in Vietnam: it is a war we should never have entered. We are caught in a trap: it is senseless to continue, and it is now impossible to withdraw - impossible and unspeakable, for the following reasons. Soviet Russia has been preparing for a showdown war with the West, from as far back as the twenties; this is part of her declared, official doctrine; and her only hope of winning in such a war is the constantly reiterated claim that the Western "proletariat" will not let their governments fight against Soviet Russia. Khrushchev repeated that claim during his visit to the United States.

The Western "proletariat," i.e., the people, have not fulfilled that hope, but the Western intellectuals have. This is the motive behind the small, but very noisy minority of Vietnicks in this country, whether they know it individually or not: to give the world the impression that the American people will not fight against Soviet Russia. If the United States were now to withdraw from Vietnam, it would be a confirmation and a surrender, a declaration of our debilitated impotence. It could unleash an unobstructed flood of communism on the world, and a nuclear war - since it would encourage the Soviet thugs, doped by their own stooges and their own propaganda, to believe that America would not fight. (Cut from "The Wreckage of the Consensus." Written in 1967. See the paperback edition of my book Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal.)

[I hope that our foreign policy will be clear and forceful enough to forestall such an impression.]

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Observe the stressed insistence of modern intellectuals on the virtue of "flexibility" as opposed to "ideological dogmatism." By "dogmatism," they do not mean merely faith in mystical doctrines, but adherence to rationally demonstrated principles as well (they make no distinction between these two). It is to prepare them for decisions such as the present one [on wage-price controls] that the notion of pragmatist "flexibility" was devised. What it actually means is that men may permit their wishes or whims to be inflexible, in the hope that a flexible reality will adjust to them. But reality is not flexible; neither is men's need of a livelihood; neither are the requirements of a productive economy.

As to the effect of Pragmatism on personal integrity, on credibility, and on public confidence, the best summary was given by James Reston in a discussion of another, earlier turnabout of Mr. Nixon's policy: the attempted rapprochement with Red China. (The New York Times, September 3, 1971.) "The problem here in Tokyo and to a lesser extent in Peking after all this is that officials don't quite know what to expect next. Maybe the Democrats and even the 'regular' Republicans are in the same boat. They recognize the problems and even admire the President's willingness to reverse and even defy his past policies and principles, but they are left without much confidence about where we all go from here....Mr. Nixon has demonstrated his flexibility and his pragmatism, but where will this lead next month or next year?" (Cut from "The Moratorium on Brains." This Letter, October 25-November 8, 1971.)

## Psychology

The intellectuals' standard complaint against this country - that it is materialistic, anti-intellectual, and treats them unfairly - is an obvious rationalization. There is no country on earth where the intellectuals receive higher remuneration for their services, have greater opportunities, and are given more authentic (often undeserved) respect. But this is not what they want: what they want is authority - arbitrary authority over uncritically obedient, helplessly awed subjects - a thing this country will never give to anyone. There are no such subjects in this country, beyond a handful of specially conditioned college students. (Cut from "A Preview," Part III. This Letter, August 28, 1972.)

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The effort that the men of that category [the men of a perceptual mentality] dread is mental, not physical. Their desire is to escape from a firm, objective, absolute, unforgiving reality - a reality that has no compassion for a mind that feels like slipping out of focus. It is the desire to substitute the absolutism of a dictator for the much more firm absolutism of nature.

The very aspect of a dictatorship which makes the man of reason, the man of a conceptual mentality, prefer to die rather than live at the mercy of some ruler's whims, is the aspect that appeals to the perceptual mentalities: the capricious, arbitrary, unpredictable nature of a ruler gives them the universe they want, where nothing is certain or firm, where they may be destroyed at whim, but may also have a chance to beg forgiveness, and a chance to get away with their whims - where they may get away with a lifetime of unfocused stupor, where their ideas, values, motions, work and food will be obtained, not by choice, but by obedience.

That is the soul and the ideals of the men who have won their chance to destroy the world by means of being called "impractical idealists." (Cut from "For the New Intellectual." Written in 1960. See my book of the same title.)

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What men need to learn is that their subconscious is a computer, programmed by their minds, which generates their emotions, that it is a needed computer on their journey through life, but that the task of their minds is to control and correct it in accordance with the facts they observe as they move forward.

There was one incident in the journey of Apollo 11 that stands as an immortal symbol of this issue. In the last moments before the lunar landing, Commander Armstrong observed that the spacecraft's overworked computer was directing it toward a crash in a crater filled with rocks. He had ninety seconds in which to take over and to select a better place for landing. He did.

Most people have longer than that to correct their course when their mind observes that the misprogrammed computer of their emotions is directing them toward a crash. But - in consequence of their modern training - most of them choose to crash. (Cut from "Apollo 11." The Objectivist, September 1969.)

## Ethics

There is nothing so naive as cynicism. A cynic is one who believes that men are innately depraved, that irrationality and cowardice are their basic characteristics, that fear is the most potent of human incentives - and, therefore, that the most practical method of dealing with men is to count on their stupidity, appeal to their knavery, and keep them in constant terror.

In private life, this belief creates a criminal; in politics, it creates a statist. But, contrary to the cynic's belief, crime and statism do not pay.

A criminal might thrive on human vices, but is reduced to impotence when he comes up against the fact that "you can't cheat an honest man." A statist might ride to power by dispensing promises, threats and handouts to the seekers of the unearned - but he finds himself impotent in a national emergency, because the language, methods and policies which were successful with parasites, do not work when the country needs producers. (A note written in 1961.)

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"Productive work" does not mean the blind performance of the motions of some job. It means the conscious, rational pursuit of a productive career. In popular usage, the term "career" is applied only to the more ambitious types of work; but, in fact, it applies to all work: it denotes a man's attitude toward his work.

The difference between a career-man and a job-holder is as follows: a career-man regards his work as constant progress, as a constant upward motion from one achievement to another, higher one, driven by the constant expansion of his mind, his knowledge, his ability, his creative ingenuity, never stopping to stagnate on any level. A job-holder regards his work as a punishment imposed on him by the incomprehensible malevolence of reality or of society, which, somehow, does not let him exist without effort; so his policy is to go through the least amount of motions demanded of him by somebody and to stay put in any job or drift off to another, wherever chance, circumstances or relatives might happen to push him.

In this sense, a man of limited ability who rises by his own purposeful effort from unskilled laborer to shop-foreman, is a career-man in the proper, ethical meaning of the word - while an intelligent man who stagnates in the role of a company president, using one-tenth of his potential ability, is a mere job-holder. And so is a parasite posturing



in a job too big for his ability. It is not the degree of a man's ability that is ethically relevant in this issue, but the full, purposeful use of his ability. (Cut from "The Objectivist Ethics." Written in 1961. See my book The Virtue of Selfishness.)

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Let me relate two incidents out of many in my own experience that helped me to identify the nature of the Argument from Intimidation.

The first was a private discussion in which I was presenting my political ideas. My opponent exclaimed indignantly, in rebuttal: "I've never heard of such a thing!" "Well, you're hearing it now," I said. This had some peculiar effect on him, out of proportion to the meaning of my words; it was as if I had cut the ground from under his feet; he argued half-heartedly a little longer, then gave up.

It was not till much later that I understood what it was that he had been telegraphing by the second-hander's code: "Since no one else has said such a thing before, who are you to say it?" My answer told him who I was: it rejected any second-hand sanction and demanded that he focus on the facts of reality. On such terms, he was unable to argue or to think.

The second incident took place when I was working in Hollywood. A literary agent approached me with an offer from a major studio that wanted me to write a novel for one of their stars, on a theme and subject of their own choice, a novel that would be published first as a book, then made into a movie. I answered that I don't write novels to order. He said, in an oddly resentful, accusatory manner: "Many good writers are doing it." I answered cheerfully: "Then I guess I'm not a good writer." Again, this had some peculiar, disproportionate, ground-cutting effect on him; he argued half-heartedly a little longer, then gave up.

Later, I grasped what he had been signaling between the lines. He was threatening me with the fact that good writers do not share my attitude. What my answer told him was: "If such are their values, then I do not care to be regarded as good by their standards." He had no further arguments to offer. (Cut from "The Argument from Intimidation." Written in 1964. See The Virtue of Selfishness.)

## Politics

There is still another sense in which capitalism may be said to achieve "the common good." Since the good is objective, it has to be defined in terms of abstract principles covering a wide variety of concretes; it is up to every individual to apply these principles to the particular goals and problems of his own life. It is only such principles that can provide a [proper] common bond among men; men can agree on a principle without necessarily agreeing on the choice of concretes. For instance, men can agree that one should work, without prescribing any man's particular choice of work.

It is only with abstract principles that a social system may properly be concerned. A social system cannot force a particular good on a man nor can it force him to seek the good: it can only maintain conditions of existence which leave him free to seek it. A government cannot live a man's life, it can only protect his freedom. It cannot prescribe concretes, it cannot tell a man how to work, what to produce, what to buy, what to say, what to write, what values to seek, what form of happiness to pursue - it can only uphold the principle of his right to make such choices.

It is in this sense that "the common good" or "the public interest" lies not in



what men do when they are free, but in the fact that they are free. (Cut from "What Is Capitalism?" Written in 1965. See Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal.)

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Property rights and the right of free trade are man's only "economic rights" (they are, in fact, political rights). There can be no such thing as "an economic bill of rights." But observe that its advocates are the vociferous enemies of and have all but destroyed those two authentic rights.

Political rights pertain to the organization of a society, to the establishment of a social system, a government, and a legal code. As such, they are validated by reference to the facts of reality: to man's nature and to the metaphysical conditions of his life on earth - and they establish basic principles for the creation of a rational, morally defensible society, i.e., a society appropriate to the requirements of man's survival.

But the concept of "economic rights" is a mystics' flight from reality. It is an attempt to extort from some men (from the ablest and most productive) a security which is metaphysically impossible: the security of a guaranteed, automatic, effortless, unearned survival. Glance back at that Democratic Party platform [of 1960] and observe such eloquent touches as "the right to enjoy good health" and "the right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accidents and unemployment." It is an attempt to change the nature of the universe by bureaucratic edict, by the power of the coercive mechanism of the absolutist state, by the omnipotent power of a gun - and by the grace of those nameless victims who are to perish in that attempt and whose existence must never be acknowledged. It is an attempt to gain freedom from reality - from nature, from reason, logic, thought, effort or work. But there is no such thing as freedom from reality. (Cut from "Man's Rights." Written in 1963. See The Virtue of Selfishness.)

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A businessman's success depends on his intelligence, his knowledge, his productive ability, his economic judgment - and on the voluntary agreement of all those he deals with: his customers, his suppliers, his employees, his creditors or investors. A bureaucrat's success depends on his political pull. A businessman cannot force you to buy his product; if he makes a mistake, he suffers the consequences; if he fails, he takes the loss. A bureaucrat forces you to obey his decisions, whether you agree with him or not - and the more advanced the stage of a country's statism, the wider and more discretionary the powers wielded by a bureaucrat. If he makes a mistake, you suffer the consequences; if he fails, he passes the loss on to you, in the form of heavier taxes.

A businessman cannot force you to work for him or to accept the wages he offers; you are free to seek employment elsewhere and to accept a better offer, if you can find it. (Remember, in this context, that jobs do not exist "in nature," that they do not grow on trees, that someone has to create the job you need, and that that someone, the businessman, will go out of business if he pays you more than the market permits him to pay you.) A bureaucrat can force you to work for him, when he achieves the totalitarian power he seeks; he can force you to accept any payment he offers - or none, as witness the forced labor camps in the countries of full statism. (Cut from "America's Persecuted Minority: Big Business." Lecture at The Ford Hall Forum, Boston, December 17, 1961. See Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal.)

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Some of you may believe that some things are more important than freedom, justice or human rights - for instance, the seizure of unearned material wealth, or the power to distribute the goods one has not produced, or charity to some at the price of the immolation of others. Most of today's intellectuals believe that these things justify statism. But if such is their belief, why do they choose to disguise it by using the concepts and terms of a political theory which is the opposite of their own? They should not talk about "freedom from want" when they mean: "privilege to loot" - or about "a just distribution of goods" when they mean: "a demand for an unearned share of the goods produced by others" - or about "the right to a minimum livelihood" when they mean: "the chance to enslave those who will provide it." "Freedom," "justice" and "rights" are concepts that belong to the political-economic system of laissez-faire capitalism. (Cut from the same lecture.)

### Epistemology

With the collapse of philosophy in the twentieth century, science has been left in the state of an expedition that has lost its leader and its way in the jungle of the unknown, with the members of the disintegrating team - from assistants to secretaries to mess boys to weight-carriers - scattering through the jungle in any random direction, each going blindly through the motions of inquiry, turning over rocks, scratching tree-bark, counting raindrops, with no knowledge of what he is looking for, what to do if he finds it, or what may be properly taken as knowledge. (Cut from "What Is Capitalism?" Written in 1965. See Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal.)

### Esthetics

Have you noticed the proliferation of trashy science-fiction movies dealing with the same preposterous theme: the stealthy takeover of this earth by some evil creatures from outer space, in the form of giant insects, conscious vegetables, or shapeless sponges growing at uncheckable speed? These stories are true, in the way that ancient myths were true - as an attempt of primitive men to express an inexplicable fear by projecting an emotional equivalent: by inventing some mysterious phenomenon, such as a supernatural monster, which they had no power to identify; the phenomenon was fantasy, the emotion it evoked was real. (Cut from "The Establishing of an Establishment." This Letter, May 8-22, 1972.)

[Modern men sense that some terrible evil is taking over the world, an evil which is more frightening, more insidious, and less tangible than flying saucers: irrationalism. As evidence, I offer the movies in which a character stares at the face of another, of his wife or child or closest friend, trying to guess whether an evil force has taken over the body of his loved one. This is a good dramatization of the emotion a man would experience at the sudden, wanton, incomprehensible irrationality of another man.]

Ayn Rand

P.S. This Letter was published in June 1975.