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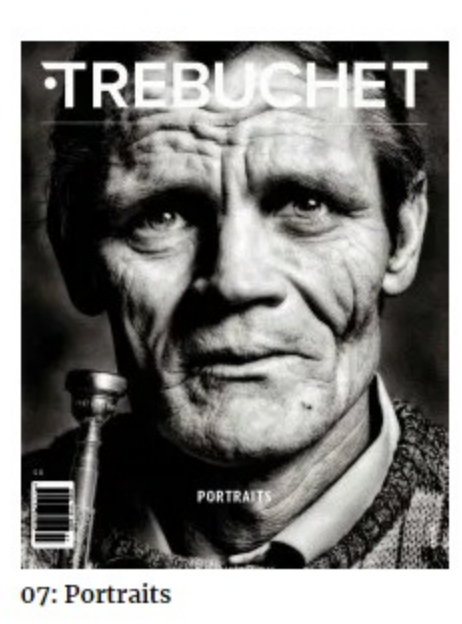
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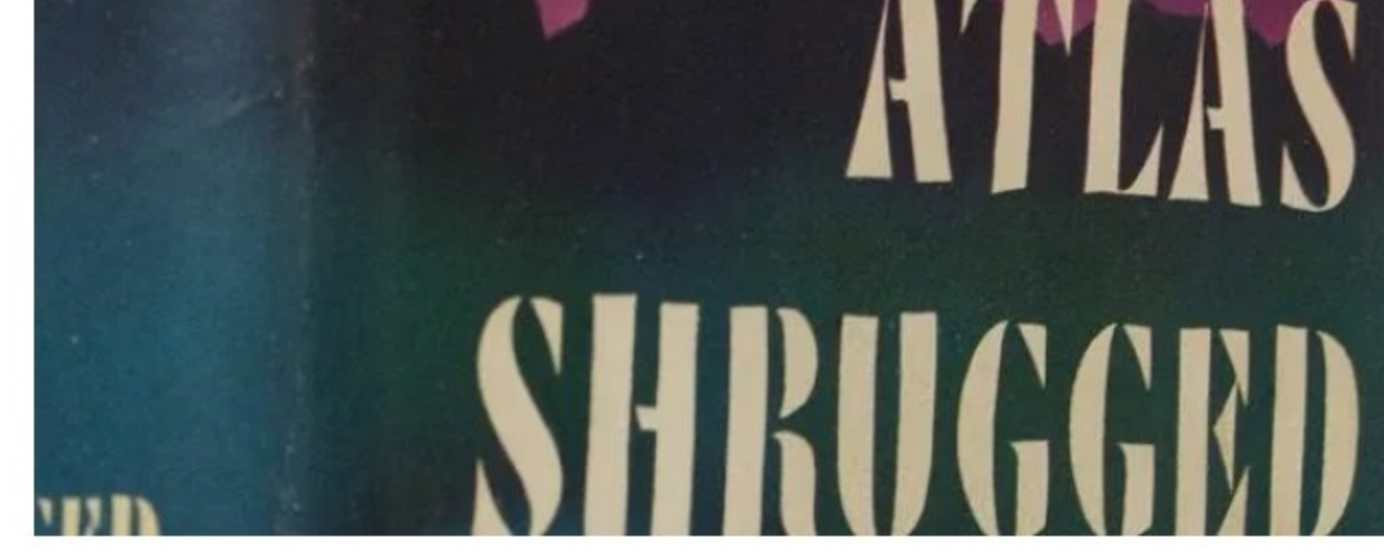
THE BUSINESS SUPERMAN IS BETTER THAN YOU: EXAMINING AYN RAND'S CONSTRUCTION OF THAT MOST PERTINENT OF MYTHS

05/03/2016 Michael Eden Society

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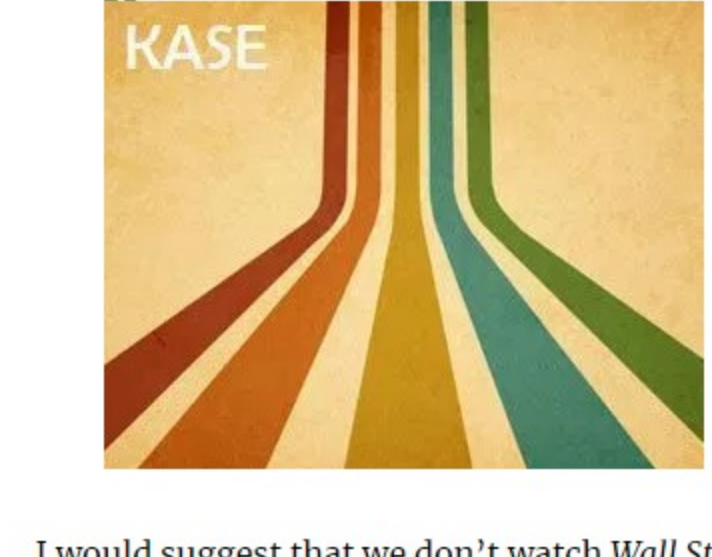
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Why is it that we remain in thrall to the enduring myth of the business superman, and entrust the running of our political affairs to his dubious moral compass?

What really convinces us of the value of the wealthy businessman?

The celebration of the businessman in popular culture is ubiquitous, from *Citizen Kane* to *Giant*, from *Wall Street* to *The Wolf of Wall Street*. Certainly, these films show excess and end badly for the central figures, but only after affording all the most charismatic actors and best lines to the playing out their glorious downfall.



I would suggest that we don't watch *Wall Street* to see the father and son reunion at its close, but rather to bear witness to Geldko's potency and his 'Greed is Good' speech. There is also 'The Apprentice' (which popularised Donald Trump) and 'Dragons Den' acting as propaganda for the self-made man, but analysis of these would leave the core of the phantasy hidden.

To really get inside this force we should look to the ultra-conformist endorsement given to capitalism and 'the entrepreneur' from Ayn Rand and her ideas about positivism.



In 1957 the Random House publishing company released *Atlas Shrugged*, an epic novel which expounded the ideals of what would come to be known as 'Positivism' – the philosophy of Ayn Rand – via a story about creative individuals and their struggles with bureaucracy and the ungrateful masses. Its tenets were absolute rationality, self-interest and the simple idea that naturally good and strong people would rise to the top in society, given their intrinsic superiority. These titans for Rand were the driving force propelling society forward:

"A creative man is motivated by the desire to achieve, not by the desire to beat others,"
– Ayn Rand

She saw examples of these kinds of people in the great capitalists of 18th and 19th centuries and in her own time she looked to the men who controlled the rail companies which united the huge cities of America from coast to coast:

"Achievement of your happiness is the only moral purpose of your life, and that happiness, not pain or mindless self-indulgence, is the proof of your moral integrity, since it is the proof and the result of your loyalty to the achievement of your values," – Ayn Rand

This idea, the heroic capitalist, the unsentimental rational man of vision, is deeply embedded in our society and is not simply the result of Rand's ultra-conformist attitude. It is easily evidenced by those who have money. After all, if they weren't worthy of it, then how could they have come by it?

Inheritance only confirms the genetic quality. It is 'in the blood' so to speak, rather than an underlying factor on individual achievement, a premise which finds favour amongst the indolent rich. The greatest evidence for the Randian hero's entitled superiority is the actual existence of wealthy businesspeople. Those of us who condemn the vast accumulation of money and the exercise of power by the few, well, we are guilty of sour grapes. To make it worse, we actually resent the very people who have provided us with relative security and decent living conditions.

The character Francisco d'Anconia from *Atlas Shrugged* lays out Rand's vision of the playing field:

"So you think that money is the root of all evil? ... Have you ever asked what is the root of money? Money is a tool of exchange, which can't exist unless there are goods produced and men able to produce them. Money is the material shape of the principle that men who wish to deal with one another must deal by trade and give value for value. Money is not the tool of the moochers, who claim your product by tears, or the looters who take it from you by force. Money is made possible only by the men who produce. Is this what you consider evil?... Not an ocean of tears nor all the guns in the world can transform those pieces of paper in your wallet into bread you need to survive tomorrow. ... Whenever destroyers appear among men, they start by destroying money, for money is men's protection and the base of a moral existence..."
– from *Atlas Shrugged*

Rand is clear that the 'abstract nature of money is both a defence against emotional manipulation or being 'looted', and that money is closely linked with the idea and forming of civilisation.

Again this is not simply Rand's notion but clearly a part of our collective consciousness, visible in the endless tabloid obsession with benefit scroungers, 'moochers' and, by extension, anyone who wants to take advantage of our wealth (the wealth of better people, following Rand's logic). Also comes the obsession with theft and radical programs for change, which are seen as much the same thing: 'looters' who want to take the wealth of better people by force.

The economist Ludwig von Mises, irritated at the criticism of Rand's celebration of the entrepreneur, puts it most clearly (and least sensitively):

"... *Atlas Shrugged* is not merely a novel. It is also (or may I say: first of all) a cogent analysis of the evils that plague our society, a substantiated rejection of the ideology of our self-styled "intellectuals" and a pitiless unmasking of the insincerity of the policies adopted by governments and political parties... You have the courage to tell the masses what no politician told them: **you are inferior and all the improvements in your conditions which you simply take for granted you owe to the efforts of men who are better than you.**"
– economist Ludwig von Mises.

Do we accept this? Is it sour grapes to speak about the abolitionists, the suffragettes, the workers' movements who had to fight for various improvements in our daily lot? Can you imagine quoting Ludwig von Mises to a group of African American police brutality victims or to women fighting for equal pay? It's not unfair to Mises to apply these contexts; after all he addresses his criticism to the masses with all their partisan concerns. Do we have these Randian titans to thank for paternity leave? The weekend? Minimum wage? The vote? National health?

Simply put: no.

Read on: [Part One](#)

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Michael Eden is the Arts Editor for Trebuchet Magazine, an artist and researcher working in London and the south east, his artistic practice is concentrated on painting and he divides his time between this and lecturing in art history and contextual studies.

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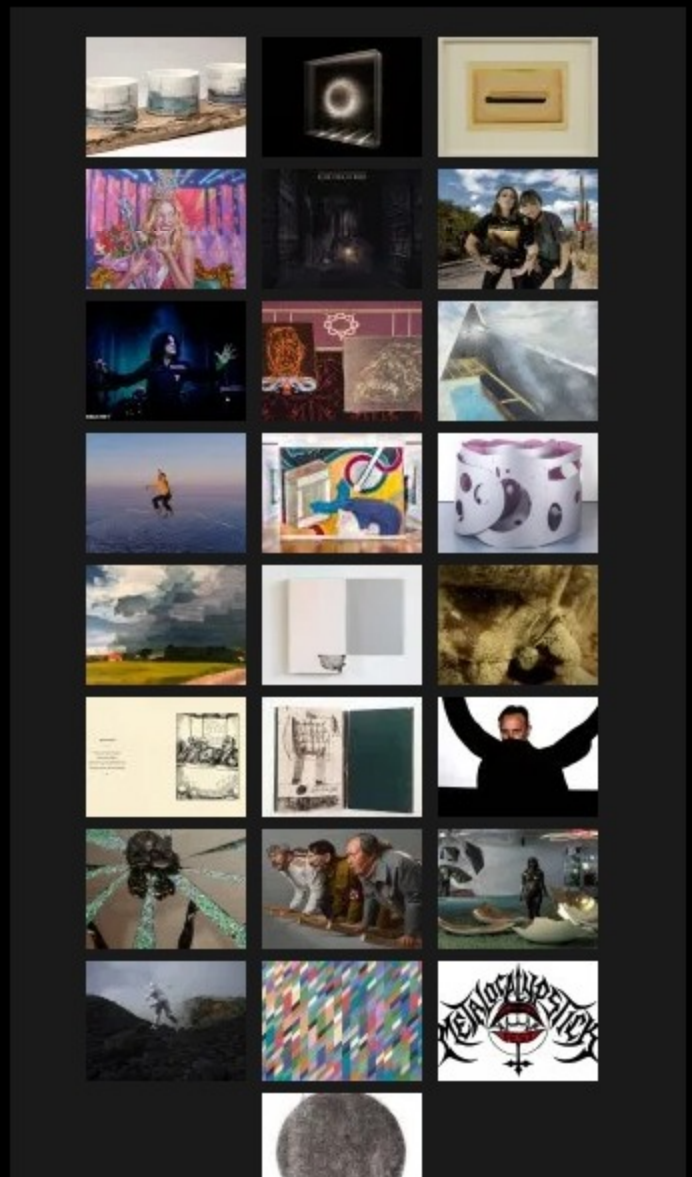
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