

BOOK REVIEWS

Free Market Revolution: How Ayn Rand's Ideas Can End Big Government

Yaron Brook and Don Watkins

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 251 pp.

In *Free Market Revolution: How Ayn Rand's Ideas Can End Big Government*, Yaron Brook, executive director of the Ayn Rand Institute (ARI), and Don Watkins, a fellow at ARI, give a full-throated and spirited defense of Rand's arguments for freedom, self-actualization, and the just society. The book is a clear explanation of objectivism that weaves in timely and accurate policy discussions, such as the chapter on health care, that buttress the overall point.

Watkins and Brook are as uncompromising as Rand. "Only Rand's morality of rational selfishness," they write, "can resolve the contradiction at the root of the founding and provide the idealism, the consistency, and the intellectual clarity necessary to end Big Government." Such directness is often needed when defending free markets, but it is not always the best strategy. In this case, that uncompromising nature condemns the book to be praised by those who already agree and derided by those who do not.

Free-market advocates often say that we're on a precipice—a choice looms before us: totalitarianism or freedom. *Free Market Revolution* effectively argues that it is time for a radical reassessment of the American character. Between looming debts, fiscal instability, and a brave new world of centralized health care, between the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street, there is something in the air.

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For Brook and Watkins, the only answer to our problems, as is clear from the title, is the ideas of Ayn Rand. While free-market luminaries such as F. A. Hayek and Milton Friedman have ostensibly pushed for a freer society, the authors argue that they have failed to create a moral justification for capitalism. As such, “today’s alleged free market champions are powerless to stop Big Government.” “To do that,” they say, “you need Ayn Rand.”

Full disclosure: I am not an objectivist. I have considered myself a libertarian since I was a teenager, but, unlike most teenage freedom-lovers, I did not find my way to Rand’s books until my mid-20s. By that time I had read most of the libertarian canon, and I did not need to be converted. When I first read Rand I was struck by her uncompromising positions, and I admired her Aristotelian/Nietzschean approach to the philosophy of freedom. I also admired her understanding that freedom needs a moral defense, even if I believe her defense to be lacking. I see her approach as a unique way to appeal to some people and one of the many ways that libertarians can advocate freedom.

But many objectivists disagree with me, and it seems Brook and Watkins are two of them. To them, Rand’s way is not just one way to advocate for freedom, it is the only way. They are exasperated by lukewarm defenses of freedom, apologies for “selfishness,” and defenses of “self-sacrifice” that they see as being little better than full-blown collectivism.

In constructing their case for full-blown and unapologetic capitalism, Brook and Watkins effectively argue that profit is not evil, that businessmen are not parasites, and that wealth does not simply pop into existence; wealth is created and earned. Rand herself was at her best when defending these truths, which are fundamental to a well-grounded defense of capitalism.

Brook and Watkins are less effective, however, in defending against—indeed, even addressing—arguments against capitalism that are more common and, to non-objectivists, more convincing. Most people do not embrace the epistemological and metaphysical framework erected by Rand and endorsed by Brook and Watkins. Most people do not see a direct connection between “A=A” and a robust defense of free markets. This is true whether or not objectivist philosophy is correct.

Unfortunately, many objectivists regard non-objectivists as being confused and having cluttered minds rather than having cogent objections to the philosophy. Some of this probably comes from

Rand's tendency to be dismissive of those who disagreed with her—see, for example, her flippantly brushing aside Ludwig Wittgenstein's seminal work on concept formation as being the product of a “mind out of focus.” Thankfully, Brook and Watkins avoid this singularly unattractive objectivist tendency.

Yet, like many objectivists, Brook and Watkins still describe the world in terms of diametrically opposed intellectual camps, those who are with us and those who are against us. In reality, our opponents are far more marginal. Most people in the Western world believe in capitalism. They acknowledge that wealth is created and earned, that businessmen can be admirable, and that free markets have done incredible things for human flourishing.

But for most people the idea that profits are an unalloyed virtue is a strange one, if not preposterous. Brook and Watkins rightly criticize the negative view of profits as misguided and lament its widespread acceptance. Hollywood, the mainstream media, and popular culture in general treat the word “profit” as synonymous with “morally problematic,” if not downright evil.

Yet Brook and Watkins do not adequately address the concerns of those who are not so much “anti-business” but rather not 100 percent “pro-business.” Such people believe in profits but not at the expense of the environment, workers' rights, the well-being of the poor, and human flourishing. They do not believe that businessmen are categorically evil, rather they believe that the negative tendencies of business should be countered by positive government regulations. Similarly, they believe that the negative tendencies of government should be countered by positive effects of businesses. Such mixed pro-business/pro-government people may be wrong about the facts, but they are not categorically putting their foot down on either the government or business side.

Nevertheless, Brook and Watkins, like Rand, treat the world as if it were neatly divided into the “altruists” (the arch enemies of objectivists) and the “selfish” (the objectivist heroes). It's the black hats versus the white hats, and the only relevant question is which side you are on.

If only it were that simple. Unfortunately, most destructive regulation and encroaching state activity comes from people choosing on the margins—that is, those who want one more regulation to curb what they perceive as unjust business practices but who don't want to destroy business.

Brook and Watkins probably agree with me that most government growth occurs due to people choosing government policies on the margins, and they would likely argue that the only way to stop a death by 1,000 cuts is to articulate an unyielding moral position that all cuts are wrong. I disagree that this rhetorical strategy alone is the best way to stop the cuts. I also believe that 500 cuts are better than 1,000.

Now, it may be true, and I grant that it often is, that an argument allowing 500 cuts may be philosophically indistinct from one that allows for 1,000, or even a million. Brook and Watkins ask, “Isn’t the only difference between socialism and the entitlement state one of degree?” Perhaps, but it is a range of degrees upon which much human suffering can be mapped.

As a libertarian, I read Rand, as well as Brook and Watkins, with a smile and a fist raised in solidarity. They make free-market champions feel like Nietzschean heroes fighting against a recalcitrant, if not willfully obtuse, prevailing narrative. They make businessmen feel like Superman and regulators into Lex Luthors. They ask you to own your life and to stop apologizing for it.

But for non-libertarians who read objectivists, I fear the opposite is true. Those who are unfamiliar with the broad range of arguments supporting capitalism and the empirical evidence of freedom’s benefits are likely to charitably describe Brook and Watkins’s views as lacking nuance. Uncharitably, they would accuse them of Pollyannaish naiveté, if not downright malice.

I’m sure Brook and Watkins don’t care what those who oppose capitalism think of them, but perhaps they would if objectivist arguments are convincing fewer people than they are pushing away.

This is why it is important to be ecumenical in allowing “acceptable” arguments for liberty. Whereas I welcome objectivists into the libertarian tent as part of a multimembered consortium to roll-back encroaching government, I fear that many objectivists would not give me the same courtesy.

Yet, despite my misgivings, *Free Market Revolution* is a good book for convincing some types of people and inspiring others already convinced. We need more than objectivism, however, if we’re going to win the fight against Big Government.

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