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Was Ayn Rand Nothing More Than a Nihilist? A Review of Aaron Weinacht's "Nikolai Chernyshevskii and Ayn Rand: Russian Nihilism Travels to America"



NIKOLAI CHERNYSHEVSKII AND AYN RAND

*Russian Nihilism
Travels to America*

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Aaron Weinacht. *Nikolai Chernyshevskii and Ayn Rand: Russian Nihilism Travels to America*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021.

Research requires that one peruses all relevant secondary literature, at least to the extent possible—and if there is not that much secondary literature available, scholars *must* have a comprehensive overview of all publications on their subject. At least that's the rule I adhered to until I discovered very good reasons to only skim some books: working on Ayn Rand, I often dug through articles and books whose authors had a clear agenda and were mostly interested in either hailing or damning their subject. In the latter manner, Lisa Duggan (2019) condemned Rand, as the title of her book said, as a *Mean Girl*, and journalist Gary Weiss (2013) blamed Rand's thought for the financial crisis, fearing America to turn into an *Ayn Rand Nation* (Gary Weiss; St. Martin's Griffin, 2013). Consequently, when I came across *How Bad Writing Destroyed the World: Ayn Rand and the Literary Origins of the Financial Crisis* (2016), I had very little patience for Adam Weiner's (admittedly compelling) argument that Rand drew heavily from Russian nihilist Nikolai Chernyshevskii's (1828-1889) dystopian novel *What Is to be Done?* (1863). As I was still interested in a thorough analysis of Rand's intellectual debt to Chernyshevskii, though, I was more excited to explore it anew through historian Aaron Weinacht's lens.

And, indeed, *Nikolai Chernyshevskii and Ayn Rand: Russian Nihilism Travels to America* does not disappoint. Aaron Weinacht is only in pursuit of knowledge and insight, and therefore he spares his readers any judgmental sermons on Rand's merits (or lack thereof) as a writer and thinker. Although labelling her as "a latter-day Russian nihilist" may sound polemical, he does not do so lightly and keeps his focus on her philosophy. As Weinacht describes it very fittingly, he retraces "the history of an idea, or perhaps more accurately, a conversation about a set of ideas, across time between the 1860s in Russia and the mid-twentieth century in the United States." This conversation predominantly takes place between two books, Rand's opus magnum *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) and Chernyshevskii's *What Is to Be Done?*, uniting two (in Rand's case: originally) Russian thinkers in their preference for conveying their ideas through fiction. "[Behind] it also lies a romantic belief in the power of art; it is after all a work of art that was chosen as the main vehicle of 'reason,'" Weinacht writes with reference to Chernyshevskii, yet it is a belief Rand shared as well. Weinacht thus invites us to a close reading of these two works—an invitation you should accept if you have done your homework and gained a certain familiarity with both novels, for there is no space for idle pleasantries such as plot summaries. Instead, you will be rewarded with a very thorough, detailed, and challenging comparative reading that also takes you on intriguing side-paths.

Divided into four chapters, Weinacht first establishes "the Nihilist Axiom" and identifies egoism as the central concept in both Chernyshevskii's and Rand's thought. Exploring the history of egoism and the linkages of Ludwig Feuerbach and Max Stirner to Russian nihilism, Weinacht demonstrates that Rand's understanding of (rational) egoism "bears very close resemblances to the egoism of the 1860s 'nihilist' period in Russian intellectual history." Although she never acknowledged any intellectual debt to Chernyshevskii and philosopher Dmitri Pisarev, Weinacht's analysis leaves no room to doubt the parallels between Rand's thought and her Russian forebears. In particular, she shared Chernyshevskii's view that life's purpose can be defined as "the realization of the full potential of the individual self, liberated from all possible constraints, be they of a physical or a philosophical nature."

Rand and Chernyshevskii also had the same vision of what kind of people we should aspire to be, as Weinacht details in the second chapter. Their *opera magna* imagined survivors of a nihilistic apocalypse who would be driven by their desire to create, to create not only tangible results, but also their "I." This culminates, as chapter 3 then demonstrates, in the God-like status of these protagonists. As Weinacht summarizes: "Christ may have saved the world by suffering for the sins of the many, but nihilist acolytes save the world by becoming gods themselves and refusing to suffer on anyone's behalf." In the final chapter, we learn how Chernyshevskii and Rand also conceive love and sexuality in a similar vein, as they denounce love as a form of altruism and reduce it to an expression of rationality.

The two authors wrote their work under radically different circumstances and with different intentions. Still,

Weinacht concludes that Rand's work was mainly a Russian import: "The United States ...[may] have been in wineskin, but *Atlas Shrugged* was old wine, nonetheless." This verdict sounds more damning than Weinacht's overall tone which is commendable for its balance and sobriety. Yes, the intellectual debt to Russian nihilism is undeniable, yet, had Rand not been adamant in claiming her pure originality, it would be hardly surprising that she carried "mental baggage" from her home-country. The wine may have tasted a bit stale for the few capable of seeing the interlinkages, but it was refreshing and liberating to millions of readers.

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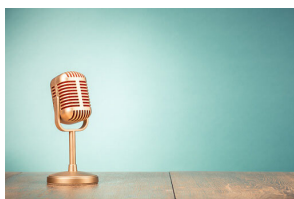
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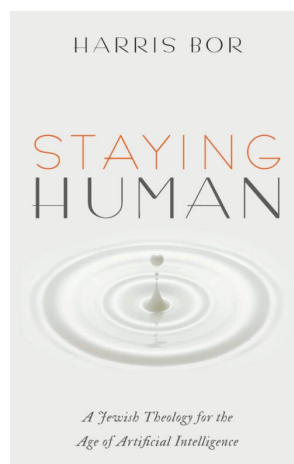
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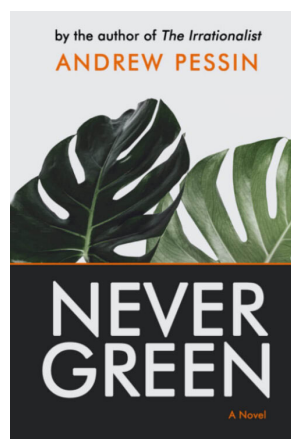
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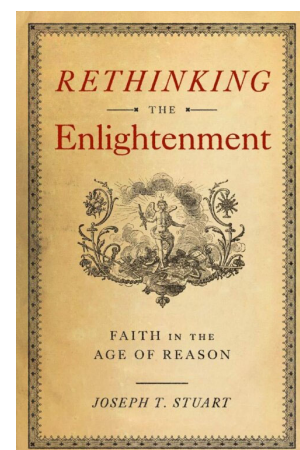
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