

## REVIEW ESSAYS

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***Ayn Rand and the Russian Intelligentsia: The Origins of an Icon of the American Right.*** By Derek Offord. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. xi, 130 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$17.95, paper.

***Nikolai Chernyshevskii and Ayn Rand: Russian Nihilism Travels to America.*** By Aaron Weinacht. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021. xiv, 182 pp. Bibliography. Index. Figures. Tables. \$95.00, hard bound.

doi: 10.1017/slr.2023.290

### **Ayn Rand and Russian Radicalism**

Could one of the darlings of the American Right actually have been a Russian Leftist in disguise? The idea seems unlikely at first glance, but in recent years the topic of Ayn Rand and her debt to the Russian intellectual milieu has generated several books and articles. I have already reviewed Adam Weiner's book, *How Bad Writing Destroyed the World*, elsewhere. Here, I will focus on the contributions by Derek Offord and Aaron Weinacht.

It seems self-evident that Rand, no matter how much she might have tried to portray herself as a wholly original thinker and no matter how much she hated Russia, would bear some imprint of the environment in which she was born and raised. Tracing Rand's possible debt to her Russian origins is not an easy matter for Rand was reluctant to acknowledge any influences and, to this day, full access to her materials is not available. As Offord notes, her followers seem very much concerned with protecting her image and carefully control what is made available (22–23). Nevertheless, despite this handicap both Offord and Weinacht demonstrate that Rand owed far more to the Russian intellectual milieu than she was willing to acknowledge. In fact, she absorbed so much from her Russian background that Weinacht argues that Rand was a "latter-day nihilist" and that she "has at least as good a claim to the 'heritage' of the Russian 1860s as the Bolsheviks" (4). More than once, Weinacht points to the fact that Rand was part of a long conversation in Russian history (13–14, 99–100, 121).

Offord agrees that Rand was a descendant of the Russian intelligentsia, especially its radical wing. He concludes that despite her political views, Rand absorbed several features and attitudes from the radical intelligentsia: ". . . she brought with her to America a burning interest in certain philosophical questions and literary themes that had long animated the Russian intelligentsia, notions of literary types that Russian writers had explored, familiarity with the Russian novel and sub-genres of it and a conception shared by many Russian writers of the uses to which prose fiction should be put" (6). As an example, Offord notes the importance of a "world-outlook" for the Russian intelligentsia and argues that "a world-outlook was precisely

what Rand wished to construct as her tool for engaging with the ‘accursed questions’ that animated her” (30). Offord argues that Rand’s behavior was essentially that of a Russian *nigilistka* and lists five binary oppositions in Rand that were typical of the Russian intelligentsia (33). In some cases, Rand reversed the values of the Russian intelligentsia: for her sacrifice was evil and she took a different attitude toward money (34–35). As he states, “her prose fiction and her remarks about it constantly bear witness to engagement with the Russian tradition of reflection on aesthetic matters of which no intelligent person educated in early twentieth-century St. Petersburg and Petrograd could have been unaware” (37). He also argues that much of the material in John Galt’s long radio address to the nation can be traced to pre-revolutionary Russian writers and thinkers (70). Offord’s discussion in Chapter 6 of how Rand transformed the intelligentsia’s Russia-versus-Europe polarity into one of America-versus-Europe is interesting. In addition to arguing for these types of connections, Offord provides a concise summary of Rand’s background and personality that will be useful for readers unfamiliar with her. Rand’s followers are unlikely to be happy with some of his characterizations, especially when he labels Rand “the poet of the sociopath” (64). In summing up his study, Offord states that Rand always remained a typical representative of the Russian intelligentsia (102).

Where I part ways with Offord and Weinacht (as well as Weiner) is when it comes to the attempt to establish a direct link between Nikolai Chernyshevskii and Ayn Rand, especially their respective novels, *What Is to Be Done?* and *Atlas Shrugged*. I should preface my discussion by noting that I disagree with most of Weinacht’s and Offord’s interpretations of Chernyshevskii’s novel, especially the character Rakhmetov and the meaning of Vera Pavlovna’s Fourth Dream. However, I have presented my own analysis elsewhere and will not belabor the point here.

Of the two books, Weinacht’s is much more focused on tracing influence to a single figure, Chernyshevskii and his novel. Despite the title of his book, however, he also discusses much else from the Russian intellectual tradition, especially Dmitrii Pisarev. To a certain extent his study is almost a sleight of hand: he often begins with a discussion of Chernyshevskii’s supposed influence on Rand, but then quickly segues to other material. Nevertheless, in these discussions of Pisarev, Fedor Dostoevskii, Vladimir Solov’ev, and others, Weinacht establishes that there was a continuity of themes over several decades by the time Rand arrived on the scene and she must have been exposed to it.

Weinacht’s book suffers from a serious flaw in that he has done little original research on Chernyshevskii. When it comes to Rand, Weinacht performed much original research, citing her essays and interviews. But regarding Chernyshevskii, the contrast is quite striking. He mostly relies on a limited number of secondary works and cites very little from Chernyshevskii’s primary materials. Given that Chernyshevskii’s name is featured in the title, one would expect far more in-depth study of him. Furthermore, Weinacht’s analysis of Chernyshevskii’s *What Is to Be Done?* relies upon a very naive, simplistic reading of the novel. He fails to make the basic distinction between the narrator and author and assumes that the characters are the author’s mouthpieces.

Via this methodology, he makes conclusions about Chernyshevskii's thought that do not seem well founded. For example, based on certain passages of the novel, he argues that Chernyshevskii was a believer in inevitable progress, or, as he terms it, "optimistic inevitable-ism" (79–80, 109). This is demonstrably not the case and even the secondary works he cites (Franco Venturi and Andrzej Walicki) should have alerted him otherwise. In short, Weinacht seems to have studied Rand well and then attempted to impose a Randian reading on Chernyshevskii's novel. He read *What Is to Be Done?* and carefully mined it for whatever bits supported this reading. And, he seems to have ignored or did not notice any parts of the novel that would conflict with this reading. For example, in the section (XVII) immediately following Vera Pavlovna's Fourth Dream, Kirsanov's encounter with a new acquaintance directly undermines the optimism expressed in that dream.

To Weinacht's credit, however, he actually did read the novel, something that I suspect many prior scholars were not always so careful to do. While his approach is somewhat simplistic, that does not prevent him from making some worthwhile observations. For example, his discussion of Mar'ia Aleksevna's non-productive pawn broking business versus her daughter Vera Pavlovna's productive sewing shop is not without interest (60). Weinacht is also to be credited for his refusal to accept the long-standing notion that in the novel Chernyshevskii preached celibate marriage (131). Even a cursory reading of the sections dealing with the Kirsanov-Vera Pavlovna marriage will show that it is anything but celibate.

Overall, Weinacht's treatment makes the point that Rand owed much to the Russian intellectual tradition. For example, in his "Introduction" he makes a highly creditable argument that Rand must have been exposed to Russian intellectual history as a student. Had he been less focused on trying to establish direct ties to Chernyshevskii and kept things more general, the book would be far more effective. Tracing any one item in Rand's work to a specific figure or specific work can be a hazardous undertaking. Indeed, as Offord states: "Intellectual and literary influence may of course be difficult to prove, owing not just to a writer's reluctance to acknowledge it but also the need to differentiate between borrowing and adaptation and to consider whether use of ideas and techniques of other writers is even conscious" (22). When tracing an idea or motif to an entire tradition, however, one is on much stronger ground. Offord's treatment is much more successful because he focuses more on the general milieu of the Russian intelligentsia. Despite the caution he expresses in the passage quoted above, he too argues for a direct connection to Chernyshevskii in some cases.

When it comes to tracing any debt by Rand to Chernyshevskii, a researcher faces several obstacles. First, at least up to this point, no one has provided any proof that Rand actually read Chernyshevskii's novel. Weinacht admits that there is no proof available that she ever read it (13, 151). This is a major hurdle to overcome. Given the status of that novel with the Russian intelligentsia in the late imperial period and that Chernyshevskii was canonized by the Bolsheviks once in power, it is quite likely, indeed, all but certain that Rand was familiar with him. However, that in no way guarantees that she read the novel. Moreover, even if she did, that does not necessarily mean it produced

any appreciable effect on her, positive or negative. Second, based on Rand's established political and economic views, it seems all but certain that she would have despised Chernyshevskii as one of the icons of the Russian intelligentsia she so hated. It is highly unlikely that his novel would have left a positive imprint on her thought and that she would consciously allude to it in a positive manner. Rather, one would expect a harsh attack and, given Rand's writing style, this would hardly be subtle. Since Rand's materials in the public domain do not display an open polemic with Chernyshevskii, at least none that has been noticed so far, a researcher is forced to the position that Rand unconsciously incorporated allusions to his novel in her own work. The trouble at this level, however, is that the ideas and motifs cited by researchers as examples of influence by Chernyshevskii on Rand are items of the most general nature and they can be traced to multiple sources. Nothing has been produced so far that compels one to conclude that Rand drew directly from Chernyshevskii.

The latter problem is evident repeatedly in Weinacht's book but also in Offord's. Several times Weinacht argues that Rand took something from Chernyshevskii, then proceeds to discuss another possible source, undermining his own argument. For example, Weinacht discusses the supposed influence of Chernyshevskii on Rand's concept of egoism, but then shortly afterwards introduces a discussion of Max Stirner (33–34, 39). Given that Rand's familiarity with German thought, including Stirner, is well established, the question arises whether Chernyshevskii is even relevant here. Likewise, Weinacht argues that Rand took from Chernyshevskii the idea to merge art and life (11, 69). However, when he introduces a discussion of the Russian symbolists and their urge to merge the two (59), he again obviates any need to posit Chernyshevskii's direct influence. In several places Weinacht argues that the principle of *zhiznetvorchestvo* links Rand to Chernyshevskii (6, 57, 64, 69). Here too, however, he undermines his own argument by noting that such ideas were to be found among the Russian symbolists and their intellectual mentors: Solov'ev, Nikolai Fedorov, and Friedrich Nietzsche (57). Offord also runs afoul of this problem. He argues that Rand absorbed the notion of the positive literary hero from Russian culture of the era of Alexander II and cites Chernyshevskii's novel as the prime example (38–39). However, when Offord argues that Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* is a subversion of the socialist realist novel and its positive heroes, he undermines any need for a direct connection to Chernyshevskii.

Despite Weinacht's claims that the similarities between *What Is to Be Done?* and *Atlas Shrugged* are "striking" (2), at times both he and Offord are clearly straining to establish a connection between the two. Weinacht suggests at one point that the presence of cigarette butts in Rand's novel is perhaps a link to Rakhmetov's cigars in Chernyshevskii's (71). If Rand herself had not been a smoker and if the cigar appeared nowhere else in the Russian tradition, this might be plausible. However, Rakhmetov is hardly the only character in Russian literature to smoke cigars. The traveling narrator in Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* describes Pechorin as smoking a cigar. Oblomov of the eponymous novel is described several times as smoking a cigar. Perhaps most memorable, the infamous Bazarov in Ivan

Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* interrupts a recitation of Aleksandr Pushkin in order to ask for a match to light his cigar. Finally, smoking was something strongly associated with emancipated Russian women in the late imperial period, the *nigilistki*. Citing it as a direct connection between the two novels is highly problematic and rather unconvincing. Likewise, Weinacht's attempt to establish another connection is not only strained but downright absurd. He argues, "with his 'Eulogy,' Chernyshevskii. . . 'kills' Vera Pavlovna's unconscious mother just as effectively as Dagny Taggart's bullet dispatches Galt's prison guard" (64).

Offord makes a similar strained connection when he ties the Crystal Palace appearing in Vera Pavlovna's Fourth Dream to Rand's love of buildings. Chernyshevskii was hardly the only Russian who referred to this building. Dostoevskii referred to it in his *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* as well as in *Notes from the Underground*. That Rand read Dostoevskii is not in doubt and she could easily have picked up on the image there. Moreover, a love of glass and steel was typical for the modernist period. Tracing Rand's love of buildings to a rather small part of Chernyshevskii's novel is a bit of a stretch. Likewise, Offord argues that the two novels are connected by the fact that metal, indeed a metallurgical discovery, is important in both of them: aluminum in *What Is to Be Done?* and Rearden Metal in *Atlas Shrugged* (50). There is no doubt that Rearden Metal plays a significant role in Rand's novel. The phrase "Rearden Metal" comes up repeatedly, some 210 times according to an electronic search. By contrast, however, aluminum plays a rather minor role in Chernyshevskii's novel. It is limited to a brief appearance in Vera Pavlovna's Fourth Dream in subsections eight and nine. Given Offord's own analysis that Rand was trying to subvert the Soviet novel, a much better candidate for a connection would be the Soviet production novels.

Since not all of Rand's materials are available to researchers, categorical statements are best avoided. It is entirely within the realm of possibility that someday an essay by Rand titled "My Intellectual Debt to Chernyshevskii" will be discovered or that she will have been found to possess a copy of *What Is to Be Done?* with the passages about Rakhmetov's cigars and aluminum underlined. However, the public record as it now stands does not support any argument for a direct influence by Chernyshevskii on Rand.

Based on the material presented by Weinacht and Offord, there is a convincing case that Rand was quite familiar with the Russian intellectual tradition and that certain elements from that tradition are evident in her own work. However, it must be kept in mind that many of these ideas and motifs circulated via word of mouth (and were perhaps distorted as a result) and were simply in the air at the time. It is not necessarily the case that she had to read a specific person in order to be somewhat familiar with an idea or motif. One need only think of an earlier era when there was much talk in Russia about G. W. F. Hegel and the dialectic, but it is rather doubtful if all those people making comments had actually read Hegel.

One problem that greatly affects not only Weinacht's and Offord's respective studies but the field as a whole has been the tendency to take at face value the claims that Chernyshevskii was an advocate of violent revolution, a supporter of secret societies to achieve it, and so forth. This view

was much promoted by the Bolsheviks and has been repeated over and over again, accepted as received wisdom that is beyond doubt. There are substantial reasons to question this narrative, however. To achieve this image the Soviets rather dubiously attributed authorship of the proclamation “To The Landlords’ Peasants” to Chernyshevskii and included it when compiling his *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*. The Soviets also simply ignored material that was inconvenient, particularly, N.F. Skorikov’s memoirs in which Chernyshevskii was reported to denounce secret societies and the use of coercion. Memoir evidence, including Skorikov’s, must always be treated carefully. However, Chernyshevskii’s own documents confirm Skorikov’s account. For example, in an 1876 letter Chernyshevskii specifically denounced the idea that the end justifies the means.<sup>1</sup> A decade later, in a letter of 1886, Chernyshevskii stated, “I consider the results of violence to be harmful, always harmful for everyone.”<sup>2</sup> Likewise, in the commentaries he attached to his translation of Georg Weber’s *World History*, Chernyshevskii gave a negative appraisal of the use of violence, stating at one point: “But the lovers of violence, although they know how to speak the language of civilized society, remain at heart people of barbarous times.”<sup>3</sup> It might be objected that all this evidence is from the post-arrest period, but even Chernyshevskii’s works written before his arrest and exile, if read carefully, call into question the image of a violence-provoking, end-justifies-the-means rabble-rouser. For example, in his *Pis'ma bez adresa* (Letters without an Address), in the first letter Chernyshevskii’s appeal to his addressee (presumably Tsar Alexander II) is motivated by the desire to avoid a violent upheaval.<sup>4</sup>

If the standard view of Chernyshevskii is undermined by these facts, then several of the positions taken by Weinacht and Offord become problematic. For example, Weinacht argues for a tension in Chernyshevskii’s novel, stating that it is “unclear how anything Rakhmetov does is more ‘revolutionary’ than the lives of these three characters. . .” (76). If the assumption that Chernyshevskii was a violent revolutionary and the corollary assumption that Rakhmetov is his revolutionary superhero are removed, then this tension disappears. Likewise, Offord states that like Chernyshevskii and Vladimir Lenin, Rand argues that a revolution must be carried out (51). However, he immediately qualifies that statement by claiming that Chernyshevskii could only hint at it. Although not naming Chernyshevskii specifically, a couple of pages later he states that Rand’s heroes have the same end-justifies-the-means attitude as the Russian revolutionaries (53). If Chernyshevskii was not the proto-Bolshevik he is often assumed to be, then this supposed connection between him and Rand evaporates. It is certainly true that Chernyshevskii had the reputation amongst some of the Russian youth as a proponent of violent revolution. Once Skorikov published his account, he was accused of falsifying things and/or Chernyshevskii was accused of betraying his former

1. Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1939–53), 14:684.

2. *Ibid.*, 15:292–93.

3. *Ibid.*, 10:915.

4. *Ibid.*, 10:92.

principles by some of the young Russians. One might argue that Rand was operating within the standard view of Chernyshevskii inherited from previous generations. But this would only serve to indicate that there is no direct link between Rand and Chernyshevskii, but only between Rand and the Russian tradition as a whole.

It seems to me that Offord and Weinacht (and Weiner for that matter) have been barking up the wrong tree. If Slavists are determined to establish a link between Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* and Russian literature, a far better candidate than Chernyshevskii's *What Is to Be Done?* is Lev Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina*. In this case, there is no doubt that Rand knew of the novel and expressed an opinion on it: she considered it "the most evil book in serious literature" (Offord, 107). For this reason alone, one must be alert for a possible polemic by Rand with it in her own fiction. Even a cursory reading of *Atlas Shrugged* reveals some obvious links to Tolstoi's novel. Tolstoi's negative statement on railroads is oft-quoted and, for him, trains and railroads are a negative symbol of the urban, industrial modernity he hated. It is no accident that Aleksei Vronsky and Anna Karenina first meet at a train station and, as is well known, Karenina commits suicide by throwing herself under a train. *Atlas Shrugged*, however, celebrates urban, industrial modernity with trains and railroads forming a major component of the novel. Rand disagreed with the positions taken by Tolstoi in *Anna Karenina* on matters like sex, marriage, and fidelity. Whereas, Tolstoi had tried to stress the non-animal, spiritual nature of Levin and Kitty's marriage versus the animalistic, egoistic affair of Karenina and Vronsky, Rand celebrates animal passion unconstrained by traditional morality. The two themes are pointedly linked when Dagny Taggart and Henry Rearden initiate their adulterous affair shortly after riding a train together during a test run of the John Galt Line. Cherryl Taggart's mental state shortly before her suicide recalls that of Karenina, although she pointedly throws herself into a river, not under a train. Finally, *Atlas Shrugged* as a whole celebrates egoism, living for oneself, and rejects any notion of altruism and obligation. It seems very much polemically directed at Tolstoi's insistence that a proper spiritual life means living for others. It is quite likely further study would reveal further connections.

Weinacht and Offord have demonstrated that Rand was very much operating within an established tradition and was a typical representative of it. The trouble is explaining how this fact went unnoticed for so long. European observers have long commented on the disappointing nature of the American educational system and the lack of a solid high culture. Although Offord is a bit restrained on this matter, one senses a European's frustration with the poor educational system in the United States when he notes that Rand only seemed original to her American audience because it was unfamiliar with her Russian context (31, 102). Offord does not quite say it, but his book raises an important question: what does it say about the level of culture in the US when Rand could come here and pass herself off as unique and original when she clearly was not?

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