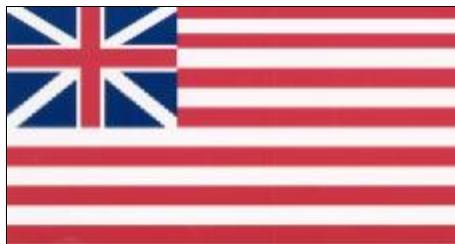


AYN RAND AND AMERICAN CULTURE

Peter Saint-André



Grand Union Flag of 1775

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Introduction

America has never had an original culture, i.e., a body of ideas derived from her philosophical (*Aristotelian*) base and expressing her profound difference from all other countries in history. (Rand, 1971: 210; emphasis in original.)

As a teenager reading Ayn Rand, I swallowed such statements whole. Now older and hopefully wiser, I ask questions:

1. Why does Rand define culture as “a body of ideas” rather than as something like “the concepts, habits, skills, arts, instruments, and institutions of a given people in a given period” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language*)?
2. Is the “base” of the American experience to be found in the philosophy of Aristotle? (For that matter, is the base of any culture to be found in a philosophy?)
3. Is the difference of America from all other countries in history so deep that there are no cultural commonalities between America and, say, England (whence most American colonists came, at least early on)?
4. How attuned was Rand to the American experience? Although she liked American movies, did she ever absorb and appreciate Whitman and Thoreau, jazz and bluegrass, the American pastime of baseball, or the history and (dare I say) folkways of her adopted country?

The Cultures of America

Rand thought that America was profoundly different from all other nations. While she did not explicate her reasons for thinking so, they seem to be connected with her view that America is the only nation in history to have been

founded on the basis of ideas (specifically, an Aristotelian philosophical base) rather than to have evolved through the accidents of history. Yet America was not founded as an Aristotelian experiment: the original 13 states were founded as English colonies, usually by religious dissenters seeking freedom for their beliefs (but no one else’s). In broad brush, there were four main emigrations from England to America before the Revolution:

1. Dissenting Puritans from East Anglia to New England (1629-1641).
2. Low-Church Anglican Cavaliers and indentured servants from Wessex and Sussex to Virginia and the Carolinas (1642-1675).
3. Quakers from the North Midlands to the Delaware Valley (1675-1725).
4. Presbyterians from Ulster and the Scottish-English Borderland to the Appalachian backcountry (1717-1775).

In *Albion’s Seed*, David Hackett Fischer argues persuasively that these four comprise the founding cultures of America, and that American culture did not emerge full-grown from the head of Zeus or develop without precedent through the “frontier experience”, but instead that American culture can best be explained through reference to the cultures of its founding residents (Fischer, 1989). Part of what makes his exploration so persuasive is the detailed information he provides regarding each culture’s social and regional origins, religious beliefs and behaviors, speech patterns, architectural styles, family ways, marriage customs, gender relations, attitudes toward elders and toward death, educational approaches, food and dress customs, ways of working and of recreation, use of time, attitudes toward wealth, division of labor, societal orders and social rankings, patterns of settlement, and relations of power—culminating in each culture’s ideas about freedom and liberty. These details are

fascinating and telling, providing connections both back to the cultures of four distinct English regions (which in turn had deeper roots in the migrations to the British Isles of the Angles, Saxons, Scandinavian Vikings, and Celts, respectively), and forward to our own times and to the regional and cultural tensions evident throughout American history.

Consider, for example, child-rearing. The intent in Puritan New England was to break the child's will for the sake of social and religious conformity in small-town democracies; the intent in Cavalier Virginia was to bend the child's will back upon itself for the sake of a kind of Stoical leadership in the "Squirearchy" of the coastal plantations; the intent in Quaker Delaware was to enlighten the will for the sake of personal and familial fulfillment in strong meetinghouse communities; the intent in the mainly Presbyterian backcountry was to build up the will for the sake of a fierce, stubborn independence in the shifting, warlike culture on the frontier between civilization and chaos.

These founding folkways, and much else besides, led to quite distinct, and often diametrically opposed, ideas about liberty. Fischer calls the New England idea "ordered liberty" (freedom to determine the course of one's own society), at worst exemplified in the stifling, moralistic conformism that we still associate with the word "Puritan", at best in the strong town-based democracies (and suspicion of anything but local power) still evident in parts of northern New England. The Virginia idea was that of "hegemonic liberty" (freedom to rule and not be ruled), at worst exemplified in the hierarchical "Slaveocracy" that valued freedom for those at the top but not for poor white trash or black slaves, at best in the aristocratic excellence of men such as George Washington. The Quaker idea was that of "reciprocal liberty" (freedom for me and for thou), at worst exemplified in the pacifistic pursuit of commerce without regard for nation or principle, at best in a quite modern-sounding respect for all human beings to pursue their own fulfillment. The frontier idea was that of "natural liberty" (a freedom without restraints

of law or custom), at worst exemplified in the violent and often-emotionalistic chaos of life beyond the reach of civilized norms, at best in eternal vigilance with regard to the sovereignty of the individual.

These ideas about liberty, which find their roots in their respective cultures in England, live on to this day in American life—even in so small and seemingly monolithic a subculture as the libertarian movement. Most economic libertarians seem to be inheritors of the East Anglian commercial culture that took root in New England: respectful of the rule of law, acknowledging a need for some forms of social order deriving from custom and community consensus, relatively unconcerned about the absolute liberty of the individual. Other libertarians, often especially those of a Randian persuasion, value liberty mainly for the sake of those at the top of the "pyramid of ability"; while none of them today would attempt to justify slavery or indentured servitude, they seem not to care about the effects of freedom on those with lower levels of talent, intelligence, or attainment. Then there is a certain kind of pacifistic libertarian, who values a studied neutrality in all worldly concerns (quite similar to that of the early Quakers). Finally, the anarchist edge of the libertarian movement often cleaves to the frontier concept of natural liberty, and proudly chafes at any least restriction on the right of the individual to do as he (or she) pleases.

If America had had a consistent philosophical base and culture at the time of its founding (subsequently corrupted only by the influence of European ideas), such differences would have been muted originally. Yet they were not: regional tensions were evident from the very beginning. It was mainly the common bond of religious dissent that pushed the American colonists over the edge into rebellion. That step was especially difficult to take because the colonists considered themselves to be Englishmen. Thus the American rebellion was in large measure a civil war—a "war between cousins", as Kevin Phillips puts it (Phillips, 1999)—rather than the struggle of one people for liberation from the yoke of another. Although

some would prefer to think of America as an historical anomaly, in fact it is downstream from England. Indeed, in recent times America has been the dominant culture within what James C. Bennett calls “the Anglosphere”.

America: Aristotelian Nation?

Even putting aside the seminal influence of these four founding English cultures on American history, there may be value in exploring the intellectual origins of early American society. Was America the child of the Enlightenment? Were America’s founders consistently Aristotelian? Can we legitimately say that America’s intellectual “base” is to be found in the philosophy of Aristotle?

The concept of an intellectual base is consistent with Rand’s notion that philosophical ideas are the prime mover of historical change; indeed, Rand’s historiography owes much to that of Marx, except that for Rand the superstructure of a society is its philosophical premises rather than the ownership of the means of production. I strongly question Rand’s assumptions in this matter, but will temporarily grant them to her for the sake of argument.

So, were the Founding Fathers of the American revolution a group of philosophical Aristotelians? Hardly. Thomas Jefferson was a philosophical eclectic who professed agreement with the largely anti-Aristotelian philosopher Epicurus but at the same time wrote a book capturing what he took to be the true philosophy of Jesus and publicly subscribed to a kind of Deistic Anglicanism. Ben Franklin was a practical man of business, science, and diplomacy rather than a philosopher, although he too tended to Deism. George Washington was hardly an intellectual giant despite his success in war and politics, and seems to have taken as his ideal the Stoical leaders of the early Roman Republic rather than the Aristotelian sage. James Madison, John Jay, John Adams, George Mason, Alexander Hamilton, Samuel Adams, and others of the Revolutionary generation were influenced more by contemporary intellectual currents and the desire for independ-

ence than by any abiding philosophy. Thomas Paine, perhaps the most radical of the bunch, was still a Deist (which was as far as one could safely go at the time —though Deism is perhaps not all that far removed from Aristotle’s theology of the prime mover, and Paine paid the price for his outspoken religious opinions).

Even if the Founders had been the most consistent Aristotelians or proto-Objectivists imaginable, American culture of the time was not Aristotelian but Protestant. All four of America’s founding cultures were Protestant, often radically so: dissenting Puritans in New England, Low-Church Anglicans in Virginia, Quakers in Pennsylvania, and Presbyterians on the Appalachian frontier. Anti-Catholic conspiracy theories were the order of the day, and Protestant radicals in America strongly distrusted what they perceived as the creeping Papism of High-Church Anglicans and the English monarchs (even after the overthrow of the Stuarts). Much of the rhetoric of the American revolution harked back to that of the overtly religious English Civil War. Indeed, J.C.D. Clark has argued persuasively that the American Revolution was neither a political war of independence from a foreign power (Americans considered themselves to be Englishmen) nor an ideological war for libertarian ideals or the natural rights of man, but primarily a religious war fomented by the more radical dissenting Protestants, mainly Presbyterians and Congregationalists (Clark, 1994).

One key idea that the Founders inherited from the English tradition, specifically from Blackstone’s interpretation of English law, was the indivisible sovereignty of the “King-in-Parliament”. The Blackstonian conception of the unquestionable supremacy of the King, Lords, and Commons was transplanted in full to America as constitutionalism, which recognized the people as invested with absolute power in the form of the President, Supreme Court, and Congress. Although the Revolution maintained a veneer of natural-rights individualism (mainly as a wartime propaganda strategy), in reality the end result was no radical reform of the laws along libertarian lines but in-

stead a government that was theoretically just as despotic as that of England (Clark, 1994: 139-140); and time has shown that what was theoretically justifiable from the first has become all too real in practice.

In short, Ayn Rand's story of founding Aristotelian innocence corrupted by evil Continental ideologies is attractive, and even possesses a grain of truth in that it took several decades for a true corruption of the American body politic to set in; but the seeds of that corruption were planted at the very beginning.

What is Culture?

Rand's notion of culture is strangely limited. She seems to have thought that "cultural activities" exist only at the level of "conscious convictions" (whatever that might mean in the context of a group, since consciousness is a quality of the individual); thus she confines culture to the arts and humanities ("from stage and screen, to literature and the arts, to the allegedly intellectual publications and discussions" (Rand, 1972: 162)). By contrast, modern historians and anthropologists consider culture to include the full range of lifeways exhibited by any group of people, which enables these thinkers to account for a much wider scope of human activity. Such lifeways include characteristic attitudes and something like "ways of thinking", but not always or necessarily a body of ideas or an intellectual tradition, let alone an explicit philosophical "base" that is exhibited only in the arts and humanities.

Furthermore, Rand confusingly seems to confine the notion of a culture to the national level:

In order to form a hypothesis about the future of an individual, one must consider three elements: his present course of action, his conscious convictions, and his sense of life. The same elements must be considered in forming a hypothesis about the future of a nation.... A nation, like an individual, has a

sense of life, which is expressed not in its formal culture, but in its "life style"... A "nation" is not a mystic or supernatural entity: it is a large number of individuals who live in the same geographical locality under the same political system. (ibid.)

However, as we have seen, America had four main founding cultures, which over time were supplemented but never supplanted by the cultures of the African slaves, Irish, Polish, Italians, Jews, Chinese, Mexicans, and many others, not to mention well-defined subcultures such as that of the Amish. The mere fact that America is a land of many cultures gives the lie to Rand's nationalist focus (which applies just as poorly to multicultural nations such as Canada or Switzerland, let alone human cultures before the rise of the nation-state).

So I would argue that Rand was looking for the wrong thing and in the wrong place. No wonder she thought that America did not have a distinctive or original culture.

To be fair, one common definition of "culture" in Rand's formative years was what nowadays we more properly call "high culture": Hegel's old triumvirate of art, philosophy, and religion. Yet even here much of American culture is quite distinctive, and is recognized as such throughout the world. American motion pictures dominate the big screen today as they did during Rand's formative years in Russia. Jazz, blues, bluegrass, and various applications and mixtures thereof (from Gershwin to rock'n'roll) are known to comprise a uniquely American contribution to modern music. American literature, too, has distinctive voices (Emerson, Thoreau, Poe, Twain, London, Whitman, etc.) and genres (especially the detective novel, adventure novel, and certain kinds of science fiction). Within philosophy, Rand downplays the American nature of philosophical pragmatism (which she dismisses as "a bad recycling of Kantian-Hegelian premises", Rand, 1971: 210), but she misses the extent to which philosophical pragmatism attempted to come to grips with the deeply active, this-worldly na-

ture of American life and pursuits, especially in the areas of business and technology. And Americans stand out among other Western cultures for their relative religiosity, especially in the form of evangelical Protestantism.

The American Difference

None of the foregoing is intended to imply that America is not different from other cultures, because it is.

What makes America and Americans different? In modern times, Americans have been defined by many things: their love affair with the automobile (Rand never earned her driver's license); their preference for large houses in the suburbs (Rand loathed her few years at a small ranch outside Los Angeles and moved back to an apartment in Manhattan as soon as she could); their mania for sports and exercise (Rand seemingly avoided physical exertion whenever possible); their creation of jazz, bluegrass, rock'n'roll, and other musical melanges (Rand preferred Rachmaninoff and Viennese operetta music); their love for technology (Rand was afraid of flying); their pragmatic attitudes and anti-intellectualism (Rand was a philosopher); their generosity and philanthropy (Rand could be giving in private life but never encouraged or praised philanthropy as a virtue); their democratic instincts (Rand celebrated the aristocracy of intelligence and achievement). In all these respects, it seems that Rand was more the Russian-born good European than one who loved and lived American culture. Other characteristic features of American culture include the "Protestant work ethic", an admiration for the self-made man or woman, a lack of class consciousness, and a rampant entrepreneurialism; here Rand is closer to the American tradition in her own conduct, the characters of her novels, and her explicit philosophy.

Yet Rand's vision of America as an Aristotelian nation is closer to an unknown ideal than to a lived reality. Indeed, she even claims that the best expression of "the American view of man" in "philosophical terms" is Aristotle's "description of the 'magnanimous

man'" (Rand, 1971: 211). Consider the implications of that statement. According to Aristotle, the magnanimous or great-souled man is deeply concerned with honor and dishonor (1124a5-6) and almost totally unconcerned with wealth or even with life itself (1232b10); he is a man of great (albeit deserved) pride who is disdainful (1124a20), contemptuous (1124b30), and haughty (1125a8); he wishes to be a superior person (1124b14-15); he owns beautiful and profitless things rather than profitable and useful ones (1125a10-11); he is sluggish (1124b25), walks slowly (1125a13), and is a man of few deeds who holds back except in situations when great honor is at stake (1124b25-26).

Now, the great-souled man may be Aristotle's ideal, and he may even be Rand's ideal (though he bears only a passing resemblance to the heroes of Rand's novels); but he is certainly not the American ideal. Americans have idolized men and women of great athletic ability (Babe Ruth), great inventiveness (Thomas Edison), great audacity (Charles Lindbergh), great talent (Louis Armstrong), great power (JFK), great earned wealth (Sam Walton), great beauty (Marilyn Monroe), and much else besides—as long as such people came by their attainments through hard work and did not lack the common touch. By contrast, the average American would consider Aristotle's great-souled man to be a haughty, aristocratic prig.

The foregoing characteristics give a sense for what is distinctive about American culture. Yet perhaps what is most distinctive is that American culture is not so much a stable thing as a churning process in which countless cultures endlessly mix (usually but not always harmoniously) within the context of the dissenting Protestantism (since morphed into a kind of secular but controlled individualism) laid down by its founding English colonists.

Interestingly, both this mixing of cultures and this individualism have roots in English society. For example, the British Isles seem to have been settled originally by the Picts but experienced successive migrations and invasions by

the Romans, Celts, Saxons, Angles, Jutes, Scandinavian Vikings, and Norman French—each of which left its imprint on English culture and on early processes of cultural mixing (as witness the mongrel that is the English language). And in a detailed study of the origins of English individualism (MacFarlane, 1978), Alan MacFarlane found that English society did not progress neatly from peasantry to feudalism to capitalism; that England was never a peasant society as far back as historical records can take us; and that English society was always more individualistic in its customs and laws (and market-oriented in its economy) than Continental societies. Whatever the true causes for these phenomena (which may be lost in the mists of time), in many ways England was the historical precursor for much that we consider to be uniquely American.

One distinctive characteristic of societies that are downstream from England is that they are fox-like peoples who “know many things”, to use a metaphor from Isaiah Berlin (Berlin: 1953: 1-3) that has been applied to New World culture by Claudio Veliz (Veliz, 1984). In contrast to, for example, the Iberian and Latin American hedgehogs who long for the protective shade of the unifying cathedral dome of Catholic Christianity (their “one big thing”), the Anglo-American foxes have in large measure created the chaos and creative destruction of the polycentric economic and technological bazaar that is the modern world.

A further distinctive characteristic of Americans is their extreme devotion to the levelling forces of democracy, as described from Tocqueville on down. Americans are not radical individualists and never have been: theirs is a controlled individualism that owes just as much to the forces of social conformity as to individual expression and fulfillment. This was especially true within the small-town democracies (in New England and elsewhere) that served as the breeding ground for much of the American way of life. We can see this even in so individualistic an author as Walt Whitman: he raised his quintessentially American voice to proclaim that “the least developed person on

earth is just as important and sacred to himself or herself, as the most developed person is to himself or herself” (*Says*, §3)—a kind of democratic sentiment far removed from Rand’s talk about “the pyramid of ability” (which all too often borders on a pyramid of worth).¹ Those who ignore America’s thoroughgoing democratic instincts risk reifying its history as one of absolute individualism and pure libertarianism in which greed was good and robber barons were heroes.

As we can see from Rand’s thesis that all historical progress can be attributed to the influence of Aristotle, Rand is at root one of Isaiah Berlin’s hedgehogs, who “knows one thing” (her own philosophy of Objectivism) and has only disdain for those “pragmatic” foxes who know many things. Yet her philosophic absolutism blinds her to the fact that the industrial and American revolutions evolved out of the fox-like culture of England, that the Renaissance delighted in the particular not the universal, and that Aristotle was not the fountainhead but the summa of ancient Greece, which was exemplified by Odysseus (the “man of many ways”) rather than by some integrated philosophical system.

As with Greece, so too with America: it does not consist in the application of a prior philosophy but instead is yet another messy experiment in human living and human culture. Ayn Rand may have thought that she synoptically summarized the American experience in her philosophy of Objectivism; but we have seen that her system does not do justice to that experience. Indeed, by the time the American approach to life is fixed by the summa of some future philosopher, the historically unique culture that is America will already be in serious decline. We can be thankful that the time for such a summa has not yet arrived.

Notes

(1) I cannot resist quoting the preface to the 1876 edition of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, since it contrasts so strongly with the essentially aristocratic individualism presented by Rand:

“For genius must realize that, precious as it may be, there is something far more precious, namely, simple Identity, One’s-self. A man is not greatest as victor in war, nor inventor or explorer, nor even in science, or in his intellectual or artistic capacity, or exemplar in some vast benevolence. To the highest Democratic view, man is most acceptable in living well the practical life and lot which happens to him as ordinary farmer, sea-farer, mechanic, clerk, laborer, or driver—upon and from which position as a central basis or pedestal, while performing its labors, and his duties as citizen, son, husband, father and employed person, he preserves his physique, ascends, developing, radiating himself in other regions—and especially where and when, (greatest of all, and nobler than the proudest mere genius or magnate in any field) he fully realizes the Conscience, the Spiritual, the divine faculty, cultivated well, exemplified in all his deeds and words, through life, uncompromising to the end—a flight loftier than any of Homer’s or Shakspeare’s—broader than all poems and bibles—namely, Nature’s own, and in the midst of it, Yourself, your own Identity, body and soul. (All serves, helps—but in the centre of all, absorbing all, giving, for your purpose, the only meaning and vitality to all, master or mistress of all, under the law, stands Yourself.)” (Whitman 1986, 783-784.)

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