

Reply to Gus diZerega on His Essay, “Turning the Tables: The Pathologies and Unrealized Promise of Libertarianism”

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I have always empathized with Gus diZerega as a maverick thinker who has absorbed the contributions of the classical liberal and libertarian paradigm, while appreciating the importance of other traditions, which has led him to question certain fundamental issues and/or thinkers who have been key to the genesis of that paradigm. My own “dialectical libertarian” project – which emerged from a trilogy of books that began in 1995 with *Marx, Hayek and Utopia* (SUNY) and *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical* (Penn State Press; second edition, 2013), and concluded with *Total Freedom: Toward a Dialectical Libertarianism* – has certainly challenged key aspects of that paradigm as well. The dialectical libertarian approach is the basis of a new anthology I’ve coedited, *The Dialectics of Liberty: Exploring the Context of Human Freedom* (2019), which features essays by nineteen contributors.¹ So I am very impressed with Gus’s provocative and challenging engagement of libertarianism with the principles of democracy.

My own view of a “dialectical libertarianism” is one that does not disconnect politics from the broader context in which it is embedded. Part of that context includes the culture; a politics-only approach that promises Nirvana by lopping off the state as if that is the only institution of social repression will swiftly discover that the political is reciprocally related to the cultural, and that any culture that is inimical to the principles of freedom will undermine its achievement. This emphasis on the broader context cuts both ways on the political map – for if it is a warning to libertarians, it is just as much a warning to those neoconservatives who embraced the ideal of “nation-building” by the imposition of Western political institutions on tribalist cultures in the Middle East that have had neither the historical lineage nor the propensity toward a society of individual rights.

¹ Roger E. Bissell, Chris Matthew Sciabarra, and Edward W. Younkins, eds. *The Dialectics of Liberty: Exploring the Context of Human Freedom* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2019).

Gus raises significant criticisms² of a certain strain in libertarianism, which I would consider of the “nondialectical” sort – that is, something which tends to view individuals as social atoms not embedded in a broader social, historical and cultural context. (Social atomism is certainly rejected by some of the best in the libertarian tradition from F. A Hayek to Douglas Den Uyl and Douglas Rasmussen.)

However, my most fundamental disagreement with Gus arises from our very different views of the work of Ayn Rand. My own study of Rand, *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical*, challenges the view of her as a social atomist. She came to intellectual maturity, educated in a Silver Age Russian culture, which embraced some of the best elements of dialectical thinking from the Aristotelian, Hegelian and even Marxian traditions, all of which viewed the individual in a more enhanced, complex way, as a social being embedded within a complexity of institutions, from language to customs, from cultural habits of mind to pedagogical practices, and so forth.

I think that at her best, Rand embraces precisely the view that Gus ascribes to progressives: “that as we better understand this [larger social and historical] context, we can abolish institutions that perpetuate or create new forms of oppression and domination.” As I argue in Chapter 10 of my book, Rand was most definitely not an atomist, despite some of her more stark claims made in polemical talks she gave at various forums. I reconstruct her understanding of the social relations of power on three levels (see part three of my book): the personal, the cultural, and the structural (political-economic). Her criticism of libertarian anarchists is that they tend to focus on the elimination of the state, without paying attention to the personal and cultural dimensions of power, which are manifested in nonpolitical ways. In this manner, she is most definitely not “numb to the other forms of aggression” that take place in our society.

For example, just a cursory look at her essay on “The Comprachicos” (republished in *The New Left: The Anti-Industrial Revolution*) shows a radical indictment of child-rearing and pedagogical practices within the family and especially within contemporary education, practices that cripple children cognitively, placing them on “unequal” footing in their interactions with others.

Now the chief problem with understanding Rand’s views is that she was both a novelist and a philosopher. As Nathaniel Branden maintains, I think correctly, in his lecture, “The Benefits and Hazards of the Philosophy of Ayn Rand,” Rand created in her fiction a vision of her own ideal man, and of a world in which ideal men and women would flourish and fully actualize their potential, whether they be giants like John Galt or men of more modest gifts, such as Eddie Willers in *Atlas Shrugged*. But, in my experience, people who

² Gus diZerega, “Turning the Tables: The Pathologies and Unrealized Promise of Libertarianism,” *Molinari Review* I.1 (Spring 2016): 55-98.

come to her work from that fictional world, and who delve no further into her wider corpus, tend to view the real world in less complex ways.

Rand, after all, emerged from a tradition of Russian novelists, in the mold of Dostoyevsky, constructing her characters as expressions of philosophical principles, of ideas. It is through her characters that these ideas come into conflict with one another. So these characters are not as “fleshed out” in terms of the complexity of human personality, emotional, psychological, and cultural underpinnings, and so forth, to which her formal philosophical and social analysis is much more attuned. The problem was compounded, however, by the “sociology of the Rand cult” as Rothbard named it: most of the culture that surrounded Rand’s inner circle “lived” in the universe of *Atlas Shrugged*, and hence, tended to create a cult of personality and groupthink around her; it is no accident that they called this inner circle “The Collective.”

But Rand the philosopher is much more aware of the complex underpinnings of individuals as social beings than one might think at first blush; I focus enormous attention on this much more multidimensional Rand in my book.

Turning to a few specific points raised by Gus:

First, Gus writes, that for Rand “[t]he market is the proper way to evaluate the relative worth of a person’s contribution to society.” But this is not quite true. She distinguishes between those things that she claims are “philosophically objective” values versus those things that are “socially objective” values – something that enabled her to claim that Einstein may have provided the world with more “philosophically objective” values (in terms of the knowledge he shared with the world), even if folks made Elvis Presley richer (in a “socially objective” way). Neither was a threat to the other, and the relatively higher wealth of Presley was not a detriment to the relatively lower wealth of Einstein. In most cases, I suspect, she would say that what individuals find worthy might be a comment on the culture-in-general, and she most definitely had views on what was a sign of cultural uplift and what was a sign of cultural degeneration.

But it definitely placed Rand in a position where she could never say that just because people got wealthy in a relatively free market, they were necessarily of greater worth to the society in general; that would rip her understanding of value out of the much more complex cultural context that she emphasized in her various essays. For Rand, markets are social relations that reflect the personal, cultural and structural context within which they are embedded; if the context is corrupted, no “free” market is going to make human life *less* corrupted. This is crucial, because I don’t think that in her overall conception, she “reduce[s] human freedom to the market” (as Gus states toward the end of his paper).

With regard to her focus on reason, I think Rand provides a much more complex view of human consciousness than what Murray Rothbard criticizes

as a singular emphasis on the rational faculty. On this point, I emphasize Rand's expansive view of consciousness in three consecutive chapters of my book; check out especially chapters 6 ("Knowing"), 7 ("Reason and Emotion"), and 8 ("Art, Philosophy, and Efficacy").

Gus states: "Clearly, we are also beings decisively shaped by time, place, and the key experiences of our lives." I found irony in this statement; with regard to *Russian Radical's* historical thesis, that is precisely how I analyze Rand's own evolution as a thinker: emerging out of the Russian-Soviet context of her youth, educated in the methods of dialectical inquiry at Petrograd University, and severely affected by the "collectivism" of its culture, Rand emerged, like any other thinker, as a person whose thinking was shaped by the context of her particular place and time. If we keep that context in mind, I think we come to understand her thought as much more enriched; we also get to understand why she often stated things rhetorically, in starkly "black-and-white" terms. So I think, for example, Rand actually did believe that individuals are social creations, in a certain sense. This is precisely why she focused on changing society in terms of the personal, cultural, and structural dynamics of its social relations. It makes her "revolution" far more complex and all-encompassing than simply a focus on the "state" as the central threat to human survival. A threat it is, she would claim, but there were personal, social and cultural practices that reproduced exploitative relations in nonpolitical ways. I examine this comprehensively in part 3 of *Russian Radical*, and I also discuss it in the final chapter of my book, *Total Freedom: Toward a Dialectical Libertarianism*.

Gus makes a good point about "individuals [as] creative gestalts." On this issue, I heartily recommend the work of Nathaniel Branden, who took Rand's dialectical insights even further. I should note that *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* published in December 2016 a double-issue anthology of essays on "Nathaniel Branden: His Work and Legacy," where some of the contributors delve more extensively into the issue of individuals as a cluster of social relationships. I deal with Branden's indispensable work in *Russian Radical*, which has been the only work in *fifty years* that has sought to reintegrate his enormous contributions back into the corpus of Objectivist philosophy. No book before mine and no book since has done this. Without taking account of his work in psychology and social relations, I believe that some Objectivists often veer off into "stick-figure" individualism. They despise Branden so much – still playing out the personal and professional 1968 break between Rand and Nathaniel and Barbara Branden – that few of them wish to even acknowledge his contributions to Objectivism, which Rand herself said were still a part of the canon: that is, all the work he published in *The Objectivist Newsletter* and *The Objectivist* and all of the pathbreaking lectures and lecture courses he presented on everything from "Basic Principles" to "Psycho-Epistemology." (And on "psycho-epistemology," I should empha-

size too the important work contributed by Barbara Branden in her lectures series “Principles of Efficient Thinking,” which has recently been published as *Think as If Your Life Depends on It: Principles of Efficient Thinking and Other Lectures*.)

I would argue that those followers of Ayn Rand who have bracketed out the Brandenian contribution are the ones who seem to be singularly lacking in the capacity for empathy that Gus so rightly emphasizes.

On this issue of empathy, Branden is especially good on social relations and how they nourish the human requirement for psychological visibility, which can only happen in a social context. It enriches the Randian concept of individualism and takes it completely out of the atomistic universe in which too many libertarians have lived. Just two quotes from Branden and his importance to Objectivism illustrate the points I’ve made (the first about how mind is more than reason, the second concerning the breadth of relations in which all humans are involved):

Mind is more than immediate explicit awareness. It is a complex architecture of structures and processes. It includes more than the verbal, linear, analytic processes popularly if misleadingly described sometimes as “left-brain” activity. It includes the totality of mental life, including the subconscious, the intuitive, the symbolic, all that which sometimes is associated with the “right brain.” Mind is all that by means of which we reach out to and apprehend the world. ...³

There are a thousand respects in which we are not alone. ... As human beings, we are linked to all other members of the human community. As living beings, we are linked to all other forms of life. As inhabitants of the universe, we are linked to everything that exists. We stand within an endless network of relationships. Separation and connectedness are polarities, with each entailing the other.⁴

Because of what I’ve said above, I think the dialectical Rand would therefore endorse completely Gus’s statement: “But once we understand that individuals only exist within a context of relationships, other kinds of aggression become possible, the kinds libertarians cannot see.” I think Rand *does* see these other forms of aggression, some of which are cognitive, some

³ Nathaniel Branden. “What Is Self-Esteem?” Paper presented at the First International Conference on Self-Esteem, Asker/Oslo, Norway (9 August 1990): 15.

⁴ Nathaniel Branden. *The Psychology of Romantic Love*. New York: Bantam (1980): 61.

of which are “psycho-epistemological,” some of which are deeply embedded in the different cultures within which we live, and even the subcultures within those cultures, some of which are part of a whole array of “tacit” habitual practices that undermine human flourishing in a social context. (Her various discussions of religious, “mystical,” and pedagogical practices as various means of stultifying the individual’s cognitive development are only the tip of the iceberg in her arsenal of social critique.)

Gus does raise significant points concerning Rand’s negative view of Native American cultures. But I should note that there have been Objectivists who have raised similar criticisms of Rand’s views; the late Objectivist legal scholar, Murray Franck, for example, has argued that Rand was completely incorrect in her view of certain Native American cultures, and he indicts the Spaniard devastation of indigenous American cultures as an example of outright aggression. Even Nathaniel Branden, who took the typical Lockean “mixing your labor with the land” view of ownership, stated that “there were terrible things that we did in our treatment of American Indians ...”⁵ So there has been spirited disagreement within Objectivism over the treatment of Native Americans.

For me, however, the points that Gus makes about American Indians are *factual* issues that Rand and some of her followers have never taken into account; from where I stand, this is more an instance of making facts transparent that do not *undercut* the Objectivist take on Native Americans; they just show that there are factual errors that some Objectivists (especially Rand) have made, and that, if they were correctly identified, could (and should) be reconciled with a more humane understanding of what happened and what *should have happened* with regard to the engagement of European colonialists and Native American cultures.

Now, Gus might argue that Rand’s view of Native American culture as “savage” in contrast to her view of businessmen as the “fountainheads” of human progress is something that is endemic to her quasi-Nietzschean repudiation of anything less-than-genius as a reflection of the human ideal. But Rand’s ethics were constructed in such a way that one’s intelligence or level of “civilized” development did not and should not matter in the practice of certain rational virtues to achieve certain rational values.

And regardless of Rand’s celebration of the American businessman, one thing is very clear even in the context of her fiction: business has been at the forefront of the move toward statism in the United States from the very beginning. In *Atlas Shrugged*, for example, Rand writes of an “aristocracy of pull,” in which businessmen of a certain type slurp at the public trough in their attempts to use the levers of the state to their own advantage at the

⁵ Nathaniel Branden. “Objectivism: Past and Future: Lecture and Question and Answer Session,” *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 16, nos. 1-2 (December): 82.

expense of those who are not as well “connected” to institutionalized power. Like Hayek, she understands that a society in which coercion becomes the predominating principle of social life, it is political coercion that becomes the only power worth having – and this is why, as Hayek maintained, the worst get on top.

Interestingly, for all her arguments about “Big Business” being America’s most “persecuted minority,” Rand actually argued in her essays⁶ that she trusted labor unions as a bulwark against statism more than she trusted big business, which historically had led the way toward the destruction of rivalrous competition and toward the formation of regulatory agencies and central banking, both designed to bolster the positions of the powerful (on this, she is closer to the New Left and the Misesian-Rothbardian-Liggio “Left-and-Right” revisionist wing of historical interpretation).

Switching to a completely different topic, I was particularly interested in Gus’s discussion of the issue of pollution. I wonder: Is it necessary for principles to be so detailed and articulated in order to understand what constitutes “aggression” in the context of pollution? That is, won’t some of these principles emerge from class action suits and be produced by a process of trial-and-error within courts of justice? In places where property is totally socialized, pollution, as we know, is an expression of the “tragedy of the commons.” Its toxic character is typified in Lake Baikal, a product of the state-guided “industrialization” of the former Soviet Union. And without things like the Price-Anderson Act, which socializes the risk of nuclear power, would nuclear power plants even exist? We debated these points back in the days when I was a member of Students for a Libertarian Society. We often raised the question: How many companies would be producing potentially devastating forms of energy if the risks of producing such energy could potentially destroy the company – and millions of lives, leading to trillions of dollars in negligence suits, or perhaps outright criminal charges?

I agree substantially with Gus’s views expressed in the first paragraph of his section on “Understanding Democracy.” I think he makes some crucial points that libertarians must grapple with. But I do question how we reconcile these notions of democracy or individual rights in cultures that have no such conceptions. There are still cultures in this world today that have no desire for, or understanding of, what the principles of democracy are, or what individual rights entail. And we certainly can’t “nation-build” in such countries that lack this understanding; one can’t graft onto any culture conceptions that are, for lack of a better word, *alien* to its implicit view of human relations.

Finally, I heartily agree with Gus’s conclusion that “When libertarians choose to broaden their understanding of what an individual really is and

⁶ Ayn Rand, “A Preview: Part II,” *The Ayn Rand Letter* 1, no. 23 (14 August 1972): 100.

what property really is, they will be in a position to contribute importantly to [the] vital task” of understanding the broader nature of “authoritarian relations” in areas of social interaction outside of the political sphere. I, myself, have seen those authoritarian relations on display in the business world in my own brief foray into a 9 to 5 job in midtown Manhattan back in the early 1980s. But I have been arguing against such authoritarianism since my days as an undergraduate history student, when I wrote a senior honors thesis on the Pullman strike, which made transparent the paternalistic authoritarianism on display in the Pullman company town.⁷

Clearly, something is wrong with any libertarian conception that is so socially atomistic that it cannot integrate the human reality of social embeddedness and the importance of human empathy. On these points, I think folks can draw many lessons from the work of Gus diZerega. But others have contributed to this project, including such scholars as Peter Boettke, Steven Horwitz, many of those among “libertarians on the left,” as well as the late Don Lavoie (see a recent essay on “Anarchism as Radical Liberalism: Radicalizing Markets, Radicalizing Democracy,” by Nathan Goodman, on the site of the Center for a Stateless Society),⁸ who was an early supporter of my “dialectical-libertarian” project.

I’m happy to have had the opportunity to read Gus’s important essay, and wish him well in his continuing project.

⁷ The essay was later republished by the Libertarian Alliance and is available here: <http://www.libertarian.co.uk/lapubs/histn/histn046.htm>.

⁸ <https://c4ss.org/content/49379>