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The Businessmen's Crucial Role

Material Men of the Mind

Debi Ghate

INTRODUCTION

In describing *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn Rand wrote, “its theme is: the role of the mind in man’s existence.”¹ This is a very broad theme, one that Rand could have illustrated via countless different story lines. Among the many possibilities, she chose a specific plot-theme. As she explained:

The link between the theme and the events of the novel is an element which I call the plot-theme. . . . A “plot-theme” is the central conflict or “situation” of a story—a conflict in terms of action, corresponding to the theme and complex enough to create a purposeful progression of events. . . . The plot-theme of *Atlas Shrugged* is “The men of the mind going on strike against an altruist-collectivist society.”²

In other words, to show the role of the mind in man’s existence, she chose as the central action a most unusual kind of strike: what would happen if a certain group of men—the men of intellect—were to withdraw from the world?

Among Rand’s heroes in *Atlas Shrugged*, we find several businessmen: Hank Rearden, Dagny Taggart, Francisco d’Anconia, and others. This is intriguing; it is rare to find businessmen portrayed as the protagonists in modern literature and movies, and even rarer if the story involves men of the intellect. Businessmen are generally treated with suspicion—they are considered greedy, soulless money-grubbers, out to take advantage of anyone in the name of making a profit. Even when we have no

solid reason to doubt their motives, the strong message delivered to the businessman who rises above the crowd is: Don't stand out or we'll relevel the playing field; don't earn too much through your chosen profession, or we'll find a way to redistribute your wealth. We expect caped crusaders to save the day, not suited businessmen.

Yet Ayn Rand cast businessmen as *heroes* in the novel. Was this an optional selection on her part? Could she have written her novel with scientists, philosophers, engineers, lawyers, or doctors as her central heroes? John Galt, the leader of the strike, says that the strikers will return to the world only when the lights of New York City are extinguished. What will it take to extinguish those lights? Who keeps those lights on?

I argue that *Atlas Shrugged*, because of its chosen plot-theme, had to have businessmen such as Hank Rearden and Dagny Taggart as its heroes *by necessity*.

THE POPULAR CONCEPTION OF THE BUSINESSMAN AS MATERIALIST

While I was writing this essay, the United States was facing tremendous economic uncertainty caused by a "credit crisis." During the frenzy, the typical cries against businessmen were once again heard. Presidential candidate John McCain vowed that his administration, if elected, would "put an end to the reckless conduct, corruption and unbridled greed that have caused the crisis on Wall Street."³ Profit-seeking businessmen are society's downfall: they are the source of our economic woes, and the public suffers for their vice of pursuing wealth. They are certainly not described as "men of the mind," the type of man that *Atlas Shrugged's* strike removes from society. Instead they are considered men of corruption and sin.

In the novel's setting, what is the response to the businessman? As in today's media accounts, the wealthy businessman in *Atlas Shrugged* is deemed evil and blamed for the current economic crisis facing the country:

The newspapers had snarled that the cause of the country's troubles . . . was the selfish greed of the rich industrialists; that it was men like Hank Rearden who were to blame for the shrinking diet, the falling temperature and the cracking roofs in the homes of the nation . . . that a man like Hank Rearden was prompted by nothing but the profit motive . . . as if the words "profit motive" were the self-evident brand of ultimate evil. (476)

Far from being considered a candidate for a strike by men of the mind, a businessman like Hank Rearden is denounced as a “predatory savage” who is nothing but an “ex-ore-digger” (404). Business is dismissed as a trivial activity that any greedy brute can undertake to make a quick buck. When Dagny speaks with Dr. Stadler, a brilliant but corrupt scientist, about an abandoned motor that she believes could revolutionize industry, he spurns the businessman’s role, stating: “You’d think any greedy fool of an industrialist would have grabbed it in order to make a fortune. No intelligence was needed to see its commercial value” (356). When a member of the “intellectual class” attempts to flatter Jim Taggart, the businessman with a “social conscience,” he says, “the best compliment I can pay you is that you’re *not* a real businessman.” In response, Jim preaches the mantra of the looters: “We are breaking up the vicious tyranny of economic power. We will set men free of the rule of the dollar. We will release our spiritual aims from dependence on the owners of material means. We will liberate our culture from the stranglehold of the profit-chasers” (404).

The contempt for the businessman and the corresponding attitude that he is a force of destruction and chaos, rests on the view that he is an emotion-driven thug who mows down the intellectual as he lustily pursues profit, nurturing greed in others. What is behind this view?

“*We will release our spiritual aims from dependence on the owners of material means,*” says Jim Taggart (404). A well-known author who frequented many parties concurs: “Our culture has sunk into a bog of materialism. Men have lost all spiritual values in their pursuit of material production and technological trickery. . . . They will return to a nobler life if we teach them to bear privations. So we ought to place a limit on their material greed” (133). “Intellectual pursuits are not learned in the marketplace,” said the hostess (144). The dominant view is that business is corrupt *because* it is material, and therefore by necessity is nonspiritual.

What is praised as spiritual by those who find the material distasteful? It is the abstract, indefinable, intangible, and impractical realm, the subject matter of highbrow discussion amongst the popular intellectuals in the novel. “No,” says an author at a gathering of socialites, “you cannot expect people to understand the higher reaches of philosophy. Culture should be taken out of the hands of the dollar-chasers. We need a national subsidy for literature. It is disgraceful that artists are treated like peddlers and that art works have to be sold like soap” (141). The art works and books that no one wants to buy are spiritual. The ideas that are beyond the grasp of the rational individual are spiritual. “You must learn to see beyond the static definitions of

old-fashioned thinking. Nothing is static in the universe. Everything is fluid,” said the professor of philosophy at the same party (132). The common view is that it is the *unknowable* and *otherworldly* that constitutes the spiritual.

Because what the businessman does is definable, tangible, concrete, and of-this-world, his work is disdained as material, and therefore not of the intellect or spirit.

BUSINESS AS AN INTELLECTUAL AND SPIRITUAL PURSUIT

Ayn Rand completely rejected the conventional view of the businessman, the view that he is nothing more than a “used car salesman” with a bigger dealership. Rather, Ayn Rand celebrated the businessman and his pursuit of material wealth as *virtuous*. As Francisco d’Anconia states:

To the glory of mankind, there was, for the first and only time in history, a *country of money*—and I have no higher, more reverent tribute to pay to America, for this means: a country of reason, justice, freedom, production, achievement. For the first time, man’s mind and money were set free, and there were no fortunes-by-conquest, but only fortunes-by-work, and instead of swordsmen and slaves, there appeared the real maker of wealth, the greatest worker, the highest type of human being—the self-made man—the American industrialist.
(414)

Why did Rand hold the businessman as the “highest type of human being”? To judge whether business requires intellect or not, one must examine what it consists of. What does a businessman do on a daily basis and over the span of his career?

Much of the novel concentrates on the lives of two businessmen whom the strikers consider their greatest enemies, and their greatest potential conquests: Hank Rearden and Dagny Taggart. Through them, we are exposed to the role of the mind in business and the full range of activities it involves—when it is pursued actively and purposefully as a productive venture. Does business require men of intellect?

Hank Rearden

Hank Rearden is an industrialist whose chosen purpose was to invent a new Metal that would outlast, outperform, and outsell

any other material known to man. He had worked since the age of fourteen in mines, foundries, and mills, learning the industry from the mine shafts up. By thirty, he owned the mine. He eventually owned Rearden Ore, Rearden Coal, and Rearden Limestone before opening Rearden Steel. Every stage of his career was an advancement over the last; every advancement brought him closer to his goal: Rearden Metal. As Rearden says to Francisco d'Anconia, "To me there's only one form of human depravity—the man without a purpose" (148).

On the night that he finally pours the first heat of Rearden Metal, he reflects on what it took to reach this day. It took him ten years to develop the metal and "every inch of its course, every pound of its pressure and every molecule within it, were controlled and made by a conscious intention that had worked upon it" (28). Rearden envisioned a world built and shaped by his Metal. He foresaw what multitudes of applications would result if he succeeded in his quest—from kitchen knives to communication wire to airplanes. With his purpose firmly in mind, Rearden spent years in research laboratories in front of scorching ovens, poring over formulas on paper, testing material, learning from each failed attempt—reformulating, recalculating, reinventing, and always reasoning, reasoning, reasoning—until the solution was found, until the day he could hold the cool metal in his hands. Consider what this required: an integrated understanding of chemistry, physics, mathematics, engineering, metallurgy, among other fields. It required the ability to conceptualize beyond previously identified and readily accessible metals, and to reconfigure existing materials into combinations not previously thought of. It required an ability to persist in the face of failure. On the day his metal is poured for the first time, Rearden finds that his mind is still sharply focused on what had been his ten-year goal: "The sight of the running metal was still burned into his mind, filling his consciousness, leaving no room for anything else" (34).

Yet, during that ten-year period, as the owner of the most efficient and productive steel mills in the country, Rearden undertakes this inventive effort while expertly overseeing all other aspects of his business. In order to garner the greatest profit and reward from his mills, Rearden must continually identify or create new or larger markets for his metal. He must envision new, industry-advancing solutions for his customers' manufacturing and engineering needs. For instance, when Taggart Transcontinental wants to build a new bridge using his Metal, Rearden sketches a design that leads to a new method of construction, at a fraction of the previously estimated cost—construction that takes into account the superior quality of Rearden Metal. He has just created a new market segment of unlimited potential, with colossal profits as his

just reward. And his customers are now able to pursue new industrial endeavors more efficiently, leading them to increase their own production and wealth—leading them to place larger and more frequent orders for his Metal. Rearden’s attitude is summed up in his reply to Dagny, when she tells him a story she once heard in school about the sun losing energy and growing colder and colder each year: “I never believed that story. I thought by the time the sun was exhausted, men would find a substitute” (171).

As an industrialist, Rearden must oversee the design, construction, and any expansion of the physical mills. What methods and efficiencies can he introduce to maximize production and continuously increase the output of his mills? Has he hired the right employees to carry out the work? What directions should he give his superintendent in the face of a crisis? The more the mills produce, the more he produces; the more he produces, the more he sells; the more he sells, the more he earns. How can he produce 600 tons of metal a day on fewer furnaces compared to Orren Boyle’s 100 tons using many more furnaces? Rearden is ruthlessly focused on squeezing the most production out of Rearden Steel, leading to larger and larger profits.

But he does not take a short-term, pragmatic view in generating those profits. He recognizes that he must earn the loyalty of the kind of customers he wants to deal with—those who will pay for his Metal and put it to the uses he had envisioned. He must determine at what price to sell his Metal so that his customers can afford it and will return. He must hire and fire employees with varying skills, from researchers to floor sweepers—the right decisions advance his long-term goal to maximize his profits. He must put out a fire at his mills and shovel coal if necessary in an emergency rather than watch and direct the action from afar. And, unfortunately, he must also deal with the Floyd Ferrises, the Wesley Mouches, the Paul Larkins, and their collaborators, who not only distract him from his purpose but actively try to undermine it. Rearden, the industrialist, must personally and simultaneously respond to multiple demands and pressures calmly, with focus, all the while engaged in the creative process of making Rearden Metal. Hank Rearden *is* Rearden Steel.

It was not easy; he experienced fatigue, frustration, and anger. He experienced occasional failure. But Rearden succeeded nevertheless. He was committed to a well-defined purpose, a purpose that he knew *had to be possible to achieve* given his hard-acquired knowledge. He knew that the goal he set—a new, revolutionary metal—would require a high level of sustained effort to attain. He recognized that his mind and spirit were the only sparks he needed to keep himself going (30).

In offering us Hank Rearden, Ayn Rand presents us with a business hero who proudly relies on his mind in the relentless pursuit of his business—for the express purpose of making as much money as possible. She presents us with a man who, through his confident dedication to his purpose, offers the world a product, Rearden Metal, that has the potential to revolutionize industry, providing a wide range of new products at a cheaper price. Through Hank Rearden, we see what intellectual and physical effort must be invested to achieve this, and the overwhelming range of intermediary decisions that rest on his judgment. When combined together in a man like Rearden, a business giant is born, the kind of man who changes the world product by product. Jim Taggart protests: “Rearden. He didn’t invent smelting and chemistry and air compression. He couldn’t have invented his Metal but for thousands and thousands of other people. *His Metal!* Why does he think it’s his? Why does he think it’s his invention?” His future wife, Cherryl, asks, puzzled, “But the iron ore and all those other things were there all the time. Why didn’t anybody else make that Metal, but Mr. Rearden did?” (262). Without him, there is no revolution in manufacturing. He knows it, as does John Galt and his fellow strikers, as do the looters who try to deny that a man like Rearden is a man of the mind.

Dagny Taggart

Dagny Taggart decided as a child that she would one day run Taggart Transcontinental—“From Ocean to Ocean, forever”—better and faster than anyone, including her legendary grandfather, Nat Taggart. She knows all other industries depend on motive power to gather manufacturing components and transport their finished goods to market. The work she does moves the country—the better and faster she does that, the more her company earns, and the more she earns as a stockholder and employee. And that profit is earned from other businesses that are also actively creating wealth from products they make. The more those businesses manufacture, the more her railroad earns by providing them with transportation.

Dagny started as a night station operator and worked her way up to Vice-President in Charge of Operation. In her, we find a competent, energetic professional who is always ready to act on her judgment in a swift and decisive way. Consider this exchange between Dagny and her mealy-mouthed brother and boss, Jim, when she announces her decision to replace the Rio Norte Line using track made of Rearden Metal, something no one has dared to attempt before:

“The consensus of the best metallurgical authorities,” he said, “seems to be highly skeptical about Rearden Metal, contending—”

“Drop it, Jim.”

“Well, whose opinion did you take?”

“I don’t ask for opinions.”

“What do you go by?”

“[My] Judgment.” . . .

“Then what on earth do you know about Rearden Metal?”

“That it’s the greatest thing ever put on the market . . . because it’s tougher than steel, cheaper than steel and will outlast any hunk of metal in existence.”

“But who says so?”

“Jim, I studied engineering in college. When I see things, I see them.”

“What did you see?”

“Rearden’s formula and the tests he showed me.”

“Well, if it were any good, somebody would have used it, and nobody has.” He saw the flash of anger, and went on nervously: “How can you *know* it’s good? How can you be sure? How can you decide?”

“Somebody decides such things, Jim. Who?” (21)

Dagny Taggart, Taggart Transcontinental’s Vice-President in Charge of Operation, decides these things.

Dagny always seems to know what to do and why. She has a seemingly pure clarity in her thinking. This clarity comes from knowing with certainty that she can make the right decision. This certainty is not without basis, it does not come from arrogance but from an earned confidence. What is the source of that confidence? Dagny knows every aspect of the company’s business from the lonely station post to the powerful board room. She has invested in learning every key aspect of Taggart Transcontinental’s business. She can read every map, operate any signal, construct a complex train schedule, hire expert contractors, and build a new railroad line. Before making her business decisions, Dagny personally examines the evidence, gains a firsthand understanding of the data in front of her, and evaluates all of the known facts. Because she has done so, she has no hesitation in issuing the necessary directions. On whose judgment? Her own. On whose authority? Her own. At whose risk? Her own. Dagny repeatedly and consistently tells employees, government officials, Jim, and the

Taggart board of directors, that she personally assumes responsibility for her decisions when no one else dares to act. Her confidence is such that she decides to personally assume the risk of building the John Galt Line, entering into an agreement with Taggart Transcontinental that has it garnering all of the benefit if she succeeds.

What does building the John Galt Line require of Dagny? Her constant goal is: the best, fastest, safest railroad the world has ever seen. Her constant motivation is: to make as much money as possible for herself and the railroad, boosting the other industries that depend on rail transport along the way so that her own company has long-term customers. Dagny knows that the fate of Colorado's industries, such as Wyatt Oil, Nielsen Motors, Hammond Cars, Stockton Foundry, depends on whether the Line is built or not. She knows that if Colorado's industries vanish, so does the entire country's economy.

Dagny has relied on her own judgment to identify that Rearden Metal is the best material to use for her endeavor even if it has never been used to build a railroad track. Because she is ultimately responsible for making the Line as profitable as possible, she must ensure that it is built to last and to transport as much traffic as possible while doing no harm to Taggart Transcontinental's passengers, or to the cargo entrusted it. To construct a railroad made of a new, untried material, she must resolve numerous engineering, manufacturing, and personnel issues. The consequences of an error are potentially costly to her given her agreement to bear all the risk—passengers could be killed if the rail is unsafe, the shareholders' investment may not pay off, Taggart Transcontinental's profits could crumble, or the commerce of Colorado could wither away, leaving the country's economy in jeopardy. What Dagny's business activities provide is a lifeline—a mechanism for people to move their goods and themselves—a way for them to carry out their own businesses, and therefore earn their livelihoods.

Because she has fully evaluated every component of the Line (human, mechanical, or otherwise), because she has planned for its construction, taking into account all known facts, because she has carefully calculated, designed, tested, and verified her vision, she succeeds—with nothing but her judgment to stand on. As she proudly rides in the engine car on the day the line opens,

She wondered why she felt safer than she had ever felt in a car behind the engine, safer here, where it seemed as if, should an obstacle rise, her breast and the glass shield would be the first to smash against it. She smiled, grasping the answer: it was the security of being first, with full sight and full

knowledge of one's course—not the blind sense of being pulled into the unknown by some unknown power ahead. It was the greatest sensation of existence: not to trust, but to know. (240)

Because of her dedication to fully understand every aspect of the railroad business, Dagny is able to quickly identify obstacles and, at a rapid-fire pace, direct the necessary actions to remove them. She uses the results of her mind's effort to *act*. When the John Galt Line is built, and she has claimed victory over the naysayers, she decides to lay a track made of Rearden Metal across the country—"From Ocean to Ocean, forever." She is in a position to immediately conclude that this is the best course of action for the success of the railroad.

However, Dagny is not able to pursue that goal. Instead, she must respond to calamity after calamity in an attempt to save Taggart Transcontinental. When the tunnel disaster occurs in Colorado, Dagny's focus immediately turns to solving the problem of how to provide ongoing transportation with the least amount of disruption. She pulls maps from the railroad's early days and issues work orders to begin rerouting tracks in order to resume cross-country operations as soon as possible. When the Comet stalls on the tracks and is abandoned, she personally walks down the track to contact help. Her guiding principle is that "so long as she was still in existence she would know that action is man's foremost obligation, regardless of anything he feels" (334). Her mind is in constant drive and she acts on its output to continuously reach for her goal: a faster and better railroad than has ever been offered to the country before.

But, like Rearden, she must excel at overseeing the details of the business while pursuing her long-term, visionary goal. She must have the kind of intellect and dedication to purpose it takes to revolutionize the transportation industry of an entire nation. It is Dagny that recognizes the value of Rearden Metal in spite of the doubts cast upon it by the country's leading metallurgists. *She* conceives of the Rearden Metal bridge and track, recognizing the durability and speed it would provide. And she recognizes the value of the abandoned motor at the Twentieth Century Motor Company's ghost town factory. It is she who pursues the answer to the motor's riddle, knowing what it would mean for her railroad and for the entire economy.

What is it about the motor that convinces Dagny she must do everything in her power to resurrect it? Dagny understands the potential wealth that the motor could bring, not only to its inventor but to anyone who has the ability to harness its power. The motor is *self-generating*, requiring no outside source to continually replenish it. This means that any motorized process could be

significantly accelerated, making more time and materials available for other use. As Rearden responds to her query as to whether he recognizes the value of the motor, if built: “I’d say: about ten years added to the life of every person in this country. . . . That motor could have set the whole country in motion and on fire” (290). And it is Dagny who extracts that invisible potential from an unidentifiable junk heap in the corner of an abandoned factory.

Taggart Transcontinental could not continue to exist but for Dagny’s purpose, knowledge, and capacity for action. John Galt and his fellow strikers know this. Dagny senses it. And so do Jim, his board of directors, and the other looters who want to use her mind’s products while cursing her existence.

Other Businessmen

There are other businessmen in the novel through whom we learn more about the intellectual power required to properly engage in business. Midas Mulligan, the financier, only makes loans to customers who he judges will pay them back with sufficient interest; he does not run a bank built on hopes, dreams, and pity, but on reality. What does that require? Mulligan must understand enough about the intended activities of his loan applicants to evaluate whether to incur the risk of supporting them (whether they be in mining, car manufacturing, or any other productive venture). In order to decide whether an investment is worth his gold, Mulligan must be in a position to *judge* whether his injection of capital will make that business grow. Ellis Wyatt, the man with no time to waste, works on drawing oil out of shale—previously considered an impossible task. What does that require? Wyatt must first conceive of the possibility, and then sufficiently understand the science and technology involved to lead the effort and hire the right specialists to convert the possibility into fact. He must then work on methods that will allow him to refine more of the oil he draws out of that shale, at a faster rate, in order to fulfil increasing demand from his customers. Ken Danagger, who owns a coal mine, judges that Rearden is a man worth dealing with under any circumstances, including the threat of legal sanction. What does that require? Danagger must be able to exercise independence in the face of popular opinion and evaluate Rearden as a business associate upon whom to stake the future of his coal mines. Danagger must be able to judge the material—and spiritual—benefits of such a business decision. Through these characters, Rand continues to show that business requires a thoroughly engaged and active mind, a mind capable of simultaneously asking a broad range of industry-redefining questions while yielding

innovative answers that generate significant wealth for its owner and those he trades with.

What Business Is

Business, when pursued as Rearden, Dagny, and other businessmen in *Atlas Shrugged* pursue it, is indisputably a material endeavor that is equally intellectual and spiritual. Ayn Rand describes the businessman as follows:

The businessman carries scientific discoveries from the laboratory of the inventor to industrial plants, and transforms them into material products that fill men's physical needs and expand the comfort of men's existence. By creating a mass market, he makes these products available to every income level in society. By using machines, he increases the productivity of human labor, thus raising labor's economic rewards. By organizing human effort into productive enterprises, he creates employment for men of countless professions.⁴

In other words, the industrialist channels the inventions and discoveries of highly specialized professions through carefully designed processes that result in goods and services, elevating our standard of living and making our lives more enjoyable, efficient, and effortless. The businessman converts the raw output of the researcher into a viable product that he can sell as widely and as profitably as possible. Along the way, he hires and therefore sustains many others of varying skill and ability, at all levels of society. That is, at the broadest level, what a businessman does.

This type of businessman is not a work of fiction created by Ayn Rand. Consider one of the earliest industrialists, James Watt (1736 to 1819). Watt is credited with commercializing a key piece of technology that brought about the Industrial Revolution, and thus our modern civilization: the steam engine. While he did not invent the steam engine, it was Watt who recognized its potential value. He began working on existing steam engines in 1764 to increase their output over longer periods of time. In 1765, Watt finally gained the critical insight of separating an engine's condenser from its piston, allowing it to maintain the requisite temperature. He then created a test engine and raised capital to mass produce the improved engine. By 1775, he had gone into business with fellow industrialist Matthew Boulton, and what followed was rapid progress in creating a commercial version of the test engine. Over the next few years, he worked to overcome other major design challenges involving the piston and beam. The

result was the birth of the first steam engine of commercial value. Watt continued to work to improve the engine and adapt it for use in more specialized markets. By developing a rotary-motion steam engine in 1781 (replacing the earlier up-and-down pumping model) and introducing other mechanical improvements, Watt made available a steam engine for use in paper, flour, cotton, and iron mills, as well as distilleries, canals, and waterworks. He continued to improve and sell engines, generating significant profits. By the time he retired in 1800, he had patented the steam locomotive and was very wealthy, having reaped the rewards for his intellectual efforts. Watt's commercialization of the steam engine is credited as supplying the foremost source of energy, which made possible the Industrial Revolution.⁵

An industrialist's mind must therefore be such that he can take the scientist's creation, recognize its potential value, adapt it for commercialization and sell it to larger and larger markets. He expects to reap significant financial rewards for his efforts. But as Francisco points out to Rearden, there are easier ways to make money (452). Ultimately, what is it that motivates the businessman to engage in the demanding intellectual work required to successfully achieve his purpose?

It is precisely because the material pursuit of business is *spiritual* that the industrialist is dedicated to it. The businessman's ultimate goal is to create *values*. When Francisco asks Rearden why he spent ten years making his Metal and what he had hoped to achieve by giving his life to this activity, Rearden responds that he is proud of his achievement. He is proud of the John Galt Line because it is the best rail ever made and he wishes to make money by exchanging his best efforts for the best efforts of others. Rearden wants to see his Metal used by the best among men—those whom it will help reach greater and greater achievements—those who understand and appreciate the greatness of his own achievement (452).

Business is an activity that offers the mind challenges of a tremendous scale (on the order of how to create a new metal, how to revolutionize the transportation industry, or how to bring oil out of shale), the successful completion of which leads to the attainment of values. The night that Rearden pours the first heat of his Metal, he thinks: "Whatever it was . . . whatever the strain and the agony, they were worth it, because they had made him reach this day" (31). As Dagny rides in the engine car on the first run of the John Galt Line, she goes to look at the generators, exhilarated:

She stood in a swaying, sealed chamber of metal, looking at the giant generators. She had wanted to see them, because the sense of triumph within her was bound to them, to her love for them, to the

reason for the life-work she had chosen. . . . “The John Galt Line!” she shouted, for the amusement of feeling her voice swept away from her lips. . . . They *are* alive, she thought, but their soul operates them by remote control. Their soul is in every man who has the capacity to equal this achievement. (245–46)

The pride and immense satisfaction of having created an industry—having accomplished what no one else could with the iron ore, the railroad system, or the shale—and the pleasure and happiness one derives from seeing one’s product put to the uses one envisioned, is the spiritual reward the businessman receives for his intellectual effort.

The financial reward that the businessman expects to earn as a result of creating these values is the objective measure of his success. But it also adds to his spiritual reward. It is his means of pursuing and maintaining other values: the friends, ideas, art, projects, and hobbies that he has chosen because they bring him fulfillment and happiness. As Francisco puts it:

Money . . . will take you wherever you wish to go but it will not replace you as the driver. It will give you the means for the satisfaction of your desires, but it will not provide you with desires. . . . Money will not pursue happiness for the man who has no concept of what he wants: money will not give him a code of values. (411)

The pursuit of business so that it generates as much profit as possible therefore supplements the spiritual rewards that the work itself provides: it supplies the means for the businessman to enjoy a full life.

Finally, business is spiritual precisely because it involves material products—the definable, tangible, concrete products created by it. Francisco explains this relationship between material goods and man’s spirit:

Dagny, we who’ve been called “materialists” by the killers of the human spirit, we’re the only ones who know how little value or meaning there is in material objects as such, because we’re the ones who create their value and meaning. . . . *You* do not have to depend on any material possessions, they depend on you, you create them, you own the one and only tool of production. Wherever you are, you will always be able to produce. (620)

The one and only tool of her production is her mind. Absent her mind, there is no tangible product for her to sell, and there is no resulting wealth for her to pursue her values with or no spiritual satisfaction to derive out of the creative process.

Without the material objects generated by business, the industrialist is unable to derive the spiritual wealth he gets from creating values out of his work. Without the spiritual investment of the industrialist's soul into his business, there is no material wealth possible to him. The two are indivisible. Business is a material *and* spiritual pursuit, demanding the best of one's mind.

As the composer Richard Halley comments in the valley:

Miss Taggart, do you see why I'd give three dozen modern artists for one real businessman? . . .
Whether it's a symphony or a coal mine, all work is an act of creating and comes from the same source: from an inviolate capacity to see through one's own eyes. . . . That shining vision which they talk about as belonging to authors of symphonies and novels—what do they think is the driving faculty of men who discover how to use oil, how to run a mine, how to build an electric motor? That sacred fire which is said to burn within musicians and poets—what do they suppose moves an industrialist to defy the whole world for the sake of his new metal . . . ? . . . [I]f there is more tragic a fool than the businessman who doesn't know that he's an exponent of man's highest creative spirit—it's the artist who thinks that the businessman is his enemy." (782–84)

What Business Isn't

Not all of the characters who claim the title of businessman in *Atlas Shrugged* illustrate the proper role of the mind in man's existence. Jim Taggart, Orren Boyle, Paul Larkin, Horace Bussby Mowen claim to be "businessmen." And why not? After all, they work *at* businesses, claim lofty titles such as president or owner, have big offices and staff scurrying about them, and take high-level meetings with the "who's-who" of Washington and Hollywood. These men are engaged in the full-time activity of trying to steal the income of hard-working people, using as minimal a level of effort as possible. They are corrupt, greedy thieves. *These* are the "predatory savages" that populate the prevailing notion of businessmen and what they do.

Recall Rand's description of the businessman and his role. Do the pseudobusinessmen transform inventions into new

products, creating mass markets for them? No, they think of ways to steal the products of others and beg loans from Washington. Do they organize people into effective teams creating productive output? No, they look for ways to have the most number of people do as little productive work as possible. These characters spend their time currying favors, evading facts, avoiding decision-making, trading pull with other pull-peddlers, attending parties to see and be seen, and speaking in half-truths and code. They do everything in their power to remain in a hazy fog and avoid the necessity of action, preferring instead to rely on the Reardens and the Dagnys to do their thinking for them. A day's work for a man like Jim Taggart is to wake up cursing the dawn, to think of who he needs to avoid that day in order not to have a favor called in, and more importantly, who he needs to entertain and play the sycophant to in order to gain a favor. A man like Orren Boyle spends his days lobbying for increased regulations to throttle his competitors so that he can avoid the difficult task of figuring out how to produce steel. These are not businessmen, they are thugs. Rather than produce, they contrive new mechanisms by which to force others to do their thinking for them. They serve as a stark contrast to Rearden, Dagny, and the other heroic businessmen in the novel. They illustrate the role of the *mindless*.

The Spiritual Field that Sustains Other Fields

But men of the mind exist in every field requiring specialized knowledge and skill. Obviously one must think rationally, have a purpose, and act on one's judgment if one is a physicist designing a self-generating motor, a composer who writes uplifting music, or a philosophy professor who teaches future generations of thinkers. What makes the businessman unique? Why would the strike have lacked success if all the other men of the mind shrugged, but the businessman did not?

On a practical and visceral level, other professions rely on the businessman for their livelihood. The physicist needs the businessman to recognize the potential value and create commercial markets for his invention. The composer needs the businessman to record and sell his music. The philosophy professor needs the businessman to build and operate the university where he teaches. Even if the professional is engaged in certain business-like activities himself (for example, a self-employed doctor who markets his practice, provides services of value, issues invoices, and collects payment, pays the bills), he relies on others to put up the financing and carry out the construction of buildings that house his practice; to supply and sell the specialized equipment he needs to carry out his profession; to

make commercially available new medicines and therapeutic products that will allow his own profession to grow. Who provides all of these elements? The businessman.

In the context of the novel, note that John Galt was temporarily employed by a motor company, Richard Halley performed in concert halls and recorded his music at studios, and Hugh Akston taught at Patrick Henry University. Each of them looked to the businessman for employment or for providing a means of earning an income. The products of their minds had limited exposure and were therefore of limited benefit, until the businessman recognized their value.

But the businessman supplies other professions with much more than employment, capital, and industrial products. He is the provider of *material and therefore spiritual wealth*, which makes possible the pursuit of other professions.

Rand, in her discussion of the businessman's role, expanded on what he makes possible: "He is the great liberator who, in the short span of a century and a half, has released men from bondage to their physical needs, has released them from the terrible drudgery of an eighteen-hour workday of manual labor for their barest subsistence, has released them from famines, from pestilences, from the stagnant hopelessness and terror in which most of mankind had lived in all the pre-capitalist centuries—and in which most of it still lives, in non-capitalist countries."⁶

Because J. D. Rockefeller refined oil into petroleum and other key materials, new products, including cars, tractors, and bulldozers emerged, freeing men from physical labor and allowing more than a small elite under the protection of patrons to engage in professions such as teaching, painting, or lawyering. Because Thomas Edison manufactured the electric light bulb, men were free to continue their activities after dark, allowing them to produce more in a day, making them wealthier. In their new-found leisure time, they could afford to buy books, listen to recorded performances, and watch movies, resulting in income for authors, musicians, and film directors. Because J. P. Morgan financed corporations, including manufacturing and drug companies, scientists and engineers were able to secure private employment rather than work for the state or under the protection of an aristocratic patron who was entertained by the abstract intellectual work done by the creator.

As *Atlas Shrugged's* Ellis Wyatt identified:

What's wealth but the means of expanding one's life? There's two ways one can do that: either by producing more or by producing it faster. And that's what I'm doing, I'm manufacturing time. . . . I'm working to improve my methods, and every hour I

save is an hour added to my life. . . . Wealth, Dagny? What greater wealth is there than to own your life and spend it growing? Every living thing must grow. It can't stand still. It must grow or perish. (721–22)

Every hour that a man like Ellis Wyatt adds to his life means that more efficient industrial processes and products now exist. With the advent of those comes the growth of many other professions—and the wealth to support them.

THE DEVASTATING EFFECTS OF THE STRIKE

As the businessmen join the strike, taking their minds and wealth-generating abilities with them, what effect is there?

In the areas of the country where industries have vanished, a regression from modern life to preindustrial conditions takes place. As Rearden and Dagny drive through Michigan's countryside, they visit an abandoned ore mine—and see the “remnants of a crane like a skeleton bending against the sky,” a discarded lunchbox at their feet. As they drive through nearby towns, they observe run-down houses, sagging structures—and horse-drawn carriages where cars once traveled. When they reach the area where Dagny finds the abandoned motor, the village of Starnesville, they are met with people dressed in rags with no shoes, drawing water from wells, living by candlelight in highly unsanitary conditions—who blankly stare at their car as if they have appeared from another dimension of space and time. They see the remains of gasoline stations, and isolated telegraph poles. They see chickens loose in the meager vegetable garden, and pigs waddling in refuse. The people appear bedraggled and hopeless. They look much older than their age and as if they are incapable of feeling anything but exhaustion (280–83).

What image does this account invoke?

English peasants in 1086 had little more than enough food to keep them alive, and sometimes not even that. Houses were crude temporary structures. A peasant owned one set of clothes, best described as rags, and little else. As late as the fifteenth century expenditures of the masses on non-food items such as clothing, heat, light, and rent were probably only 13 percent of all expenditures.⁷

When Michigan's industries shut down, its people find themselves living in conditions similar to what eleventh-century peasants

endured. They have lost centuries' worth of progress. They are reduced to a state of bare subsistence, and one can no longer afford the luxury of employment as a scientist, composer, or philosophy professor. They are on the path to returning to what the West was like prior to Watt, his steam engine, and all of the other advances of the Industrial Revolution: "The hovels of the poor in London and elsewhere were health hazards of the highest order. . . . Sanitation was primitive and sewage much the same. In many parts of London, people simply threw their garbage into the street. . . . There were outhouses and cesspools instead of sewers."⁸ The tangible effects of the wealth generated through industrialization are plainly visible when looking at how life expectancy has improved as society has become more industrialized.

The pre-industrial period could generate only minor fluctuations in life expectancy, averaging in the mid-to-high 30s, but the Industrial Revolution created a sustained upward movement. "People lived longer because they were better nourished and sheltered, and cleaner, and thus were less vulnerable to infectious . . . diseases . . . that were peculiarly susceptible to improved living standards." The industrial era initiated a gradual but steady march upward regarding English life expectancy, which is currently 74.7 years on average for men and 80.2 for women. "It took thousands of years to increase life expectancy at birth just over 20 years to the high 20s. Then in just the past two centuries, the length of life . . . in the advanced [i.e., industrialized] countries jumped from less than 30 years to perhaps 75 years."⁹

Starnesville—the town of filthy shacks amongst ruins—provides a stark reminder of what history has already shown us. It illustrates what happens when the source of material and spiritual wealth, the industrialist, has withdrawn. Remove the businessman, remove our ability to sustain civilization. Without the mind, and the businessmen's use of it to create wealth, it is not possible for others to pursue values beyond those utmost crucial values for physical survival: food and shelter.

In the absence of industrialists, society returns to a pre-nineteenth century level of existence. Human life shortens in span—death comes more quickly for all. *This* is the result of the mind on strike.

In the days that followed Rearden's strike, what effect was there on the spirit of the people? A steel shortage causes a number of businesses to fail and close, shop owners give up their stock to

looters, small businessmen commit suicide and panic ensues. In the hours following Dagny's strike, the lights of New York City go out. All that is left is Wyatt's torch, burning incessantly. There is no mind left to bring the much-needed oil out of the ground. As Francisco tells Dagny:

The rebirth of d'Anconia Copper—and of the world—has to start here, in the United States. This country was the only country in history born, not of chance and blind tribal warfare, but as a rational product of man's mind. This country was built on the supremacy of reason—and for one magnificent century it redeemed the world. It will have to do so again. (771)

WHY THE STRIKE REQUIRED BUSINESSMEN

Given Rand's choice to write a novel about the men of the mind going on strike in the midst of a collectivist society, her selection of businessmen as the lynchpins holding the looters' society together was essential. Rand views the businessman as the "field agent of the army whose lieutenant commander-in-chief is the scientist."¹⁰ She describes her character, Francisco d'Anconia, the industrialist, as being the perfect blend of his two intellectual fathers, a philosopher and a physicist. In her view the businessman and the professional intellectual are partners.

Why was the businessman crucial to the strike given its purpose? Because of all the professions, his mind was the most disdained for being dedicated to pursuing what is considered the lowest of realms: the material world. Yet his mind was the one that all others most depended on for the requirements of human flourishing. Industrial civilization and all that it depends on—our release from physical labor, leisure time, art, culture—demands that the businessman be given a special place of honor amongst its "men of the mind." The industrialist not only provides the material means for other professions to exist, his success makes possible our pursuit of spiritual values. Only the businessman is in a position to simultaneously withdraw the material and spiritual wealth that the looters have looted. Only he can sever both sources at once, and with such devastation, simply by uttering one word: "Enough." Only his act of shrugging can figuratively, and literally, turn off the lights of New York City.¹¹

NOTES

1. Ayn Rand, *For the New Intellectual* (New York: Signet, 1963), 88.
2. Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature*, revised edition (New York: Signet, 1975), 85.
3. B. Reinhard, "McCain blames Wall Street's 'unbridled greed' for economic woes," *Miami Herald* (Sept. 16, 2008), retrieved from www.miamiherald.com.
4. Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, 27.
5. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica Micropaedia Ready Reference* 15th edition, Vol. 12 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2002), 528–29.
6. Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, 27.
7. J. Simon, *The State of Humanity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 137.
8. Andrew Bernstein, *The Capitalist Manifesto* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2005), 64.
9. Bernstein, *The Capitalist Manifesto*, 120 (see n. 31 for sources cited).
10. Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, 27.
11. I wish to thank the Ayn Rand Institute's Yaron Brook, Executive Director, and Onkar Ghate, Senior Fellow, for their insightful editorial advice and their moral support, and its Academic Coordinator, Christopher Elsee, whose valuable assistance made it possible for me to have the time to write this essay. For an excellent discussion of the issues addressed in this essay, see the title essay by Leonard Reikoff in *Why Businessmen Need Philosophy* (Ayn Rand Institute Press, 1999).