

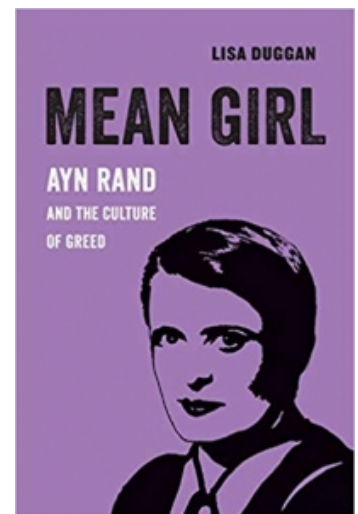
Book Review: Mean Girl: Ayn Rand and the Culture of Greed by Lisa Duggan

In Mean Girl: Ayn Rand and the Culture of Greed, Lisa Duggan offers a new thesis on the infamous literary, cultural and political icon, Ayn Rand, exploring how the adoption of many of her philosophical and political ideas and beliefs helped fuel the insidious shift towards neoliberalism. Duggan's skills as a cultural historian and her sharp-witted socio-political commentary fuse seamlessly together in this short yet fascinating book that is a necessary read for students of culture and politics, as well as activists and organisers, writes Ellen Reid.

Mean Girl: Ayn Rand and the Culture of Greed. Lisa Duggan. University of California Press. 2019.

In 1905, Alissa Zinovievna Rosenbaum was born into a middle-class Jewish family in St. Petersburg, Russia. While Rosenbaum lived a relatively comfortable life financially until her teens, it is important to acknowledge that she grew up in what Anne C. Heller has described as [‘the most anti-Semitic and politically divided nation on the European Continent’](#). Alissa's father's position as a pharmacist, and his use of variants of his name, enabled the Rosenbaums to have greater freedoms than many other Jewish people living in Russia under the Tsar, where the threat of pogroms was constantly present. Despite the fear of violence, arrest and/or exile for the Jewish community at the time, her father's career as a pharmacist grew from strength to strength, allowing the Rosenbaums to become part of the Jewish bourgeoisie.

However, in 1917, when the Bolshevik revolution began, the Rosenbaum family business was seized by the newly established socialist government. Rosenbaum's family fled to Crimea to escape the poverty of St. Petersburg, and their financial stability and social capital was never retrieved. This uprooting and loss that the young Alissa experienced affected her greatly, and she held this sense of dispossession with her throughout her life. Her upbringing had hitherto shielded her from the experiences of poverty that had motivated the working class to rise up against Tsar Nicholas II – for the young Rosenbaum, the Bolshevik revolution was a gross display of ‘theft, bullying, and the exercise of illegitimate power by people who did not deserve it’ (Duggan, 18). Her obsession with Hollywood cinema and her disillusionment with the loss of financial and social capital led Rosenbaum to move to the United States in 1926. It is here that she formally changed her name to Ayn Rand, and it is in the United States that she would become the infamous literary, cultural and political icon that has come to define our contemporary culture of greed.



There are few authors better equipped to write *Mean Girl*, this new thesis on Rand, than Lisa Duggan. With Duggan a self-proclaimed [‘pinko commie queer’](#), prospective readers may assume that *Mean Girl* will be a scathing critique from cover to cover. However, the ‘weird obsession’ Duggan has garnered for Rand over a ten-year period (91) has resulted in a book that gives readers a deep, insightful and nuanced look at the life, philosophies and worlds that Rand inhabited and created.

The blending together of distrust of the working class, ambivalence towards the Jewish community and erasure of the possibility of an agentic, female subjectivity marked Rand's fictional and political writings. In this short text, Duggan illustrates how Rand's philosophical and literary works gave way to a new world order based on ‘ethical egoism’, rampant individualism and a surge in capitalistic endeavours that put profit before people, public services and the environment. Throughout *Mean Girl*, Duggan illuminates the seductive qualities of Rand's writing and highlights how her ambivalences enamoured the most power-hungry and privileged, arming them with a new hypocritical language that has seemingly stunned the masses into believing that surrendering solidarity will solve all of society's problems.

Running parallel to her narration of Rand's life, Duggan subtly links Rand's politics and positionality to the ethics and ethos of modern Western society (particularly in the United States) where the 'Season of Mean is truly upon us' (xiii). Duggan highlights how the power imbalances and problematic representations of gender, race and ethnicity in Rand's fictional works – which typically place white, male, imperialist 'heroes' at the forefront – have been reproduced, institutionalised and legitimised in our modern world. This text is particularly prescient in a time when right-wing populism is [gaining traction](#), allowing those in power to be utterly unapologetic about the cruelty they produce – be it through law, policy and/or the tolerance of hate speech, amongst other issues.



Duggan opens *Mean Girl* by introducing readers to the slew of contemporary fans of Rand – including [President Donald Trump](#) as well as technology venture capitalists like Uber co-founder, [Travis Kalanik](#), associated with a company that [stands accused of exploitation](#). Most notably, the common strand that connects Rand's fans together is that they are [largely cisgender, heterosexual white men](#) who have swathes of privilege – yet this privilege is rarely acknowledged, creating a false idea that the contemporary world operates under a fair and just meritocracy. This is particularly interesting to consider as Rand has been described as having '[a particular genius](#)' which allowed her to mould the most privileged of characters into the most oppressed, legitimising those at the top as the only vehicles of progression for society. At their core, Rand's ideologies purport that being selfish and greedy are not only desirable qualities, but necessary in order to succeed.

While many of us may have knowledge of Rand as a literary icon who authored novels including *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), Duggan's text also provides a deep dive into her political musings and philosophical writings. Rand developed a philosophical movement known as 'Objectivism' in the early 1950s. The Objectivist Collective asserted the need to be selfish, promoted individualism and argued that the ideal political-economic system for a successful world was laissez-faire capitalism (10). At its peak, Objectivism had a 3,500 strong following across the United States in 1967 (67), yet many contemporary cultural commentators acknowledged the almost cult-like behaviour of its followers. One requirement of becoming a student of Objectivism at the Nathaniel Braden Institute was to swear that 'Ayn Rand is the greatest human being who has ever lived' (Braden in Duggan, 68). While the Objectivist Collective disbanded in the late 1960s, Rand's philosophical movement lives on through the Ayn Rand Institute, which purports that Objectivism is '[a philosophy for living on earth](#)'.

Using her signature wit, Duggan eloquently yet accessibly charts how [Rand's fiction is viewed as the 'gateway drug'](#) to right-wing politics. Yet, interestingly enough, Duggan also highlights how her work has been co-opted by some leftist groups. As a researcher interested in queer studies and queer theory (of which Duggan can be considered a giant), for me one of the most striking revelations provided in *Mean Girl* is the coveting of Rand by queer groups offering queer readings of her work. While Rand is widely known as being homophobic (ii), there has been significant investment in her political and philosophical writings by queer readers of her fiction, who are often interested in the homoeroticism and polyamorous portrayals within her work first and foremost. However, this interest in Rand on the part of LGBTI+/queer people highlights how pervasive her influence is – regardless of her true politics and ethics, readers often see some sort of value and merit in her work, which is reminiscent of how people can fall into the trap of neoliberalism. The illusion of the 'good' life, an alternative world in which life is worth living, is central to Rand's writings as with neoliberalism. The catch is, however, that only those who are the most relentless with their privilege and/or greed get to achieve such a life.

Duggan's book helps readers to be alert to Rand's true intentions – to instil egoism in her readers, and to promote a cold, harsh, unregulated capitalism in the name of individual freedom and technological and social progression. In a similar vein, 'soft' neoliberals have captured the hearts and minds of many (Western) societies and their political spheres due to their invisible cruel intents. For example, in true *Mean Girls* fashion, we end up trying to follow in the footsteps of the cruellest of humankind, just like the 'beta' women in *Mean Girls* follow Regina George. Rand's work has lulled admirers into believing that we are means to ends in ourselves, and that the individual should be held above all else.

Duggan's skills as a cultural historian and her sharp-witted socio-political commentary fuse seamlessly together in this short yet fascinating book that is a necessary read for students of culture and politics, but also activists and organisers who feel the deep disillusionment of what seems like a never-ending neoliberal era. *Mean Girl* is also an essential text for anyone interested in the insidious shift towards neoliberalism, and how the spectre of Rand has shaped the political landscape, inhabited morality and made ethical egoism and rampant individualism a new cultural creed. This book is incredibly prescient at a time when we are on the verge of environmental collapse, when we are bearing witness to a new rise of right-wing populism and when solidarity has become a word without any weight. For Duggan, this is not just a book about Rand. It is a call for revolution against the grain of the cis-heteropatriarchal, white supremacist societies we live in. Duggan urges readers to 'expose the cruelty at the heart of neoliberalism, and build on the social solidarity [Rand] worked so hard to discredit' (90). As Duggan writes, we must reject Ayn Rand and all her acolytes – because, after all, they reject us.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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