

POP culture

Premises Of Post-Objectivism

THE CULTURE AS AN IDEAL SOCIETY

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[W]hat are we supposed to be about, Sma? What is the Culture? What do we believe in, even if it hardly ever is expressed, even if we are embarrassed about talking about it? Surely in freedom, more than anything else. A relativistic, changing sort of freedom, unbounded by laws or laid-down moral codes, but - in the end - just because it is so hard to pin down and express, a freedom of a far higher quality than anything to be found on any relevant scale on the planet beneath us at the moment.

The same technological expertise, the same productive surplus which, in pervading our society, first allows us to be here at all and after that allows us the degree of choice we have over what happens to Earth, long ago also allowed us to live exactly as we wish to live, limited only by being expected to respect the same principle applied to others. [...] It is the embedded achievement of that oft-expressed ideal that our society is - perversely - rather embarrassed about. We live with, use, simply get on with our freedom as much as the good people of Earth talk about it; and we talk about it as often as genuine examples of this shy concept can be found down there.

- Iain M. Banks, *The State of the Art*

In his science fiction novels, British author Iain M. Banks projects a future human society that seems to embody all the essential virtues of Objectivist social theory, while at the same time suggesting how two widespread and major shortcomings of current Objectivist thought may be corrected.

The Culture is a machine-symbiotic human society. There are artificial intelligences and other mechanical persons enjoying individual rights. Biological persons (humans) are enhanced genetically and biotechnologically, they have a lot of extra glands and add-ons that expand volitional control of body functions and mind states. This includes the ability to change sex back and forth by will, or to have both sexes (intersexuality) or no sex. *The Culture* is an abundant society, with no scarcity economy. One *Culture* adage is, **Money is a sign of poverty**, meaning that money only has a function in a scarcity economy, and therefore its existence betrays a pre-

abundant (poor) society. *The Culture* is a stateless society, continually expanding its size and accumulated knowledge. Erik Vasaasen has described 'The Culture' as **Star Trek without the Prime Directive**. When the Contact branch of *the Culture* encounters dictatorships or religious-militaristic civilizations, or other societies that violate *the Cultures* code and sense of human dignity, liberty and individual rights, it neutralizes, subverts, educates and transforms them.

My purpose in this article is not to perform a detailed discussion of the probabilities or the specifics of the evolutionary path towards a society like *the Culture*. Rather, I seek to achieve three goals:

- (1) to present the big picture, and incite people to read Banks' books and others like them,
- (2) to impart that a society like *the Culture* is the goal and ideal we should have in mind and strive for, and that this must influence our priorities and strategies today, and
- (3) to indicate a few areas of cultural difference from our present society and their consequences.

EPICUREAN ANARCHY AND AUTARCHY

Living in an abundant society without scarcity means that people are free to spend all their time anyway they want to. People with creative urges or passions have a maximum degree of freedom to pursue these wherever they may lead them. Or, one can pursue other interests, like play or having fun. This may sound more Epicurean than Objectivist, and it probably is. But then again, Epicurus had a more developed conceptual apparatus for understanding joy and pleasure than Rand ever did^{<1>}. Which leads to the first shortcoming of Objectivist social theory of today.

Everything Rand wrote about economics, politics and social theory assumes an economy of scarcity. She assumes a second-wave^{<2>}, industrial civilization. Her followers seem to take this premise for granted as well. Given this premise, all subsequent social reasoning and conclusions focus on exclusive property rights, how to achieve and apply just principles for establishing them, money, and the industrial social organization. But we are already in the process of transcending that kind of society, heading into a third-wave, post-industrial era. In the not too distant future, we can already see a glimmer of an abundant society. A few key technologies are necessary for establishing abundance. In particular: nanotechnology, biotechnology, genetic engineering, further advances in electronics and computer technology, and further expansion into space including the establishment of microgravity industrial production facilities. All these are well underway, and they could have advanced far enough to completely penetrate society within the next 50 years. Artificial Intelligence would be nice too, and would establish mechanical persons. But perhaps cybernetic extensions and add-ons to the human body would come first; cyborgs may arise earlier than artificial intelligences. This would be slightly different from Banks' *the Culture*, where cyborgs are not emphasized.

MATERIAL AND IMMATERIAL AUTARCHY

If all or most of these things happen, human society would have become much like *the Culture*. And, if that happens, Objectivist social theory and practice would need to

be updated. Why not be proactive? We live in an age in which there is a widespread fear of the future. The idea of progress is being questioned or attacked openly by pre-modernists and postmodernists. Defending the future, crusading for Progress, ought to be a primary concern and goal for Objectivists. But in order to do so effectively, Objectivists need to cast off their conservative clinging to second-wave ideals, concerns and mental habits. Taking some cues from modern Epicureans as well as from hitech developers, visionaries and post-industrial esthetes like K. Eric Drexler, Michael Rothschild, and Barry Vacker^{<3>}, Objectivists could become a vanguard for progress. I would like to see Objectivists and Randians promote third-wave post-industrial abundance, rather than getting stuck in second-wave, industrial procedures for dealing with scarcity.

Scarcity is a concept that covers a wide range. There is a big difference between today's industrial wealth and a pre-industrial scarcity of resources. And yet the principal difference between abundance and scarcity is bigger and more fundamental than the difference between the extreme ends of scarcity. What will a culture of abundance be like? Abundance depends on the success and penetration of nanotechnology. The thing about nanomachines is that once they arrive, they will also be capable of building new nanomachines, like a controlled reproduction. This means that we'll leap-frog into an abundant society.

There have been some cultural anthropological studies comparing social groups living in abundance - the international jet set, indigenous native tribes of pleasant climates, and the Open Source community where hackers produce software without any economical need to do so. These different social groups show some remarkable similarities^{<4>}. Productivity, respect, reputation and status are still important in these groups - and the means to achieve them is to give things away. The more you can produce and give away, the more you establish yourself as an abundant producer and boundless creator. This is radically different from the frugality and preoccupation with exclusive property rights associated with industrial second-wave civilization. One way to understand this difference, is to think of it as a trade involving immaterial currency. There is material abundance on the personal and consumer-related levels, since everyone can have their nanomachines produce whatever they want. Instantly and endlessly reproducible material objects and resources have no market value or function as they would in a scarcity economy. What does have value? Recognition of one's virtues, skills and achievements. That is the currency of post-industrial civilization. Such recognition is "scarce" because it must be earned, therefore it becomes the currency in a materially abundant culture.

Much of today's ideological and cultural conflicts can be seen as a conflict between two incompatible currency systems: the traditional industrial, material currency system, and the emerging post-industrial immaterial currency system. The conflict between these two systems will continue to grow deeper (until we leap-frog into abundance), and it is already a more important and fundamental societal conflict than the traditional left-right or socialist-conservative conflict which belongs within the industrial paradigm. Everyone who claims allegiance to progress and the future should embrace the emergent post-industrial paradigm, and promote choices, practices and policies that will further and hasten its arrival. This includes stepping out of the industrial paradigm and stop wasting time and energy on outdated concepts like «left-wing» and «right-wing».

BIOLOGICAL ANARCHY AND AUTARCHY

The second major shortcoming that I would single out for criticism in contemporary Objectivist thought and praxis, and again due to social conservatism, is the whole area of sex and gender relations, and Objectivism's relationship, or lack of such, to feminism. Many Objectivists advocate unsupported and reactionary beliefs about an alleged naturalness of universal gender roles and Platonic ideals of gender identity and sexual preferences. There have always been dissenting voices though. Especially after the initiation and establishment of Objectivist online forums, this topic has surfaced again and again in Objectivist discussions. With the recent publication of *Feminist Interpretations of Ayn Rand*<5>, a major step has been taken towards bringing Objectivism into the 21st century in this area. My own contribution in that volume, entitled *The Female Hero: A Randian-Feminist Synthesis*, discusses this topic at length.

As indicated above, *the Culture* provides a fresh and illuminating perspective also on this issue. In *the Culture* people have been biogenetically altered and enhanced to such a degree that they can change and choose sex by will, surely the ultimate application of *social constructionism* to sex relations. In *the Culture*, there is no institutional prejudice on the basis of sex, gender, sexual orientation, race, class etc., and an individual expressing such prejudice would be seen as a primitive savage. I see no reason for Objectivists, Randians and libertarians (or indeed, anyone) not sharing this sentiment. Yet apparently many do, and seem to long for a return to the fifties, an alleged golden age with clear gender roles, and clear social roles in general, in an apparently simple and stable culture (this was the very theme of libertarian president candidate Harry Browne's recent campaign).

Perhaps full sexual and biological autarchy (as in voluntary and reversible control over/change of one's sex organs) is required in order to achieve a society like *the Culture*, free of sex- and gender-based bigotry and prejudice. If so, it is worth noting that this idea, also known as **automorphism**, doesn't only exist in the imaginative minds of science fiction writers, but is actively pursued by scientists today, and may actually be realized within a decade or two<6>.

THE GOLDEN AGE IS NOW

Many Objectivists claim a lost Golden Age, a static and ideal state the eclipse and decay of which, so reminiscent of the Christian concept of the Garden of Eden and Man's Fall, they seek to return to or recreate. For some it is the fifties. Or the 19th century. Or ancient Greece. I think this mindset is not only factually wrong (ignoring very real limitations and bad aspects of those periods), but wrong on principle as well. I like a lot about 2000 Earth culture. There's a lot I don't like, or even hate, and want to change. But I wouldn't trade this period for any previous period in human history. **The Golden Age is now. This is what the idea of progress really means.**

«The Golden Age is now», as a principle, is implied by Objectivist epistemology, ethics and esthetics. I exist in a context, not as an atom. I am what I am in part because of my place in time, space and history, and my time is the best time. When some alleged Objectivists claim a previous period in history as a Golden Age much better than the present and as a goal that one should return to, they have seriously

misunderstood the spirit, if not the letter of Rand's legacy. Rand's philosophy is anti-nostalgia, on principle, because it looks ahead, from the now into the future. In the words of Ayn Rand: **Anyone who fights for the future, lives in it today.**

But which future? With his books about *the Culture*^{<7>}, Iain M. Banks has presented a powerful, persuasive, optimistic and fun vision of what humans can accomplish. His vision captures and integrates the most important and beneficial philosophical, political, cultural and technological developments of our time. If you know anyone who needs a «progress boost» or a cure for nostalgia, pessimism and fear of the future - or just a reminder that liberty must be lived, not only talked about - look no further.

NOTES

<1> For a comparison of similarities of and differences between Epicurus and Rand, see Shelton, Ray: Epicurus and Rand, in *Objectivity*, Vol. 2 No. 3 and subsequent debate in Vol. 2 No. 4. <http://bomis.snap.com/objectivity/abstracts.html#EPICURUS>

<2> By «second-wave», I refer of course to Alvin Toffler's concepts of the first, second and third waves of civilization, known from Toffler's numerous books, in particular *The Third Wave* (1980). Recently, Toffler has begun using the term «supercivilization» rather than «wave». See for example the Tofflers' *Encyclopedia Britannica* article, entitled *Supercivilization and its Discontents*, at <http://www.britannica.com/bcom/original/article/0,5744,5364,00.html>.

<3> See Barry Vacker's forthcoming book, *Chaos at the Edge of Utopia*, <http://www.ifi.uio.no/~thomas/po/chaos-edge-utopia.html>
Also, various books by Drexler and Rothschild, respectively. Web searches on *transhumanism*, *nanotechnology* and *extropianism* will yield interesting results as well.

<4> For a discussion and comparison of these social groups, see Eric S. Raymond's essay, entitled *The Magic Cauldron*, at <http://www.tuxedo.org/~esr/writings/magic-cauldron/>

<5> Gladstein, Mimi & Sciabarra, Chris: *Feminist Interpretations of Ayn Rand*, Pennsylvania State University Press 1999. See also <http://www.nyu.edu/projects/sciabarra/femstart.htm>

<6> See for example Natasha Vita More's essay, *The Future of Sexuality*, at <http://www.natasha.cc/sex.htm>

<7> Banks also writes mainstream novels, and occasional science fiction not about *the Culture*. Books about *The Culture* include the following titles: **Consider Phlebas; The Player of Games; The State of the Art; Inversions; Use of Weapons; Excession.** *The State of the Art* describes *The Culture's* discovery of and meeting with Earth 2000 culture.

POSTSCRIPT

After writing and publishing this article, I have been made aware of several web sites dedicated to Iain Banks in general, and to the Culture in particular, including *Culture Shock* at <http://www.phlebas.com/>. The site contains a lot of information, including a bibliography, a FAQ, a link collection of relevant articles and interviews, a news service, a lot of trivia, a mailing list, an article by Banks himself about *the Culture* (**A Few Notes About The Culture**, <http://www.phlebas.com/text/cultnote.html>), and much more.

LINKS

Culture Shock

<http://www.phlebas.com/>

Iain Banks bibliography

<http://www.phlebas.com/text/bib.html>

A Few Notes on the Culture, by Iain M Banks

<http://www.phlebas.com/text/cultnote.html>

Link page to interviews, articles and FAQ

<http://www.phlebas.com/text/banks.html>

The Culture mailing list

<http://www.core.no/culture/>

Iain Banks' Culture novels

<http://www.gen-mars.freemove.co.uk/books/banks/index.htm>

War and Culture

<http://www.strangewords.com/archive/use.html>

Hamish Sinclair: Iain M. Banks' "Culture" references in Bungie's Halo

http://www.marathon.org/story/halo_culture.html

SFbook.com's Iain M. Banks page

<http://sfbook.com/?authorid=6>

Iain (M.) Banks Resource Page

<http://www.purge.freemove.co.uk/banks.htm>

Slipstream

<http://www.rossyb.dabsol.co.uk/slipstream/frameset.html>

The web pages for the alt.books.iain-banks newsgroup

<http://members.tripod.com/a.b.i-b/>

Iain Banks web ring

<http://www.rossyb.dabsol.co.uk/banksie/>

'The Wasp Factory' web site

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/1027/index.html>

The address of this document:

<http://www.ifi.uio.no/~thomas/po/the-culture.html>

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Index to the Post-Objectivism web site:

<http://www.ifi.uio.no/~thomas/po/articles.html>