

How Ayn Rand's Dystopian Novella Anticipated Cancel Culture

Recent [legislators](#), activists, and education reformers have promised to lead us into a new world of equity. No longer will some groups have a different lifestyle from others. No longer will some groups have a different education from others. There will be reform or else, [Hawk Newsome](#) warns, "we will burn down this system and replace it."

For a preview of these glories, we have only to open Ayn Rand's [Anthem](#). In this dystopian novella, collectivists achieve their ideal by burning cities and books, then implementing central planning. Now everyone is equal: equally poor, equally housed, equally limited in what they can say and do and think.

If, as [Jen Maffessanti](#) observes, dystopian fiction helps us understand the dangers we face, then none is more relevant to this moment than Rand's novella. What *Anthem* clarifies is the real significance of collectivist ideals and language, which undermine not only our rights but our ability to articulate them.

"Our Name is Equality 7-2521"

Anthem opens by foregrounding the triumph of the collective through the narrator's struggle to express and justify his thoughts. In this world, there is no "I," only the collective "we," which has become synonymous with good. The novel opens,

It is a sin to write this. It is a sin to think words no others think and to put them down upon a paper no others are to see. . . . And well we know that there is no transgression

blacker than to do or think alone.

Only the “Council of Vocations” can approve such writing. The narrator, Equality 7-2521, struggles to conform even as he defies such rules: “We strive to be like all our brother men, for all men must be alike.” But he is not.

At six feet, Equality 7-2521 towers over other boys. His teacher warns, “There is evil in your bones.” In school, he is unhappy because “learning was too easy. This is a great sin, to be born with a head which is too quick.” How does he know? “The teachers told us so.”

Eventually, Equality 7-2521 tries to imitate the slow learners. But the teachers know, “and we were lashed more often than all the other children.” And when he turns fifteen, the Council of Vocations places him in the Home of the Street Sweepers, where he will have no more opportunities to display his “quick” mind. Equity achieved.

“Our Poisoned Language”

Anthem anticipates F. A. Hayek’s later warnings about “our poisoned language.” In [*The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism*](#) Hayek observes, “so long as we speak in language based in erroneous theory, we generate and perpetuate error.”

That error is evident in the use of words to convey entire moral arguments. In *Anthem*, “we” and “the collective” are “good,” just as, Hayek observed, “social” now designates what is “morally right.” And “what at first seems a description imperceptibly turns into a prescription”: distributive justice.

A similar shift is now occurring in the use of “equity.” According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the earliest recorded instance was from 1315, from which point “equity” has been used to mean “the quality of being equal or fair;

fairness, impartiality, even-handed dealing.”

Now “equity” means the moral imperative to ensure equal outcomes, as in the concept of “[educational equity](#)”: “Equity recognizes that some are at a larger disadvantage than others and aims at compensating for these people’s misfortunes and disabilities.”

How does “Equity” do this? It “aims to take extra measures by giving those who are in need more than others who are not. Equity aims at making sure that everyone’s lifestyle is equal even if it may come at the cost of unequal distribution of access and goods.”

In other words, to achieve “equity,” the unacknowledged officials treat people unequally.

“The Plans of the World Council”

Rand’s *Anthem* illustrates the results generated by such committees. The Council of Vocations achieves equal lifestyles by grouping diverse people in the Home of the Street Sweepers, where Equality 7-2521’s team consists of a talented artist and a man incapable of using his broom due to incessant convulsions. Their work is uneven, to say the least.

When Equality secretly discovers electric light and brings it to the Council of Scholars, they reject his invention because he invented it alone. Furthermore, it would destroy the Department of Candles and “wreck the Plans of the World Council,” which took fifty years to approve the candle. They insist it be destroyed, metaphorically seeking to keep their world in the dark.

For the collective, the goal is control of outcomes, not freedom or human flourishing. And to maintain that control, they make sure that no one can see the truth, much less say it. In the Home of the Street Sweepers at night, the men

undress silently in the dim candlelight: “For all must agree with all, and they cannot know if their thoughts are thoughts of all, and so they fear to speak.”

“The Smallest Minority on Earth is the Individual”

Over the last few months, we have come closer to Rand’s dystopia of fear, silencing, and distorted “equity.” In a recent [survey](#) at the University of North Carolina, students across the political spectrum reported that they (like the Street Sweepers) engaged in self-censorship in classrooms, remaining silent even when their opinions related to topics in class. They are afraid.

They are not alone. Online mobs are destroying careers and lives, as John Stossel observes in “[Cancel Culture is Out of Control](#).” He urges those of us who can speak to do so.

Yet embracing free speech and other rights becomes increasingly difficult as governments push to eliminate them. Recently the California legislature passed [ACA 5](#), which would allow for “race- and gender-conscious remedies” to correct differences in university admissions and government contracts. This measure for equity would overturn Proposition 209, which prohibits the state from discriminating against or granting preferential treatment to any group or individual on the basis of race, sex, or ethnicity.

If California’s citizens pass it, the government will be able legally to discriminate against individuals. Yet, as Rand [argues](#):

Individual rights are not subject to a public vote; a majority has no right to vote away the rights of a minority; the political function of rights is precisely to protect minorities from oppression by majorities (and the smallest


minority on earth is the individual).

Rand urges individuals to take a stand. In her author's foreword to the American edition of *Anthem*, Rand observes, "The greatest guilt today is that of people who accept collectivism by moral default."

If we need models, we have only to look to Leonard Reed. He discovered that *Anthem* had been published in England (1938) but had been rejected by American publishers. Deciding it deserved a broader audience, he issued the first American edition with Pamphleteers in 1946, the same year he founded FEE.

Our own options will vary, but as John Stossel urges, those of us who can speak up, must do so. Otherwise, we face entering the twenty-first-century version of *Anthem*.

—

This article was originally published on FEE.org. Read the [original article](#). 

Dear Readers,

Big Tech is suppressing our reach, refusing to let us advertise and squelching our ability to serve up a steady diet of truth and ideas. Help us fight back by [becoming a member](#) for just \$5 a month and then join the discussion on Parler [@CharlemagneInstitute](#) and Gab [@CharlemagneInstitute](#)!

Image Credit:

Pixabay