

Travis Shrugged: The creepy, dangerous ideology behind Silicon Valley's Cult of Disruption



By **Paul Carr**
On **October 24, 2012**



“On bad days, I look at our revenue graph.”

- **Travis Kalanick**

When Uber was forced to **shut down** its yellow cab hailing service in New York last week, founder Travis Kalanick threw a fit that PandoDaily's Nathaniel Mott **described** as “downright adolescent... just short of [Kalanick] stamping his feet.”

In fact, as Mott explains (and as sources close to the negotiations have independently confirmed), there was precisely one reason why UberTaxi failed to take Manhattan: Travis Kalanick himself. For one thing, the TLC is bound by contracts with existing vendors not to allow any other credit card processing in

NY cabs until next February. Likewise, changing laws on handheld devices and pre-booked pickups cannot happen overnight. But unlike in Washington and Boston, where the company has also **fought with regulators**, New York was more than amenable to the idea of innovation. A compromise was on the horizon.

Uber, however, does not profit from compromise. Kalanick is a proud adherent to the Cult of Disruption: the faddish Silicon Valley concept which essentially boils down to “let us do whatever we want, otherwise we’ll bully you on the Internet until you do.” To proponents of Disruption, the free market is king, and regulation is always the enemy.

The pro-Disruption argument goes like this: In a digitally connected age, there’s absolutely no need for public carriage laws (or hotel laws, or food safety laws, or... or...) because the market will quickly move to drive out bad actors. If an Uber driver behaves badly, his low star rating will soon push him out of business.

It’s a compelling message but also one with dire potential consequences for public safety, particularly for those who can’t afford to take a \$50 cab ride to Whole Foods.

Laws don’t exist merely to frustrate the business ambitions of coastal hipsters: They also exist to protect the more vulnerable members of society. Back home in London (where such statistics are available), 11 women a month are attacked in unlicensed cabs, and unlicensed drivers are responsible for a horrifying 80 percent of *all* stranger rapes. If Uber doesn’t have to follow licensing laws, then neither does any Tom, Dick, or Harry who chooses to paint the word “TAXI” on the side of his car, and start offering rides via the Internet. A disruptive CEO will shrug (and *there’s* a foreshadowing word) and insist that it’s not his fault that such criminals exist. “Just because there are people who want to rape, murder, or rob you shouldn’t prevent me from making another million dollars,” he’ll argue.

Remarkably, a large part of the Internet community — by which **I mean** that tiny number of social media fanatics who spend their days on Twitter, looking for the

next cause to rally behind or the next bad guy to boycott — will agree with him.

Sure enough, when I Retweeted Mott's PandoDaily post, I was immediately inundated with @replies accusing me of being “anti-free market” and insisting that the only thing the government should do for technology companies is “get out of the way.” What was curious about those most loudly defending Kalanick — apart from the fact that they all were idiots — was that almost all of them directly or obliquely referenced the same author [in their Twitter bio...](#)

Ayn fucking Rand.

I'm actually embarrassed that it took me until then to make the connection, particularly given I used to host the startup competition at a technology conference called “TechCrunch Disrupt.” The original Silicon Valley meaning of a disruptive company was one that used its small size to shake up a bigger industry or bloated competitor. Increasingly, though, the conference stage was filled with brash, Millennial entrepreneurs vowing to “Disrupt” real-world laws and regulations in the same way that me stealing your dog is Disrupting the idea of pet ownership. On more than one occasion a judge would ask an entrepreneur “Is this legal?” to which the reply would inevitably come: “Not yet.” The audience would laugh and applaud. What *chutzpah!* So Disruptive!

The truth is, what Silicon Valley still calls “Disruption” has evolved into something very sinister indeed. Or perhaps “evolved” is the wrong word: The underlying ideology — that all government intervention is bad, that the free market is the only protection the public needs, and that if weaker people get trampled underfoot in the process then, well, fuck ‘em — increasingly recalls one that has been around for decades. Almost seven decades in fact, since Ayn Rand's “The Fountainhead” first put her on the radar of every spoiled trust fund brat looking for an excuse to embrace his or her inner asshole. (For a delightful essay on that subject, I recommend Jason Heller's “[I Was A Teenage Randroid.](#)”)

Consider the following quote...

The question isn't who is going to let me; it's who is going to stop me.

Or this one...

The only power any government has is the power to crack down on criminals. Well, when there aren't enough criminals, one makes them. One declares so many things to be a crime that it becomes impossible for men to live without breaking laws.

Either of those lines could have come from the mouth of Travis Kalanick, or any of his Disruptive ilk. The first is frighteningly close to the line you've heard from every entrepreneur you've ever wanted to punch: “It's easier to seek forgiveness than ask permission.” The latter is just a really great excuse for breaking whatever silly law is frustrating your ambitions. Of course, both quotes are Rand.

But Rand's worldview isn't confined to breaking laws and risking public safety. It's when she moves on to human relationships that she really gets into her stride. Courtesy of [The New Republic](#) (hardly the most liberal of publications), here's a handy guide to some other things that Rand and her followers believe....

Greed good; altruism evil

It's rational to be self-interested, selfishness is thus a mark of high ethics. Q.E.D. Winners deserve to be winners because they are winners.

The rich are being exploited by the poor

In Atlas Shrugged, Rand's hero John Galt grows tired of the leeching workers that live off the business acumen of others, so he leads an upper-class strike that leaves industry decimated. Rand's point is that without economic supermen, the country would collapse. She of course ignores the fact that the same outcome would result if every working stiff in the country up and quit too.

No social services

Rand [compared](#) Medicare, which she [reportedly received](#), to “a ‘hoodlum’

who robs and kills to acquire a yacht and champagne.”

Male chauvinism

Rand was a self-professed “male chauvinist” who **believed** women should engage in male hero-worship. For this reason, she rejected the idea of a female president. [*Specifically she said: "For a woman to seek or desire the presidency is, in fact, so terrible a prospect of spiritual self-immolation that the woman who would seek it is psychologically unworthy of the job"*]

Now hold on, Paul. You're making quite a leap there. Just because both Rand and Kalanick believe in *laissez faire* capitalism, and just because the principles of Disruption sound an awful lot like the plot of “Atlas Shrugged,” doesn't make Kalanick a Randian.

After all, in addition to all that weirdness above, Ayn Rand **idolized** child-murderer William Hickman, praising his “wonderful, free, light consciousness — [resulting from] the absolute lack of social instinct or herd feeling.” Worse still, Rand inspired Paul Ryan, The Tea Party and the Koch Brothers. You'd better be damn sure of your facts before you go accusing the founder of Uber of being a Randian.

Okey dokey!

From an interview with the Washington Post:

WP: I noticed your **Twitter avatar** is the cover of Ayn Rand's “The Fountainhead.”

Kalanack: I don't know what you're talking about. [Laughs.] It's less of a political statement. It's just personally one of my favorite books. I'm a fan of architecture.

See. Not a political statement. He's just a fan of architecture. And one can only

assume, then, that it was a completely different Travis Kalanick who responded to the **Mahalo question** “How would Ayn Rand react to the current policies and realities in the USA?” thusly...

One of the interesting stats I came across was that 50% of all California taxes are paid by 141,000 people (a state with 30mm inhabitants). This hit home as I had recently finished Atlas Shrugged. If 141,000 affluent people in CA went “on strike”, CA would be done for... another reason you can't keep increasing taxes to pay for unaccountable gov't programs that offer poor services.

Okay, okay, so maybe Kalanick is a fan of Ayn Rand, and maybe what used to be called Objectivism is now called Disruption. But is it not possible to agree, intellectually, with the tenets of ~~Disruption~~ Objectivism and still not act like a raging asshole?

Well, I dunno. Let's consider how Kalanick treated his Uber taxi drivers in New York. When he was trying to convince them to break the law to boost Uber's footprint in the city, Kalanick offered yellow cab drivers free iPhones and promised to “**take care of**” any legal problems they encountered with the TLC. A few short months later, when the service was forced to close, those same drivers received a message to come to Uber HQ. Reports **the Verge**...

Multiple drivers said Uber called them into headquarters, claiming they needed to come by in order to get paid and would get a cash bonus for showing up. When the cabbies came in, Uber surprised them by asking for the device back, informing them that taxi service was no longer available in New York.

That's classic Rand right there. The more replaceable the worker, the more they can be treated like total shit. After all, if they're so damn special, they can always leave and find another job.

And indeed several members of the Uber's New York team did leave, having grown tired of Uber's schtick. Here's [The Verge](#) again...

Matt Kochman... served as Uber's founding general manager in New York before he left last year. Kochman left Uber to do consulting for transportation brands and startups, fed up with Uber's irreverent attitude toward regulators. "Discounting the rules and regulations as a whole, just because you want to launch a product and you have a certain vision for things, that's just irresponsible," Kochman said. Community manager James Aviaz left at the same time, leaving just one Uber employee in New York.

You can tell a lot about how a company will treat its customers by how it treats its workers, just as you can tell a lot about a CEO by his or her mentors.

If Rand was [hypocritical](#) in her attacks on Medicare, so too does Kalanick enjoy an uneasy relationship with consistency. During his fight with the DC taxi commission, Kalanick repeatedly denounced the "backroom deals" made between corrupt city officials and taxi operators and denied that Uber was trying to make similar deals:

"The notion that there some sort of deal or arrangement or whatever was just not the case," said Kalanick in [an interview](#) with the Washington Post. How embarrassing, then, when the Post [uncovered](#) documents proving that Uber had indeed tried to make under the table arrangements to operate in DC. Or as the Post's Mike DeBonist put it: "If you're going to be dismissive of backroom deals, it behooves you to stay out of backrooms."

And there's the rub. Given their Randian origins, we kid ourselves if we think most Disruptive businesses are fighting government bureaucracy to bring us a better deal. A Disruptive company might very well succeed in exposing government crooks lining their pockets exploiting outdated laws, but that's only so the Disruptor can line his own pockets through the absence of those same

laws. A Disruptive company may give you free candy in your 50-dollar cab but, again, that's only because doing so is good business. If poisoning that same candy suddenly becomes better business (like encouraging New York cab drivers to be distracted by their phones, or putting vulnerable people at risk of attack is better business)... well maybe that's an option worth exploring too. After all, food safety legislation is just another attempt by the government to drive Disruptive businesses off the road.

Think I'm exaggerating? Consider how that other poster child for disruption, Airbnb, reacted when the first (of [several](#)) homeowners had [her house trashed by renters](#). The victim's complaints were ignored for a full 14 hours, in line with Airbnb's "use our service at your own risk" policy. Only when investors started getting cold feet about a cacophony of negative press did the company finally offer any assistance or compensation.

Luckily for the homeowner, Airbnb's investors were not Rand followers, nor thankfully are all of Kalanick's backers. And yet... we may ultimately look back on these days with misty eyes. If the current crop of Disruptive entrepreneurs continues to grow rich — Kalanick already invests up to \$1 million per year in startups — the next generation of Disruption will likely be founded by Randroids, funded by other Randroids. (May John Galt have mercy on our souls.)

A final word on hypocrisy: specifically my own. I am an Uber user. Not of UberTaxi, but of their town cars, which on my visits to San Francisco are frequently more reliable than the city's godawful taxicabs. My self-justification for continuing to do so would make Rand grin in her grave: I'm not directly hurting anyone by using the service, nor will I protect anyone by making my life harder. It's not like Travis Kalanick will alter his behaviour one jot as a result of my one-man boycott.

But none of that is an excuse. Ayn Rand once wrote on altruism that "the issue is whether the need of others is the first mortgage on your life and the moral purpose of your existence." No, it isn't the first mortgage, but it is one of them.

I've written before that to be truly disruptive (small 'd') the startups must have a moral dimension, even when that jars with the pursuit of profit. It's just hypocritical for me to argue that on one hand while sidestepping those same ethical choices myself. And so, as of about ten minutes ago, the Uber app has taken its place in the dustbin of services I'll just have to live without, at least while the company's founder continues to celebrate the ugliest face of capitalism.

My decision might not affect Travis Kalanick's sleep one jot, but it'll sure as hell will do wonders for mine.

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