

Symposium on "Rand, Rush, and Rock"

Replies to Chris Matthew Sciabarra's Fall 2002 article

Fancy Meeting Rand Here

Robert M. Price

In the mildest of friendly criticisms, Chris Matthew Sciabarra (2002, 166) suggests that Carol Price and I miss the mark when we read Neil Peart as politically conservative. We mean simply to separate him from the faceless hosts of collectivism and implicitly from Big-Government-ism, which so often serves as its expression beyond the ivory tower of thought. It is no surprise to hear that Peart has libertarian leanings, as that, too, is often categorized as a kind of political conservatism. (Of course, unlike many libertarians, he seems equally suspicious of "Big Money.") But all these labels are problematic, since classical "conservatism" meant a paternalistic interference in public and private life by a watchful state, something that fit hand in glove with the Grand Inquisitor and his State Church, the like of which prevailed in all traditional societies.

In contrast to such "conservatism," "liberalism" once denoted a policy of keeping the government out of people's private affairs and ethical choices. Today's liberalism looks like that older version in regards to one issue alone: abortion. There and only there, it seems, "liberals" want a hands-off policy. As a libertarian, or anything like one, Peart certainly would not advocate today's brand of liberalism or yesterday's brand of conservatism. And we know from the "Fear" songs and others what he thinks of the slave mongering of religion—so there can be no thought of his having the slightest empathy with Pat Robertson or the Pope. Nor do we even imply such by indicating Peart's "conservative" direction.

Nor is Peart's perceived a-religiosity in any fashion incompatible with old-style liberalism/libertarianism, since such ideals of Individualism and Democracy have other than Christian roots anyway. No

one can look at the Bible and rightly see there some sort of blueprint for democracy or equality. There are, to be sure, scattered elements, which may hold the seeds of these views, as in the Letter to Philemon, where it begins to dawn on the writer that perhaps there is something incongruous about one Christian owning another as a slave. (Pre-Socratic Sophists had already condemned slavery as unnatural and inhuman centuries before.) The values conservatism strives to "conserve" stem from ancient Greece and from the Enlightenment. Fortunately, some eighteenth-century Christians found it not too difficult to harmonize Christianity with these alien doctrines, but Christians cannot claim possession of them, as charlatans like Jerry Falwell do with all their prattle about the Bible being the irreplaceable foundation for democracy. It is frightening that in our day these people have succeeded so well with their propaganda that to call someone "conservative" carries with it the implication of Grand Inquisitor religiosity, an erroneous assumption held alike by the right-wing fundamentalist (who accepts it) and the liberal Unitarian (who rejects it).

It must be significant, however, that Randian Individualism, like traditional religion, does see fit to clothe itself in the Hero-Myth. If your creed is the determination of the individual and his/her triumph against the poisonous forces of collectivity and compromise, then it is natural to symbolize this message in the form of a tale of such an individual whose struggles are archetypal, painted on a broader canvas than the one most of us use. This enables the reader to better see the issues, and his/her own reflection in them. Peart, too, has occasional characters whose indomitable will pits them against the forces of facelessness.

One wonders if he or Rush fans or Randians are familiar with the comic book work of the great Steve Ditko, best known as the creator, with Stan Lee, of "Spider-Man." Ditko is very heavily influenced by Rand, and in a series of underground comics starring a hero named Mister A, Ditko spreads his views in no uncertain terms. Appropriately, the Mister A strips have been printed only in black and white, because this character sees no shades of gray and dispenses justice according to a code that he believes to correspond to an objective and

easily discernible duality of Good and Evil. As wounded kidnapers, whose victim Mister A has just rescued, lie bleeding to death, Mister A spares them but a few moments of sermonizing on why they deserve no compassion (Snyder 1985, 96). At the scene of every victory he leaves his trademark, a card split down the middle, black on one side, white on the other. Needless to say, he is also a vigilante, impatient with the self-hamstringing paradoxes of the law.

Other Ditko characters with a measure of such Randianism (or quasi-Randianism) would include The Creeper (a Joe Pine or Bill O'Reilly-style talk show host by day), The Blue Beetle (a scientist accustomed to science fiction menaces, but committed to rationalism and a foe of astrology), and The Question, a news anchor and crime reporter who gets sick of hearing about the crooks escaping and takes justice into his own hands. He is an almost-mainstream version of Mister A. Mister A wears a silver faceplate sculpted into impassive human features, while The Question's face appears to be featureless flesh (also a mask).

Other comic creators have carried Ditko's philosophy further. Frank Miller (who wrote the *Ronin* series as well as the movie *Robocop 2*) has a position much like Ditko's, as seen in his 1987 mini-series comic *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and its current sequel *The Dark Knight Strikes Again (DK2)*. Ditko's superhero The Question appears in the latter as a minor but significant character, refusing to cooperate with the cartel of supercriminals who have come to control the world. We see him arguing on Chris Matthews's TV show *Hardball* with the archliberal Green Arrow, who calls The Question, "Mr. Atlas-Shrugged-Is-The-Word-Of-God." The Question replies, "I'm no Ayn Rander! She didn't go nearly far enough!" Meanwhile, George Will sneeringly dismisses both of them as "vulgarians" (Miller and Varley 2002, 74).

1987 also saw the publication of *Watchmen* written by Alan Moore and drawn by Dave Gibbons. Moore, an ultra-liberal himself, parodied Ditko's Question, combining him with Mister A into a character called Rorschach, whose face mask was a shifting inkblot, presenting to the criminal whatever fear he might choose to see there. Rorschach's *mot juste*: "Soft on scum. Too young to know any better.

Molly-coddled them. Let them live?" (Moore and Gibbons 1986–87, chapter 6; 14). Despite intending to satirize Ditko, Moore later admitted Rorschach resonated with readers more than the rest of the superheroes in the series.

Some will take the popularity of such black-and-white, authoritarian characters as merely a sign of the adolescent mindset of comic book readers. But the comic book readership has aged, just as the Rush audience has, and both may be old enough to consider ideas they were once too young and naive to countenance.

References

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