

Symposium on “Rand, Rush, and Rock”

Replies to Chris Matthew Sciabarra’s Fall 2002 article

**Rand, Rush, and
De-totalizing the Utopianism
of Progressive Rock**

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Chris Matthew Sciabarra’s (2002) paper is a solid overview of the recent scholarship linking Rand, Rush, and progressive rock. He also offers a few intriguing ideas for new directions in this literature, some of which I wish to follow up here. The central argument I wish to make is that Rush’s music represents a post-socialist utopian alternative to the totalistic, socialist-oriented utopianism that authors such as Macan (1997) and Martin (1998) associate with the “first-line” progressive bands of the late sixties and early seventies.¹ That alternative utopianism is seen in both their lyrics and their music. Lyrically, the use of Rand and other ideas from libertarian social thought reflects a less totalizing and more individualistic conception of the good society. Musically, their steady trajectory away from long, intricate (totalistic?) song structures toward shorter, more streamlined ones—while *still maintaining many of the core values of progressive rock (e.g., virtuosity, complexity and lyrical seriousness)*—refashions the utopianism of early progressive rock (“music with a purpose”) into smaller “units” reflective of parallel ideas in the rise of libertarian social thought during the mid-70s. Put more bluntly, if the early progressive rockers’ conceptions of utopia reflected Marxian and neo-Marxian totalistic visions of the 60s, the utopianism of Rush’s work (both lyrically and musically) reflects the more decentralized, individualist and less totalizing visions of Ayn Rand, Robert Nozick, and F. A. Hayek that gained intellectual currency in the 70s.

The Rise of Libertarian Utopian Thought

Part of the problem several authors have with including Rush in the category of progressive rock is that their ideas are understood to be "anti-progressive." However, leftist political thought (traditionally understood) does not exhaust all of the social philosophies, including utopian ones, that might rightly be called "progressive." More specifically, I hope to argue that the strand of political philosophy broadly called "libertarianism" offers an alternative progressivism and utopianism to that of the traditional left. Furthermore, it is that strand of progressivism that influenced Neil Peart and Rush during the period in which their music evinced the most obvious similarities to the British progressive bands they so admired. In particular, Rush's move away from long, totalistic song structures parallels the libertarian critique of socialism. Thus, with an expanded view of the political philosophies that might be called "progressive," the path Rush carved is more rightly understood as a legitimate form of progressive rock. To make this case requires a brief, and perhaps dense, detour into the history of political thought in the late twentieth century.

The year 1974 is central to this story. In the history of progressive rock, it is a year that Martin (1998, 227) refers to as a "year of scaling back" after the heights of 1973 and before. Interestingly, that "scaling back" happens in the same year that Rush's self-titled debut makes its appearance. More interestingly, it is also the year of two major events in libertarian social thought: the awarding of the Nobel Prize in Economics to F. A. Hayek and the publication of Robert Nozick's landmark *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*.² One need not argue for causal connections here, but there did seem to be something in the Zeitgeist of that year that suggested change was in the air. And, it is fair to say, both of these works were developing ideas that had been associated with Rand in the decades prior.

The central claim of this libertarian revival was that the utopian dream of a society consciously constructed to serve particular ends, even if that construction was done in the most democratic and egalitarian form imaginable, is an impossible one. Alongside Rand's

moral arguments for capitalism and against socialism, Hayek and Nozick (and others) offered consequentialist reasons why grand schemes of social construction could not work. For Hayek, the problem was that such schemes would have to somehow bring together in one place the knowledge needed to know who should do what, when, and where. He argued that the very nature of human knowledge prevented its articulation and centralization in such a manner. Any scheme to create a unified utopian vision would founder on the rocks of the inarticulability of much of what we know. Human beings simply do not have the ability to consciously create and construct the social world. All utopian thought must deal with these limitations, and it is a problem that faces attempts at consciously constructing social institutions, or consciously allocating resources, no matter how democratically they proceed.

More specifically, Hayek objected to the "scientism" that he saw implicit in much socialist and leftist thinking. In his work immediately after World War II, it would be more obvious where these concerns were coming from: social planning was the order of the day, and that planning was often based on a naive faith in Science. However, even in the 1960s and 70s, there remained in leftist thought a strong strain that suggested human social institutions could be reconstructed and remolded in ways that would eliminate the problems presumed to be associated with capitalism. For Hayek, this "constructivist" mentality was based on a misunderstanding of both the nature of knowledge and the evolution of the social world.

The obverse of Hayek's argument was that the way in which human societies had evolved and would continue to flourish was by recognizing the unplanned nature of much human social order. His emphasis on the importance of "the circumstances of time and place" (Hayek 1948, 80) and inarticulateness of knowledge formed the basis of his arguments about order emerging, as it were, from below rather than from above. It is the decentralized choices of smaller social units (individuals of course, but also families, firms, and other units) that, with the right sets of social institutions, lead to prosperity, peace, and social cooperation. For Hayek, the path to the most desirable society is through the decentralization of political power and respect

for the choices made by small-sized social units. Utopia is not a totalizing concept for Hayek; the good society is an unintended consequence of the myriad choices of the actors that comprise it. It is through social competition that we discover the best ways of doing things. The notion of competition as a discovery procedure is central to Hayek's thought, as well as Nozick's, to be discussed below.

Despite his critique of socialism, Hayek (1952, 194) was not dismissive of utopian theorizing. To the contrary—he defended it as a way to clarify one's thinking and to create critical challenges, as well as being inspirational:

[W]e must be able to offer a new liberal programme which appeals to the imagination. We must make the building of a free society once more an intellectual adventure, a deed of courage. What we lack is a liberal Utopia, a programme which seems neither a mere defence of things as they are nor a diluted kind of socialism, but a truly liberal radicalism which does not spare the susceptibilities of the mighty . . .

As such, twentieth-century libertarian social thought certainly has a utopian strand to it.³

Robert Nozick's contribution to this line of thought is that his book not only made libertarian ideas respectable in intellectual circles, it also makes the most overt claim to utopian theorizing within the libertarian tradition.⁴ Nozick's argument is that "utopia is a meta-utopia." Rather than one utopian vision being the best for everyone, everywhere, a better vision of utopia is a society that allows actors (whether as individuals or groups) to formulate their own "mini-utopias" subject to the freedom to enter and exit those utopias as they see fit. Thus, the role of the state is limited to what Nozick calls "the framework," which is a broad set of rules ensuring entry and exit and the prohibition on the use of force. By allowing people to formulate their own communities with their own rules, subject to the framework, the Nozickian libertarian utopia becomes a multiplicity of utopias. Utopia becomes de-totalized. Each utopian community maintains the belief that it is the ideal and has its own set of principles

defining that ideal. Thus, it keeps many of the values of more totalistic utopian visions, but de-totalizes them by allowing for a variety of claims to those values on a smaller scale.

Nozick's meta-utopian vision is really just an application of Hayek's conception of competition as a discovery procedure. The "filtering" process that Nozick invokes to ensure that the various small-scale utopias will largely match people's preferences for the good society is really just the social analogue of economic competition as understood by Hayek. If the Nozickian framework is in place, then the discovery process of entry and exit will sort people's preferences into the various small-scale utopias. By the mid-to-late 1970s, libertarian social thought had both undermined the totalistic pretensions of socialist utopian thought and offered a decentralized alternative utopian vision that might be as inspirational as its socialist predecessors.

The development of these ideas did not stop in the 1970s, as the last twenty-five years has seen a flowering of literature on libertarianism as well as its increasing presence in the socio-political landscape. Hayek and Nozick, and to a lesser extent, Rand, have all had intellectual cottage industries grown up around them, and libertarian books, articles, and journals have grown in numbers over this period.⁵ Over that time, libertarianism has become less insular, having to both take into account, and in some ways absorb, new ideas from the broader intellectual world. It slowly began to have some of the richness and diversity that leftist and radical thought had acquired by the 60s and 70s. And like those ideas, it would not be surprising if libertarianism had ignited the interests of young artists over that period.

Rush's Libertarianism

Though Sciarra begs off the interpretive question, it is worth some time investigating just how libertarian or "Randian" Rush is. This remains a contentious question among fans of the band, as those with more libertarian political leanings find (or think they've found) Randian ideas permeating Neil Peart's lyrics up to and including

2002's *Vapor Trails*. The non-libertarians can equally point to numerous (apparent) counter-examples that suggest a "drift" or "mellowing" from what was the more clear Randian influence between 1975 and 1978. My own interpretation, backed by some lyrical evidence below, is that Peart's politics over the whole of his work is probably best categorized by the term "individualist," with his earliest work being explicitly Randian and libertarian, and with his later work having less overt connections to that literature, but nonetheless reflecting some of its main themes and concerns. This interpretation suggests that both sets of fans noted above might well be right! In Peart's work since the early 80s, one can find both libertarian individualism and individualism that is compatible with aspects of contemporary leftist thought.

The number of Rush compositions that are explicitly Randian in one form or another is actually quite small, particularly when viewed against a catalogue of well over 100 songs. However, when the Rand or libertarian-influenced songs include "2112" and "Cygnus X-1 Book II: Hemispheres" and "The Trees," all of which are both central to the group's climb toward success and their claim to be progressive rockers, it is easy to understand how the influence of Rand might be exaggerated by fans or critics who are less familiar with their whole career. If we go beyond Rand per se, the libertarian/individualist content of Peart's lyrical work takes on a somewhat larger proportion of the band's work. For my purposes here, it is necessary to establish that their later work (when their musical form was less traditionally progressive) was also libertarian-influenced.

Let me briefly discuss several examples, spanning their work from the 80s and 90s. In "Natural Science" from 1980's *Permanent Waves*, Peart offers a critique of scientism that parallels Hayek's:

Computerized clinics
 For superior cynics
 Who dance to a synthetic band
 In their own image
 Their world is fashioned
 No wonder they don't understand

and

Science, like nature
 Must also be tamed
 With a view toward its preservation

Both stanzas suggest that trying to construct a world based either on our own preferences, or something dictated by "science" is bound to turn out poorly. We need to avoid the temptation to "remake" the world either in our own image or in that of science.

Moving Pictures from 1981 has several songs with libertarian themes. "Tom Sawyer" lead character's mind is "not for rent/to any god or government." In "Red Barchetta," a young man resists the government's attempts to prevent the private use of cars by illegally taking out his uncle's red Barchetta for a spin in the country. The themes of freedom and escape from an oppressive regime parallel both libertarian thought and the ideas from "2112" five years earlier. In many ways, "Red Barchetta" shows Rush's evolution away from the long-form song structure as a way to communicate their ideas, toward shorter ones that convey similar ideas in a more compact form. This move, to be discussed further below, was an intentional one by the band, who has said in several places that there was not enough challenge left in writing the long-form songs. Mastering the more traditional song form, but without giving up their other values, was seen as more of a challenge. Finally, "Witch Hunt" condemns censorship and mob behavior, and is but a thinly-disguised slap at the Moral Majority and other Religious Right groups that were emerging at the time.

By the mid-80s, Peart's lyrical content was becoming even more subtle in its libertarianism. However, songs such as "Red Sector A" on 1984's *Grace Under Pressure*, which portrays life in a concentration camp, and "Territories" from 1985's *Power Windows*, which takes on imperialism, both contain strong libertarian implications, even if they are not always explicit. On 1987's *Hold Your Fire*, the song "Mission" recalls Peart's earlier interest in Rand with its emphasis on the power of creative genius. The lyrical themes of 1991's *Roll the Bones* center

around the role of chance and luck in human existence, with several songs, especially the title track, exhorting the listener to nonetheless realize that one can make one's own way despite the role played by fortune. "Heresy" from the same album is a look at the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union from a perspective that could be viewed as broadly libertarian. More recent albums, especially 2002's *Vapor Trails*, have seen Peart turn more toward relationships and his own life, with almost no references to broader political and social issues. Still, even in the semi-autobiographical songs about his own tragedies on *Vapor Trails*, he emphasizes the ability of the individual to survive, and eventually triumph over, the worst of circumstances.

One last connection to Rand and libertarianism is worth mentioning. Sciabarra (2002) notes that Martin's discussion of the aesthetics of progressive rock shares much with Rand's aesthetics. I would argue that Rush's music is very much consistent with the Randian aesthetic. For Rand (1971), good music matches a good sense of life (i.e., it portrays man as heroic), it is made by the artist with conscious intentionality, and it has a degree of complexity that the mind finds challenging. Almost all observers of Rush's music point to the optimism of their lyrics.⁶ I would further add that musically, their predilection for major chords and high energy songs also portray a kind of musical optimism that matches Rand's Romanticism. In particular, guitarist Alex Lifeson's solos often have the feel of late-nineteenth-century classical music in the ways in which they ascend.⁷ The complexity of their music has also been noted by numerous others, and this is a value for Rand as well.⁸ Finally, that their music has a strong degree of intentionality behind it is also clear. The recent *Vapor Trails* took 14 months to complete, for example. In addition, in his instructional video *A Work in Progress*, Peart breaks down the drum parts for all 11 songs on *Test for Echo*, demonstrating the meticulous construction that goes into his playing. He is very clear in saying that nothing happens by accident. It would be a very interesting project to develop the relationship between Rush's and Rand's aesthetics in more detail.

Rush as Post-Socialist Progressive Rock

Having established both Rush's libertarian credentials and the rise of libertarian utopian theorizing about the time that Rush began producing albums, what remains is to put the two together and make the claim that Rush's output from 1975 through 1978 constitutes a legitimate, post-socialist contribution to the progressive rock tradition. The standard objection is that Rush's libertarian/individualist lyrical content was politically out of step with the leftist utopianism of the British bands normally thought of as central to the progressive tradition. However, as I've tried to show above, there is a legitimate tradition of progressive, utopian theorizing in libertarianism and that tradition began to reassert itself precisely as Rush hit the scene. Thus, if Rush is to be considered progressive along most other measures (particularly in their virtuosity, complexity, and use of long song forms), this claim about their lyrics suggests that the usual reason for excluding them from the category of progressive holds little weight.

In addition, I'd like to push this argument one step further and claim that Rush's work *after* 1978 marks out a viable path forward for progressive rock precisely because it implicitly takes account of the rise of libertarian utopianism and the corresponding decline of more totalistic socialist utopianism. Just as the pastoral/communal utopianism and long-song forms that characterized the progressive rock of the late 60s and early 70s made sense given the intellectual and political milieu of the period, so does Rush's shorter song forms and individualism/libertarianism make sense given the developments in social thought during the 70s and on into the 80s.

One way to understand this shift is that Rush kept the core *values* of progressive rock, such as virtuosity, complexity, and utopianism, but changed the *form* of the music by moving from the long, overarching song form, to a shorter, more, as it were, "decentralized" approach to getting their musical and lyrical ideas across. The classical liberal utopianism of Nozick, Hayek, and Rand recognized the difficulties with one-size-fits-all social structures, and understood why it was necessary and desirable that individuals be allowed to

construct their "utopias" as they saw fit. Rush saw that they could make their musical and lyrical statements as collections of shorter pieces, rather than making the one grand statement in a twenty-minute song. More importantly, they recognized that they could do so without abandoning the core values of progressive rock (and I would argue, the Randian Romantic aesthetic).

Nowhere is this clearer in their music than in the move from the last song of their classically progressive years to the first song of their 80s and 90s output.⁹ The last song on 1978's *Hemispheres* is the nine-minute virtuosic instrumental "La Villa Strangiato." The song incorporates everything from folk themes, to jazz, to hard rock, to a theme from Raymond Scott's 1930s composition "Powerhouse." Musically, it moves through several shifts in meters and is divided up into multiple sections. It also has solo showcases for each of the three band members.¹⁰ What is also of interest, but not often mentioned, is the subtitle of the song: "an exercise in self-indulgence." Rush was being explicit about precisely the sin that the rock press, and the punk rockers, had pinned on progressive rock—its pretentiousness. That said, "La Villa Strangiato" remains an excellent example of Rush's hard rock take on progressive rock, and it returned to their live shows in the 2002 tour.

What is of interest is the shift seen between that song, perhaps the dying breath of Rush's linkage to the old progressive rock, and the first song of 1980's *Permanent Waves*. "The Spirit of Radio" remains perhaps the quintessential Rush song, and certainly one of their most recognizable and popular. Bowman (2002b) provides a thorough analysis of the structure and influences in the song. What I wish to note here is that Rush seemed to have taken all the things that had infused their earlier progressivism, opened it up to new influences, and then made their statement with an economy of five minutes rather than across the whole side of a vinyl album. Several of the trademarks of progressive rock are there: the song is complex, the lyrical subject matter is of intellectual weight, and the performance requires a high level of virtuosity. But it is not an attempt to explain everything or to address grand social concerns. Rather it addresses, with seriousness, a more focused concern, that of the

changing music industry of which they are a part. Bowman's analysis of the interrelationship of the musical influences and lyrical themes says all I would want to say about the song itself. My argument is that part of what it does is to mark out a new path for progressive (or perhaps, to use Martin's [1998, 271] phrase for 1984's *Grace Under Pressure*, "post-progressive") rock.

It is my contention that Rush's post-1978 music represents a legitimate contribution to the tradition of progressive rock, once we realize that the types of social theorizing that might be classified as progressive had expanded during the course of the 1970s. With the rise of libertarian social thought, and its corresponding critique of leftist totalistic utopianism, it would make sense that the range of influence for progressive rock would expand as well. Rush's music reflects that evolution as they moved from large-scale libertarian/Objectivist songs in the mid-70s, to smaller-scale individualist songs in the 80s and 90s. Given the legitimate claim that libertarianism has to being progressive and, in some sense of the term, utopian, Rush's musical output can also rightly be seen as progressive, in both the 70s and beyond.

Notes

1. Bowman (2002a) makes this point in passing. I see it as having significance for explaining both Rush's lyrics and the evolution of their music.
2. One might also note a couple of real-world events of relevance in 1974: the near-end of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, depriving progressives (both left and libertarian) of one of their unifying causes, and the ongoing serious troubles in the U.S. economy, which could well be interpreted as the last gasps of the explicit Keynesian-style government management of the previous decade and a half.
3. Although I will not be discussing his work here, Murray Rothbard's (e.g., 1973) strident defense of "anarcho-capitalism" is perhaps the most radical form of libertarian utopianism. Rothbard, and a number of other libertarian theorists following in his wake, argue that there are no necessary functions of the state and that in its absence, humanity would reach its greatest flourishing. Whether that conclusion, or the arguments made in support of it, is accurate is another question. For my purposes, establishing its existence is the key issue.
4. To some degree, it seems as though Nozick's version of utopia might have been influenced by the "Galt's Gulch" section of Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). Certainly, that community would fit as a Nozickian utopia, which suggests that Rand should also be included among those contributing to this classical liberal utopianism.
5. A useful overview and history of the libertarian intellectual and political movements can be found in Kelley 1997.

6. It is this optimism that explains two interesting things about Rush. First, it explains the strong overlap between fans of Rush and fans of Star Trek. I believe that same optimism is infused throughout the various Star Trek shows and films. Second, it explains why Rush's *Grace Under Pressure* (1984) album feels so out of place in their catalogue. It is simply too dreary and depressing lyrically. Musically, it has all of the usual Rush touches, and some of the music suggests an optimism that works against the "greyness" of the lyrical content. Even among those who like the album, there is some sense that it stands out in their work. The band members have said it is hard for them to listen to, mostly due to the various stresses they were under at the time that were likely the cause of the album's atypical dreariness.

7. One point about Rush music that has not been made, to my knowledge, in the literature is that Lifeson is a licensed pilot, which might explain why so many of his solos can accurately be described as "soaring." In particular, the brief solo in the title track from 1989's *Presto* seems to capture this best.

8. See Rand 1971, 58: "Epistemologically, a man who has an active mind regards mental effort as an exciting challenge; metaphysically, he seeks intelligibility. He will enjoy the music that requires a process of complex calculations and successful resolution. (I refer not merely to the complexities of harmony and orchestration, but primarily to their core, the complexity of melody, on which they depend.)" Rush's music is quite thoroughly characterized by complexity and successful resolution.

9. Bowman (2002b) notes the importance of this transition as well.

10. An excellent analysis of the piece can be found in an article by Marshall (1993) in *Guitar School* magazine.

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