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A Popular Culture Representation of Neoliberalist
Cultural Hegemony

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Why is the Federation so obsessed with the Maquis? We've never harmed you. And yet we're constantly arrested and charged with terrorism. Starships chase us through the Badlands and our supporters are harassed and ridiculed. Why? Because we've left the Federation, and that's the one thing you can't accept. Nobody leaves paradise. Everyone should want to be in the Federation. Hell, you even want the Cardassians to join. You're only sending them replicators because one day they can take their "rightful place" on the Federation Council. You know, in some ways you're even worse than the Borg. At least they tell you about their plans for assimilation. You're more insidious. You assimilate people and they don't even know it.

Lt. Commander Michael Eddington to Cpt. Benjamin Sisko, *DS9*, Ep. 4.22 "For the Cause"

Introduction

One of the great lessons of twentieth-century theories of representation is that popular culture is an immensely effective medium for both the promulgation and furthering of discourse and doxa. Cultural texts reveal hidden social currents and often serve to offer implicit approval of their fundamental principles. This discussion will draw upon such a background in order to examine how elements of neoliberal ideology are expressed and given tacit support through the American media franchise *Star Trek*. This is not an exploration of the topic by a fan of the series, however.

Whilst growing up, like many Western children of my generation, I thrilled

to the sight of Captain Kirk wrestling rubber monsters in an abandoned quarry and laughed at the Tribbles multiplying endlessly in the cargo holds of spaceships, but it was only ever a casual fling. Never a love affair. Never a fall into the negative ecstasy of the communicative medium of which Baudrillard wrote so eloquently (Vint 198).

In subsequent years, I watched the odd episode of one or another of the later television revivals, along with attending various movies with friends or, later on, as a distraction during long international flights. The surface of the show was glossy – characters smiled at each other and talked about how human society had evolved beyond the need for conflict or personal greed – but, as a viewer, I found myself uneasy and somehow unconvinced by this vapid representation of future *homo sapiens*. If nothing else, why was a culture so apparently devoted to peace spending so much time on war? What exactly *was* the alternative to money? How were all of those spaceships paid for and, if they didn't have to be, why didn't everybody have one? It seemed to make no sense.

It is important to offer a caveat and mention my fundamental concern with the franchise at the outset of a discussion like this. Additionally, I have made every effort to research things, but there are many more titles than anyone other than the most devoted fan could ever hope to be consume. There are seven series at present, with 741 episodes so far, as well as thirteen films, with more in the pipeline, and literally hundreds of novels and comics (perhaps even into the thousands), alongside a countless amount of non-canon fanfiction and other media.

In this paper, I will give some examples to support the claim that Star Trek's "United Federation of Planets" offers a popular media realization, rationalization and justification of contemporary neoliberalism. The Federation is itself actively redirective. It pushes itself forward as a tolerant, inclusive, benevolent governing organization built upon principle, yet has countenanced – and frequently encouraged – racism, nepotism, arbitrary hierarchical preferencing, violent police actions, suppression of dissidents, destructive mining, war, environmental devastation, political assassinations, and even genocide.

This dichotomy is under-addressed and never satisfactorily resolved in any of the movies or television series. One particularly telling point is that “Starfleet,” the naval arm of the Federation, is not explicitly described as a military organization, despite clearly being such, as it has warships and soldiers who can and do kill at the command of their superiors. It is my contention that it would be hard to find a better example of how neoliberalist agendas can be furthered and how consent can be both manufactured and thuggishly enforced.

This paper will thus explore the idea that *Star Trek* advances something which can be considered a neoliberal agenda at the level of submerged doxa, as Bourdieu might perhaps have understood it. In order to do so, I have split the discussion into the following sections:

- 1) Defining some characteristics and promulgators of neoliberalism – then and now
- 2) Exploring the political and ethical world of *Star Trek*
- 3) Examining the existence and ongoing role of neoliberal elements within the *Star Trek* narrative(s)

Defining Neoliberalism

Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* contain a recipe for the development and furtherance of hegemony, both in terms of the political and civil societies. A key point is the manufacture of consent, where concessions result in the redirection and replication of cultural discourse via various outlets and strategies. The recent popularization of the term “neoliberal,” which has moved from a fringe pejorative to a recognized mainstream political stance, indicates a need to describe the evolution of a philosophy that has underpinned imperialist agendas since Classical times – the idea that “we know what is best for you.” The definitions of “we,” “you,” and “what is best” may shift, but the core rhetoric remains stable.

The term “neoliberalism” is a familiar one, but those who use it very likely have different conceptions of what it might mean, where and when it should be applied and to whom it should do so. David Harvey, one of the leading

commentators in the area, identifies the players as those from both the perceived right and left sides of global politics:

The capitalist world stumbled towards neoliberalization as the answer through a series of gyrations and chaotic experiments that really only converged as a new orthodoxy with the articulation of what became known as the 'Washington Consensus' in the 1990s. By then, both Clinton and Blair could easily have reversed Nixon's earlier statement and said 'We are all neoliberals now.' (Harvey 13)

This is a relatively short discussion and there are many broad points to consider. For now, perhaps the following definition from Duménil and Lévy will suffice:

[Neoliberalism] expresses the strategy of the capitalist classes in alliance with upper management ... in tending to strengthen their hegemony and to expand it globally. (1)

In short, one can identify the following commonalities in such discussions:

- 1) Neoliberalism is self-interested
- 2) Neoliberalism is manipulative, using different mechanisms and strategies to pretend not to be self-interested
- 3) Neoliberalism pretends small government but is, in reality, hegemonic
- 4) Neoliberalism imposes itself upon others through both negotiative strategies and direct oppression
- 5) Neoliberalism draws upon the rhetoric of individualism (it is very similar to libertarianism with an excessively macro-economic bias) and allows it – only insofar as the goals of the ruling hegemony are not seriously challenged, however
- 6) Neoliberalism is inherently imperialist

As for neoliberalism and libertarianism being similar but for minor differences in focus on the exercise of the mechanisms of independence, a point which shall be touched upon later, I refer the reader to Tsutomu Hashimoto's excellent discussion "On [the] demarcation problem between neoliberalism and libertarianism."

Ethical and political choices in *Star Trek*

There are several books and articles on the ethics and politics of *Star Trek*, from Judith Barad and Ed Robertson's *The Ethics of Star Trek*, through Sal Creber's *Race, Gender and Politics in Star Trek Deep Space Nine*, to George Gonzalez's very recent *Star Trek and the Politics of Globalism*. Generally, these seem to be written by fans of the universe, working from the perspective that humanity, as represented in the show, has evolved to a point of moral maturity, and that they – or perhaps an idealized "we" – are the natural leaders of and impartial arbiters for the society of the future. They/we believe that they/we know what is best for everyone.

Let us look briefly at some of the ethical issues with the *Star Trek* universe(s). A few examples are given in each case in order to underpin the main point that quite remarkable moral transgressions are commonplace, but there are many, many more examples throughout the franchise:

Racism

Humans are the dominant members of the Federation in *Star Trek*. The headquarters are on Earth and the ships of Starfleet, which enforce the will of the Federation, are all named in English, and frequently either after famous vessels from Earth's past or places on the planet. Non-humans are rare in general, and almost non-present in senior command positions. Aliens in command, whether politically or militarily, tend to do poorly, such as the non-human President of the Federation during the Changeling crisis in *Star Trek Deep Space Nine*, who hands over control of civilian populations to a military junta due to fear, indecision and confusion (see: *DS9*: "Homefront").

Nepotism

Being related to an influential member of the Federation is a sure way to advancement. In fact, there seems to be an expectation that children will carry on in the footsteps of their parents and disappointment if they don't. The line "I knew/served with your father" is a common one in the *Star Trek* universe. Wesley Crusher is a case in point, although there are many other examples, including Kirk himself, who, in the 2009 reboot of the movies, is advanced to the head of the command queue simply because he had a father who was a Captain (*Star Trek*).

Hierarchical Preferencing and Militarism

Hassler-Forest has written extensively on hierarchy and militarism in the *Star Trek* universe(s), noting that the enforcement of hierarchical structures fits within the military structure of Starfleet. It is constantly stated that this is not a military organization ("peacekeeping force", anyone?), but Starfleet has heavily-armed ships, advanced military technology and highly-trained soldiers. Some of these are seen in episodes (i.e. *DS9*: "Nor the Battle to the Strong"), but, for the most part, they are kept out of sight and mentions of military action are in passing, if they happen at all.

One of the most obvious examples of hierarchy in practice are the holodecks on board ships and space stations. These are spaces where people can live out their fantasies, but they are clearly more available to officers than normal members of the crew or civilians. The Enterprise has sixteen holodecks and a crew of just over 1,000 people, not including passengers and family members. If time is equally rationed, then crew have probably 8 hours a month at the most, and likely less. On Deep Space Nine, the holodecks are even more severely restricted. They are, in fact, supposed to be managed by the Ferengi as entertainment spaces, but Federation officers are more than happy to override this for a multiplicity of reasons and simply take control as desired.

The Creation and Destruction of Life for Personal Gain

The holodeck characters, as established in the shows *DS9*, *Voyager* and *TNG*,

possess a form of sentience. The Doctor, a medical hologram who is activated in *Voyager*, spends a great deal of his time fighting for the recognition of his rights to sentience, which are eventually (and reluctantly) acknowledged after being trampled upon a few times. For example, at one point this Deleuzian body without organs is rebooted and his memories are lost (*Voyager*: “Latent Image”).

More concerningly, every single holodeck character has a created backstory and sentience in order to further the depth of the illusion for participants. At one point, a holodeck character asks Captain Picard “When you’re gone, will this world still exist? Will my wife and kids still be waiting for me at home?” (*TNG*: “The Big Goodbye”). Picard, for the record, replies that he doesn’t know, which is sidestepping the issue.

Bribery

Holmes has argued that the neoliberal state can give rise to greater corruption opportunities (209), and the case of *DS9*, with the frequent corrupt negotiations (often via the Ferengi, who are both a despised ‘other’ and a necessary tool) for the purpose of advancing Federation interests being just one example. Federation officials themselves are also open to bribery (see, for example, Christopher Bennett’s novel *Star Trek: Enterprise: Rise of the Federation: A Choice of Futures* 290).

Imperialism and Subjugation

Exploration is code for imperialist expansionism in the universe(s) of *Star Trek*. As the Federation explores, it builds relationships and expands its membership, in much the same way as the East India Company did from the seventeenth century onwards.

The Klingon Empire is one of a culture of warriors who are forced to abandon many of their activities following a pact with the Federation known as the Khitomer Accords. This is a struggle personified in a Klingon Starfleet officer called Worf, who must constantly find a way to reconcile his warrior nature with the expectations of Federation service. There are countless

other examples, as the joining of races to the Federation is a major subplot in almost all of the movies and series. *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* is primarily concerned with bringing an entire people – the Bajorans – into the Federation. This involves many political and cultural restructures, including the abandonment of a caste system and other traditional values.

Destructive Mining and Waste

Starships run on something called dilithium. This is a fictional, unreplacable ore that has apparently miraculous properties, but is highly volatile. It is gathered through mining, and the mining frequently results in planetary destruction.

The Federation uses this material frivolously. Powering spaceships is one thing, but they run massive entertainment complexes and live in luxury whilst interacting with a universe where many clearly struggle with poverty.

Genocide

Star Trek: Deep Space Nine includes a long-running plot concerning a war against “The Founders,” a race of changelings. They are infected with a Federation-designed and created disease that will destroy the whole race. Several members of the DS9 crew take measures to find an antidote and deliver it, but they do so against the express wishes of Starfleet command (*DS9*: “Extreme Measures”). In other words, Starfleet and the Federation condone and attempt to conduct genocide. The reason for the war, by the way, is that the Federation wishes to continue its expansion and negotiations for goods into an area controlled by the Founders. In other words, it is a military action undertaken to protect imperialist growth and the flow of trade.

One can see from these examples (and there are hundreds more) that the Federation, like all governing organizations, leaves a lot to be desired. It is self-serving and, at times, openly evil. However, is it fair to call it neoliberal and, if so, what are the consequences?

There is mention in Barad’s book of the ethical concerns of *Star Trek*:

Insurrection, in which a people called the Ba'ku will be forcibly relocated for the purposes of mining the resources of their planet. Picard, the individual, challenges his Federation's idea of relocation (283-284). However, Barad doesn't mention that moral clarity is provided by the bad guy turning out to be *really* evil in this film, thus reducing the decision to a simple, black-and-white answer.

Star Trek and Neoliberalism

In 2010, Nick Couldry asked the following:

What if, under particular conditions (themselves connected to neoliberalism), the general space for 'voice' that mainstream media provide works in important respects to *amplify* or at least normalize values and mechanisms important to neoliberalism and, by a separate movement, to embed such values and mechanisms ever more deeply within contemporary cultures of governance? (Couldry 73)

He was, for his discussion, considering the case of reality television in particular, but the question applies just as well – if not more so – to through-constructed, scripted media.

An argument against considering the Federation as a neoliberal organization is that the former has outwardly renounced property and money, whilst the latter relies upon these as essential elements in the market. However, a look at the actual functioning of the Federation shows markets and trade in full force. *Deep Space Nine*, perhaps the series most concerned with looking beneath the surface of the heroic façade, of the masking narrative of bold captains and plucky ensigns, features multiple episodes based on the acquisition of goods and currency. Nothing, we learn, is free, although the illusion of this can certainly be created aboard a starship where every cabin has devices that can supposedly “replicate” any object. There are clearly limitations to these, however, as otherwise the “gold-pressed latinum” beloved of the Ferengi (a racist stereotype if ever there was one) would simply be

endlessly reproducible.

Manu Saadia has written on the post-capitalist economics of *Star Trek* in 2016's *Treconomics*. This is a look at a post-scarcity society, but does not really answer any of the hard questions. It is similar to many other works on the show in that it is written by a fan and this is apparent. The replicator is assumed to be the answer to all difficulties of need, but from where does the fuel to power it come? How are those resources negotiated for and protected? Everybody apparently has everything they want, but the mechanisms to provide it are hidden and the enforcers faceless.

This is not the place to go into a long discussion of the relationship between the replicator and authenticity, but, as an aside, it is commended it to anyone interested as a fascinating case study in the progress of Baudrillardian semiotics.

In reality, the Federation's version of trade is much more in line with the ideas of Duménil and Lévy, who don't see neoliberalist commerce as "free," but rather coerced and enforced. This is done by a combination of seduction and force – a futuristic version of "the silver or the lead". We have already considered the military nature of Starfleet, an organization which, despite the stated aim of exploration, seems rather to be seeking resources and (lesser) partners in their acquisition and management. Duménil and Lévy say of neoliberalist organizations that their "main political tool is always the establishment of a local imperial-friendly government" (9). They also refer to "hybridization at the top" as a form of neoliberal compromise, leading to a "convergence of objectives" (87). Harvey points out that a neoliberal governing body:

...must also set up those military, defence, police and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. (2)

As for a collaborative hegemony, Duménil and Lévy further note that:

There are important implications to the notion of joint, though unequal, domination by a group of upper classes or advanced countries. The common dominion is based on cooperation but also rivalry. At the top of a social hierarchy, various groups are involved and support the project of a more narrowly defined leadership. Such hierarchical alliances can be denoted as “compromises,” as the leader adjusts its demands to some of those emanating from its followers but finally prevails over them. The same is true concerning the comparative positions of the various countries within the group of imperialist powers. A compromise at the top also prevails in the exercise of a joint domination internationally, but discipline is imposed by the hegemonic power... (10)

In this sense, *Star Trek* represents and attempts to rationalize cultural and social development as tools for domination.

Additionally, there is a sinister group already mentioned in this discussion within the Federation, known as “Section 31”, that engages in CIA-type activities, including political assassination and the destabilization of governments. Just as the attempted assassinations of Castro spearheaded US policy in the region (Blakeley 100), so do Section 31’s attacks on Cardassian political figures push forward the federation agenda.

Are Federation Citizens Free?

The case of the Maquis, a group of independent-minded settlers who object to the Federation’s policy of appeasement of the Cardassian Empire, with whom they were previously at war and from whom they claimed lands. The lands are now to be returned, so the settlers have decided to undertake guerrilla actions. The Federation responds by imprisoning and even killing their own members, primarily because they are taking action contrary to the goals of the larger organization. As Harvey notes:

A contradiction arises between a seductive but alienating possessive individualism on the one hand and the desire for a meaningful collective life on the other. While individuals [within neoliberalism] are supposedly free to choose, they are not supposed to choose strong collective organizations (such as trade unions) as opposed to weak voluntary associations (like charitable organizations). They most certainly should not choose to associate to create political parties with the aim of forcing the state to intervene in or eliminate the market. To guard against their greatest fears – fascism, communism, socialism, authoritarian populism, and even majority rule – the neoliberals have to put strong limits on democratic governance, relying instead upon undemocratic and unaccountable institutions ... to make key decisions. This creates the paradox of intense state interventions and government by elites and 'experts' in a world where the state is supposed not to be interventionist. ... Faced with social movements that seek collective interventions, therefore, the neoliberal state is itself forced to intervene, sometimes repressively, thus denying the very freedoms it is supposed to uphold. (69 – underline mine)

Individualism and Libertarianism

Star Trek, especially from *The Next Generation* onwards, seems to offer a vision of utopian liberalism on the surface, but it is Clintonian liberalism, smooth on the surface and rotten underneath. As Berkowitz notes of the former president:

Bill Clinton was a “New Democrat” who was “devoted not only to the protection of individual rights and the social and economic bases of equality but also to the principle of personal responsibility.” (ix)

There are many discussions which trace the promulgation of neoliberalism through the Clinton years, from Fowler's look at Bill Clinton through to Gilson's evisceration of Hillary Clinton. These all argue that the Clintons (and,

to some extent, Obama) presented a seemingly friendly and inclusive liberal version of the neoliberal agenda. Henry Giroux, in an article called “Neoliberalism and the dead bodies of children” identifies a difference between “soft” (Clinton) and “hard” (Trump) versions of the ideology at play in our recent global political climate (14).

An argument can be made also that the promotion of the agenda of the individual (save where it goes strongly against the interests of the governing Federation) is libertarian, and thus, as we have seen, closely allied to neoliberalism. Captain Picard, for example, is constantly going on about individual rights, but these only matter when they matter to him directly, as in his protection of crew members in the midst of major disasters.

The “Prime Directive” is an Excuse for Nonaction

The “Prime Directive” in *Star Trek* is essentially a principle of non-interference in cultures that lack sufficient technological development. The threshold in this case is pre-warp technology, although one can imagine that it might apply to isolated societies and, say, advanced weapons in our current world.

Just like today, the future Prime Directive is violated whenever Federation members feel like it, but is used as an excuse for not intervening in cases which might have negative consequences for a neoliberal hegemony. The poor are helped if they have something to offer and left to suffer if they don't. As we have seen, the Federation has no problem with displacing populations and disrupting cultures if it means access to greater resources.

Conclusion

This discussion is not arguing that *Star Trek* in any or all of its manifestations is deliberately created to be neoliberal propaganda. One does not need to imagine a shadowy conspiracy of master manipulators reaching forth to direct narratives. Rather, it seems that the Federation, as the expression of the ultimate point of American Ideological Evolution, naturally expresses such principles without realizing it does so. Neoliberalism is part of the character and fabric of the United States, whether on the extreme right or

their version of the left, which is, as many commentators have pointed out, still somewhat to the right of, say, the left in Europe. Giroux, for example, calls the Democrats “allegedly more progressive” (20). The moral dilemmas of *Star Trek* are those which arise in a neoliberal state, and the solutions found to them are in line with a neoliberal agenda.

The *Star Trek* universe is one where solutions seem hard but eventually come easily. Scientific problems are solved by technobabble (“Chaotic space intersects ours at the eighteenth dimensional gradient. Voyager entered through a trimetic fracture” (*Voyager: “The Fight”*)) and moral problems by the lines between the good and the bad guys being clarified (Khan was seemingly only trying to protect his crew, but turned out to be a mass murderer in both *The Wrath of Khan* and *Star Trek: Into Darkness*).

Perhaps the true utopian aspect of *Star Trek* for a neoliberal ideologist is that, unlike reality, the answers to the big, difficult questions are clear and things always work out for the best in the best of all possible universes. Provided one is a human belonging to the Federation, that is. The inhabitants of rest of the universe, however, have to endure the privations of rapacious imperialism and all the hideous apparatus of jingoism with which it is so frequently attended.

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