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Rediscovering the Future: What We Need from Star Trek: Discovery (Part One)

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Rediscovering the Future: What We Need from Star Trek: Discovery (Part One)

Abstract

In this first of two essays on CBS's *Star Trek: Discovery*, this essay describes what we should want from this newest contribution to the Star Trek universe. The essay argues that Discovery should take sides on important contemporary politics issues, in the tradition of the best of previous Star Trek shows and films. Specifically, Discovery needs: 1. a complex treatment of identity politics, 2. a critical presentation of internal cultural diversity and imperialism, and 3. a more nuanced and specific vision of the political economy of the Federation.

Keywords

Star Trek, Toxic Masculinity, Capitalism

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Cover Page Footnote

Bryant William Sculos holds a PhD in political theory and international relations. He is a postdoctoral fellow at The Amherst Program in Critical Theory, adjunct professor at Florida International University, contributing writer for the Hampton Institute, and Politics of Culture section editor for *Class, Race and Corporate Power*.

Anyone with any interest in politics and *Star Trek* has heard the perhaps exaggerated claims that Gene Roddenberry was a socialist. Whether or not this is precisely true or not is far less important than the fact that his vision of *Star Trek*, which first manifested in the path-breaking *Original Series*, offered a complex imaginary for imperfect socialism in space. Most people who watched the show, even at the time, were probably mostly unaware of the socialistic dimensions of the universe they were being entertained by—a universe much closer to the one preferred by those pinko commies in Russia and the wretched halls of American academia than it was to the emergent neoliberal capitalist system they thought it would have been worth dying (or, more accurately, to kill) to protect. If Roddenberry's vision was intentionally socialistic, it was also intentionally obscured; it is the background of *Star Trek* and one that progressively fades away as we move through the *Next Generation (NG)* and then in *Deep Space Nine (DS9)* with the predominant presence of the Ferengi and endless warfare. There are moments where the post-scarcity of the Federation is mentioned, but due to various plot elements (especially with focus on post-occupation Bajor in *DS9*) this reality is often ignored or bypassed.¹ The in *Star Trek: Voyager*, with the ship thrown halfway across the galaxy into the Delta quadrant, it has no substantive socioeconomic backdrop at all. It is one of bland isolation—and even the technological symbol of post-scarcity in the whole of the *Star Trek* universe, the replicator, is eliminated by the shortage of the fuel needed to power the replicators (deuterium) in the Delta quadrant. The most recent series before *Discovery*, *Enterprise*, could have brought this socialistic background back in, and in fact it could have given us a clearer picture of how the post-scarcity abundance based Federation developed. It didn't. Don't even get me started on the J.J. Abrams reboots. These films are nearly completely devoid of all political and social commentary. They are well-made and broadly entertaining, but are nearly entirely character- and explosion-driven. *Star Trek* at its best meshes characters-driven and universe-driven plots that call on the audience to think about how they would have acted in a similar situation—minus the outer space and aliens parts. At its best, *Star Trek* offers an accessible philosophically-sophisticated alternative imagining of a future beyond the worst aspects of the present—while offering plenty of opportunities to criticize that present.

This brings us to the present, and the beginning of a new *Star Trek* franchise, one that promises to bring Roddenberry's radical left agenda into the hearts and minds of capitalism's Netflix-conditioned automatons—or so we can hope. In all seriousness, CBS's *Star Trek: Discovery* is all potential, and so far it has lived up to the hype in terms of special effects, acting, and action—but has only grazed the surface of any serious political or social commentary, to say nothing of a vision of alternative future beyond the worst dimensions of the contemporary conjuncture. This essay represents the first of two on this newest contribution to the *Star Trek* franchise. This first essay, based on the first three episodes of *Discovery*, will discuss what this show should and could be (and what it seems like it won't be based on what we've seen so far). The second essay, based on the entirety of the first season once it has finished airing, will compare what I discuss here to what the show actually delivered (besides probably hundreds of millions of dollars into the hands of a few corporations and CEOs—which is all but guaranteed at this point).

(1) A complex, critical treatment of identity politics.

¹ I don't want to overstate or oversimplify things here. Simply because the Federation has achieved a generalized post-scarcity society, does not necessarily mean that that post-scarcity is or should be shown to be experienced in every scenario or every encounter with other worlds and planets. One could argue that this complexity actually gives us a better picture of what post-scarcity would look like in a universe as diverse as the one that the *Star Trek* franchise opens up to its viewers (or, in typical science fiction fashion, could be giving us a sense of what post-scarcity in one country in our contemporary world might look like).

Since the *Original Series* first aired on television, *Star Trek* has been known (and indeed was socially controversial at the time) for its treatment of interracial interactions. The most well-known example of this is when Capt. Kirk has an amorous moment on screen with a female of another species. While this was an important commentary at the time, as have been the various poignant iterations of this theme in the subsequent iterations of *Star Trek* through *NG*, *DS9*, and even still though less so in *Voyager*. From the first several episodes of *Discovery*, it seems that *Star Trek* is poised to continue attempting to better deal with issues of race and gender—as well as cross-cultural interactions more broadly. *Discovery* will eventually feature a woman of color as captain. Her name is Michael (played by the excellent Sonequa Martin-Green). While I have no wish to underplay the importance of this, this kind of symbolic identity politics isn't enough. We need more. If Michael, as she has behaved up to this point, simply behaves in the same way as previous captains and officers in the *Star Trek* universe, the importance of a Black female captain loses its critical potential. We need a much more complex treatment of identity politics from *Discovery*. We do need more strong Black female leaders to be characters in mainstream Western culture to be sure, but we also need those figures to challenge the status quo in more radical ways than we've seen Michael do so far.

(2) A critique of well-meaning imperialism that refuses to simplify or fetishize or Orientalize.

As any *Star Trek* fan knows, the Federation and Starfleet are supposed to be restricted in their interactions with other worlds and peoples by the “Prime directive.” This directive is supposed to prevent external interference in the development of primarily pre-warp civilizations. As any *Star Trek* fan also knows, the Prime directive is ignored about as often as it is followed. This contradiction is often used to express the ethical, political, and cultural dilemmas that technologically “superior” explorers, who, for all we know, are well-intentioned but also driven by their own morality and concepts of what is just. In *Discovery*, we know we will see a lot more of the Klingons. Thus far we have seen more of their language and their cultural and political complexities than has been presented in earlier *Star Trek* series and films. We have also seen some of the internal diversity of the Klingons. We should expect to see more of this. Are there serious Klingon intellectuals? Are their Klingon pacifists? We've already seen an “albino” white Klingon. We should hope that in addition to the writers of *Star Trek* avoiding the caricaturing of a non-Federation race/species, we should hope to see a more complex critical treatment of any internal imperialism within the Klingon people as well as critique coming from inside the Federation of any imperial ambitions or outgrowths of its ostensibly peaceful, purely exploratory mission (a mission that seem to turn militaristic more often than not).

(3) A more nuanced and specific explication of the political economy of the Federation.

While it might not seem like it would make for compelling television, we should want *Discovery* to provide us with a deeper, more realistic understanding of the politics and economics that makes the Federation function. Beyond allowing the building of exploratory vessels and the activities of Starfleet, we don't really ever get a detailed presentation of how the Federation actually works internally, with only a few simplified exceptions. I'm certainly not asking or hoping for a lecture on the historical development of the post-scarcity society, but I want to see more. It's easy enough to make post-scarcity the foundation of the Federation, but what about its politics? Do Federation citizens vote? Who decides on the policies of Starfleet? Do the people of the Federation continually decide that Starfleet is living up to its promise? In fact, throughout all of the iterations of *Star Trek*, detailed depictions of the internal politics of the Federation are almost completely non-existent.

While *Star Trek* has often provided a vision of a world beyond the artificial scarcity, competitiveness, possessiveness, consumerism, and the profit-driven individualism of late capitalism (which is itself no small thing), and perhaps it is the intellectual in me, but I've seen enough of that vision. I want to see a bit more about how the sausage is made. Is the Federation really the idyllic post-scarcity democracy that its characters often treat it as? This is especially important for our contemporary world that is currently being ripped apart by rampant inequality and plutocracy. We need a nuanced picture of what post-scarcity democracy *could* look like in a space-faring future, and that could include some self-reflective moments that highlight the struggles that remain within the Federation. It need not be a perfect future for it to be of critical use for its audience.

My greatest fear for *Discovery* is that it will fail on all of these registers, and in fact I fear it will completely avoid making any overt, controversial political, social, cultural, or economic statements of any kind in order to not lose any potential viewers (especially given the corporate importance of *Discovery* to CBS's live-streaming enterprise). At its best, *Star Trek* has been able to present a mixture of campy, heavy-handed critique alongside a subtle science-fiction realism. Our country—and the wider world—is as polarized as it has ever been, and despite the current US President's near-pathological need to be crude, cruel, and offensive (in word and deed), there is much more of a need (and demand) for a radical political vision to challenge not just Trump's cruelty and impropriety, but the fairly mainstream Republican politics in which his chaotic approach is rooted. Without falling into vulgar simplicity, I want *Discovery* to combine its incredible aesthetic of profound technological realism with an elaborate—if still incomplete, intricate, and self-reflective—politicized narrative. This doesn't mean that I want *Discovery* to present a vision of a world that progressives and socialists would comprehensively agree with, but if it is able to present a complicated but broadly programmatic political storyline, a storyline that should target its largely liberal audience's self-delusions and misconceptions, the series will also be able to challenge its audience to think differently about the present and the possibilities for the future.

In order for *Discovery* to be successful (and worthy of that potential success), it needs to take sides.