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Rediscovering the Future: The Ambiguous Achievements of Season One of Star Trek: Discovery (Part Two)

Abstract

In this second of two essays on CBS's *Star Trek: Discovery*, this essay looks back at the author's earlier hopes for the show in relation to what this most recent contribution to the franchise actually offered. This essay argues that *Discovery* failed to offer a complex treatment of identity politics and a more nuanced and specific vision of the political economy of the Federation. On the other hand, season one did provide a moderately successful critical presentation of imperialism, as well as a consistently sophisticated ecological sensibility—both of which are crucially important in the contemporary moment.

Keywords

Star Trek Discovery, Identity Politics, Imperialism

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Cover Page Footnote

Bryant William Sculos holds a Ph.D. in political theory and international relations, specializing in: Critical Theory, postcapitalism, and global ethics. He is currently a postdoctoral fellow in The Amherst Program in Critical Theory, and, starting September 2018, he will be a Mellon-Sawyer postdoctoral research fellow in the Dept. of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Bryant is the Politics of Culture section editor for *Class, Race and Corporate Power*, and he also writes regularly for *The Hampton Institute*, *New Politics*, and *Public Seminar*.

To say that season one of CBS's much-heralded streaming-only contribution to the *Star Trek* canon was a letdown really doesn't do justice to the complexity of that judgment. While there were a few positives, for the most part *Discovery* failed to consistently build on what is best in the legacy of *Star Trek*. Its complete embrasure of Hollywood special effects, expensive technological realism, and feature-style narrative has led it to be viewed positively by audiences, if not by the most diehard Trekkies. That it is has been profitable for CBS is indicated by the fact that the show is exceptionally expensive per episode to produce and still it has been renewed for a second season. Whether all of this, and the well-known loyalty of Trekkies, will be enough to draw prospective consumers to commit to its emergent streaming service, supposedly designed to compete with Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Hulu, remains to be seen (I, along with many others, watched *Discovery* "on a friends' account").



Plot-wise, *Discovery* manages to have both too much going on without getting the viewer to think deeply about much of anything—again, at least not consistently. The key philosophical question, about the continuity and originality of individual identity, is regularly brought to the fore, but then only superficially explored by the characters.

Season one of *Discovery* reboots the classic *Trek* trope of the Mirror Universe, and more aggressively than any previous series. The Mirror Universe concept has always been a fun, campy deviation within the various *Trek* series in which it appears. It has never been a fundamental aspect of any season of any series—and the weird narrative progression of season one of *Discovery* is a great example of why that is: it's not the *Star Trek* universe we know and love. The more time you spend on the Mirror Universe, the less time the audience gets with the traditional Federation-based plots and characters.

Discovery had the opportunity—which it almost took—to do something a bit more novel within the *Star Trek* universe using the Mirror Universe modality. There is a disappointingly brief exploration of the resistance to the Terran Empire in the Mirror Universe. Klingons and a variety

of different species are shown working in solidarity—organizing collectively to engage in apparently some kind of (likely violent and non-violent) resistance. It was the kind of tease that had so much undeveloped potential, it almost would have been better off if the writers pretended like they never thought about including the resistance in the first place.

In *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine (DS9)* we got a better look at an organized resistance in the Mirror Universe—and even that wasn't all that well-explored, at least not politically. In *DS9*, the development and use of the Mirror Universe plotline is character driven. It is compelling and intriguing, but not very politically or philosophically sophisticated. *Star Trek* has never done subtlety well, but that isn't the same as not doing nuance well. *Discovery* had an opportunity to focus on the politics of the resistance, the process and struggles involved in building an interspecies solidarity in the face of an apocalyptic enemy. It would seem especially appropriate given the reemergence of questions of the nature of political resistance in the present moment to explore this avenue more deeply, but, despite *Star Wars: Rogue One* providing a commercially-successful example of how to present the complexities of revolutionary organizing, tactics, and strategy, *Discovery* didn't go in that direction.

Let me be honest: *Discovery* is fun to watch. But wasn't it *Star Wars* that was supposed to be about aliens and laser beams? *Trek* was always the more philosophical of the two late twentieth century space stories. Building on J.J. Abrams' transformation of *Star Trek* in the rebooted feature films, *Discovery*, in too many ways, continued to degrade the ethical, political, and even dissident character of *Star Trek*.

The show, while being poorly thought-out in terms of narrative, is probably one of the better written *Trek* series in terms of dialogue. The plot is often trivial and incoherent, but the characters are allowed some depth—especially for a show that eventually becomes a really long action-movie in space. This makes each episode watchable—and even enjoyable. It was really only in looking back, as I sat down to write this review, that I fully realized how confused and superficial so much of the season really was.

With all of that said, I want to now look back on what I wrote in Part One¹ and see where *Discovery* landed in relation to my hopes and expectations for the series (recall: Part One was written after seeing the first three episodes of the season). There, I suggested that in order to live up to its potential in the contemporary moment and push the *Star Trek* franchise forward, building on the best elements of previous series, *Discovery* would need to offer three things: 1. a complex, critical treatment of identity politics, 2. a critique of well-meaning imperialism that refuses to simplify or fetishize or Orientalize, and 3. a more nuanced and specific explication of the political economy of the Federation. While these were admittedly lofty demands, *Discovery* generally failed in two of the three areas. There is little critical treatment of identity politics (quite the opposite) and there is absolutely no exploration of the mythological communist political economy of the Federation.

¹ See Bryant William Sculos, “Rediscovering the Future: What We Need from *Star Trek: Discovery* (Part One)” in *Class, Race and Corporate Power*, Vol. 5: Iss. 3, Article 8 (2017). Available online at: <http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatpower/vol5/iss3/8/>.



First, on the question of identity politics, *Discovery* portrays a variety of species, genders, gender roles, and sexualities. The cast has a higher percentage of female actors than any previous iteration of *Star Trek*—and these excellent actresses were not secondary characters. Their performances throughout the first season (with several having to play what are technically two different characters due to the Mirror Universe plotline) were universally strong. The undoubtedly conscious decision on the part of the casting team and writers was certainly driven by a desire to have a more inclusive and equitable show and narrative. The *Discovery* team should be applauded for this rather simple effort, given how few shows, even to this day, couldn't be bothered to do even that (though, no word on whether the actors and actresses in *Discovery* were actually paid the same).

Beyond that, while the show certainly portrays strong, complex, engaging female (as well as at least two gay male) characters, the narrative of the show does nothing noteworthy with their female-led cast. This is a victory of liberal identity politics. We see female and gay characters playing the same kinds of roles within the storyline as straight, male characters typically have. It may be interpreted as a somewhat useful gesture to present diverse identities as basically similar, with no overt commentary on gender or sexuality differences, given how far our societies are away from even this standard. However, as a mere gesture, this lack of explicit engagement with questions of identity politics in the show (beyond the deeper philosophical question of what it means to be a “self,” which is well-explored) forces the critical juxtaposition—of a world without differences in identity leading to differences in power, status, or social function and our world that is anything but—into the background. I could imagine it would be quite easy for the casual liberal viewer to miss this juxtaposition entirely. A conservative viewer might actually be more likely to notice; they would probably find the presentation of women and gay men in crucially important roles to be offensive. Regardless, the critical differences between the world of *Discovery* and our world, with regard to gender and sexual bigotry and hierarchy, tends to fade into obscurity.

Second, there is some rather heavy-handed criticism of imperialism in season one. Given the politics of the moment, subtlety is overrated and perhaps dangerous. Through the presentation of

the Empire in the Mirror Universe, which is made to seem like a kind of racially-homogenous fascistic parallel to desired world of Trumpism—literally to the point that one of the main characters from the Mirror Universe expresses the goal of “making the empire great again”—we are offered what perhaps, prior to 2016, would seem like an unnecessary message to most people that race-based slavery, extermination of races, and even the consumption of sentient (humanoid) beings based on social hierarchies is wrong. This message is well-articulated in season one. Slavery, genocide, and cannibalism are no-no’s. Got it. At some point though, someone should probably alert President Trump and his supporters.

The rather comical system of promotion in the Mirror Universe (killing your superior) might seem absurd to most viewers with respect to the critical force of the parallel between the Mirror Universe Empire and the contemporary American Empire, especially as imagined by Trump and his backers—but I found it to be an effective science-fiction exaggeration of the cut-throat world of late capitalism. What wouldn’t you do for a promotion if you lived in the world that Trump and his ilk desire for us? What wouldn’t you do if you were raised in that world? What extents do you already go to to “succeed” within late capitalism? How many other lives (both human and non-human) have suffered or been ended because of our socially-individualized desires to acquire wealth and status?

This isn’t our fault though. It is a systemic imperative, the alternative to which *Discovery* leaves woefully underexplored, to the point where even a critical viewer could come to the conclusion that such drives are merely human nature. *Discovery* in this sense is not portraying human nature so much as it is reinforcing the ideological narratives of the culture industry within which it was produced and from which its viewers are conditioned.

Third, there is absolutely nothing of note about the political economy of the Federation in season one. My initial hope otherwise was a bit more of a pipedream than the others—but damn, I just really want to see a courageous set of writers use the *Star Trek* universe to offer a more detailed look at what a just, technologically-sophisticated future political economy could look like. *Discovery* not only doesn’t provide a detailed exploration of the socioeconomic backdrop for the show, it doesn’t touch on it at all. The Federation is also presented far more militaristically than it is in nearly all of the other series (perhaps with the exception of the final two or three seasons of *DS9* and select portions of *Voyager* and *Enterprise*).

There was however an unexpected bright spot in *Discovery* that was not only political prescient, but this critical commentary was also presented with a consistency that previous *Star Trek* series have lacked. Throughout season one of *Discovery* there is a clear ecological sensibility that is both sophisticated for the genre and crucially relevant to our contemporary moment. One of the major plot elements of the show is a pseudo-teleportation technology known as the “spore drive.” With the capture, and exploitive use, of an interstellar fungus known casually in the show simply as “mycelium,” the U.S.S. *Discovery* is able to travel basically to any point in the universe along an interdimensional network. The problem is, using the network in this way degrades and will eventually destroy the (living) network—we eventually learn the fungi and their network are both living and sentient.



The parallel to the ecological destruction wrought by the extractivist and polluting political economy of capitalism is not necessarily obvious—but it's there. The structural explanation the show offers for why this technology was pursued, short of broaching a critical treatment of capitalist political economics, was because of the intersection of science and war. Well-meaning, inquisitive scientists are sheep-dogged into developing a weapon of war and (unknowingly) in the process potentially annihilating an entire species and their co-constitutive ecosystem. Beyond the critique of war-driven ecological destruction, this thread weaved throughout season one is also presented without a lot of problematic anthropocentrism. While there are certainly characters that only care about the mycelia insofar as they can exploit them, there are also moments of genuine, non-instrumental or condescending interspecies compassion—even for a species that does not communicate or express its sentience in a way that most humans would recognize. Still though, with all of that said, the political-ideological alternative is left murky at best. More consistently though, *Discovery* offers little but a comfortable liberal critique of only the very worst excesses of capitalism represented by imperial fascism.

Now, perhaps more than ever, we need ambitious, righteous, aggressive, self-reflective, and inspiring visions of what the future can be. Humanity has always been a bit better at the dystopia than the utopia. We need complex, realistic and motivational science fiction (and social science). *Star Trek: Discovery*, through one season, isn't exactly a model worth emulating—and it doesn't even do dystopian very well (not that it explicitly tries to—besides somewhat with the Mirror Universe). *Discovery* is really only fundamentally dystopian insofar as it reflects the dystopia of an unthinkable present and future beyond shitty, commodified cultural products that make us more passive and uncreative with each entertaining second of viewing.²

So yes, I did mostly mindlessly enjoy *Discovery*—but, if I can be so cruel, I think Donald Trump could enjoy it too.³ All is not lost though. Given the emergence of the best of *Star Trek* from within late capitalism, it is still easier to imagine a creative, nuanced, critical, and inspiring *Star Trek* series than it is to imagine either the end of the world or the end of capitalism.

² For *Discovery*, the ecological sensibility discussed above being the major exception to the stupefying effects of enjoying this show—and the countless others like it.

³ And not just because the Klingons' and the Mirror Universe Empire's ideologies borrow, with varying degrees of obviousness, to the fetishization of cruelty dominant in the neofascism of Trump and his ruling Republican Party colleagues—though there is that too.