The Spectre of the Gun: Star Trek and the Cold War

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It is to be hoped that the premise, influence and sheer appeal of Gene Roddenberry’s Star Trek need little introduction. The franchise, chronicling the exploratory and diplomatic adventures of various starship crews, has enjoyed phenomenal success largely due to its optimistic, uplifting portrayal of the future—a welcome change from the dystopian spirit that marks most televisual science-fiction. This optimism has sustained the show’s popularity through its five main series (the original, The Next Generation, Deep Space Nine, Voyager and Enterprise) and twelve films, but has never been the only level on which it may be analyzed and enjoyed. Contemporary politics have also featured consistently in its plotlines and moral messages, the most prominent, at least in the original series (broadcast 1966–1969), being the global Cold War.

Star Trek has always been an aspirational franchise, shaped by an ethos of progressive humanism that it believes humanity as a whole will one day adopt. On the other hand, it is also inevitably a product of its time—a fact that is true of all its incarnations, but perhaps most evident in the original series. As Nicholas Sarantakes mentions, this is the Trek show that most clearly engages with the values, prejudices and anxieties that characterized the Cold War at its height.(Sarantakes, 2005, 77) The following will therefore focus almost exclusively on the original series, save a few highlighted exceptions.

Face of the Enemy

Perhaps the clearest Cold War parallels in the show are embodied by its various alien species. In particular, the principal antagonist powers, the Klingon Empire and the Romulan Star Empire, are established as analogues of the Soviet Union and communist China, respectively.

The connection between the Klingons and the Soviets was confirmed at the time of the show’s original run, with producer Gene Coon remarking in 1967 that, ‘We have always played [the Klingons] very much like the Russians’. (Sarantakes, 2005, 78) Indeed, the original conception of Klingon society, according to one of the actors who portrayed them, was of a culture oriented towards “the collective good” rather than “individuality”, in a thinly-veiled reference to the Soviet communist social model.(, n.d.) More fundamentally, however, the Klingons are characterized as the most dangerous recurrent menace to the security of the Federation, a description also applied to the Soviets for much of the Cold War. The Romulan-Chinese parallel, meanwhile, is less pronounced on screen, but as Aaron Angel points out, both powers fulfil the role of ‘the other enemy’—not the principal foe or existential threat represented by the Klingons/Soviets, but still ‘a force with which to be reckoned’. (Angel, n.d.)

These comparisons are given emotional resonance, however, only by the association of the United Federation of Planets (and therefore the show’s protagonists) with the USA. While it shares many of its characteristics with the United Nations,(O’Connor, 2012, 200) the picture we have of the
Federation is more American than international. Just as the UN headquarters are situated in New York, so does Earth (more specifically, in most cases, San Francisco) play host to the Federation’s President, its Council and its military arm (Starfleet), of which most main characters throughout the franchise are members.

By Any Other Name

Of course, Earth’s privileged status within the Federation is also motivated by more fundamental storytelling concerns; it is to be expected that American audiences will find it easier to relate to a threat to the Federation if it has its sights set on San Francisco in particular. Pragmatic cultural and budgetary considerations also doubtless played their part in the producers’ decision to present their diverse, multi-planetary civilization primarily as an extension of the United States. Still, it is equally clear that such an approach gave the show considerable scope for political commentary, and that this was intended by the creators from the beginning.(Sarantakes, 2005, 74-77)

One of the most frequent targets of such commentary was the Cold War, and the way in which the US was waging it. Rick Worland, for instance, argues that despite its science-fictional trappings, the show ‘neatly duplicated the configuration of international Cold War politics of the 1960s’. (Worland, 1988, 112) This interpretation has been echoed by a variety of scholars, including Mark P. Lagon and Daniel Bernardi. (O’Connor, 2012, 195) Far from taking the contemporary political situation for granted, however, the producers were keen to take advantage of their show’s futuristic setting to interrogate, even criticize US foreign policy. Many episodes do indeed ‘duplicate’ certain Cold War relationships and situations, but this duplication takes the form of deliberate and critical allegory, whereby the basic assumptions of Cold War politics are, for the most part, discredited.

Naturally, such subtexts should be seen as part of Star Trek’s broader progressive, liberal form of social commentary—the show famously ‘decried militarism, advocated racial equality [though it had little time for gender or sexual equality] and suggested that humans will have simply outgrown acquisitive capitalism in the future’. (O’Connor, 2015) Its critique of US foreign policy and Cold War politics was one pillar of this far grander vision—albeit one to which the producers attached considerable importance.

The Paradise Syndrome

It is of course possible to take such comparisons too far, and this may be reading too much into what is, after all, a science-fiction/space fantasy franchise. In a recent (and thankfully mild) controversy involving Star Trek politics, for instance, William Shatner himself went on record asserting that, ‘Star Trek wasn’t political […] to put a geocentric label on interstellar characters is silly’. Mike O’Connor offers a stern rejoinder to this idea, however, stressing that the contemporary political undertones of the show are impossible to ignore.(O’Connor, 2015)

Nonetheless, he also acknowledges that Roddenberry’s original intention was to make his show ‘thoughtful and philosophical, rather than explicitly political’. In particular, he and his fellow producers were keen to avoid any specific mention of how humanity had achieved this state of technological, social and moral utopia by the twenty-third century, and of ‘which socio-economic system ultimately worked out best’. (O’Connor, 2012, 189) In short, the Federation’s standing in for the USA did not mean that it needed to mirror the US political system. Indeed, the few details of
Federation society that are revealed on screen point to a culture in which such political differences have been transcended altogether, and in which the best features of both capitalism and communism have been combined in an almost dialectical way.

**False Profits**

One such detail is the lack of money or private enterprise in Federation society. This remains implicit for much of the show, but comes to the fore when the Enterprise crew encounter humans from their past (that is, the audience’s present). Various stories involving time travel to Earth’s past, such as the film *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*, or the later *Next Generation* episode ‘Time’s Arrow’, present humanity’s reliance on money as an obstacle: the Enterprise crew’s lack of ready cash leaves them powerless in this barbaric capitalistic society.

The idea is discussed more prominently in the *Next Generation* episode ‘The Neutral Zone’, a subplot of which sees a trio of cryogenically frozen humans from the early twenty-first century being discovered and revived on the Enterprise. One of their number, an overbearing, loud-mouthed financier, finds it particularly hard to adjust to a civilization in which money no longer exists. His disorientation is eased, however, by his conversation with Captain Picard, who urges him to move beyond such a blinkered worldview and ‘enrich [him]self’ with all the new challenges the future has to offer. This endorsement of one of communism’s signature features in an otherwise liberal, Americanized society is striking.

**Emissary**

Roddenberry’s Federation also bears some superficial resemblance to communism in its attitude towards religion. In most of its incarnations (aside from the later series *Deep Space Nine*, which deviated from the norm in almost every sense), the show is ‘aggressively secular’.(O’Connor, 2012, 190) When it features at all in the franchise, religion is usually revealed to be the result of either deception or naivety, and is certainly something that humankind has long since left behind. The parallels with the anti-religious Soviet form of communism in particular are apparent.

Despite these points of similarity, however, it is clear that the viewer is not meant to conclude that communism has triumphed on twenty-third century Earth. As noted above, the future of *Star Trek* was always intended to be one in which such petty political divisions had been overcome. Neither capitalism nor communism has conquered the planet; both have been superseded by something far better.

**Amok Time**

A more obvious sign of this spirit of compromise, however, was the introduction in *Star Trek*’s second season of Ensign Pavel Chekov, a new main character of Russian nationality who, the show made clear, came from the very same society as his American (and Scottish) colleagues. There is some uncertainty surrounding the origins of the character. The most widely circulated explanation is that Chekov was devised in response to an editorial in Pravda (the organ of the Soviet Communist Party) complaining about the lack of Soviet characters on the show. The idea that Pravda wrote such an editorial is generally believed to be apocryphal, but there is evidence to suggest that whether it is true or not, Roddenberry believed it at the time.(, 2005, Brioux, 2008, 43-44) Regardless, Chekov’s
presence in the main cast serves a similar purpose to that of the African-American Lieutenant Uhura and the Asian-American Ensign Sulu – namely, to illustrate the inclusiveness of Roddenberry’s twenty-third century world, and the extent to which he believed humanity would by then have conquered all the prejudices and inequalities that plague the present.

That Which Survives…

As O’Connor points out, Star Trek’s political message has grown less important to each new generation of fans, as the particular socio-political circumstances that gave rise to the show recede further into the distance.(O’Connor, 2012, 186) That is certainly true of this author, who began his foray into Trek fandom in the late 1990s with The Next Generation, and for whom the appeal of the franchise has always been in its imagination and its characters, rather than its political morals.

The fact that the show is a product of the politics of its time, however, is an integral part of its creative DNA. It is quite possible that only the 1960s, with their peculiar combination of steady liberalization and Cold War paranoia, could have given rise to a science-fiction series as defiantly optimistic as the original Star Trek. Each of its television and cinematic sequels have, in turn, traded on this optimism to great effect. In essence, then, the show can be viewed as an indirect response to the social and moral questions posed by the Cold War. Though the questions have not been asked since 1991, Star Trek’s answer has lost none of its appeal.

References


