

or, Where no White Northern European Superman has Gone Before

By Alex Holland

The Star Trek franchise tells us more about American society and progressive values than any other sci-fi series. It must return

This year's release of the 11th film in the Star Trek franchise turned out to be a commercial and critical success. As an avid Trek fan I enjoyed it immensely, and was amused by the more hardcore Trekkies whose denunciation of it's deviation from the more traditional format was brilliantly lampooned in [The Onion](#) . Having said that there was something missing from this film compared to some of the others and that was the more meaningful political undertones that the rest of the series contained.

This was a pity given how producer-director JJ Abrams explained that why he got into the project, "had less to do with Star Trek and space and more to do with the optimism and humanity and of finding your purpose through unity." Those unfamiliar with the TV series and films may feel that this is overblown guff for a series that is really an escapist fantasy about phasers and other boys toys.

Warp Speed and transporters are inescapable elements of the franchise. However these superficial flourishes are incidental to the deeper political and cultural themes Star Trek reflects and hope to promote. These range from communist to reactionary, multicultural to orientalist and have been some of the richest ever to feature in the popular mass media. Indeed, esteemed critic Ziauddin Sardar wrote in the New Statesman 10 years ago that Star Trek represented "a great barometer of American consciousness."

Abrams' new film focuses on the origins of characters from the original series of Star Trek, such as Captain Kirk played by William Shatner. This 1960s show is often held up as an example of politically idealistic propaganda for the times. A sort of West Wing in space if you will.

In many senses the original series showed an optimistic future. The multi-racial crew of the Starship Enterprise are part of a Federation of planets made up of numerous different alien species. These races willingly enter into a system of equitable solidarity with each other, like an intergalactic version of Immanuel Kant's model for perpetual peace. The Enterprise is part of Starfleet whose primary mission is peaceful exploration, and that of military defence as a last resort.

At a time when the Cold War was raging and US racial segregation was just being made illegal the Enterprise's bridge officers showed a rainbow future. A Russian Ensign Chekov, Asian Helmsman Sulu and black Communications Officer Uhura are often referred to when promoting the show's aspiration for a racially harmonious future.

Famously, Whoopi Goldberg says as a child she was inspired to become an actress when she watched Star Trek and saw a black woman on TV who wasn't a maid. More famous still is how Star Trek featured one of the first on-screen interracial kisses in US history between Lieutenant Uhura and Captain Kirk.

In many ways these progressive qualities were radical but should not be overstated and taken out of the context of their time. Uhura may not be a domestic servant but her bridge duties are little better than those of a glorified secretary to Captain Kirk.

Both her and Sulu are US-born leaving Chekov apparently the only non-Westerner on the crew. Even the half-alien Spock's mother is an American. Chekov though undeniably brave and competent is the butt of many jokes and portrayed as a fool whose claims that everything has been authored by Russians need to be patiently corrected by Kirk and the other wiser American crew.

This could all be said to be fair-play for a programme that was already pushing the boundaries of the time. Where the original series of Star Trek got really reactionary is with its generally Orientalist view of the universe and flag-waving for US Cold War interventionism. The alien civilizations Kirk's crew encountered were irrational, passionate and consumed in visually attractive, yet bizarre, rituals and traditions. Their males were physically potent but not often smart, and quick to turn to violence.

Their females were exotic, erotic sex objects whom Captain Kirk invariably seduced. In a sense Kirk captures these women with his superman charisma. The Starship Enterprise is in effect the force of technologically superior colonial rationalism that comes to dominate the native "other",

as Orientalist as [Edward Said](#) ever could have decreed.

This may well not have been conscious on the part of the show's producers. More likely it was just a passive assimilation of tropes and stereotypes from generations of Americans caricaturing foreigners. Where there does seem to have been a more deliberate effort was to reflect the idea of US Cold War interventionism as a benevolent force.

The Klingons, though containing many elements of WWII Japanese martial valour, are essentially a not too subtle metaphor for the Soviet Union. They and the Federation are engaged in a game of brinkmanship and influence across the galaxy, where the righteous party is always the Federation.

In the episode "A Private Little War" Kirk makes this direct comparison himself. The Captain says, "Do you remember the 20th century brush wars on the Asian continent? Two giant powers involved like the Klingons and ourselves, neither side felt that they could pull out... the only solution is what happened back then... a balance of power".

This virtually direct endorsement of US intervention in to South East Asia makes the show much less idealistic than it superficially seems. Kirk even goes on to advocate arming the pro-Federation faction to exactly equal the Klingon one even if it results in a prolonged conflict with greater death on both sides.

In a similar theme Kirk frequently quotes the highest law in the Federation, the Prime Directive of non-intervention, just before he breaks it. Time after time he radically interferes in planets' autonomous developments because they don't match his, or the show's, US Liberal capitalist values.

Probably the best example is an episode called "The Apple" where the Enterprise discovers a society where the immortal residents never suffer and everyone is happy. They gain these benefits from a giant machine called Vaal in return for feeding it with fruit. Vaal makes sure the society is entirely stable with no births or deaths, needs or wants.

Dr McCoy argues the machine should be destroyed as by providing for the people it is robbing them of the opportunity to enrich themselves through work. Dr Spock argues against by saying that they have a right to choose as system that differs from Earth, especially one as benevolent as theirs is.

Kirk eventually has the Enterprise destroy the machine because it threatens the ship's security but says he would have done it anyway. Kirk explains, "They should have the opportunity of choice, we owe it to them to interfere."

This pro-US interventionist and confrontational stance did not survive later in to the franchise. The feature films signaled a shift in a less reactionary direction. In *Star Trek IV* the Enterprise goes back in time and saves the whales and in *Star Trek V* Kirk kills God.

Around the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* was released. It centered around the collapse of the Klingon Empire. In the film, Captain Kirk, the self-confessed inter-galactic Cold Warrior, rejects the opportunity of delivering a humiliating blow to his now defeated enemy. Instead he accepts the need to treat the Klingons with respect and trust to ensure long-term peace. I think it is safe to assume the US government of the time were not fans of the franchise.

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These peace negotiations result in an alliance that lasts into the *Star Trek: Next Generation*. In the updated TV series there is a Klingon serving as a bridge officer on the new Starship Enterprise, and he isn't even American. This version was lead by Captain Jean Luc Picard, played by classically trained actor Patrick Stewart.

Following on from the *Next Generation* TV show came the 8th Feature film, *First Contact*, and with it the most radically utopian theme so far in Star Trek. As a result of time travel a character from the 21st Century asks Captain Picard how much his ship costs. Picard answers: "The economics of the future are somewhat different. You see money doesn't exist in the 24th Century... the acquisition of wealth is no longer the driving force in our lives. We work to better ourselves and the rest of humanity."

This anti-capitalist, even communist, theme grew much stronger in the next television series *Star Trek: Deep Space 9* which regularly featured an alien species called the Ferengi. Ferengi society was entirely geared towards profit and embracing the philosophy that "greed is good". These aliens are continuously mocked by the post-capitalist Federation citizens as virtual savages.

In *Deep Space 9* another time-travel plot reveals how a key element in the development of Earth's post-capitalist utopia was the result of a major economic recession in the early 21st century. This recession leads to an uprising of the unemployed whose brutal repression by the state leads to a broader social revolution. Considering these episodes came out in the mid-90s during the heyday of free market triumphalism is especially significant of how deep this anti-capitalist strain had become in the show.

The most politically relevant aspect of *Star Trek* for today came with the latest and last of the TV series, *Enterprise* and the War on Terror. Scott Bakula starred as Captain Jonathan Archer leading the first Earth space vessel, this time set a generation before Kirk's adventures.

*Enterprise's* first two series went about establishing the characters and relationships and only really took off politically in response to the 9/11. In the third series Earth suffers an unprecedented attack. A suicidal alien pilots a destructive probe that destroys much of Florida and part of Venezuela, killing seven million people in a single blow.

Starfleet discover the attack came from a coalition of closely-related species called the Xindi, who live in a hostile and unstable area of space, the Expanse. Captain Archer also finds out the Xindi are building a massively more powerful version of the probe-weapon that will destroy the whole of Earth.

Captain Archer leads his crew into Xindi territory and has several violent confrontations with elements of their coalition. Over the course of the series however he discovers that the Xindi are only trying to destroy Earth because of the influence of extremist transdimensional beings called "the Sphere-Builders" who are venerated by some Xindi as religiously inspired. These beings have convinced the Xindi that Earth is responsible for the instability in their area of space and that humans are bent on the Xindi's annihilation when in fact it is these transdimensional beings who are the source of the Xindi's problems.

For those who haven't already seen the parallels replace the words "probe" with "WMD", "Xindi" with "Arab", "Expanse" with "Middle East" and "Sphere-builders" with "Islamic extremists" and

the story should become familiar to contemporary Earth. What is not familiar is the conclusion. Archer realises wholesale confrontation is counterproductive and forms an alliance of equals with the moderate Xindi against the extremist religious forces. This results in saving both Earth and Xindi space.

The next series of *Enterprise* took the real-life parallels a step further. The Chancellor of Earth's ally, the planet Vulcan, begins a pre-emptive invasion of the rival Andorians. The pretext for the Chancellor's aggression is that the Andorians are developing planet-destroying probes similar to those made by the Xindi. Vulcan's invasion is necessary to dismantle this weapons programme. The same nefarious Chancellor has neutralised domestic political opponents to his aggression by blaming them for a terrorist attack on a prominent building in the Vulcan capital that he and his allies actually perpetrated themselves.

This 4th series of *Enterprise* aired in 2004 and was the most damning attack on the Bush regime's invasion of Iraq to appear in mass-media entertainment at that time. Even the sympathetic portrayal of the Iraqi resistance in superb Sci-Fi series *Battle Star Galactica* was not as direct an assault on the Neocon view of the world. Criminally, this 4th series of *Star Trek* was the last, cancelled due to insufficient viewing figures.

I dearly hope that, given the success of the new *Star Trek* film, another TV series will be considered. As well as being entertaining viewing in terms of action-adventure and escapist fun it should be clear that the *Star Trek* franchise has represented a lot more. Both politically reflective of the times it has been produced in but also a form of agit-prop art for a different, better future there's still a lot of our space left for *Star Trek* to boldly explore.

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