

Star Trek and Realism

Written by Aaron Haviland

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AARON HAVILAND, NOV 14 2014

Star Trek is no stranger when it comes to discussions of international relations. For example, Amit Gupta (2013) wrote an article for E-International Relations discussing the various phases of the science fiction franchise and how they reflected contemporary themes in popular and academic discourse. Aaron David Miller (2014) wrote on his blog that President Obama's foreign policy can be explained by *Star Trek*'s "Prime Directive" of non-interference. Numerous examples abound where *Star Trek* is used as a launching point for a discussions of realism, liberal internationalism, and other aspects of international relations. However, most of these discussions, even when they concern realism and non-interventionism, gloss over the fact that the worldview of *Star Trek* is inherently liberal and Wilsonian. In this Wilsonian worldview, *Star Trek* preaches that people from all cultures, civilizations, and planets can come to agree on a shared set of human rights values and unite under a democratic government. The purpose of this article is to undertake a realist critique of *Star Trek* and its messages about international relations and culture. This critique is placed in the context of the debate between Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama, as well as the more recent Cycles of History versus Idea of Progress debate discussed by Robert W. Merry.

The Government of the Federation

The original 1960s series *Star Trek* focused on a mostly human crew exploring the galaxy in the Starship *Enterprise*. The ship and crew represented the United Federation of Planets, an alliance of planets and species formed in the year 2161 by Earth and its allies after a war with the Romulan Empire. The Federation (as it is usually referred to in short-hand) is portrayed as benevolent, peaceful, and democratic. In subsequent spin-off series and films, which portray different crews, ships, and space stations set in different time periods, the Federation remains the central governing institution. In some episodes, it is simply a side note used when the crew is introducing themselves to new species, but in others, Federation politics and its relations with other interstellar powers are the driving force behind many storylines.

By the middle of the 24th century, the Federation encompasses over 150 members, with the Federation Council and President located on Earth. The Federation is deliberately modeled by the *Star Trek* writers as an idealized version of the United Nations in a number of ways: 1) like the United Nations, the Federation was formed in the aftermath of a major war by the victorious powers; 2) the Federation has approximately the same number of members as the United Nations; and 3) the Federation flag is a field of stars (instead of a planet) surrounded by two olive branches. The analogy, however, falls apart in a number of ways. The Federation serves as a governing body that conducts foreign policy with outside powers. There is virtually no chance that war will break out among the member planets, but war has certainly occurred between the Federation and non-Federation empires. The United Nations, in contrast, is a forum where international relations are conducted among its members.

The comparison also fails with the criterion for Federation membership. In *Star Trek*, a candidate for Federation membership has to possess faster-than-light propulsion ("warp drive") and a single planetary government. Furthermore, all member planets have to maintain a minimum standard of human rights. In the *Deep Space Nine* episode "Accession" (1996), the candidacy of the planet Bajor in the Federation is threatened by the reintroduction of a caste system. Finally, as Captain Kirk argued in *The Original Series* episode "Errand of Mercy" (1967), the Federation is a democratic body. Although it is never explicitly stated on screen, it is a fair assumption that all member planets are therefore required to maintain a democratic, constitutional government. The United Nations, on

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the other hand, counts among its members the worst human rights abusers. It is difficult to imagine a *Star Trek* episode featuring a Federation member resembling North Korea.

To be fair, the comparisons of the Federation to the United Nations did not begin until *The Next Generation* and later series in the 1980s and 90s. Originally, during the 60s broadcast of *The Original Series*, the Federation was modeled on the contemporary United States, a democratic body engaged in a Cold War with several rival powers [1]. Federation members appear to possess a shared set of values regarding individual freedom and self-determination, more unified than the shared values of all United Nations members. With this in mind, it is probably easiest to drop the comparison to the United Nations and instead treat the Federation as a more unified alliance, similar to the European Union or pre-Civil War United States.

However, even these comparisons have their flaws. Firstly, the issue of secession is never discussed on screen, but some of the non-canon *Star Trek* novels establish that Federation members do have the right to secede [2]. International law prohibits unilateral secession because the constant threat of it would paralyze the central government. Difficult decisions, such as whether or not to go to war, would have to be reached unanimously. With over 150 members of the Federation, it is unrealistic that all planets would agree with all wars at all times, but that is the inference that *Star Trek* is making.

Another area of concern is the surrender of sovereignty. In *The Next Generation* episode “The Drumhead” (1991), Captain Picard references the “Seventh Guarantee” as a fundamental right for all Federation citizens that protects against self-incrimination, comparable to the Fifth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. This episode establishes that there is a Federation Constitution that guarantees rights for all citizens and that these rights are actually enforced, more like the U.S. Constitution than the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In order to be a member of the Federation, planets therefore have to surrender a certain amount of legal sovereignty so that the Federation can enforce these rights. One need only look at the ongoing debate over the relationship between U.S. Constitutional Law and International Law to see how unlikely such a scenario would be. *Star Trek* brushes over this debate and assumes that the legal system of the future will easily resemble the Western legal tradition.

The Importance of Culture

The assumption that Western values will inevitably be accepted as universal values points to another area of concern, that of culture. In his 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article and follow-up 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel Huntington warned against this assumption: “Western belief in the universality of Western culture suffers from three problems: it is false; it is immoral; and it is dangerous.” *Star Trek* warns against interfering in the development and internal affairs of other cultures. Starfleet officers are bound by the Prime Directive to go so far as to give their lives in order to prevent such interference. However, *Star Trek* also assumes that all planets will eventually develop to the point where they adopt Federation values and join the Federation on their own accord.

The counterargument is that the values which united the Federation are not Western in nature, but rather a shared creed of universal, democratic values. Cultural diversity still exists, on the micro-scale, but the shared creed is enough to overcome these differences and unite a multicultural state. Samuel Huntington addressed this same issue of multiculturalism in his last book *Who Are We? The Challenges of American Identity* (2004). Huntington argued that, in the long term, a creed is not enough to unite a state. There needs to be a core culture that defines the state’s values on a deeper level. The American Creed would not be enough to hold the United States together were it not for the existence of a core culture based on Anglo-Saxon Protestant values. History is also replete with examples of multinational states, from the Habsburg Empire to the Soviet Union to Yugoslavia, that have inevitably crumbled under the forces of nationalism.

In *Who Are We?*, as well as a 2004 article in *The National Interest* titled “Dead Souls: The Denationalization of the American Elite,” Huntington warned against cosmopolitan forces that wanted to strip the United States of its cultural core and transform it into a multicultural state. Huntington’s fear was that by losing its cultural core to the forces of dual citizenship, political correctness, and multiculturalism, the United States would lose the cultural elements that had made it a great country in the first place. In addition to the cosmopolitan elite, Huntington also warned against the

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growth of an imperialist elite that wanted to strip other countries of their own unique cultures and reshape the world in the American image.

The Federation seems to mostly align with the cosmopolitan worldview. However, throughout *Star Trek*, there have been occasional accusations that the Federation is imperialist and wants to assimilate other cultures. In *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (1991), the Klingons are wary that their empire will crumble and that their way of life will become annihilated once they are forced to fall under Federation influence. Indeed, despite assurances to the contrary by Captain Kirk's crew, it is difficult to see how a warrior culture could continue to thrive as a member of the peaceful Federation. This cultural assimilation is also reminiscent of Benjamin Barber's *Jihad Versus McWorld* (1995) thesis, where the unfettered expansion of capitalism consumes distinctive local cultures and replaces them with bland, corporate products.

Huntington's alternative to cosmopolitanism and imperialism is nationalism, which involves a re-affirmation of America's Western identity, coupled with a decision to stop forcing Western values onto other civilizations. *Star Trek* would like to present the Federation itself as a model of this *modus vivendi* among civilizations, but it operates too much like a state or a European Union-type alliance to be a realistic example. The European Union has enough difficulty establishing supranational unity among its members, all of which belong to the same Western Civilization. *Star Trek* writers are also not kind to attempts at reaffirming cultural autonomy. In the last season of *Star Trek: Enterprise* (2005), which lays the groundwork for the foundation of the Federation, there are individuals and groups who are concerned about human culture becoming subsumed after prolonged contact with Aliens. However, these are all portrayed as either racists or terrorist groups.

The Idea of Progress

The apparent dismissal of culture as a driving force in politics harkens back to the debate between Francis Fukuyama's *End of History* (1992) thesis and Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* that began in the 1990s and is still discussed today. Fukuyama posited that the conclusion of the Cold War signaled the end of debate over how mankind should govern itself. With the collapse of the communist model, all governments would inevitably move towards liberal democracy. The aforementioned Samuel Huntington, however, argued that culture and religion would play a greater role in international relations, now that the ideological debate of the Cold War had ended. As the previous discussion of culture suggests, *Star Trek* clearly aligns more closely with Fukuyama than Huntington. Indeed, the term "End of History" is even mentioned in a speech by Captain Kirk at the end of *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (1991), a Federation-Klingon retelling of the end of the U.S.-Soviet Cold War.

The Fukuyama-Huntington debate was expanded upon by Robert W. Merry, political editor of *The National Interest*, in his book *Sands of Empire* (2005). Merry places the discussion in the greater context of a debate between the "Idea of Progress" and "Cycles of History." The Idea of Progress, which aligns with Fukuyama's thesis and of which Merry is critical, posits that humanity as a whole is moving toward a unified civilization of universal principles. Cycles of History, on the other hand, was an idea developed by the German historian Oswald Spengler. Spengler put forward that history can only be divided into separate civilizations, such as Western, Orthodox, and Sinic, that rise and fall in cyclical patterns. It is impossible to conceive of a universal human civilization, as the cultural underpinnings that define each civilization are simply too different.

In support of the Idea of Progress, *Star Trek* has always treated humanity as a single civilization that is gradually molding the species around it into a single universal civilization. For example, the closing lines on the screen in *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979) are: "The Human Adventure is Just Beginning..." In the first episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987), Captain Picard represents Human civilization in a trial convened by the omnipotent being Q, where he argues that Humanity has made rapid progress over the past several centuries. When the Federation is later attacked by the Borg Collective (*Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1990)) and Captain Picard talks about how "our civilization" is based on freedom and self-determination, he is referring to the Federation and all member planets. This suggests that, through the Federation, all sentient beings are evolving towards a universal civilization based on shared cultural values and Wilsonian ideals.

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Injecting Realism into *Star Trek*

Demonstrating a preference towards Wilsonian ideals is, by itself, not a problem. However, *Star Trek* writers would present a more nuanced discussion of international relations if they injected more political realism into their stories. One could envision a scenario where a planet requests admittance to the Federation, but the planet's civilization (or, better yet, one of its several major civilizations) has a long-standing practice that is contrary to mainstream Federation values, such as female genital mutilation or euthanasia. Is the planet admitted in the hopes that it will "evolve" towards more enlightened cultural practices like the rest of the Federation? Another avenue ripe for story exploration is the issue of secession. How does the Federation survive under the threat of large-scale secession? On the other hand, harkening to the issue of constitutional versus international law, what if the Federation moves in a direction that is contrary to human laws? Does Earth leave the Federation?

Star Trek has a legion of loyal followers, including this author. However, in order to remain relevant and meaningful, it needs to move beyond Wilsonian tropes and ask more difficult questions about international relations.

Footnotes

[1] In *The Original Series*, the primary rival of the Federation was the Klingon Empire, which was modeled on the Soviet Union in that it was expansionist, undemocratic, and frequently competed with the Federation in a tense rivalry for territory, allies, and the development of planets. Similarly, the Romulan Empire was written to resemble China, a mysterious and largely unknown culture that occasionally allied with the Klingons in their rivalry of the Federation.

[2] All episodes and movies of *Star Trek*, with the exception of the two most recent films *Star Trek* (2009) and *Star Trek Into Darkness* (2013), are set in the same fictional universe and are considered "canon." When creating new episodes or films, writers were supposed to adhere to previously established canon and avoid contradictions. Novels, video games, and other media are considered to be non-canon, so writers of episodes and movies were not bound to adhere to storylines in those books. As a result, there have been many *Star Trek* novels that were later contradicted by subsequent episodes and films. However, there has not been a *Star Trek* television show on air since 2005, and the two most recent films were set in an alternate timeline caused by time travel. Without the looming threat of contradiction by an ongoing television series, many recent *Star Trek* books have been establishing a semi-official continuation of the canon stories set after the series.

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