

# *Star Trek*, global capitalism and immaterial labour

Dan Hassler-Forest

As one of the most expansive storyworlds in *sf*, *Star Trek* appears to offer an imaginary representation of a post-capitalist utopia. But in the context of global capitalism the franchise's superficial post-capitalism translates all too easily into a neoliberal fantasy of post-industrial labour and hierarchical social relations. Drawing on Hardt and Negri's theoretical work on empire and globalisation, this essay approaches *Star Trek: The Next Generation* as an expression of the contradictory cultural logic of global capitalism.

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'To boldly go where no man has gone before'. Few phrases sum up more blatantly the triumphalist mind-set of 1960s American capitalism. Simultaneously appropriating and rewriting five centuries of colonialism, the *Star Trek* imaginary (US 1966–) is structured by a teleological view of history in which human development is synonymous with modernisation and technological advancement, resulting in a post-capitalist technological utopia. In *Star Trek*'s 'visionary' future, humanity has essentially progressed beyond its own dialectical nature: class struggle, warfare, poverty, famine, sexism, racism and all other aspects of human history's struggles with itself have been eradicated. The United Federation of Planets' flagship *Enterprise* with its multi-ethnic (and indeed multi-species) crew therefore represented for many a meaningful ideal of human progress, or what Raymond Williams famously described as utopian *sf*'s 'civilizing transformation, beyond the terms of a restless, struggling society of classes' (201). Drawing on the genre's long tradition of progressive teleological liberalism (from Jules Verne to Isaac Asimov) on the one hand, and on the 1960s' counter-cultural energies on the other, the franchise became for many a touchstone of both the *sf* genre's penchant for liberal-humanist idealism – in Williams' terms, a 'willed transformation' of human society – alongside its dedication to speculative science and technology, or what Williams calls *sf*'s 'technological transformation' (199).

But even as the *Enterprise* and her crew became enduring cultural icons of America's Cold War-era utopianism, it also seemed to anticipate the emergence

of a new paradigm: the dawn of a 'Pax Americana' that ushered in the age of global capitalism. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri famously described the political organisation of this age as one of empire, using terms that resonate strongly with *Star Trek's* imagined future of immaterial labour and biopower. Empire is, like itself, 'simultaneously an ideological fiction and a way of experiencing the world' (Csicsery-Ronay 232). Like Hardt and Negri's definition of empire, *Star Trek* is both a way of imagining a collaborative alternative to capitalism and a tool for naturalising the tools and methods of control that have emerged in the post-Fordist era. As tempting as it may be to celebrate the franchise's liberal humanism, it all too often brings with it not only the baggage of imperialist and colonialist Western history, but also an emergent structure of feeling that brings together some of global capitalism's most striking ideological contradictions.

At the same time, *Star Trek* has been the most elaborate and complex transmedia world-building franchise in the genre's history. The list of official (or 'canonical') live-action *Star Trek* primary texts for television and film is overwhelming: three seasons of *Star Trek: The Original Series* (US 1966–9, 79 episodes); seven seasons each of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (US 1987–94, 178 episodes), *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (US 1993–9, 176 episodes) and *Star Trek: Voyager* (US 1995–2001, 172 episodes); four seasons of *Star Trek: Enterprise* (US 2001–5, 98 episodes); and 13 feature films (1979–2016); and a fifth live-action TV series *Star Trek: Discovery* to be broadcast in 2017. In addition to this already voluminous output, the official franchise has included an animated series (US 1973–4, 22 episodes), dozens of videogames and many hundreds of novels, while at the same time inspiring legions of fans to produce several decades' worth of fan fiction, fan art, role-playing games, mashups, cross-overs, cosplay performances and other creative appropriations. *Star Trek* is therefore one of those unusually expansive imaginary worlds that, like *Star Wars* (US 1977–) or Tolkien's Middle-earth, has become so vast that it is truly unlikely that even the most devoted fan can have experienced the resulting storyworld in its entirety (Wolf 134–5).

Since this expansive imaginary empire has undergone so many changes over its fifty-year history, it makes little sense to try to define *Star Trek's* ideological values or its politics in precise terms on the basis of textual analysis. Not only are there obviously substantial differences between series from different historical eras, but there also isn't as much internal coherence or consistency as many have assumed even within a single *Star Trek* series. Due to the largely episodic nature of nearly all of American television drama in the years these seasons were broadcast, the abundant variations

and ‘retcons’<sup>1</sup> make it difficult to generalise about the storyworld’s politics based on the textual analysis of any given selection of episodes. As Roberta Pearson and Máire Messenger Davies point out in their recent *Star Trek and American Television*, the ideological criticism of a television programme faces the obstacle of having to ‘account for the tens or even hundreds of episodes that constitute a series’ (184). Therefore, in order to discuss the politics of *Star Trek* and its ambivalent relationship to capitalism in any meaningful way, one must instead extrapolate the structure of feeling that underlies its world-building, and the basic contradictions that constitute what can only be understood as the storyworld’s fully dialectical structure.

In order to foreground how the development of *Star Trek*’s storyworld can be read as a way to make sense of the cultural and material emergence of global capitalism in the late-twentieth century, I will focus in this essay on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.<sup>2</sup> This series was produced between 1987 and 1994, the very years in which our political economy made its historic transition towards truly global capitalism. The popular show revived the ailing franchise and transformed the original series’ loosely structured storyworld into a more systematically organised world-building enterprise (no pun intended), and became the architectonic paradigm for future entries in the franchise (even if the *TOS* crew remains more famous). I will argue that *TNG*’s dialectical structure of feeling in the post-Cold War period is based upon a fundamental tension between anti-capitalism on the one hand and global capitalism’s capacity to incorporate and appropriate its affective energies on the other. Drawing firstly on the narrative and formal logic that has informed the franchise from its beginning, and secondly on specific examples from *TNG* episodes, the first part of this essay will examine some of the processes of deterritorialisation at work within the series. My analysis builds upon Hardt and Negri’s discussion of the difference between the imperialism of industrial capitalism and the emergent cultural logic of empire and immaterial labour. Within this context, *Star Trek* occupies such a prominent place not only because its storyworld developed in tandem with the transformation from industrial to post-industrial capitalism, but also because it provided a pleasurable fantasy that helped negotiate and make sense of these changes.

1. ‘Retcon’ stands for ‘retroactive continuity’, or changes to earlier story events that are made retroactively in order to make them fit in with the storyworld as it has later developed.

2. For a more elaborate discussion of the relationship between fantastic storyworlds and global capitalism, see Hassler-Forest.

### 'To boldly go': *Star Trek's* ambivalent imperialism

Morgan Gendel (*TNG* writer): You can't call *Star Trek* capitalist. You can call the business model of *Star Trek* capitalist, but you can't call the show itself capitalist. And yet, I think it's very American in that it embodies the hope in the individuality of every person: every person can contribute to this thing in good spirit and work together and make a difference. It's almost like the pioneer spirit of America, which I think Gene Roddenberry originally meant as 'Wagon Train in Space'. So I think it's got a lot of that pioneer spirit, very American. 'To boldly go'. (*Beyond*)

The one concept that defines *Star Trek* in all its incarnations is the fantasy of peaceful and benevolent exploration. The iconic closing words from *TOS's* opening credits voice-over have survived intact over the years: 'to seek out new life and new civilizations; to boldly go where no [one] has gone before'.<sup>3</sup> The world's most famous split infinitive was used not only in *TOS* and its cinematic spin-offs, but also in the opening of every *TNG* episode, and was more recently featured to great effect at the end of the 2009 cinematic reboot. The imperialist spirit these words express is fundamental to *Star Trek's* storyworld. And no matter how many other aspects have been adapted and transformed over the course of half a century, the franchise's specific structure of feeling remains firmly anchored in this colonialist imperative, as well as the 'racist Imaginary' it articulates (Golumbia 91).

In its first incarnation, the series' narrative formula clearly reflected its 1960s context of the Cold War and America's 'Golden Age of Capitalism' (Harman 161–90). *TOS* offered a direct and obvious narrative expression of the United States' rapidly growing military and economic power after the Second World War, and its futurist fantasy of intergalactic exploration provocatively represents 'the end point of American-dominated globalization' (Booker 199). Pitched to the networks as an episodic frontier adventure series set in outer space, *TOS* offered an archetypically American fantasy of non-violent imperialism grounded in discourses of prosperity and collaboration rather than military conquest. Some aspects therefore already seem to anticipate the development of global capitalism, especially as it relates to Hardt and Negri's emphasis on the United States' governing role as a benevolent peacekeeping force: 'Empire is formed not on the basis of force itself but on the basis of the capacity to present force as being in the service of right and peace' (*Empire* 15).

3. The only significant alteration to the phrase occurred when *TNG* first appeared in 1987, in which the words 'no man' were replaced by the gender-neutral 'no one'.

For while the writers and producers clearly drew heavily on naval colonialist fiction of the Victorian era, like the adventures of Horatio Hornblower (Rabitsch 28), the Federation's considerable military power is supposedly only meant to defend, not conquer. Imaginary intergalactic empires in *TOS* compete for allies and resources in ways that mirror the precarious post-war balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union, with the Klingons standing in most obviously for the Russians' competing empire. Compared to the later *Star Trek* series, *TOS* is also more explicitly militaristic – especially during its first year. In the episode 'Errand of Mercy' (23 Mar 1967), for instance, Captain Kirk (William Shatner) famously proclaims, 'I'm a soldier, not a diplomat', while the near-constant combat situations the crew finds itself in do indeed tend to come across as 'an inadvertent endorsement of militarism' (Booker 200). The flagship's attention-grabbing multi-ethnic crew therefore symbolises nothing so much as American capitalism's ability to absorb and contain all forms of difference and opposition within a hegemonic structure of universal juridical rule backed up by military force.



'Errand of Mercy', *Star Trek: The Original Series* – Season 1. Paramount Home Entertainment, 2009.

While *TOS* resonates strongly (if perhaps inevitably) with the capitalist order of its own historical era, it established several crucial narrative coordinates that incorporate and express capitalism's later post-Fordist development, something that would become far more pronounced in *TNG*. The franchise's 'prophetic' futurism gave dramatic form to the historical processes of globalisation that sped up rapidly in the years following the franchise's first appearance. In this sense, *TNG*'s more explicit galactic peacekeeping force effectively dramatises a process of deterritorialisation, as the striated terrain of an older world is smoothed over by modernisation on the basis of rationalism, technological innovation and liberalism. In *Star Trek*'s storyworld, a radical form of deterritorialisation has already taken place on Earth, yielding a utopia so boringly bereft of conflict that writers of the various series have proved unable to muster up any interest in it whatsoever.<sup>4</sup> Gene Roddenberry's famous vision of a flawless human future effectively eradicates all forms of cultural difference, absorbing the entire planet in its ideal of complete modernisation. Internal conflict is thereby displaced onto an imaginary exterior space that helpfully stands in for the many forms of conflict that result from imperialist practices.

As intergalactic explorers, the crew members of the starship *Enterprise* thus perform imperialism's age-old ideological work by mobilising the fantasy of peaceful and benevolent exploration guided by reason and civilisation. While *TOS*'s negotiated militarism corresponds roughly with its era's triumphalist mode of America's developing military-industrial complex, *TNG*'s structuring fantasy articulates the transition towards empire in the years directly following the Cold War's end. And even though the political and cultural differences between humans and aliens often operate as allegories for real-world cultural and ethnic stereotypes, the show's narrative foundation in its most literal sense expresses neoliberalism's world without alternatives. In *Star Trek*'s storyworld, it is in fact a precondition for entry into the Federation that worlds have reached an equivalent point of political unification, and are able to speak not as Spinoza's diverse multitude but as a unified Hobbesian 'people'.<sup>5</sup> One of the main contradictions of *Star Trek*'s storyworld is therefore the way its unifying approach to any given planetary culture co-exists somewhat awkwardly with the overwhelming diversity of interplanetary species.

4. *Enterprise* showrunner Brannon Braga's original idea to have the first season of the prequel series take place on Earth was rejected by the network for not being sufficiently recognisable as *Star Trek*.

5. 'The *People* is somewhat that is *one*, having *one will*, and to whom one action may be attributed' (Hobbes qtd in Virno 22).

The franchise's superficial respect for ethnic and cultural diversity thus boils down in political terms to an assumed teleological endpoint of history for each society, in which the total globalisation of highly diverse humanoid societies is made equivalent with empire's discourses of technological and social progress. This effectively transforms imperialist capitalism's inherent racism into what Étienne Balibar has described as 'differentialist racism', with culture now filling the role formerly played by biology (17–28). In other words: what appears superficially as a post-racial, post-capitalist worldview amounts in fact to a displacement of racism from ethnicity onto forms of cultural difference. This is evident in many *TNG* episodes, especially those that take place on planets that have not yet reached the point of 'warp capability'. Such societies are patronisingly presented as less developed than enlightened future humanity, and are therefore subject to Starfleet's crucial Prime Directive: alien societies may not be interfered with in any way until they have independently reached this point of political and technological 'maturity'. And while the many episodes that deal with this liberalist principle show that the Prime Directive is in practice broken with downright comical frequency, it remains a primary expression of a political position that camouflages *TNG*'s lingering colonialism.

This is all the more interesting for the way in which life on board the *Enterprise* is rigidly structured by hierarchical roles. Within the *Enterprise*'s regular crew, these roles are not merely superficial titles that happen to identify individuals within a particular system of power. In every incarnation of *Star Trek*, the narratives demonstrate over and over that these ranks are the natural extensions of individual talents and character traits: like Captain Kirk, Jean-Luc Picard (Patrick Stewart) was born to be a starship captain; William Riker (Jonathan Frakes) has the talent and ambition to fulfil a position of leadership, but proves repeatedly that he is happier and more comfortable with his role as Picard's second-in-command; and Deanna Troi (Marina Sirtis) is ideally suited, both in temperament and in genetic make-up, to be Ship's Counsellor. The hierarchical organisation of *TNG*'s command structure thus goes beyond the militarism implicit in the uniforms and insignia: it combines global capitalism's ideological basis of meta-individualism (Gilbert 70) with imperialism's emphasis on continuity and clear boundaries.

To be sure, the static make-up of these roles is part and parcel of a media production context in which substantial changes to a basic narrative formula were uncommon; consider for instance the difference between *TNG*'s largely stable and unchanging cast of characters and the far more flexible and unpredictable variety of twenty-first-century franchises like *Battlestar Galactica* (US 2003–9) or *Game of Thrones* (US 2011–). But these production

practices of the culture industry at the same time communicate important ideological and political values that reflect capitalism's material organisation. For this reason again, *TNG* is best understood as a transitional text between the striated framework of industrial capitalism and cognitive capitalism's post-industrial empire. It demonstrates a fundamental ambivalence about capitalism and its alternatives – both real and imagined. On the one hand, it offers the pleasurable fantasy of a post-capitalist utopia, while at the same time clinging to the rigidly hierarchical operational structures and narrative conceits associated with capitalism's 'pioneering' years of colonialism, using the well-worn rhetoric of rationalism and technological progress as a convenient form of legitimisation.

This enlightened imperialism is made more palatable by contrasting the Federation's practices with those of more obviously aggressive competing imperialist forces, like the Klingons, the Romulans, the Cardassians and the Borg. Similarly, the avaricious and profit-obsessed Ferengi embody capitalism's unsavory association with a generalised ethic of greed, profit and uncontrollable sexual desire, deploying uncomfortable anti-Semitic stereotypes to again disassociate the post-capitalist Federation from the most 'uncivilised' aspects of unbridled capitalism. But this explicit contrast with less attractive forms of imperialism and capitalism masks the extent to which *Star Trek* remains grounded in those very frameworks. Both its emphatically hierarchical organisation and its dedication to competition as a fundamental human quality contradict the storyworld's supposedly post-capitalist environment: as Raymond Williams has repeatedly argued, capitalism is as much grounded in the meaningful organisation of social relations, which *TNG's Enterprise* – as a workplace of hierarchically organised immaterial labour – reflects as natural and unchanging. The franchise's willful disassociation from capitalism therefore effectively amounts to a fantasy in which undesirable aspects of the capitalist order are conveniently erased or displaced, while capitalist social relations persist in fundamentally unaltered form. In fact, the constant focus on the rigidly hierarchical organisation of the ship's crew reinforces the franchise's indebtedness to the cultural and historical logic of imperialism. Therefore, as Slavoj Žižek might say, it continues to show us the familiar world of global capitalism, but in the form of a fantasy that functions as ideology at its purest.

This structural disavowal is even more pronounced in the occasional episodes in which we witness alternate timelines such as the 'Mirror Universe', where a more belligerent version of the *Enterprise* is introduced and explored. Such narratives, which are especially important to world-building by speculating about possible alternatives, have appeared many times throughout



the franchise, from *TOS* episodes ‘The Tholian Web’ (15 Nov 1968) and ‘Mirror Mirror’ (6 Oct 1967) to *ENT*’s two-part ‘In a Mirror, Darkly’ (15 and 22 Apr 2005), as well as in many (non-canonical) *Star Trek* comics, novels and videogames. In *TNG*, such an alternate timeline is featured in the third-season episode ‘Yesterday’s Enterprise’ (19 Feb 1990), where an unexpected encounter with a spaceship from the past transforms Picard’s ship into a military vessel engaged in an all-out war with the Klingons.<sup>6</sup> Only one character realises something has changed, and speaks up to the captain:

**Guinan:** Families. There should be children on this ship.

**Picard:** What? Children on the *Enterprise*? Guinan, we’re at war!

**Guinan:** No we’re not! At least we’re not... supposed to be. This is not a ship of war. This is a ship of peace.

As in the thematically similar Mirror Universe episodes, there is a striking visual contrast between the *Enterprise* as it is normally seen and the alternate timeline’s more ostentatiously militarised version. The starship’s bridge and corridors are shrouded in shadow, the low key lighting dominated by red and yellow hues rather than the customary spectrum of brightly lit and ‘neutral’ greens, greys and pale blues. Contrary to Kirk’s claim in *TOS*, the *Enterprise*’s sudden transformation from exploratory vessel and peacekeeping force to military warship is coded as undesirable, both in the episode’s visuals and in the resolution of its plot. Offering a dystopian imaginary instead of the franchise’s usual utopianism, the episode’s alternate timeline strengthens the sense of inevitability and lack of viable alternatives to its post-historical present – while simultaneously highlighting the narrowness of the line dividing the ‘good’ future from the ‘bad’ one.

By contrasting *TNG*’s familiar reality with an alternate future that is less desirable, this episode crystallises a temporal logic that is fundamental to *Star Trek*’s world-building: speculation about alternatives will always serve to reinforce global capitalism’s guiding mantra by demonstrating that there is, in fact, no alternative. At the same time, the contrast between the two versions of the starship once again displaces *Enterprise*’s military nature, in the same way that our own global empire appears to operate not as an aggressive force, but merely acts ‘to pacify, mobilise, and control the separated and segmented social forces’ (Hardt and Negri *Empire* 339). In both cases, public support derives

6. The episode occupies a central role in *Star Trek*’s developing tradition of complex world-building for other reasons as well, including the appearance of original cast member Denise Crosby, whose later return in yet another role (playing her time-displaced character’s adult daughter) resulted from her unusual guest appearance here.



'Yesterday's Enterprise', *Star Trek: The Next Generation* – Season 3. Paramount Home Entertainment, 2013.

from a consensus opinion that empire's continuous warfare is not the result of a belligerent militarism, but maintains the appearance of a Starfleet-like benevolent peacekeeping force.

### **Replicators, communicators and holodecks: immaterial and affective labour**

Immaterial labour is one of the defining elements of post-industrial capitalism. In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri place particular emphasis on what they call the 'affective face' of immaterial labour, constantly producing and reproducing 'social networks, forms of community, biopower' (293). These new forms of biopower that inform what they call the postmodernisation of the global economy are crucially driven by the 'production and manipulation of affect' (293), a task that is as much socio-cultural as it is economic and political. But what distinguishes this global stage of capitalism from the previous one is its decentred, inherently collaborative nature: 'the cooperative aspect of immaterial labor is not imposed or organised from the outside, as it was in previous forms of labor, but rather, *cooperation is completely immanent to the laboring activity itself*' (294). This is precisely where Hardt and Negri locate the network society's potential for a new form of spontaneous and ultimately utopian communism: because the creation of value in the networked economies of global capitalism is the result of immaterial cooperative activity, the multitude becomes less dependent upon capital to 'valorise itself' in classically Marxian terms.

But within this new environment of information capitalism, the inherently democratic nature of immaterial labour is at the same time countered by an 'oligopolistic mechanism' that paradoxically attempts to maintain a centralised form of power within a decentred or rhizomatic system (298–9). This process is evident for instance in the ongoing privatisation of digital communication platforms, as corporations like Facebook, Google, Apple and Microsoft organise the flow of information and limit the multitude's abilities for self-organisation. This privatisation of shared digital platforms enhances rather than decreases existing lines of global inequality and exclusion, as 'the immanent relation between the public and the common is replaced by the transcendent power of private property' (301). The radical, even utopian democratic potential so often ascribed to shared internet platforms is thereby usurped by an ideology 'that values hierarchy, competition, and a winner-takes-all mind-set' (Van Dijck 21). The same can of course be said about the media landscape, where businesses have learned to incorporate the potentially subversive practices of fan cultures and user appropriation.

A helpful example of the limitations of *TNG*'s self-proclaimed 'culture of freedom and self-determination' ('The Best of Both Worlds' (Part 1, 18 Jun 1990; Part 2, 24 Sep 1990)) may be found in the episode 'Hollow Pursuits' (30 Apr 1990). This episode introduces engineer Reginald Barclay (Dwight Schultz), a guest on the show who would become a recurring minor character in the *Star Trek* storyworld. The episode's plot concerns Barclay's inability to function as an effective worker on the engineering team because of his addiction to the imaginary scenarios he plays out on the ship's immersive holodeck. The normally affable and ingratiating Chief Engineer Geordi La Forge (LeVar Burton) chastises Barclay repeatedly for arriving late for duty and for underperforming in his assigned tasks. An exasperated La Forge even asks the captain for permission to transfer the shy and withdrawn Barclay off the ship. But the captain denies the request, suggesting instead that the chief engineer make Barclay his 'pet project' and try to transform him into a more effective worker.

Aside from the strange panic the episode displays towards the suggested effects of media addiction (videogames in particular), the episode is unusual



'Hollow Pursuits', *Star Trek: The Next Generation* – Season 3. Paramount Home Entertainment, 2013.

for showing a direct conflict between an individual crew member and his work environment. Throughout the seven seasons of *TNG*, there is no shortage of episodes that foreground anxieties about the main crew members' ability to carry out their work efficiently and effectively. But in nearly all cases, this anxiety involves normally efficient main crew members suddenly undergoing a transformation that makes them unable to function within the established structure: Captain Picard suddenly deprived of his natural authority ('Tapestry' (15 Feb 1993)), Commander Riker behaving erratically because of sleep deprivation ('Schisms' (19 Oct 1992)), Counsellor Troi losing her empathic abilities ('The Loss' (31 Dec 1990)), Lieutenant Worf (Michael Dorn) facing an injury that would leave him a paraplegic ('Ethics' (2 Mar 1992)), Doctor Crusher (Gates McFadden) unable to rely on her own professional judgement ('Remember Me' (22 Oct 1990)), or Lieutenant Commander Data (Brent Spiner) experiencing homicidal waking dreams ('Phantasms' (25 Oct 1993)). In all of these cases, the momentary crisis is ultimately resolved by the full restoration of the character's original abilities before the episode's ending.

This stability of character and narrative formula still expresses the residual cultural logic of industrial capitalism: with very few exceptions, the main cast members of the *Star Trek* series remain permanently employed in unchanging roles, forming a reliable community with enduring social bonds, and obviously enjoying full health care benefits as Starfleet employees. But at the same time, the labour they perform is indeed largely immaterial. They inhabit a world where material goods are no longer the product of human labour, but where they are created by seemingly magical 'replicator' technology that can conjure up full meals and cups of hot Earl Grey tea out of thin air. All of these elements contribute to a utopian post-capitalism where questions of labour, class conflict and the limited nature of physical resources have been resolved, but where actual social relations remain unchanged even within *Star Trek's* remarkable post-scarcity storyworld.

Picard and his crew perform work that is not only primarily immaterial, but that is also preoccupied with the development of subjectivity and social relations. This is especially meaningful in an economic context in which 'co-produced services and relationships' have become ever more central, and where 'producing increasingly means constructing cooperation and communicative commonalities' (Hardt and Negri *Empire* 302). And while this production of cooperation may sound quite warm and fuzzy, it is at the same time accompanied by new coercive forms of power. For while cognitive capitalism thrives on forms of productivity that seem to stimulate freedom and creativity, it must rule the multitude 'along internal lines, in production, in exchanges, in

culture – in other words, in the biopolitical context of its existence’ (344). And even as *TNG* retains imperialism’s residual top-down hierarchies, it also gives narrative form to empire’s emergent biopolitical forms of control.

One of the most visible changes between *TOS* and *TNG* is the modification of the iconic ‘communicator’: what had been an influential precursor to the mobile phone<sup>7</sup> now became a tiny badge all crew members carried on their uniform at all times. The key difference resulting from this change is that the entire crew now forms a hi-tech virtual network of constant surveillance and control, in which their interactions are tracked and monitored by a powerful central computer. Going beyond Foucault’s panoptic logic of modernity (*Discipline* 228), the virtual and ubiquitous nature of the communicators’ connectivity resonates much more strongly with Deleuze’s writing on the society of control, whose central dependence on computers represents what he calls a ‘mutation of capitalism’ (6). The mutation in this sense involves the shift from a capitalist mode focused on the production of physical commodities to a new dominant mode primarily concerned with the production of subjectivity.

To return then to the *TNG* episode centred on the dysfunctional, overly imaginative Barclay: the plot events here offer a provocative illustration of precisely this process. The daydreaming holodeck addict proves to be unreceptive to the more traditional forms of discipline, as he fails to respond to the constant threats that result from ubiquitous surveillance and the technologically enhanced panoptic machinery of which he is a part. In fact, La Forge’s initial response could be described as perfectly Foucauldian: his recommendation is that the subject who fails to internalise normative self-discipline must therefore be removed from this environment. According to Foucault’s disciplinary logic, the inmate’s sustained resistance in the face of institutional pressure exerted by ‘normalizing power’ would lead to his movement to another position within modernity’s all-encompassing ‘carceral network’ (304). But Picard’s response to La Forge’s exasperated transfer request instead illustrates empire’s emergent biopolitical logic: rather than imposing discipline on Barclay from outside, it is his subjectivity itself which must be reshaped.

The conflict is therefore resolved not through the imposition of punitive measures, but through an elaborate exploration of his imaginary life, which in *TNG*’s storyworld can be visualised and shared using the holodeck’s immersive and immaterial technology. Several crew members in the episode subsequently visit Barclay’s Freudian ‘dreamwork’ to witness how they are experienced and

7. Martin Cooper, who invented the first mobile phone for Motorola in 1973, famously cited *Star Trek* as his inspiration.

re-imagined through his 'defective' subjectivity, while many of them pressure him to abandon his overactive imagination and re-engage with the ship's daily reality of immaterial labour. Predictably, the crew's attempt to stage an intervention is unsuccessful: Barclay's emotional investment in the imaginary lives he leads on the holodeck is too strong for him to abandon by sheer force of rational argument.

The episode's resolution hinges instead on the dissolution of the traditional boundary between work and leisure. Just as the neoliberal subject is trained by culture, technology and economic necessity to relinquish this distinction, Barclay learns that his fan-like addiction to fantasy gives him abilities that have a use value on the *Enterprise* bridge. What the episode therefore teaches both Barclay and its audience is that work and leisure – the private and the public – should no longer be approached as separate spheres, but as a single continuum. In the same way that the media industry has happily accommodated fandom's cultural practices and sensibilities, the commanding officers on the *Enterprise* learn to absorb Barclay's skillset in a mutually beneficial compromise: Barclay may continue to indulge in his holodeck compulsion, as long as he does so in more moderate ways that no longer impede his functioning as a productive immaterial labourer.



'Hollow Pursuits', *Star Trek: The Next Generation* – Season 3. Paramount Home Entertainment, 2013.

This is one of several moments in *TNG* where the limits of the franchise's nominal post-capitalism are vividly illustrated. The hierarchical system in which the crew functions so effectively is repeatedly presented as the natural result of an innate sense of human competition, with the main crew members' authority and 'natural' division of labour articulating the perfect balance resulting from this market logic in the absence of alienating wage labour. The android Data is often the character whose questions set up the ideological justification for the franchise's investment in these 'common-sense' market values, as occurs in the following exchange from episode 'Peak Performance' (10 Jul 1989):

**Data:** Forever curious, this urge to compete.

**Pulaski:** Oh, it's a human response. That inborn craving to gauge your capabilities through conflict.

**Data:** Doctor, there are other ways to challenge oneself.

**Pulaski:** Well, perhaps, but they all lack a certain thrill.

**Troi:** Data, humans sometimes find it helpful to have an outsider set the standard by which they're judged.

**Data:** To avoid deceiving oneself.

Like the incident involving Barclay, this dialogue shows once again how thoroughly the capitalist concept of generalised competition remains central to *Star Trek's* supposedly post-capitalist storyworld. Like the episodes that explore characters' occasional desire to abandon their Starfleet careers and explore a life of leisure and actual self-determination, these are repeatedly revealed to be less satisfactory and therefore less desirable than their immaterial labour on board the *Enterprise*.<sup>8</sup>

The structural coordinates of *TNG's* storyworld thereby correspond precisely with those ideological notions that have mythologised and naturalised what Gramsci would call the 'common-sense' history of capitalism (Patnaik 3): a teleological narrative propelled by 'natural' human competition, progress through technological development, and a conception of historicity guided by the colonialist 'pioneering spirit' – though of course presented in a way that is deprived of its essence of exploitation, violence and oppression. Given the storyworld's anti-capitalist potential, it is remarkable how rarely *Star Trek* has explored the social, economic and cultural implications of a world

8. A provocative exception is the fifth-season episode 'The Inner Light' (1 Jun 1992), in which Captain Picard lives out a lifetime outside Starfleet by unwittingly receiving the memories of the member of an extinct pre-industrial culture. Tellingly, the episode's enduring legacy in the show is the development of Picard's musical abilities, in the same way that global capitalism so eagerly sees 'primitive' societies as a source of 'authentic' cultural value.



beyond capitalism.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the franchise's sustained focus on the *Enterprise*'s leadership ends up celebrating and mythologising capitalism's core values of individualism, entrepreneurialism and patriarchal authority. The striking absence of any visible democratic forms or procedures speaks volumes about *TNG*'s actual investment in a truly post-capitalist imaginary. Instead, it offers a fascinating hybrid of residual imperialist power structures on the one hand, and emerging post-industrial practices on the other.

### **'Make it so': The chain of command and imperial administration**

*Star Trek* in general – and *TNG* in particular – manages to fuse the rigid boundaries and stable structures of imperialism with empire's flexible entrepreneurialism. The show's militaristic trappings reinforce capitalism's inherently hierarchical nature, while the characters' and creators' repeated disavowal of this very militarism at the same time allows the audience to engage with the characters as explorers rather than as enforcers. But even more importantly, the social relations among the main characters and the physical environment on board the *Enterprise* confirm the sense that they are first and foremost co-workers, and that the episodes tend to follow the coordinates of television's traditional workplace drama. The vessel's brightly lit interior indeed looks more like a fancy hotel than a spaceship, and in this sense the weekly episodes often come across as no more radical in their politics than an average episode of *The Love Boat* (US 1978–87). Tellingly, the bridge resembles nothing so much as a corporate boardroom, complete with luxurious carpeting, elegant woodwork and an enormous view-screen offering the equivalent of conference calls on Skype. In the world of *Star Trek*, imperialism can be practiced without any harmful effects by a sympathetic, reliable and (more or less) unchanging elite team of professional and highly capable managers. *TNG*'s crew therefore also represents the perfectly efficient intergalactic corporation, the invention of warp capability and immaterial labour an uncanny literalisation of Marx's famous description of capitalism's tendency to 'annihilate space through time' (*Grundrisse* 537–44).

David Harvey applies this phrase to the post-industrial reorganisation of capital, which he has described as the neoliberal era of 'flexible accumulation'

9. *Deep Space Nine* has arguably demonstrated the most interest in examining more complex shifts in social relations within this imagined future, though it too has always remained strongly limited by its familiar 'frontier outpost' framework with all its imperialist implications.

(*Condition of Postmodernity* 147). Although Harvey clearly disapproves of Hardt and Negri's more esoteric tendencies, his analysis of post-industrial capitalism perfectly matches their theorisation of empire's deterritorialising power. He explains how capitalism's central value system is now 'dematerialized and shifting, time horizons are collapsing, and it is hard to tell exactly what space we are in when it comes to assessing causes and effects, meanings or values' (298). In his own book on America's neoliberal empire, Harvey again emphasises capitalism's 'incessant drive towards the reduction if not elimination of spatial barriers', arguing that global capitalism's new phase of flexible accumulation 'is driven remorselessly by round after round of space-time compression' (*New Imperialism* 98). Hardt and Negri add that this sped-up process of deterritorialisation under global capitalism has at the same time been accompanied 'not by free play and equality, but by the imposition of new hierarchies' (*Empire* 154).

Both these aspects are fundamental to *TNG*'s storyworld: while technological progress has facilitated an almost unimaginable degree of space-time compression, we witness at the same time the rise of a new hierarchy of benevolent and peaceful managerial militarism. In spite of this technocratic storyworld's nominally progressive ideals, there is therefore hardly any space for actual democracy (as far as we can see), as its post-capitalist future instead so clearly maintains its emphasis on individualism, hierarchical authority and generalised competition that perfectly fits the description of imperial administration: the benevolent and completely voluntary work of maintaining global peace and order – though in this case obviously in a way that extends far beyond our own planet (*Empire* 339–41). This reading is supported not only by the show's dedication to centring our attention on characters in positions of authority, but also by the captain and crew's perpetually strained relationship with Starfleet's higher leadership.

As Adam Kotsko has pointed out in a perceptive blog article on *Star Trek*'s politics, the captain's authority tends to be absolute, and general trust in his (or her) leadership is unconditional: 'the central concept that we're going to get liberal outcomes (Federation ideals!) from authoritarian structures (quasi-military command structures!) is, to say the least, difficult to find evidence for in the real world' (Kotsko). But when Starfleet admirals or bureaucratic institutions become involved, they are almost always hindrances to the main crew's normal efficiency. The corruption, bureaucratic entropy and destructive dictatoralism that we encounter repeatedly at the level of Starfleet's upper levels plays up the neoliberal sentiment that large, state-like institutions are inefficient

at best and downright evil at worst.<sup>10</sup> Like a corporation's lean and mean elite board of directors, the main *Enterprise* crew should be free at all times to act without interference 'from above', and should therefore also be given the latitude to interpret rules and juridical restrictions without direct regulation from the bureaucratic and cumbersome regulatory bodies whose ideals they represent.

## Conclusion

Over the past half century, the *Star Trek* storyworld has shaped our imagined relationship with global capitalism more than any other entertainment franchise. Arriving at the height of American capitalism's 'Golden Age' of the mid-1960s, its vision of a glorious future of technological progress and material plenitude helped pave the way for global capitalism's age of imperial administration and immaterial labour. Throughout this period, *Star Trek*'s increasingly complex transmedia storyworld negotiated the tension between industrial capitalism's residual imperialism on the one hand, and post-Fordism's emergent network structures on the other. While the narratives of individual episodes, films, novels and comics engaged with a wide range of social concerns, the structure of feeling provided by the franchise's larger storyworld maintained a contradictory relationship to capitalism.

When considered from the perspective of radical political theory, *Star Trek* rejects capitalism by imagining a post-capitalist future in which class struggle is transcended and a technocratic utopia is realised. As one of the most popular forms of pioneering fan culture, it developed and sustained international communities with strong ties to counter-cultural movements and progressive political ideals. And as a global entertainment franchise, *Star Trek* developed from a cult phenomenon into a mainstream commercial property in the very period in which capitalism entered its post-industrial phase, and started paving the way towards global capitalism's empire. *TNG* in particular offers a compelling illustration of this transition, as the rigid structures of *TOS* develop into a more flexible storyworld that foregrounds immaterial labour and affective energy in the production of subjectivity.

Hardt and Negri have devoted great attention to the crucial differences between imperialism and empire, and *Star Trek*'s paradigmatic storyworld gives us a helpful illustration of world-building practices that engage with and

10. The most vivid illustration is offered in the episode 'Conspiracy' (9 May 1988), in which it is revealed that three powerful Starfleet admirals are controlled by evil alien parasites.

negotiate between both of these frameworks. Associating *Star Trek* with radical politics may initially seem obvious, as the franchise has been popularly known from the very start as a politically progressive and intellectually stimulating form of popular entertainment. When attempting to untangle *Star Trek*'s actual politics, however, there are surprisingly few direct engagements with the storyworld's post-capitalist setting. Indeed, the franchise's sustained focus on 'enlightened colonialism' alongside a kind of humanist militarism illustrates most vividly Hardt and Negri's thinking on the transition from imperialism to empire. Both the stability of the television series' formats and their continuous investment in continuity and hierarchical power express a remarkable political conservatism, and the storyworld's technology facilitates Deleuze's 'society of control' while also providing the most vivid dramatic illustration of Marx's 'annihilation of space through time'.

As an expression of a political position, this fantasy mobilises a glaring contradiction one encounters over and over as part of capitalist culture in general, and in *Star Trek* in particular. By combining industrial capitalism's clear hierarchical structures with post-Fordism's immaterial labour and networked biopower, *TNG* negotiates constantly between residual and emergent tendencies in shifting capitalist orders. What results is a structure of feeling that shows a remarkable correspondence with the internal contradictions of global capitalism: simultaneously progressive and conservative, anti-authoritarian and hierarchical, individualist and collective, and nominally post-capitalist while remaining fully immersed in capitalism's competitive social relations. Therefore, much like empire itself, *Star Trek* miraculously succeeds in presenting its political and ideological ambivalence as 'the best of both worlds'.

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